

Welcome

THE GHOSTS OF EARTH (2009 Paul Dore) is the first volume in the hexology that will constitute the Truthfarer series. The remaining five volumes will be published at regular intervals over the next two years.

The first book describes the beginnings of a universe: the origins of space and time, of consciousness itself. These cataclysmic events set in train the Truthfarers' quest, and the account of their journey Homewards.

This history follows the adventures of two of these beings as they travel from the skies of an ancient planet to the realm of the gods, and then onwards to the freezing landscape of a new world, before finally encountering the subterranean realms of the Gaki. These creatures are a strange race indeed, inexorably driven by an insatiable hunger towards madness, to an insanity that holds within itself the key to the next stage of their path towards ultimate knowledge.

Welcome all, to the realms of the Truthfarers! We bid you rejoice - and perchance join - in their struggle to find that lost treasure of all sentient life; the Truth that Lies Within. We hope you enjoy your journey.

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Thank you

THE GHOSTS OF EARTH

PROLOGUE

No time or place. Nothing and then – fullness; a soft, even, pure and translucent glow, a constant whiteness, a limitless beauty in silver-cold light that invaded everything. It penetrated all, and filled the void with its near perfection. A minutia of the preternatural emptiness shivered across its surface and the unity was broken. And then eternity and infinity shattered and fragmented, and from that terrible whiteness uncountable fragments exploded into an infernal heat that swept outwards, dimensions swirling into being in its awful wake.

And so time and space were born, and once again the terrible cycle of life and death was set into motion. Blazing light and heat boiled maniacally, devouring all and spewing out the remainder in incandescent dust; and chaos was brought under the tyranny of dimension. The measured process ticked away, nanosecond by nanosecond, as the alpha accident exploded in wave upon wave, a primal fire raging through space.

Time passed, and passed on. Great gas clouds cooled and coalesced, forming particulates that collided and combined. Stars were born and died as the nebulae swirled and exploded, floating like great hulks upon an ocean of flame, their dead elemental forms basking in its luminosity. Throughout the newly born cosmos the embers lurched in a drunken dance, great arches of dust twisting and gyrating sinuously, breaking and then reforming in a mindless ballet of accidental death, purposeless and meaningless; space born upon space, with all racing from all into the blackness of eternal night.

The aeons pass and that dread fury has now slowed and dispersed. Great suns blaze across space, circling ponderously about each other, some to die quietly, others to implode and then explode, sending their debris soaring outwards in search of new homes. Thus the process of birth and death, expressing itself in unthinking and unfeeling matter, metres on, measuring moment by moment its senseless path.

Epochs upon epochs speed by. Suns are born and suns die, and around them the dust gathers and coils, gravity bound. Then, too, the planets make their entrance, exemplars of that most elegant of forms, the sphere. And they join the majestic chorus, ploughing their stately orbits, adding each one their measure to the cosmic dance. Some would fly far from their mother star, and her light and heat would barely dance upon their surface. Others would draw too close to their parent, and would fall back into that deadly embrace, to be swallowed whole by their progenitor. Element bound to element, born from the solar furnaces, matter endlessly seeking new expression; but all still dead - so dead.

But from that flaw, embedded in the matrix of primordial matter, a new expression lay in

wait; an accident yet to be born - and the ages stream by. The skies were much darker now, for that vast, embryonic array of jewels, those burnished suns that had filled the great spaces, they had reeled away now, moving into the deeps, receding ever further from their kin. Some were solitary children, blazing their light out into the cold dark reaches until their nuclear fires were exhausted. Others cast their warmth upon attendant planets, bound like servants to their estate. On a very few of these captives an ancient play was about to be presented; that same dark flaw, the sole witness to this universe's conception, was about to perform its latest role, its purpose finally to be fulfilled. Form played upon form, combinations and permutations endlessly experimenting; fault upon fault, with no discernible pattern but a random chaos, a madness spinning out anarchy - and all about lay cosmic death. But within this vast nexus of interplaying forces a surprise conceals its face. Yet still there was no spectator to this crucible, this forcing medium. No eye or ear, no physical sense or consciousness to prostrate itself in terrified worship before the insensate whirl. The mystery that was to be awaited its time and place, and the unfolding of its esoteric purpose. The primal flaw had struck at the heart of the universe, born within the first cosmic fires, the progeny of a force indestructible and perfect, though within its own nature fundamentally divided. This was the first paradox of the many, which would echo yet through the void. A perplexity and a puzzle so profound that the whole cosmos itself would in its deepest being unravel the solution; both the analysis and the synthesis, beautiful in its conception, but still a pregnant enigma ready to spill its seed, its creatures eager to vitalise the dead forms that surrounded it. It lay poised, a deadly precursor, creator of life and death, and holding all within its compass; this miasma incoherent, seductive, cardinal, immortal, but mortally incarnate. It flowed through time and space, immediate in its power, creating forms, yet in these insufficiencies seeking always its completion.

Finally, on a dead husk of rock, it emerged within matter, whilst the harsh light of a nearby star played upon that impervious surface; and thus it remained for millennia. Nothing happened; changeless; no transformation, immutable; and the universe ground on its dead way. This lifeless world turned mechanically about its axis, in mindless, echoing repetition. The nearby star beat its sterile surface with a raw, harsh radiation. Thousands upon thousands of years slipped by, the universe and the planet older but by a fraction in cosmic terms. And then: Awakening! Life! There was not a movement, no hint even of this subtle change; it was so nevertheless, but of a fragility that even the slightest shift in all those variables that had conspired to bring about this miracle would have extinguished its incipience forthwith; thus it clung to the very edge of existence.

And the universe continued on its course in an insensible and constant pursuit of its limits. Up until now all was an impotent play of light and darkness, of change and purposeless transformation, and the essence of futility; but here the imperceptible seed was about to bear fruit. Upon that tiny sphere of rock, which twirled endlessly within darkness into light and into darkness, time seemed frozen. This monotone, punctuated only by the burning light of the nearby sun, merely accentuated the sense of stasis. It could have been that this unique experiment, this limitless possibility, might never have occurred, but for the intervention of another transformational event. From far away, coursing through the depths of space, a rogue meteor struck the surface of this empty bauble, scoring out a vast chunk of rock, and dismissing the wounded splinter into the void, as it accelerated away irreversibly from its mother sun....

Millennia passed. The small asteroid hurtled ever onwards, ploughing through the emptiness and dust, bearing constantly its hidden load. Eventually it sank into the gravitational embrace of a minor sun, which lay in an isolated corner of a dark galaxy, and began its spiralling course downwards towards a fiery conclusion. As it arrowed towards the grave, the fragment passed across the orbit of a small planet that circled about this star, and was drawn into its more benevolent influence. Thus, as to a rescuing parent, it hastened like a wayward child into that adoptive embrace, and drew closer to its new haven. By this series of coincidences the orphan now found itself within reach of a new home. Throughout its extensive wanderings it had acquired a protective mantle of dust, seared onto its surface by the fires of numerous suns, and this further sealed by the multiple impacts of smaller meteorites. This shroud burned away fiercely as the wanderer reached into the atmosphere of the planet, until finally, unable to withstand the stresses, it exploded, showering the lands below with chunks of superheated rock.

Time beat onwards interminably. The aeons flowed past like the wavelets on a mountain torrent, time and tide in speeding flight. Volcanoes and fiery molten lava streams had once played upon the tormented surface of the planetoid, but now a gentler nature prevailed. The flaw lay basking upon its beneficent surface, a nestling awaiting whatever fate might bring, its insentient guardian necessarily unaware of the miracle that it bore, and quite oblivious to the implications for this world, or indeed the universe itself. But there remained yet another accident to present itself before this act of the play might conclude, and thus usher in the prelude to the next scene. There could be no witness to this event; none can say truly what passed on this lonely isle in space. However, the consequences of the final enactment are evident, and undeniable. In due course the flaw finally burst into full bloom. This small, grey ember, this insignificant, little smut, which lay upon the ground, slowly and almost imperceptibly changed colour. From the dull and insensible greyness that it presented to the light, a faint shine now appeared upon its surface, with the faintest tinge of iridescence, so subtle as to be quite unremarkable. It emanated a sombre glow, and a warmth quite unlike the blistering fury of the vast sun that floated above the planet's surface; and a gentle, delicate frisson shook it, indicative of a new kind of heat - and a new form. This birthling speck seemed to quiver. An internal quake vibrated through its form as if it were rousing from a long slumber, a quiescence that had lasted for a near eternity. The budding tremor grew in strength. It was a motion engendered within itself, not born of the blind forces of gravity nor of the solar winds, nor even of the action and reaction of mass, but a new kind of movement; the movement of life. Suddenly the form seemed to explode within itself, producing a violent perturbation that ran throughout its entire frame; and a new wonder was brought forth from the gestation. It was a generative movement, the first of living matter, and the beginning of that which could renew itself, thus unconsciously ensuring its own immortality; for what had been one was now two. There they were, glistening and quiescent, two newborn forms laying easily, side by side. And time proceeded on its inexorable and irrevocable way. The anvil had been struck and its echoes were already beating through the void. Two became four, and four became eight, and with each generation, each accident, diversity was created.

The eras swept by. The sun now looked down on a world that was saturated with life, albeit primitive. Unicellular plant forms floated in the clear, warm seas that bathed the planet, their waters nurturing and supporting its many offspring. A few of these tiny

organisms had clustered together as if for mutual support. Others floated here and there on the surface, drifting wherever the tepid currents took them. There existed such a nice balance, but also a deadly inertia. It is arguable whether what followed was the product of a natural tendency built into the cosmos, or maybe the cells themselves provoked the next phase; or then again, merely another accident. The organisms continued to replicate, multiplying continuously. They fed voraciously upon the copious waters and bright sunlight. The clumps of cells had now become vast mats that drifted over the oceans. As they propagated they bumped and collided, scraping cell against cell. Some lived, some died, and their corpses floated and decayed upon the swelling surface. Between these mats lay great open spaces of water upon which a few lone cells danced. But such was the fecundity of these organisms that eventually even these great gaps began to condense; finally the entire ocean surface was covered with one enormous layer of these germs. The clumps started to thicken. As tier weighed upon tier, and the upper levels grew upon each succeeding generation, those at the lowest levels were deprived of their life-giving light and died. Mutation continued upon mutation, and the struggle for survival increased as adaptation accelerated. The clusters became more integrated and specialised, seeking always to increase their chances for continued existence. Competition grew between the differentiating species, the death rates soaring as new equilibria were established and then abandoned, in the continuous and unrelenting process of evolution. On the surface nothing seemed to have changed; the great drifting mats floated as always, serene upon the oceans. But in the depths below the struggle had become ferocious and unforgiving. Some lone cells, which had long split away from the mats, now adopted more aggressive strategies, their competition spurred on by the increasingly desperate contest for the requirements of life. Their mode of adaptation was quite different from the collective and aggregated organic forms. The same process of division and specialisation proceeded within their evolutionary development, but produced radically different species. Since they were no longer able to rely solely on the motion of the ocean currents to bring food to them they had had to acquire the means to propel themselves forwards, and developed a sensory apparatus to guide them in their constant search for sustenance. They instinctively understood not only that they were in competition with the vast mats that dominated the surface, but also with each other. The battle for survival was now well and truly joined: aggressor against aggressor. New balances were established, and the dwindling food sources and constant evolution ensured that the great mats gradually shrunk in size. The antagonist organisms now fed not only on their passive brethren but also upon their more mobile brothers. The seas began to open up again. Through it all the sun glowed steadily down upon this cosmic experiment.

The newly born planet, though established in relative docility by comparison with its more juvenile years, was still vomiting up rock from its core. The process of plate formation thrust land ever upwards and new islands formed continuously, beading the wide seas. Periodically, one of the great sea mats would drift upon these new coastlines and lie stranded there, its massive form no longer cooled by the ocean currents. Soon it would die under the blistering heat of the new sun, its corpse decaying upon the sandbanks. The rich dust it produced as it decomposed would gradually be blown inland by the sea winds, to settle into dunes along the shoreline, thereby enriching the near sterile earth that lay there. Similarly, the violent gales and rains that frequently swept the planet's surface would break down the freshly exposed rocks thrust up from beneath the mantle, there to mix with the decaying mats, and thus produce a rich loam, the fertile basis for new life.

The millennia rolled forwards. Genetic variation begat the development of multi-cellular organisms, both more capable but also more vulnerable, rendered thus by their increasing differentiation and specialisation. Within the oceans drifted embryonic predators, evolving in ceaseless competition and, with greater food reserves, growing ever larger, as they propagated, struggled and died in the agonizing contest for life.

Thus did these matters unfold as the planet and its sun, indeed the whole system, sped through immeasurable space. And then, from out of its depths, came nemesis; a massive rock that had been hurtling towards this point in space and time for millions upon millions of years, to keep finally its fateful and violent appointment. Mass collided with mass, and the whole was reduced instantaneously to a frame of flaming debris, which exploded back into the night, each fragment bearing its own lone message into the void.

Again and again, across the empty reaches of space, in millions upon millions of galaxies, on worlds more numerous than the sands of a billion seashores, life struggled to gain a foothold in this all but sterile wasteland, relentlessly beaten back time and time again by vast unthinking and uncaring forces. And so the grim process unfolded, an endless procession of blind chance, an infinity of opposition ranked against these weak and fragile forms, all but helpless against those seemingly malevolent powers: the supernovae and meteorite strikes, and the planetary orbits so erratic as to deny the accident its due place in the cosmic play.

The uneven struggle continued over even more vast passages of time than can be conceived by consciousness; yet life seemed forever doomed to remain an undiscovered possibility. Finally, in a desolate star system on the edge of a newly born galaxy, random chance threw yet another cast that life might find its foothold. The experiment ran its course for the trillionth time; the gradual evolutionary process from simple to complex, the interplay of survival and adaptation producing an increasing diversity of animal and plant life, these in turn based on a fragile and mutual interdependence; species coming into existence then to pass away, only to be replaced by more successful forms. These again, by mutation and combination, moving from the lesser to the greater, a stumbling invention framed always within the steady beat of time.

The ages passed, and still the repeated catastrophe withheld its baleful influence. On a fine edge this life continued to flourish, gradually enforcing itself upon the planet, firmly establishing its base. But all that had come to be bore yet the hallmark of the relatively insensible. The higher primates that had now evolved here, it is true, exhibited many aspects of a fully sentient development; the ability to group together for mutual protection, the use of primitive skills, even a rudimentary language; but reflexive consciousness was absent. There was still no subject for any object.

Yet Nature bided her time, debating the catalyst that might provoke this movement. Some have insisted that it was simply another mutation and consciousness came into being in the same fashion that all other transformations had been stimulated. Others argued for divine intervention - though most now would dismiss this as a mere childish fancy. Howsoever, we must bear witness to the fact that despite the undefined cause the effect is indisputable, for there would be none otherwise to join this argument. Reflexive

consciousness, at some time and in some place, was spawned; and strangely, not just here on this small world, but again and again throughout the cosmos. From these modest beginnings the universe and everything in it would be transformed to a degree so far unknown; the next phase had commenced. However, what had not been understood - until fairly recently that is - was this form of consciousness was but the lowest stage of a whole range of psychic evolutionary stages yet to arise. For time being at least, we must be satisfied with its present incarnation; the form of a hominid, a proto man. Those other hidden and esoteric depths would display themselves when time and nature declared them due. For now...

It is part of the vanity of any species to refer to itself as 'man', conveying as it does that sense of a final reference by which all other groups and forms are judged. So the idea 'man' in this new world resembles but little in what we would conceive with respect to our own condition. The creature in question possessed a body bordered by four limbs. Upon the superior aspect of the torso was seated the main receptacle for sensory data. The form, as a whole, was capable of motion. It was fully autonomous in terms of action, although quite capable of operating with its own kind in collective ventures such as hunting, defence, construction and so on. It possessed internal organs for the processing of food necessary to sustain its life force, together with ancillary organs that had evolved to maintain it in optimum condition in all but the most adverse of environmental circumstances. It was the product of uncounted generations of selection, and held easy sway over the other species that inhabited the planet. Its predisposition to act in accord with its fellows gave it a clear advantage over the many other equally well-adapted life forms; this, together with its superior intelligence, allowed it to maintain its dominance.

These hominids were omnivores, able to consume and digest both plant and animal life. By the lengthy and painful process of trial and error it had gradually acquired insight into what was ally, and what was not. Additionally it had acquired the capacity to pass down knowledge from generation to generation, in a folklore conveyed in many forms, so that these in turn were able to benefit greatly from the accumulated wisdom of their elders. This was the real source of man's control over other species. Whereas other creatures too were able to transmit hard won expertise via instinctual learning, this could not equate with self-conscious intelligence, and the transference of more complex conceptualisations. In this manner the process of intellectual evolution was sent into overdrive, telescoping what would have taken millions of years through natural selection into a matter of centuries, even decades. Thus this species rapidly outstripped every other, and easily gained and maintained its ascendancy. Inevitably the weaker and less adaptive organisms fell by the wayside and, one by one, whole genera were wiped out. It seemed that the highly developed intellectual ability possessed by the hominid breed was matched only by an almost paradoxical heedlessness when it came to the welfare of its competitors. But for now the primary question of concern was the day-to-day business of survival; the luxury of contemplation was reserved for an as yet distant future. And so day followed day, with a routine clinging to the edges of existence.

SEPARATION

Now there lies a fiery desert here, stretching across vast landscapes to the waters of an inland sea; a waste extending many thousands of miles, with but few creatures clinging to life, and otherwise empty. This barren furnace finally ends at a sea that a noble warrior people long ago named The Sea at the Middle of the Earth. But then this land was filled with life, with rich pastures and great forests and valleys, and fast running streams that flowed eagerly across its face, feeding the earth and all its creatures. In the great blue sky contoured with vast plumed clouds, testimony to the teeming life below, there lived, amongst others, two majestic eagles. They were great golden beings. This was an age when that precious metal did not lie cold and dead in the earth, but was born on the wings of living creatures; their feathers shone resplendently in the brilliant sun. Indeed, their bodies glowed so brightly that they appeared as sons and daughters of that great burning orb itself, that rode the sky far above. Their names were Aquila and Aquilus, female and male. Their days were spent drifting in the air currents, floating in great circles as they rose and fell according to their wish, their penetrating gaze staring into the blue distance, measuring the great circle of the earth, or seeking out prey on the land far below. Their dominion was the air, and within that element their will was law. They saw the world as no others did; and from that an insight was born: the wisdom of eagles. Each night they would float down to their lair that balanced on a ledge, cleaved by ageless time into the side of a mountain, one of a range of granite cliffs that lay to the south of their land. And each night they would make love, their mating calls echoing through the mountains, and then passing into deep space, to greet the cold stars above. Then they would sleep, Aquila lying enfolded in the great golden wings of her lover, her nest within her nest. From these unions many offspring were born, to be raised by their father and mother until they too were ready to depart their home. Then they would take their place in the ether, and become masters and mistresses of that element; but always Aquila and Aquilus remained inseparable. In their journeys through the sky they would sometimes circle so far apart that they disappeared from each other's sight; but their hearts were united and the bond was never broken.

One morning Aquilus awoke, and within him arose a great conceit. He wished to give his mate a token, a proof of his great love and adoration. He reflected on that which was most precious in this world. Of course he knew instantly, that there could be nothing greater than that which gave life and granted power to his wings, which warmed his feathers and fed the updraughts that lifted him high into the sky. It was the father and mother of being; it was the great golden sun from which he and his kin had descended. He would set upon this as his prey. He would bring it down to earth to lay at the feet of his beloved Aquila; then she would know his great passion. He moved with ease into the sky whilst Aquila still rested sleeping in the nest. He danced with the currents, higher and higher, his wing beat steady and powerful. He felt the heat of that distant quarry burn upon his face, but his eyes he kept averted, so bright was its light even for his fearsome sight. The air became colder and thinner and he beat his wings the more vigorously, fighting the forces that would draw him back to the earth. He knew that he would not, could not, give up, and so he struggled

onwards, and rose above the world. He felt his blood pounding within his skull as he pushed through the atmosphere. So high had he gone that the sky had become dark, and the stars seemed brighter and harsher, floating just before him, dancing wildly, crazily. Finally, it was too much for his mortal frame, and his heart burst into a thousand pieces, his insensible body falling back towards the earth. But his eagle will carried him upwards, sparing not a thought for the dead shell that had now encased his soul. His spirit soared out into space for he could see clearly now the great fire, burning directly before him, drawing this child of the air to her bosom; with an unwavering gaze he sped towards his prey until, without hesitation, he flew into the heart of the sun.

Far below Aquila had awakened. She felt uneasy that her mate had left her without calling out, as was his custom. She rose from the nest and flew towards the east, and to the rising sun, in search of Aquilus. She flew all day, even until the shadows fell deeply from the mountaintops. She soared high and low, her fierce gaze piercing even those granite peaks. Her wings spread over the plains and forests, cutting the clouds and skimming the seas. All that day, and the next, and the next, she sought him out. These hollow and desperate passages mounted into months, and then years, until within her heart she grew to the knowledge that he had gone forever. Now she lay alone in the nest, with the biting loneliness in her heart settling into a cold despair, that in turn became resignation. The years passed and she lived the life of the eagle. No other mate did she take, no more children did she bear. Then, on one bright and clear morning, she rose into the sky and took flight towards the east and to her mother sun; and her heart finally broke. She fell to the earth to pass once more into the great cycle of life and death.

THE ASCENT

For a few moments he knew not where he lay. All around him there blazed a light that was almost impossible to contemplate, yet strangely its fierce heat left him untouched. Gradually this incandescence seemed to dissipate, and at last he could see his surroundings more clearly. He appeared to be lying on a bed of flower blossoms of the brightest hues; blood reds and creamy whites, butter yellows, both dark and light, with wine deep purples flowing through all. They provided the softest of beds, easing and cushioning his limbs, their perfume both overwhelming and invigorating. Far above his head arched a perfect azure sky, pure and brightly clear. He raised himself to lean upon his hands. For one strange moment he seemed to feel the sensation of wings unfolding upon his shoulder blades. But this absurdity disappeared as quickly as it had glanced into his mind. He gazed with fascination at the extraordinary landscape that encompassed him. As he narrowed his eyes, burdened as they were by the burning light that seemed to emanate from everything about him, he found that he could pick out the smallest details on objects, and no matter how far away they appeared to be. Gently sloping hills, shading green into green, flowed across the far plains into the distance, and these in turn were criss-crossed by wide flowing streams and rivers, their waters reflecting the glorious heavens, their surfaces shimmering mirrors framed by bright water lilies that bore flowers of indescribable beauty. Some of these colours were cognizable; but there were tones too that he had no way to describe, so wondrous were their hues. Great trees spread their massive limbs across the foreground, their outstretched boughs elegant in their reach. Many were of great age, and bore fruit that much resembled bright and sparkling jewels, pendant upon their frames. His senses bore to him all these undiminished, as if he were a newborn babe awakened for the first time. His sharp hearing could pick out a subtle breeze blowing gently over the land, a soft sussuration, a reassuring murmuring that lulled his mind into quiet tranquillity; his skin shivered, caressed by these same gentle, soft and fluttering swirls, sending a thrill of pleasure through his body. It was only then that he noticed not a single ache or pain in his entire frame. His thoughts dwelt idly on a recollection that seemed to be fading fast, a strange echoing of something from another time, that drifted away into the air. All the while the penetrating perfumes from the blossoms assailed his nostrils, stimulating him, lifting his thoughts higher and higher.

He stood up, and the movement was effortless. Again he had that vague notion that surely there should be some resistance, an inertia that would burden every movement. And yet his body rose effortlessly, as if born on a zephyr. He gazed about him at this foreign land. He had no idea of how he had come to be here, no intimation at all. He looked down at his body. He discovered that he was attired in a long, flowing robe of the purest gold, which drifted languorously about him, light as the finest of silks though it had the appearance of that beaten metal. It fell in swathes about him, shimmering and glowing, as if the sun rested within its fabric. He could not tell of what it was fashioned, either by touch or by sight, yet it was as light as the most gossamer wisp of cloud. It neither chafed nor irritated his skin, as it swept about him, shadowing his every move. His gaze fell for a moment upon his arms where they emerged from the long sleeves of the gown. The pale skin

glowed with perfection, a satin surface corrupted by neither blemish nor scar. Yet it was not lifeless, for a network of fine, red veins and capillaries traversed the flesh indicating that here stood no cold and insensible statue.

He returned his attention to the landscape around him, and stood ensnared by its beauty. He could see small, brilliantly coloured birds darting through the air, for all the world like delicate jewels. Their feathers glowed with blues and scarlets, yellows and greens, a veritable rainbow of magical tones, and a display so clear and intense that they were as fiery darts cast by some mischievous divine into the skies, flashing like bright sapphires and rubies, or glowing garnets and emeralds. They moved so swiftly that they seemed like trails of flame in the air. He espied some of their number resting on the branches of a nearby tree, and his ears could pick out their calls, a sound so clear and melodic that tears came to his eyes, so enraptured was he by their song. He stood there in momentary time, captivated by the sights and sounds of this new world.

Doubtless he would have remained in this entranced state much longer if he had not noticed some figures approaching him across the plain from his left. At first he thought that they had advanced from a position quite close to where he presently stood. But then he recalled how his vision, so acute, could see far into the distance, and it was only their scale that alerted him to the fact that they were still some way off; his sense of this dimension remained utterly confused. However, he could already distinguish clearly their facial aspects and forms, and these revealed the approach of three men and one woman. Their countenances were exquisitely beautiful, with refined and symmetrical features, their pale skin like his, quite flawless. They moved effortlessly, seeming to glide over the intervening ground and, though they advanced with no great haste, they covered the distance in what seemed a matter of seconds. As they drew nearer he could more fully appreciate their excellence. All were dressed in the same manner as he, though their robes were of different colours. They were of distinguished proportion, tall but strong, the shape and length of their limbs in harmony with the whole. Their faces were of an androgynous form. Indeed, it was only possible to ascertain that one was female from the more curvaceous elements of her physique. All possessed a kind of beauty that surpassed the usual conventions of masculine and feminine. Their bone structure was elegant yet powerful, and there was an economy of strength that radiated from their features, coupled with a sensitivity and softness that were truly ethereal. Their eyes glowed with a warmth and intensity that were altogether unbearable to receive; it was at once luminous, yet overflowing with wisdom and compassion; a glance in itself was sufficient to lift one's spirits to the very heights. They came to a halt directly before him, welcoming him with their presence, silent but clearly appraising him and his sudden appearance in their land. Suddenly his senses were assailed by the most delightful of odours, perfumes so exotic and complex that he fell back in confusion, momentarily overwhelmed by their powerful intoxication. To his surprise he seemed to sense a meaning in these luxuriant smells. The others remained quiet, still regarding him with that same calm curiosity. But they appeared a little taken aback by his reaction. He struggled to regain his composure despite what might almost be termed an olfactory assault. Within the barrage of perfumes he began to translate this strange new language into concepts with which he was more familiar. It would seem that within this extraordinary sensual communication the strangers were welcoming him; and as his skill grew the message had now become quite unmistakable. He could detect a slight hint of polite inquiry as to

whence he came, and perhaps an interrogatory whiff requesting his name. Quite bewildered, he attempted to reply in a manner that was customary to his species; but as he moved his lips no sounds issued forth. He reassured himself with the recollection that he was confident that this was the usual mode of expression that he had employed in the past; but again the words simply would not come. The four looked on, a degree of inquisition in their manner, trying to fathom what he might be essaying. It was the woman who first seemed to grasp what was passing between them. She turned to her companions and an exchange of quite extraordinarily beautiful fragrances floated through the air between them. With his new-found skill, he could now catch the essence of her communication. It would seem that they had deduced that he must be newly arrived, and not at all familiar with the mode of language here. They laughed, a remarkable cascade of scents, quite different in tone from those employed in communicating their language; but the nuances, though subtle, were clear. They turned back to him, and quickly clarified his situation. They recalled for his benefit their own distant pasts and how they had come to reside in this realm - though it had been so long now that they had almost forgotten those times. It emerged that he had, in some fashion as yet unspecified, passed from his old life to this heavenly realm. He had been reborn a full-grown adult, for there was no infantile stage in this world. They again welcomed him. With great patience and consideration they told him all that they could about his new world, including their own unique mode of communication. It seemed that all that was required to answer was simply to think what he wanted to 'say'; the scent glands contained in his skin would quite naturally exude the perfumes that would convey those concepts. He attempted this and, to his astonishment, perfectly and fluently expressed his wishes. The conversation from that point onwards was most enlightening. His companions indicated that time here proceeded in quite a different mode from other worlds. It could not exactly be described in the manner of the 'passing' of time, nor could it be said that he would reside here for eternity. These complex ideas were quite easily grasped in their perfumed form but our language unfortunately cannot adequately translate these intricacies. Whilst he resided in this place he would have need of neither food nor drink though he could consume both if he wished. There was an abundance of trees and plants supplying both fruits and berries to meet this unnecessary hunger, and these were of an unparalleled delight and succulence. The waters of the rivers and streams were of a most pure and sweet taste, easily sufficient to allay a thirst that needed no quenching. There were no wild creatures to fear, no predators against which he should be on guard. All his requirements would be supported in this delightful place. He could pass his time, so to speak, in any way that he chose; in conversation, or in contemplation upon his condition in this most beautiful of worlds. It had already struck him that his own conceptions possessed a most striking lucidity. Indeed, his thought processes were extremely clear and uncluttered, perfectly formed and framed, and passing serenely through his consciousness, the most abstract of considerations displaying a kind of pellucidity that was quite remarkable. His perspicacity seemed extraordinarily developed: it was sharp and clear, and totally devoid of its customary confusion or opacity. Any idea that he cared to focus his mind upon, any philosophical question that he raised within his consciousness, each was effortlessly and instantly penetrated and resolved. Seemingly, and in concord with this extraordinary precision of thought, his emotional states too were of a steady blissful tenor, which did not appear to diminish; a kind of warm excitement, and an exhilaration that neither disturbed nor tired him. His whole being was suffused with this equanimous sentiment, expressive of both love and compassion, these seeming to exude an influence in every direction and without discrimination, extending even to the blades of

grass beneath his feet and to the jewelled pebbles that lay on the beds of the streams; and this beneficence was unstained by any kind of fear or anxiety.

The others had retired to some distance, to observe him disporting within his thoughts. Finally, and assured of his well being, they left him to his own reflections. He remained there, timelessly drinking in the sights and smells and sounds, ever delighting in his own company. The sky darkened faintly as evening fell. He scanned the skies carefully, seeking some source for this diminishing effulgence; but he could detect nothing. The heavens possessed an immanent radiance, which had now almost indiscernibly dimmed, leaving the bright landscape to settle into more sombre hues. Though he felt no need to rest he lay upon the blossom bed, and fell promptly into a profound slumber. He was assailed by dreams both soft and vivid, full of unfathomable and unspeakable significance, which enfolded him in a warmth of quite unimaginable depth.

Thus he sojourned in this delightful realm. There was no counting of the days or months or years, for there were none to measure. There was no oppressive ennui, no sense of languor or prolixity. Each boundless moment seemed as fresh and new as the next. Occasionally he would converse with his neighbours, who seemed to appear always and without fail, at the point when he felt most inclined towards company. Similarly, when he chose to visit them, they would dependably welcome him, as if they had been anticipating his arrival at that precise instant. All of this world's inhabitants seemed to lead solitary lives, taking the same pleasure in their own company as he did in his. On a number of occasions the woman visited him. They talked in their own manner, roving through thoughts and sensations, emotions and perceptions, with a fluidity that was prodigious, and in a mode that transported him into the mysteries of their minds and deeper still, even beneath conscious thought, and into ideal realms more marvellous than the ones they customarily inhabited. However, there was one notable occasion where their communication took on a quite different form. At this interview the female indicated that she would take pleasure in communion. At first he could not interpret the sense of what she was trying to empathize. She explained lucidly the nature of that contact, and again asked if he would assent. He had at no point since his arrival felt the slightest stirrings of sexual interest in her; but he now realised this to be the gist of her intent; or at least as best he could translate it. He indicated his approval more from a sense of curiosity rather than any desire. She reached out towards him and very gently and softly placed her finger upon his brow. Suddenly he was assailed by sensations of a completely unfamiliar character. Where factual or emotional communications possessed quite distinct tones, these were of a wholly different order. There was conveyed, if one could describe it in words, an amalgam of bliss, ecstasy, rapture and tranquillity; all were perfectly combined to heighten the impact, both individually and collectively, of these qualities. The contact was brief but, for all that, powerful. He was left with a sense of enhanced completeness, an experience that in itself suggested, perfect though this world seemed, there was yet a deficiency; this was his first intimation that paradise existed at some distance from his present condition. He was to experience this contact only once during his abiding, but so powerful was this that it burned deeply into his consciousness.

And so the moment expanded, with experience upon experience, but not once descending into gross familiarity or boredom. It was as if on each awakening he was reborn afresh, to imbibe the sights and sounds, odours and tastes, and tactile impressions of this wondrous

place. No hint of world-weariness or ennui interfered with his pleasure. Timelessness passed onwards, immeasurable and ungraspable. There was no apparent change or ageing in this precious place. He seemed as youthful and vigorous as when he first arrived. Similarly, there was no indication or sign of degeneration or decay in anything about him; death seemed to be a stranger here, unknown and alien.

One morning, and when he had wakened from his customary vivid slumbers, he noticed the slightest of aches in the region of his chest. So extraordinary was this that for a moment he experienced what might have been called anxiety - if it might be said that he could feel such an emotion. He was quite at a loss to comprehend the sensation. He pondered on this feeling within his physical sensibility, and the tremor that it had sent through his body. How could it be called? Or reconciled? What would the frame of reference be? On the next awakening the same thing occurred. He repeated the process, of searching for some basis for grasping and encapsulating the event. Now he was seized with a growing uneasiness. If anything it was this 'anxiety' more than the actual physical sensation that was causing him the greater problem; the strangeness of it, and his inability to fit this into his understanding of this world. It was as if something quite extraneous had intruded into this place: an element, both unnecessary and jarring. The physical sensation had gradually receded in significance, and he became entirely preoccupied with the more central problem, that of reconciliation. As the matter played upon his mind he found himself roaming about those delightful scenes, experiencing what can only be described as a slight annoyance with his surroundings. He began to find the unchanging landscape irksome, its unrelenting similitude an irritant. This displeasure and anxiety grew, and came to pervade his whole being. He shunned too the company of his friends. They would visit him from time to time, but now he would wave them away. Of course they withdrew immediately, recognising his need to be alone. If he but knew it they could easily have explained his condition, but their wisdom dictated that this was not a matter on which they might intervene.

The light had grown brighter, which signified what passed for morning in this world. He had awakened to discover that the ground beneath his body seemed unusually uncomfortable, hard and replete with intrusive edges. His sleep had been restless, and his dreams wild and disturbing, full of unknown portents that he could not distinguish. He struggled to his feet. As he looked downwards he noticed with some astonishment that the earth beneath him appeared to be growing transparent. He viewed this new phenomenon with some fascination, and not a little disquiet. The colours seemed to bleed away, as it were, leaving a clear window upon the ground into which he now peered with some curiosity. He could see far below some thick, puffy, white objects, which floated over a grey haze, this last appearing to recede even further underneath. It suddenly occurred to him that these could only be clouds, and that what emerged from under these was the surface of some distant land. With this knowledge his vision strengthened and clarified, and now he could clearly perceive this far removed terrain.

Finally, his telescoping gaze brought him in sight of the body of a man lying by a stream, its edges frozen in the grip of ice. Within him the recognition grew that this fellow was clinging to the very limits of life. And there stirred a faint memory, the vaguest recollection, that this being had played some part in his life, albeit in a very distant past. More than that there arose in him an overwhelming sense of pity, and with such force that he was almost

cast to the ground. He could see clearly that this poor creature was dying from hunger, and sensed the man's pain cutting deeply into his own body.

Time and space converged within him. He/she was a fawn, cast forth into the world by his/her mother; then a yearling, and finally a young adolescent, antlers growing and thickening. Now she/he was wandering through some thickets near a stream. At one and the same time he was far above, looking down through this window into a distant world, and then here too, standing by the stream, he/she gazed upon the fallen man lying nearby. A searing pain again shot through her, a terrible agony, and her consciousness grew dim, and she fell to her knees into the freezing waters, collapsing finally on to her side. And then there was darkness again

THE DESCENT

Cold penetrated through the sleep of the man as the first faint touches of dawn were caressing the sky. It was a most inhospitable season both without and within, a chill air enshrouding the cold emptiness of his belly. He struggled to wake through the freezing fog that enveloped his mind, only to rouse to that interminable pain that racked his body. As he lifted from his uneasy slumbers he could faintly recall the lingering echoes of a dream, the last in a series of strange visions had followed him all his life. He could dimly recall within this reverie he had been some kind of great bird, soaring through the air on powerful golden wings, searching for something; but he knew not what. He had flown for miles upon miles, scanning the blue-grey distances, a great desolation penetrating to his bones, and carrying a loss so deep that it manifested itself even in the physical, in an ache that reached to his very soul. Now he was awake and that hurt had been translated, and had become the hard ground upon which he lay. He had never spoken to anyone about these visions; they haunted him, and he endured them alone.

About him his fellows were stirring with groans and grunts. Not one was eager to face either the dreadful cold or the dangers of another dawn. One by one their bodies stirred into life. The cave in which they dwelt could shelter nearly one hundred of the tribe; but there was nothing like that number here now. The winter had been harsh and many of the old and the sicklier had perished. Even some of the healthy had succumbed to an unknown illness, coughing their life's blood away, with both lack of food and warmth contributing to their untimely demise. Now they barely mustered twenty-five all told; and they were on the very brink of extinction. They needed able hunters, men and women who could track prey, and feed their ever-falling numbers; healthy males and females, too, to breed so that their children could defend the tribe and their lands in the future. Although the other natives in the region fared no better than they, enemy scouts had been sighted near the stream that flowed through their valley, and they knew that soon they would have to fight again. Matters became worse when food was so meagre; men were desperate, and prepared to risk all to seize what they could.

He moved, groaning slightly with the effort, and forced himself to get to his feet, his body sickened with cold and hunger. His eyes were sunken deep into their sockets, and the deprivation had etched itself into his face. There was that gnawing emptiness in his belly that never seemed to go away, a constant accompaniment for as long as he could remember. Fatigue flooded every limb, leaving them trembling and frail. He looked around at his friends. All had that same despondent and defeated air, anticipating another desperate day hunting for food that did not exist, the cold sucking their life away moment by moment. He dragged himself wearily to the cave entrance where he looked out into the valley below. The sky was crystal clear, and a sharp, icy wind floated high over the freezing lands as these disappeared into the horizon. This site had been chosen for its clear vantage over the land about it. No surprise assault could be made against them here. There were rock scree that lay above and below upon the slope. Any attempt to approach would be heralded by the noise of falling debris. It was fortunate indeed that they needed

no guard, for none of them were in any condition to undertake such a task. He leaned against the rock wall, gasping with even this slight exertion, and peered back into the gloom of the cave. He could make out a few of the others in the half-light; they did not seem inclined to venture forth. Some of the babies, the few that had survived winter, were crying in the darkness, screaming out their hunger, with their mothers helpless to feed them. He and a few of the other younger men had hunted on the previous day. They had travelled many miles searching for game. They had sighted some deer but had been too weak to pursue their quarry, their hunger and exhaustion disabling them completely, even for this vital task. Wearily he again turned back to look down the valley. He could not allow himself to think any further for there was no other choice. The freezing grip of fear enveloped his heart, attacking both his body and his will. If he could not summon up the resolve then he would surely die, and the tribe would be weakened further by the loss of yet another hunter and warrior. He had to move, to try once again. But throughout his whole being echoed the certainty of failure and death; and his resolve was almost extinguished.

He did not even bother to look behind him as he stumbled down the slope. If any were to follow they would; and if not His frail condition caused him to slip, and he fell forward, sliding down the incline, a stream of rocks and pebbles tumbling around him. So tired was he that he simply allowed himself to hurtle forwards, raising his hands only to protect his face. Finally he arrived near the bottom of the gradient, raising a cloud of hoar frost and dust as he hit the frozen ground. He lay there dazed and bruised, the torrent of rocks and stones still falling around him, exhaustion and pain battering his body. Grimly he again pulled himself to his feet, and climbed down the remainder of the slope. He could hear no noises behind him so he guessed that none were following. He took the trail through a small wood of spindly trees, their grey branches and trunks rotten and broken. Everything about him was covered in a thick layer of sharp, white frost. The whole landscape had an almost mystical character garlanded as it was in this unforgiving but beautiful coating of freezing ice. But to his eyes it signified nothing more than the cold harshness of their lives, an uncaring blankness that gave no comfort. He was so careless and tired that he barely noticed as a branch struck his face; but then he felt a coil of blood dripping from the wound to his forehead. He stumbled onwards with just the desperate realisation that he had to keep moving forwards sustaining him, punishing him with its merciless drive. He proceeded in this fashion and moved deeper into the valley, the ground gradually levelling out before him. The only sounds that he could hear were the irregular rhythm of his footsteps, slipping and sliding over the frozen ground.

His sight was now almost totally obscured by the blood dripping down into his eyes; but he was too weary to wipe it away. Finally he came upon the stream that had over the millennia carved out this river valley, and which was home to his tribe. The edges of the watercourse were frozen solid, but the water trickled freely though sluggishly down its centre. If there were any game to be discovered in the area this was where it might be found. The animals – those few that had survived the freezing conditions - would come down to water here in the early hours of the morning. He stared hopelessly around him; but no creatures were to be seen; deep within his heart the despair rose up again to overwhelm him. His resources were exhausted and he knew that death must come soon, for cold and hunger would see to that. He fell to the ground, a deadly tiredness invading every part of his being. He could hear the sounds of water gurgling gently past his prone

body, and a layer of silence seemed to fall about him. His hearing grew dull, and everything felt distant, quite unreal. The cold insidiously took hold of him, ready to carry him out of this world, and with it came a curious warmth that penetrated even to his bones. He could feel sleep tugging at his eyes, pulling them blessedly shut. Then, through the closing fog, he vaguely sensed some movement, a vibration that shook the ground ever so gently. He dismissed it, as a part of a dying dream. There – again - he felt rather than heard a slight thud. Despite his weakened condition he forced his eyes open, and managed to roll his body over in the direction from which he believed the noise emanated; but even this small effort was almost beyond him. He squinted towards the memory of the sound. He thought he detected a slight movement. It was then he glimpsed, out of the corner of his eye, a rush of russet and gold, and the merest blur of colour. He exerted himself further for it occurred to him that this might be the very last thing that he would see before his spirit finally gave way. He shook his head, as much to clear his mind as his sight. There, but a few feet away, he saw the most beautiful of creatures, standing quite still and gazing at him inquisitively: a fine, red deer. He knew that he had never seen anything quite so splendid, nor so alluring. Perhaps this was one of those spirit creatures of which the shaman had spoken, welcoming him at his entry into the spirit world. Or maybe a long dead ancestor sent to conduct him into the concourse of his elders, all of those who had already passed on to the other side. The deer made a movement, and he could hear the sounds of its hooves as it delicately scabbled over the rocks. He groaned aloud his sorrow. This was a kind of cruelty, that such a beautiful beast should be sent to remind him of the vitality of life just as he was being ushered so callously from it. The deer gazed at him steadily; it showed no fear, nor did it seem inclined to flee. Could it be that she had sensed his weakened condition, that he posed no threat? The two remained caught in the moment, staring at each other: the dying man and the sublime animal. Then, as if a screen had been drawn away from her eyes, there appeared a gleam, a spark that completely transformed her dull gaze, a momentary flash, and the bright patina of intelligence betrayed itself as something passed between them. The beast had been transformed; no more an animal but a messenger. Something divine had possessed the creature, and now struggled to commune with him. It lasted but a fraction of a second and then the deer's blank and mindless gaze returned. Suddenly the doe fell to its knees, and then the rest of its body followed, toppling slowly to the ground. The shock pulled him from his reverie. A sudden vitality flooded through his body. He struggled to his feet, swaying slightly with the effort, and managed to stagger into the stream and wade across to the motionless creature. She was dead. There was no sign as to the cause; there was not a mark upon her body. The pelt was undamaged and the beast appeared to be in the prime of life. Gradually, and as the surprise ebbed from his body, his pained hunger reasserted itself. He knew he had to somehow get the carcass back to his people. He could not leave it where it was. There would be many hungry creatures that would quickly sense the death, and they would come urgently, seeking their share. He knew also that his cries would not carry back to the cave. He had no choice but to try and drag the body homewards by himself. He lashed its feet together with some thick grasses that he had pulled from the ground, his hands slipping on the cold, white, biting leaves. He grasped the hooves and started the long, slow struggle, to heave the dead weight back along the trail towards the cave mouth. Despite the numbing chill he soon found himself sweating profusely with the effort. He drew upon all his reserves of energy and, with head lowered, fought his way back along the path. At each step his heart pounded, as if it would press forth from his body. His whole frame ached with the almost superhuman exertion of his labour. Every

step was dragged from his depths, and each pace seemed the last that he could summon up. After what seemed an age he came to the lower slopes that lay beneath the cave, and raised a halloo to rouse his comrades. His cries, though weak, carried up the hill, and he could see some movement above. When the others caught sight of his burden the entire clan was transformed. They rushed down the slope as one, animated by the vision of such a rich trophy, and with new-found vigour. With much noisy chattering and excited shouting the body of the deer was quickly carried back up the hill to safety. The tribe immediately fell upon the creature, eagerly ripping into it, gorging themselves on its flesh and innards. In but a short space the creature had been stripped down to its bones, and even these the adults chewed upon and crushed between their teeth, until the very marrow was sucked out. When they had sated their hunger the questions poured forth as to how the hero had come upon the animal. They listened to his story with astonishment, scarcely believing his, and their own good fortune. So enthralled were they by his account that he had to repeat the tale several times. It was as if the savour of the story lent gusto to their recent meal. Every detail was examined with excited curiosity; all that he had seen and felt. For some reason, which was not clear even to himself, he decided not to tell them of that strange exchange between him and the beast; of that glance that seemed to betoken an intelligence. He was even persuaded that he had imagined the whole episode. After all, in his weakened physical condition and in the state of mind that that conduced, how could he be sure that this had taken place at all? But for the rest of his life he could not forget it; and he never completely dismissed the matter.

The death of the deer marked a dramatic change in the fortunes of the tribe. The long series of catastrophes that had brought them to the point of extinction seemed happily reversed. The long cold season lifted and the sun again shone warmly in the sky. Game that had abandoned the valley returned in large numbers to the region. With these beneficent omens the tribe regained its strength, as if some evil curse had been lifted. The hero of that day attained a powerful standing in the tribe. His own abilities and qualities would have assured him of this anyway, but his role on that day secured his position. His fellows held to the belief, true or not, that he had brought good luck to them. Now that he was attired in the garb of the mystic and wise man, saviour and saint, many sought his advice, coming to him to resolve their disputes and quarrels. As time passed his reputation spread, of his great wisdom and fairness. People would travel from far away to seek his counsel. He took a wife and then another, such was his status in the tribe. They bore him many sons and daughters and, with the growth of his clan, his influence became even greater. Finally, in accordance with tribal tradition and with the death of the incumbent chief, he assumed that mantle. Under his leadership the tribe continued to flourish. By a series of skilfully negotiated treaties and marriages peace was established - and strengthened - with their neighbours. Year followed year, and under his wise guidance all prospered.

But the passage of the years led inevitably to the approach of that old foe, one that he had so adroitly evaded. He grew old and frail and there came a time when, with due ceremony, he transferred his powers and responsibilities to his eldest son. He continued to advise and counsel the young man but gradually withdrew from even these roles as the latter became more proficient. His first wife died soon afterwards, which was a great sadness for him. The grief of the loss aged him suddenly, and he seemed to falter. Many of his friends believed that he never fully recovered from this shock. Then the old enemy

struck a further blow, and his second wife too succumbed to old age; he was left to continue alone.

He was blind now and entering the last year of his life if he but knew it. Each morning he would sit in the sun, enjoying its warm and consoling glow upon his skin. He would remember increasingly that cold season so many years ago, which had nearly extinguished his people. Memories crowded upon memories, jostling in his mind for attention. Frequently one of his many grandchildren would sit by his side, and ask him to recount the stories of those days; but it all seemed as a dream now. They would always want to hear the tale of the deer. For some reason that incident alone seemed to have survived the passing of the years, undiminished in its clarity. There he was, lying near the stream, his life ebbing away. Here was the sound of the deer coming down to water's edge, its steps ringing in his ears. Now he was struggling to raise himself from the ground. Yet still he could not bring himself to mention that strange light that had glowed in the deer's eyes.

It was an autumn day and the sun was very low in sky. It was approaching evening and there was a biting chill in the air. Winter was near and he could feel its icy fingers reaching into his bones. Despite this he had asked to be brought down to the stream. He liked to sit there upon the bank, and listen to the soft and gentle plashing sounds of water as it rolled over stones that layered the rivulet's bed. It was a melody that he treasured the more, for his other senses had become increasingly dulled. On this eve he was accompanied by his youngest great grandchild. The old man had lived to an extraordinary age and knew that his time was near. As usual the lad was asking him about the old days when even he, grandfather, was a young man. He could hear the the boy's voice echoing in his ears, but he felt somewhat distracted. He could not quite make out the meaning of the words. There was another sound drifting in the air. It was not the stream, nor the wind blowing gently through the leaves. It had a strange familiarity to it, something that recalled the distant past. He strained to hear it clearly. It was a soft exhalation, of warm air blowing through nostrils, and a slight huffing, of an animal breathing. His eyes opened and yet again he was a young man, laying by the stream. Opposite, and upon the other bank, he could see the deer. It was gazing at him intently, its eyes bright with intelligence. But there was something more than that; they held in their depths a sapience that was unknown even among men. That look passed between them, of the kind exchanged between the closest and deepest of friends; here was a warmth and a knowing, and an intimacy sealed a long time ago. He felt the tears rolling down his cheek, for his old friend had truly returned. And then it was as if all these years had been but a dream. His wives and children were mere fantasies, that had floated into and out of his life; that glance of intense communion had reduced all to the slightest of fancies, so real was it in its depths. Once again he could see the deer standing over him, a gentle smile playing over its human/animal face. With a look of such kindness and love, of compassion and understanding, that his heart had completely melted within that gaze; and his spirit passed on. The boy knelt by his great grandfather. He stared down at him, and saw the tears that lay wet upon the old man's face. His own tears fell, to mingle with those of his beloved ancestor. He called out to the skies, to the earth and to the waters, for in his grief he knew that a great man had died. He lifted the slight and frail body, and carried his burden back to the tribe.

For many days and many nights the whole tribe grieved their loss, and much ceremony

and many rituals were performed, to safeguard the departing spirit of their father. People from near and far travelled to make their leave-taking of the elder. In accordance with custom he was given a sky burial. His body was carried down to his favourite place by the stream and laid out on a wooden bier, itself supported on tall wooden stands, which held the corpse high in the air. They made their farewells and then departed, leaving their chieftain's flesh quite exposed to the elements. For many days the great eagles of that region feasted on the cadaver, stripping it clean to the bones. When the animals had finished their task the men of the tribe returned and collected the few remnants, and buried these in the earth next to the stream, a final resting place, which they marked with a small cairn of stones. This became one of the tribe's holy places and was much revered. It was a refuge where any who were troubled would bring themselves, there to reflect and meditate. It possessed an atmosphere of quiet and tranquillity that brought much comfort to those who rested nearby. They knew that they were in the presence of wisdom and valued it highly, for the spirits blessed this place.

And so that eagle consciousness whirled endlessly from world to world, from being to being ... and the universe rose and fell, and was born and destroyed in a cycle of becoming and re-becoming, without beginning and without conclusion. And then it came to earth....

THE GHOSTS OF EARTH

The soft fluttering tendrils of dust floated gently through the air, twisting and sinuously shifting, a cloying game of sparkle and flash as the motes flickered in the eye of the sun, its glare burning down through the skies. Light touches skipped across the space, flicking mischievously their flurries, falling into fresh spasms of play as these fine particulates spun through their dance. An eye peered curiously from the shadow of a doorway, watching this careless motion with both joy and envy. How would it be to play so thoughtlessly, without consequence, and no mind to burden the motion? The other remained tightly closed, the better to focus on the tiny players that disported so hypnotically and elegantly. The watcher might have wished for a third eye for from the darkness behind a form quietly crept up on him. A hand was raised, and the sunlight caught the flash of the blow upon the unfortunate's head. "So again I catch you dreaming, foolish". The strike had spun the watcher around. As he lost his balance he stumbled a few paces back into the yard. His assailant followed him quickly, his hand raised for yet another attack. Now, in the daylight, all could be seen. He was a young lad, perhaps no more than a dozen years of age, slightly built and fair haired. His skin was pale, a marked contrast to the dark and hirsute visage of his assailant. The man stood over the young fellow, his shadowy face darkened further by his evident rage. "Fool. Is there time for your stupidity? The light's failing and you're not yet on your way to bring the cattle into the shelter. You stand there, gazing like an idiot into the air. Well?" The challenge rang around the yard but the boy knew that no answer would be the best reply. His uncle would be further enraged if he made any attempt to respond, or to excuse his actions. He wanted the boy to speak up for then he would have his chance, and the blows would follow fast and hard upon him, as they had many times in the past. He looked down to the ground, his gaze buried in the earth, and as far away from the light as he could stare. He could not see it but he could feel the man shaking with rage but a few paces away. Inwardly he prayed as hard as he could that the blows would not follow. He must not wince or draw back, for that would be the signal and the attack would begin, only to be concluded when his oppressor's breath would catch; but then he would be lain upon the floor, crouched against that frenzy of violence. He had given up seeking an answer to this man's appetite for brutality. There was no meaning but to endure and wait – but wait for what? He had no clue.

He could hear the man's breathing, a heavy rasping and almost wanton sound; but not the shuffling of leather against cloth, as his oppressor might raise his fist. "Get out fool. Into the fields and bring the beasts in. There'll be no food for the wastrel tonight". He turned and, with a grimacing smile, moved back into the darkness of the dwelling. The boy turned away and, with a strange joy, walked across the courtyard, his body shaking with fear but filled with relief at his uncle's extraordinary beneficence. Strange that the mere absence of terror should fill a heart with such lightness; and yet it did. He pushed past the wicker fencing that lay across part of the yard, and walked down past the mud walls of the cow byre and out into the fields that surrounded the farm. His uncle was right in one respect; the light was falling fast, and the shadows stretched ever longer before him as he strode along the path towards the pastures, and the herd had been gathered there in the early

morning. His immediate joy had subsided somewhat, and again his grumbling mind started its litany in his head. Aching as it was from the blow dealt by his uncle, the pain within started to grow afresh as his mind protested the injustice. For as long as he could recall his uncle had treated him thus. From the death of his mother, but a few years before, he had been placed under this man's guardianship, if it could be called that. The thought of his mother - a sister to this monstrous tormentor - could barely be countenanced. How strange the twists of ancestry that one so sweet and kind in disposition should be from the same root as such an antithesis in character embodied in her brother. The question rose within him, as it had done so many times in the past – how could it be that she had so misjudged the fellow as to leave her only son in his care and charge? He shook his head to rid his mind of these distressing reflections; questions and more questions, and nothing to hold back the tide of uncertainty.

His thoughts carried him along the dusty pathway as much as his legs, until suddenly there appeared before him the herd. They had dispersed themselves across the broad, sparse pasture, cropping upon the clumps of stringy, brown fronds that passed for vegetation here. The year had been cruel, and the summer rains had not fallen so fruitfully. The ground was stony hard, grazing against the soles of his bare feet, and the dust swirled upwards at each step, testimony to its parched state. But the beasts were of a hardy branch, and well used to such provender. They stared up at him as he approached and lazily stirred their bodies around, as they marched in heavy but determined files towards him. At the sound of their hooves the more distant beasts fell into line, and soon the whole herd was converging upon him. His envy now took a new direction. How easy to live like this? How simple the steady pace of these beasts – untroubled, unthinking, uncaring - their dull, friendly but vacuous eyes that let the world slip by, to hurtle easily into the past that they could never recall, and into a future beyond their grasp; only the swift slip of the knife to separate them from this moment and that dark journey into eternity. Besides these his burden seemed a dreadful one. Moment by moment the thoughts and fears blasted and sputtered through his mind, a fury and a tempest in which he could barely keep his footing. Against the steady pace of their life his world would erupt again into the chaos of his fate. Fancies and dreams would evaporate in a second, and he would be thrust back into doubt. Yet how could he rank himself with these fool animals? This could only be a betrayal of his birthright as a human being. Poor creatures that they were, the price of their apparent serenity was high; and his, almost beyond payment.

He gazed on quietly as the beasts gathered around him, standing so closely that he could feel the hot clouds of their breath upon his face. He passed a glance along their ranks and they looked back, the unseeing blankness of their stares reflecting back his own unknowing. He turned and started on his way back towards the farm buildings, the herd falling in behind, stepping steadily along the way as they did each morning and evening. Sometimes he found the rhythm of their hooves upon the ground oddly comforting, but this evening it was not so. It accented, if anything, his own disquiet, and the anger that lay upon his heart boiled upwards. He could sense its pressure rise through his chest, and then into his throat as the muscles there tightened. He could not endure this life much longer; but he knew no other way. His prison had no walls, no gaoler, and no lock. All around the country spread widely, its greying colours merging into the soft rise of the hills that bordered the district upon every side; and far above the darkening sky rose on and on until it touched - nothing. He could walk in any direction and none could hinder him, not

even his uncle. Yet the fear of the unknown held him as securely as any wall might; and doubt was his captor. The anger swept up in waves, but now it had a new object. He must be a coward for no other would tolerate this life; and a coward such as he was contemptible. And so there it was; he deserved fully such a fate as this. He was but a scared child with neither the wit nor the strength of character to oppose his fortune, and with only one recourse: to submit. This is the lot of all that lack that essential vitality, that vigorous state which seeks out the unknown and embraces it fully. His sentence therefore must be that of the lacklustre and spiritless creature, which bows to its own poor fortune, as do these poor dumb creatures now, that follow him so obediently; they accept what is their due, and thus must he. The fury had abated now and instead he had sunk into that dark corner within, where it enfolded him in its horrible but familiar embrace. His home was a place of desperation, and there was to be no future for him but the endless refrain of his own disdain.

The light was failing fast both within and without. The outlines of the farm were softened by the evening glow, and the sun cast its last long shadows across the ground even as the herd paced their way back homewards. He stepped into the yard and stood to one side as his charges filed dutifully into the sheds, the ground already strewn with hay, and the baskets filled with grain for their evening feed. He looked behind him at the doorway that led into the dwelling. He could see the reddy glow of firelight seeping out beneath the door frame, there to reflect gently upon the cobbled stones. Again a wave of envy rose up within him, as he wondered at these creatures' careless and unthinking nature, contrasted so sharply with his own, which was engorged with opposition and strife. He decided he did not wish to join his uncle in their evening meal. The repast would be conducted in a customary silence with perhaps the occasional grunt from his guardian, as that monster wolfed down his food. The man was an animal but lacked even the grace of these poor beasts. The boy smiled at the comparison; even in his pain the human spirit fought against that suffocating tide of suffering that swept through his fragile form. He was defeated in all ways but one; for within his heart, if he but knew it, there lay that vital spark that would not give way, that would not surrender. No. He did not feel inclined to share the dubious company of the only family left to him. His uncle would not care if he returned or not; and all the more food for him! It was not fear that turned him away from that fire lit doorway but a resignation that tonight, at least, he could be alone with his own dark thoughts. The herd were safely secured and it just remained for him to fasten the gates upon them. He pulled the wooden bars through their guides and, without again looking at the hut, he moved across the yard and passed through the opening onto the track. The sun had almost set now, and he could just see its shimmering rays sharp against the brows of the hills far away to the east. The sky was almost black now. As the night drew in, the stars grew brighter above. He quickened his pace, driven by a strange anxiety that rose inexorably within his breast. There was something precious here, and he could not risk its loss. His uncle would not question his absence, yet he was stirred to hurry forward to preclude even that faint chance.

He advanced along the path, his heart pounding with an unaccountable anticipation. Around him the night drew down from the heavens, and the daytime sounds of the creatures of the field and sky gradually faded back into the shadows. Even the gentle breeze had now stilled, and he was left quite alone, with only the sounds of his muffled footsteps shuffling along the ground, his feet lifting and falling softly, as he tiptoed along

the track. Ahead the sky was a deep purple, with only the faintest outlines of light from the dying sun to silhouette the distant hilltops. He looked upwards to admire the beauty of the night sky, which flung itself far above the land. As he drew further and further away from the farmstead his anxiety diminished by degrees, and he settled down to a steady but even pace, covering the ground in long, easy strides. The mere pleasure of this motion stilled his body and mind, and he exulted in that physical calm, and the enormous sense of freedom that now spilled through him. The path headed straight out through the dry meadow lands and down to a small stream, which curled its lazy way round one of the borders of the farmstead. Even though the rains had been sparing, enough water had fallen upon the hills to send their flow even this far out into the plain. The path ended at a small pool that had formed to one side of the meandering stream. The waters were generally at their shallowest at this time of year, and yet he had never seen their levels so low as they were now. He loved to sit here of an afternoon under the shade of the tall beech trees that lined the watercourse, and stare into the murky depths of the pool, to imagine what lay beneath its surface. This was a place where his moods seemed to rise and swirl to the surface, much like the small brown fishes that darted about in this tiny, watery world. At one time he thought that the pool possessed some kind of magical and malevolent power. Indeed, on certain days there would be a such a dread about it that he could barely bring himself to sit nearby, and sometimes he had had to fight the compulsion to flee its dark menace. He would persuade himself that some frightful monster might hurl itself from those muddy depths, and fall upon him as he sat helpless upon the bank. No matter how many times he rebuked himself, that the pool, even at its deepest, was but a few inches of water, yet his imagination would argue this madness so eloquently that he would be quite convinced of the threat, and it was only with the greatest of self control that he would restrain himself from running headlong from its edge. He hesitated only because to do so would mean that he would no longer be able to observe carefully the incipient signs of the monster's arrival upon the surface, and thus his gruesome despatch would be rendered all the more horrific by its invisible advent. However, he could never quite decide whether it would be better to meet this fearsome end knowing the nature of his assailant, or whether it would be better to be consumed within this beast's jaws, yet fully ignorant of its true nature. And so, partly paralysed by this self induced fear, and partly mesmerised by its fascination, he would remain beside the dark pool, praying that his mind would still its fearful mutterings, and the waters would again return to their benign form. But then, at other times, it would possess a completely different aspect. Instead of these dark phantasmagoria he would observe the water boatmen flitting across its sticky surface, whilst beneath them the little fishes would flit by, the sunlight occasionally catching upon their scales, and revealing their silvery bellies so cunningly concealed by nature. Then the starlings that nested above in the leafy canopy would rise suddenly and without warning, seemingly called by some hidden sentry, and swirl above the fields, silently drifting clouds of fluttering wings, beating in perfect unison. At these times the pool would be like a friend, a familiar and cool haven of peace hidden away from the hot sun, which burned down day upon day over the parched fields. And so the guardians of the pool took turns in their duty, and the boy would keep them company.

But now it was night. He had never been in this place at this time, and a novel feeling arose within him. The moon had taken her station in the skies, and shed her silvery glow over the quiet lands. There was just enough light to penetrate the shield of leaves that covered the stream and the pool. The waters, by contrast, were the darkest in the

shadows, and yet blazed with a white glow where their surface lay open to the moon's gaze. He was not afraid now of the pool, for the moonlight seemed to chase away all of the mysteries that lay in its depths. He sat and stared at the bright, still waters. There was no sign of the little fishes now, and he imagined that they lay peacefully at the bottom of the waters, slumbering quietly under the night sky. To his childish mind the world was a reflection of himself and it existed according to his unspoken rules; a comforting image perhaps, and even occasionally a truthful one. He did not know it but he gained a kind of solace from this imagining. This was his world too, and for now he stayed carefully within its embrace. The night was quiet and calm, and his body and mind gradually stilled, embraced in that soothing tranquillity. He rested there for he knew not how long. The pool and its shimmering aspect enfolded his soul, and time eternal dwelt in his heart. The heat of the day had been exchanged for the soft coolness of the night, and his restless being gave up its turmoil. Imperceptibly he drifted from wakefulness into sleep, and the hidden, inner world of his darker mind drifted to the surface. Images and echoes swirled here, an amalgam of the day's sights and sounds, flowing seamlessly into one another, a scribbling rush unfolding the cipher of his waking hours. Gradually, the spectacle receded into a dark mist, that seemed to float just behind his eyes, holding him fast within a dream. From out of this sombre ether appeared a figure, which advanced towards him slowly. He could not discern its features but the gait of the form seemed familiar; yet he still could not identify it. The outline approached, moving with a kind of inexorable pace that itself brought a shiver to his ghostly mind. He wanted to retreat before this procession, but his body would not allow it. He stood frozen in a swirl of mist that drew itself about him. Now it was he who was moving towards the form, while it remained motionless. A tightness drew across his throat and he made to call out. But again his body denied him this liberty; instead the breath was caught within. He felt his body struggling against this oppression, and his whole frame shook with the effort. He could not distinguish whether it was fear or this awful tension that convulsed him the more. Whichever, the two were locked together, an inescapable bond linking them. Finally, the shape stood directly before him. He awaited its pronouncement with a dread heart. But then he thought he heard a heavy sigh. He stared intently into what might be the face of this being, anxiously seeking the source of this sound. But all that could be seen was a dark blankness: no mouth, no lips, no features at all. Suddenly, as if a veil had been drawn aside, two dark eyes appeared, and their penetrating gaze shot through him as a knife might pierce his heart. The shock and their very intensity seemed to push his body back, and he could feel himself falling. An arm reached out and grasped his elbow, drawing him abruptly upright. The eyes gazed with an horrific intensity into his own. The mist before the figure's face seemed to slowly drift aside and now he was able to see the person clearly before him. It bore the countenance of his uncle, or so it appeared, for although there was some physical resemblance this was not the man himself. The eyes had softened somewhat, and there was a look of what might be described as compassion in that otherwise fearsome gaze. His uncle in the real world was a brute and a fool, and the fellow that stood before him now was anything but these. The mist continued to clear. He could not be sure but there seemed to be something of a smile playing upon the lips of this creature. Quietly he awaited whatever was to befall him. He was quite sure that he was in the vicinity of something that was far more powerful than he, and not at all predictable. This stranger continued to hold him by the arm, either to prevent his escape or collapse, he could not tell. Not a sound issued from the apparition's lips, not even the murmur of a breath; just a dark presence, both formidable yet familiar. Gradually, and almost imperceptibly, the boy saw the fogs drift towards him, and felt the grip upon his

sleeve loosen. He raised his arms to steady himself as a sudden wave of giddiness fled through his mind, his body jolting shockingly at the sensation. The mist grew thicker and thicker. All that he could see now of the figure were those two luminous eyes gazing into his own. Then, and quite oddly, he experienced a sense of loss as this ghostly simulacrum started to drift away. Never before had he regretted being out of the presence of the real man, but now, in this unfamiliar world, even he was welcome company. Finally the fog drew down completely, and the eyes at last vanished into the gloom. But just as he thought that his companion had finally disappeared he heard a voice echoing through the twilight, which seemed to shimmer to this unworldly tone; and the words he could just discern; "Seek beneath; seek only beneath"; and then nothing.

The night sky rose darkly above his head. He found himself again lying on the damp grasses at the border of the pool. His body felt warm against the ground but he shivered with the night chills that were rising up from the earth. He could not remain here longer and yet he hesitated to return to the farm. His uncle would have long taken to his bed and he had nothing really to fear from him for the time being. Rather he exulted in the freedom that he felt resting here beneath the great dark sky with its sharp and glittering stars, their light piercing the shadowed heavens, and the vast ochre moon that illuminated the meadows and plains, as these disappeared into the softened gloom. He was disinclined to give all this up now, in exchange for the questionable comfort of a warm pile of straw. Instead, he raised himself upon his elbows, and struggled to his feet. His body ached, and his limbs were stiff from lying on the ground for so long; but he was young and the rigour left him quickly enough. He looked about him, uncertain where to proceed. If he walked for a while he could shrug off the cold and maybe find somewhere to bed down for the rest of the night. He strolled easily along the border of the pool until it rejoined the course of the stream, and thus he followed its winding way along the meadow's edge. Although he had been by this way many times before he had not traversed here by night, and the terrain seemed unfamiliar to him as it floated serenely beneath the gentle tones of the moonlight. The moon lay just behind his right shoulder, and he could see his shadow lengthily advancing ahead of him upon the ground. He followed the path with no particular aim in mind, other than to warm himself a little. An owl-hoot echoed suddenly through the silence, the jarring notes causing him to jump. He peered into the trees nearby as if he might espy the creature responsible, and chide it for its importunate calling. The night died away into the silence. But if he attended carefully even now he could just hear the rustling sounds of the night dwellers as they busied themselves in the gloom, pursuing their own obscure activities; he was by no means alone. The rivulet ran calmly on its way, its dark waters drifting lightly over the pebbles that formed the base of the channel. The clouds were rushing by overhead. From time to time they would pass over the face of the moon, and the land below would grow darker under their passage. Then she would emerge again triumphant, her bright silver serene face still gazing down upon the earth. He moved on into the unknowing night.

Beneath him through the half open window he could hear the sounds of the city floating upwards. The constant murmur of the metropolis' traffic flowed through the narrow ways, veins and arteries of the conurbation, that stretched out in every direction, seemingly to the horizon, and a buzz of industrious activity that at this very moment was annoying him almost beyond measure. 'Hesvee should not be troubled in this fashion', he thought. 'Did the world not know that he needed to concentrate on this most perplexing problem? Why

did it insist on imposing its troubling and trifling affairs upon his attention when he had far more important occasions upon which to reflect?' He was, after all, one of the Masters of Psychical Study at the most prestigious school of learning in this, the foremost city of his homeland. It was a matter of intellect, of discipline, of years of applied and constant effort that had led him to be where he was now. And there, below, was that fickle humanity, so troubled by its own ant-like activities that it must need force its foolishness upon him. He was indeed engaged upon a piece of research that must demand every ounce of his attention. The burden of the years of intense effort had marked itself on his body and face. He was of sturdy build that gave some hint as to his peasant ancestry, a lineage that he cared not to much advertise. However, this rough frame presented a distinct contrast to his strangely delicate features, the most remarkable of which were those dark and penetrating eyes that peered out from beneath deeply furrowed brows. It was a brave student, or colleague indeed, who could withstand the master's dread scrutiny. This powerful countenance was lent further emphasis by the sharply hawkish profile of his nose, which jutted out just like this bird of prey. He was of dark complexion, more a reflection of his genealogy than hours spent in the open. But in all, the general effect inspired not a little respect; perhaps even fear. He had a broad chest and powerful arms and would have cut a fine figure but for the presence of a pronounced hump upon his back; a congenital condition but accentuated by many hours of study bowed above his desk. His sight similarly had paid the price for his studious endeavours, for he was remarkably short sighted yet declined the assistance of glasses, a vanity and a conceit that would occasionally lead to awkward encounters with obtrusive furniture. It was a strange and elective disability, for whilst he was indeed prone to such accidents, when it came to his own speciality, the translation of ancient texts, he could mostly rely upon his natural vision with but the occasional assistance of an eyeglass for the more obscure writings. He was getting on in years but the march of time had been softened by the application of certain dark dyes to his hair, which should by now be silvery grey; but we shall comment no more upon this, and return again to a consideration of the master's studies. The matter in hand, the translation of a text but recently discovered in the archives, and a document located with great difficulty, buried as it was under layers of scrap paper, dust and indeed a considerable accumulation of negligence on the part of the archivist; the discovery might almost be compared with that of an archaeological find, given the depths of detritus under which it had been submerged. At first sight it seemed an innocuous document, a scrawling in faintly inked letters, inscribed in the second century coda of the dynasty that had reigned in the time in Sulla, and of the lineage Vebeneii. To the untutored eye it was but another piece of scrap parchment, having all the importance of a bill of lading. However, he, Hesvee, was not one to miss a jewel in a dung heap. It had been brought to his attention by one of his few remaining students, a fellow who seemed to have grasped a little of the skill that he, the Master, had tried desperately to impart to the fellow when, on those rare occasions, the duties of his academic position required that he communicate with the man. In this case he felt almost grateful at the imposition since it had seemingly led to the present occasion, and to this encounter with the wonder that lay upon the wooden desk before him. His eyes were red and sore from the intensity of his inspection. All night, and now well into the morning, he had strained to make out the faint outlines of the hieroglyphs, furiously copying these into his notebook together with copious annotations to assist him in his researches. He had already been able to make some kind of general sense of the information. It seemed to be, in outline, a form of instructive manual though it was unclear as yet as to the purpose of its devising.

There were large gaps in the translation due to the obliteration of parts of the original script, these caused indubitably by water damage, and the fact that major sections of the manuscript were simply missing through its unfortunate fragmentation, another casualty of careless time. His hope was that there would be enough information to fill in these breaches, at least sufficient to portray a fuller picture of the document.

To one side of the room stood a couch that was presently occupied by the sleeping form of his student, the discoverer of this miracle. The man had been pressed into service the night before and had not been permitted to depart. It was clear neither to him nor to Hesvee why his presence was demanded since his sole function so far had been to ensure that the oil lamps remained fully charged. From the Master's point of view the man was almost totally useless, but for this function and the fact that he had somehow stumbled upon the manuscript. Perhaps superstition underlined the Master's motive; that the presence of the scroll and the attendant, both quite simultaneously, were two necessary conditions for unravelling its meaning. Or maybe, and this a more likely explanation, the Master was so enraptured by his exploration that he had quite forgotten that the fellow was still there. It was at that very moment that the fellow awakened. Completely oblivious as to where he lay he turned abruptly on the couch, and consequently tumbled noisily onto the rush-covered floor, uttering as he did so a loud exclamation. "Gods! Where am I?" The Master jumped in his seat at the interruption, and turned with considerable anger to address the man. "What? What? Who?" This stuttering inquisition came to an end as he recalled the fellow's presence, and recognised him once more. "Quiet. Be quiet. Just be quiet". The Master turned away and, hunching his shoulders, returned to his studies. The fellow had fully awakened now and raised himself carefully from the floor, seating himself upon the couch. He remained there, very quietly, unsure as to what to do. One did not question the Master – ever. The fellow was of middle years, but with a young face, and a bright smile that demonstrated a friendly and even temperament. He had a naturally buoyant personality that he subdued with much effort in the presence of his chief; light badinage ill-fitted the due decorum of the scholar. It was fortunate that he encountered life in such an amiable fashion; such a resource was of great benefit when dealing with the vagaries of his present charge. At the moment his countenance was taking on a rather paler hue. Just recently risen from his slumbers he had recognised an increasingly, pressing need that could not be ignored for much longer, not without some considerable embarrassment that is. Finally the biological imperative overcame both discomfiture and fear, and he made a silent move to rise from the couch. He managed a few steps across the rush-covered floor, his bare feet making little sound other than a slight rustling. This, however, was more than sufficient to arouse the ire of the Master, subject as he was to a hypersensitivity to any kind of distraction. Again he turned to face the hapless servant. "What? What? What are you doing?" The man was obliged to make some kind of response, adjoined to a suitable excuse. "If it please you sir?" he was about to continue. "It clearly does not", was the swift and direct rejoinder. The pressing need was approaching a potentially bursting climax, and the man's discomfort served to embolden his reply. "I have to go, sir. Really! I have to go". "Go where?" was the inquiry. "Not so much where, but now", replied the squirming servant. Light dawned even upon the preoccupied scholarly mind of the inquisitor, and he dismissed the man perfunctorily. "Get out. Get out. Just get out". The man literally ran from the room, but carefully, to hear the words called out behind him "But be back. Be back". He ran down the corridor and almost flung himself into the privy - where we shall leave him to his privacy.

The master had returned to his perusal of the script. The writing was very faint and almost impossible to decipher. He passed his hand across his brow, seeking to sweep away the tiredness and the perspiration that lay there. He could feel the heaviness of sleep dragging down upon his eyes, and the yellow parchment scraps seemed to float dizzily before him. His mind was quite befuddled, and he had to acknowledge that he could make no further progress in his condition. Almost angrily he pushed the papers away, and stood up. He stretched his body and felt his spine straightening, a great relief after so many hours spent cramped over his desk. He tottered towards the recently vacated couch and threw himself down upon it, and fell instantly into a deep sleep. His loud snores burst upon the room. His body may have lain prone and bereft of action on the bed, but his mind was still gambolling away, excited, almost tormented by the imposition of its enforced labour over so many hours. His thoughts were pierced through and through by unsought images that floated up from his consciousness, prompted perhaps by the intriguing codes that he had sought to disentangle for so many hours now. Yellow pages flapped like great birds through this dreamscape, and the air was filled with their loud and incomprehensible cawing. He waved his hands wildly, seeking to thrust away these importunate beasts; but his limbs merely flailed in the empty air, the crazily darting creatures always slipping by, just beyond his reach. He grew more and more frustrated. Now he was enraged, and struck out again and again, his mouth opened in a bellow of anger; but not a sound could be heard. He felt his legs begin to buckle beneath him. Before he could raise his arms to protect himself he had collapsed, and fallen upon a cold and unyielding surface.

He awoke abruptly and discovered that, in both dream and reality, he had fallen to the earth, and was presently chewing on a clump of rushes that made up the floor covering. He twisted his pained body, trying to reach the side of the couch, and finally managed to pull himself up onto it, but huddled in a supine position. As he did so he noticed a pair of sandals, which contained a pair of feet, which were in turn located close to one side of his head. He raised his eyes to discover his student, staring down at him with what could only be described as an expression of pure horror on his face. In part to hide his discomfiture, and also an acknowledgement of the fact that he could not sit up unaided, he scowled at the fellow. "Well! Well! Are you just going to stare, fool? Help me". With this gentle invitation the student suddenly recalled his master's position and bent forwards, proffering his hand towards the latter. Between the efforts of the two of them, finally, the older man regained an upright posture - and a little of his composure - whereupon he roughly ordered his saviour to make some tea, and bring it to him immediately. Meanwhile, the master made his way towards the desk, his intent to return to his studies. He looked down over the smooth polished surface and instantly realised that something was amiss. To the casual eye things were much as they had been before he had taken his brief nap. Papers lay hither and thither, spread in much disorder, but to his practised observation these had been disturbed. His efforts had largely been focussed on assembling the fragments in some kind of pattern, which eventually would make a sense of the message inscribed upon their various surfaces. He had matched tear to rent, and jagged corner to incised cutting, in a laborious attempt to piece together the wreckage of these documents. So intense had been his labours that although the inattentive observer would miss it, the absent section signified a great gaping hole had been torn in his researches; a small, but very important, piece was missing. He examined the open window in front of which the desk was situated. Although the air outside was warm and still, it might be possible that a

soft gust had blown the missing section to the floor. He fell to his knees and, with as much vigour as an elderly man might summon up should he be sufficiently impelled to do so, he set about examining the area beneath the counter. His eyes flitted everywhere, searching eagerly, if not frantically, for the errant morsel. There was nothing to be seen but some stale crumbs of bread from a long distant meal, and the usual accretions of dust and dirt that might be found on the flooring of any dedicated and disinterested scholar. His meticulous nature might be most suited to the study of ancient texts but it did not extend to a too close examination of his living and work quarters. He cast his eyes further afield in the hope that perhaps the soft gust might have been more in the mould of a brisk draught, and thus had blown the fragment further into the room. For a moment the horror passed across his mind that perchance it had been carried fully aloft, and thence wafted into the streets of the city below. He cast this thought aside with alacrity, for such a thing could not be contemplated now; the paper had to be here somewhere. He heard steps sounding along the corridor outside, and then the door to the room swung open. He heard a gasp behind him, and felt his upper arm being tightly grasped. "This is terrible, sir. Are you alright? Perhaps a little dizzy from the fall, Master?" enquired his student and now, apparently, his protector. "Get off, fool! Get off! Get off!" The hand abruptly released its grip, and he again fell forwards onto the floor. He was quite fuming with annoyance and fear, and the full force of the anger and anxiety he felt at his loss was now directed at the poor fellow behind him. "You are undoubtedly an idiot. A complete idiot. A full fool beyond question". The Master roared the last with utter venom. So vehement was his declaration that the hapless man stumbled backwards into the open doorway. Wrath surged through the Master's body, and with the energy thus evoked he hauled himself again to his feet and turned upon his student. He knew with complete certainty that before him stood the person who was singularly responsible for this tragedy. "Where is it? Where is it. you idiot? Tell me now". A silent pause followed whilst the interrogated cast desperately about in his mind to decipher for himself this out-flung code, shrouded as it was in an incomprehensible fury. He deduced from the expression on the Master's face that no response was not a politic choice. "I, I, I'm not sure what you mean, Master? Er. The question is not quite.....", and he tailed off. Perhaps silence would have been the wiser course. The Master leaned forward, and hissed like a snake about to strike. "Fool. A piece of the document is missing. Where is it? Where IS IT?" The last words were uttered with such ire that again the man shrunk back; but at least now he had a clue as to the basis of the Master's inquisition. "The paper?" "Yes. The paper, fool!" The Master's anger seemed to be growing by the second, and repeating his words back to him clearly had a far from a soothing effect. It was time for a desperate admission. "I don't know sir. Truly I don't. I've been out of the room since you decided to take a rest, sir. I've not seen, not touched the papers. Please, sir. Indeed I have not". Through the veil of his rage the master could just distinguish the shivering outlines of his servant, and it was this vague impression rather than rational choice that impelled him to reconsider his initial judgement. Perhaps the fool was telling the truth? What motive could he possibly have to filch the missing item? The idiot was barely able to make his tea let alone estimate the value of the information that these fragments might contain. The master reflected that, indeed, perhaps his lack of sleep, and almost obsessive investigations had rendered his perspective, on this occasion at least, faulty. He felt his rage begin to subside, and the mist before his eyes gradually dissipated. "Very well". He turned away from the man and looked again at the desk, hoping that somehow the missing piece would rematerialise, for if willing had such power it surely would have; but there was nothing. His body slumped

forward, and the tiredness that had been swept away by the torrent of his emotions suddenly reasserted itself; he would have fallen yet again if his attendant had not observed him. The latter moved quickly and, before there should be a repetition of the previous events, he grasped the old man about the waist, and helped him towards the chair. It is strange how the emotions can transform so quickly. Moments before he had been in almost mortal fear of the man's anger, and now he felt sorrow and compassion for the fellow, seeing how despondent and weakened he had become. He knew at least that the man's passions were driven by his work and, even if he did not fully comprehend the importance of his studies, nevertheless he could not doubt the impact of the loss upon his master. "If it please you, sir, perhaps you need to take a proper rest? A good night's sleep should restore you". He was surprised at his own temerity. The master was not widely reputed for the ease with which he took advice, especially when such emanated from his inferiors. However, his instincts told him that the man was at the end of his tether. He helped him to the couch again, and laid a blanket over the still, and already slumbering, form.

A world away the boy walked through the night. The sky was clear, and the air, cool and still. The path moved through the gloom, and he followed its winding way quite unconsciously. There was a simple joy in the movement, and his pace followed that inclination; no direction other than that afforded by the road; no intention other than that guided by the sense of liberation that filled his body. Each step took him further away from the farm and his past, and into a future of unknown possibilities. He had had no plan when he left the farm, and still no notion as to what he might do next. Through his mind flowed the solemn images of his past. His mother's death filled these vistas, and the growing realisation of his unhappiness from that dreadful day. Even when he considered his uncle he could not truthfully say that the man had been deliberately cruel. It was his nature; he had led a brutal life and knew only that way in his consort with others. He was no more than an unwanted burden upon the man, and one that the latter could not sustain. His resentment was clear against his nephew; yet the fellow lacked the self-restraint to hold that part of his anger in check. He was not totally blameless, nevertheless he remained quite helpless within the grasp of his own weak character. The boy, although of the same bloodline, was not of his stock at all. He might be kin in that household, but a stranger all the same. He was not sure how it came about but with each pace that he took from the farmstead he moved imperceptibly into a different world. He could not be certain that this new realm would be any more friendly or gracious than the former, but change was inevitable, and he knew that he could not go back. He had passed a frontier within himself that would ensure, more completely than the highest range of mountains in this world, that there was no retreat. As the conviction of his decision grew within him, so his pace intensified. He doubted very much that his uncle would be greatly concerned at his absence. It was rather that he was impatient to greet this new world, eagerly reaching out towards it as it, in turn, welcomed him.

He had already passed well beyond the boundaries of the farm. It was not a large holding, and only sufficient to keep one man in a livelihood and, until recently, one small boy. The path had joined a larger track that traversed the plain, passing by the adjoining parcels of land belonging to their neighbours. As he strode along, occasionally he would hear a fox's barking cries, as they broke in upon the night's silence, marking at least one creature's witnessing of his passage. As soon as he had moved out of scent's range the quiet of the

night would again fold about him, and he would be all but invisible to the world. He drew some sense of reassurance from this, yet he had no fear as he marched through the district, for this was a peaceful community. There had been no trouble from brigands in many a year. The badlands were still some way off, lying deep within the confines of the Northern mountains. Their inhabitants knew better than to venture here into Videnford, and with any kind of evil intent. The locals might be farmers but they were a sturdy race, and knew well how to protect themselves against the incursions of those who would be foolhardy enough to essay a raid. The wild men of the mountains had had their noses bloodied before, and judged it better to attack only those who were bold, or stupid enough, to venture into the high passes, or the dark valleys of their own realm. Nevertheless, it was a brave adventure to sally so far from home. 'Home'. It felt strange to apply that word to the farm, for it had never seemed that way to him. His mother's cottage had been the last place that he had considered thus. His mother's – and of course his father's. But now they were gone, and he felt a surge of excitement - and of sadness - rush through his body; he was marching forth into the unknown; but truly alone. His heart thrilled, and beat the more strongly with these conflicting emotions; the world, indeed, had taken on a new aspect. He could not describe this precisely; it was neither friendly nor inimical. It just had a newness about it, and even with the most commonplace experience, this now impressed itself more deeply upon his senses. In truth, he was not quite sure how he felt about this transition, between the old and the new. Suddenly, the fact of his departure forced itself upon his consciousness most powerfully. He looked about him as if he had just woken up. He stopped in his tracks, and turned about, looking back up the way that he had come. The path wound away into the distance, through the fields and copses that dotted the landscape until, finally, it disappeared over a shallow hillside; and beyond this lay his past. How odd that he had left without any plan or intention! He felt like he had escaped some great oppression; but in truth it could hardly be called that. He had no idea of where he might go, neither plan nor aim; he was lost. It crossed his mind to reverse this foolishness, and make his way back to the farm. If he exerted himself he could easily return before the sun rose. His uncle would never know; indeed, he would barely remark upon the matter. He could return and the whole thing would be banished from his mind, if not his memory. He had no provisions upon him; no money, not even a dagger, foolish and ill prepared fellow that he was. But the moment passed swiftly though much had passed within his soul. There are times in life when upon the moment turns the whole of its course; and for Melaskkoli this was one. To go forwards, or to go back? But the impulse of life, especially that of the youthful, is ever onward. And so the boy turned his head, and continued on his journey into the future.

Bold as the spirit may be the body will make its demands regardless. Though he was driven forward by the excitement of this undertaking his stomach commenced to rumble in a most prosaic way. Again he was reminded of the importunity of his nature, as the gurgling grew into a dull ache that even his youthful zest could not ignore. He looked about him wistfully, searching for some sign that these symptoms could be alleviated urgently. The night was well advanced, and the shadows deep black. Nothing stirred but a few grasses, drifting in the faintest of breezes. Faintly he could hear the rustlings of the night creatures as they scavenged their own living. But these were well tutored in their trade, and he but a poor novice. No immediate solution presented itself, and he was left with but one choice. He reached to his waist and tightened, by a couple of notches, the leathern belt that circled there. But he resolved, at first light, those notches would be

loosened at the earliest, possible opportunity. The moon glimmered patiently down upon the path as he disappeared into a small grove of trees.

The master awoke, slowly and gently, to the sound of someone moving in the room. He lay quietly for a few moments, disoriented by the lingering sleep that still enveloped his mind. Gradually he came to, and shifted his body around to observe the source of the disturbance. He saw the crouched figure of his dutiful, but not very astute, pupil, busying himself before the fire that he had cultivated in the hearth. The master observed that daylight had given way to night, and a coolness had descended with the gathering darkness. His body ached as if it had sustained some terrible blows, and his head felt dull and heavy, as though from an excessive indulgence of wine. Momentarily he had forgotten the causes of his physical and mental anguish, and then the recollection returned with the rising clarity of his thoughts. "Ohhhhh", was wrenched from his very soul, as he recalled the missing slip of parchment. At this exclamation his fellow ceased his ministrations before the fire, and turned to observe the master. The man's face displayed his anxiety, and he braced himself for a renewed verbal assault. Perhaps it was sheer fatigue on the part of Hesvee for he had neither the energy, nor it would seem the inclination, to renew his admonitions. Besides, it seemed that he might have been entirely unreasonable. Yet he reflected, 'Why on earth should this fellow steal something that to him could have no value? He did not know the significance of the parchment, and so he would be quite without motive.' It was extremely painful for him to admit these facts, especially in his grossly weakened state. But the fault should lie with the responsibility, and this was his alone certainly. He was not an unkind or unreasonable man, which made his behaviour all the more reprehensible. Something powerful had overwhelmed him, to drive his temper thus, and to such overweening passion. He pushed himself upright, closely observed all the while by his student. The fellow looked as if he was readying himself to sprint from the room should the master's anger explode forth once more. A tinge of pity rose in the former, and he glanced over to the fellow. "Softly, Celarent" he murmured. It was an affectation on his part to pretend ignorance of such trifles as names, but in truth his memory was exceedingly acute. "Softly", he repeated. The pupil could see that the fury had passed, and a look of such relief brushed over his features that again the master felt a strong sense of remorse, that he should have caused the man such discomfort. It would, however, not do, not do at all, to actually apologise. There were certain forms in these hierarchies, and these could not be dispensed with. However, an accommodation could be reached, and a restoration of harmony achieved, if only by a diplomatic detour of recent events. "The night has already drawn in, Celarent. I must have slept for some considerable time. It was considerate of you to light the fire". The words, and their evident kindness, secured the breach, and both master and servant returned to their previously concordant affiliation. Carefully Celarent continued to feed the flames, piling on coals to the burning bundle of twigs, each one placed attentively to feed the red, glowing fire whose heat already filled the room. He rose and walked across to the open window. There was a slight breeze wafting into the room and he raised his arms to draw the shutters. The city was beautiful to behold in the later evening hours, with a bright, silver moon glowing down upon the myriad flat rooftops, that lay like so many tesserae, spreading constantly outwards, rising and falling in staircases across the scape. The darkness of the streets beneath was pierced only by the orange glow of fires and torches, which diffused their comforting beams throughout the city. He pulled the shutters close upon the scene, and turned towards the master. "How are you feeling, sir?" His concern was evident, and quite

genuine. The master grimaced slightly. "Ah! Feeling my age tonight, I fear, Celarent. Indeed." Much was left unsaid, but that sufficed. "Perhaps if I prepare you something to eat? Then I shall leave you alone to your studies?" The questions floated through the air between them, and the master appeared to consider the matter. "Yes. I am hungry. But I think enough of study for today. It does not seem to agree". There it was said; and the matter could now finally be concluded. The unwritten code had been observed, and normality restored. "Yes sir. Perhaps something light. Soup and bread to keep out the cold, sir?" Such an observation seemed quite unnecessary for the room was already aglow from the fire. But the master nodded, and Celarent left the study and made his way to the kitchen. As he was passing through the doorway the master looked up. "Perhaps you would care to join me in the meal, Celarent. You must be hungry too". The fellow nodded his assent but was surprised at the invitation. In the four years that he had served as attendant and pupil he had never before been issued with such a summons. He made his way down the corridor and into the small kitchen that lay at the end.

As he busied himself cutting up the vegetables and meat he pondered on the invitation. It had been a most unusual day to say the very least. His master was not a man of changeable temperament, and yet his conduct of late had been almost unfathomable. He was, of course, devoted to his work, and became entirely absorbed in each new project, and to such an extent that on occasion he would neglect eating, even foregoing sometimes due care to his attire, fastidious man that he was. However, it would usually be enough to remind him of these essentials, and he would recollect himself and break off from his studies. Indeed, it was one of Celarent's duties to ensure that the master was properly cared for, as well as to attend to his other responsibilities. Ever since he had discovered these old letters, or so they seemed to him, the man had become as one obsessed, and his whole demeanour transformed. If ever possession by inimical spirits could be demonstrated, the master over the last few days could be said to exemplify the condition. But the outburst today had been extreme, and briefly Celarent had been all but convinced that the master was finally losing his mental equilibrium. It was a considerable relief to see him restored to his old self though the man looked quite drained by this recent eruption. Celarent finished his preparations and poured the contents into a pot, then added some herbs, and as an afterthought flung a generous pinch of pepper into the mixture, to bring some zest to the concoction. Finally, he tossed some chunks of goose fat into the container before making his way back up the corridor to the study. He found the master sitting in his chair and staring at the fire, his face peaceful, but quite ruddy from the heat. "Excuse me, sir". Celarent knelt before the flames and hung the pot handle over a metal hook that was suspended over the hearth. He quickly returned to the kitchen and came back with a pitcher of water in one hand, and a wooden ladle in the other. He could smell the fragrant aroma of the fat sizzling over the fire, and the delicious scents of the meat as it browned in the pot. He again knelt down and proceeded to stir and turn over the contents of the pan with the ladle. When he was satisfied that the meat was starting to burn he added a little water to the copper, and continued to stir. All the while the master looked upon the scene with a calm and quiet expression upon his face. Finally, the servant tipped the rest of the water into the pot and left the stew to bubble and hiss over the fire. The smells drifting through the room were quite mouthwatering and Celarent recalled how hungry he had become; all that remained now was to wait for supper to cook.

On the other side of the world, in the growing light of early dawn, there stumbled another

humble and weary creature. The night was falling away quickly, and sharp rays of gold were piercing the sky. He was so tired now that he could spare not even a glance for this splendour. All that preoccupied him now was finding somewhere to lay his head. He had been driven by hunger so far, and his belt was tightened to the last notch; but now his body protested its exhaustion. There was but one benefit from this, for one pain seemed to distract from the other. His feet were dragging along the ground, raising little spurts of dust behind him as he pushed himself onward. He could have rested earlier, but something drove him on. It was not for fear of discovery, that his uncle should notice his absence and give chase. He managed to raise a smile that such a thought should even cross his mind. No! The man might complain the deficit of such cheap labour; but no great love was lost between them. He doubted even that he would raise the alarm. Again, he did believe that the fellow was driven more by malice than indifference, though he was not sure that the latter was a lesser evil; many wrongs have occurred through the inactivity of the will or conscience. It was more that he should regain his sanity, or his sense, and turn back along the way he had travelled so arduously throughout the night; a fear indeed of his own vacillatory nature. He shrugged his shoulders as if to ward off the thought, and perhaps to restore some feeling of vigour to his exhausted body. Maybe he could just turn off the way, and find a little nest in which to curl up? His body ached and his feet were sore, his eyes bleary and red from peering into the darkness for so long. But he struggled on a little further, looking about him constantly for a place to sojourn. Now the path had reached the brow of a low rise, and before him was spread a little valley down the middle of which ran a small stream bordered by long green and brown rushes. If he could not eat at least he could fill his belly with water, and pretend that his hunger was sated; besides, his mouth was parched. He was breathing heavily, both from the demands of his long march but also from exhaustion, which was threatening to drag him down at each step. He stumbled, as he made his way along the slope of the dale. The grasses on either side were shimmering with the morning dew, and there was a low mist hanging over the dip. He waded through this vaporous ether until he reached the bottom, and then commenced to push his way through the grasses that lined the bank. Ahead of him, and just to his right, he could see a muddy patch of earth, which bordered the edge of the shallow stream. He made his way there and knelt down on the sludge, to slake his thirst with the cool waters. The stream flowed slowly but steadily, and the water was beautifully clear. He plunged his face into the liquid, and gasped with shock as the cold fluid brushed his face. He raised his head quickly, laughing with surprise. There was no reason why it should not be so, for its source must lie in the mountains, which lay just a few miles to north. The freezing jolt had fully wakened him now, and banished his tiredness completely. But then eagerly loitering nearby was his old friend Hunger, and this one had hastened to make his presence known. Indeed, the cold water in his stomach had, if anything, increased his appetite rather than allayed it. He drew handfuls of water from the stream and alternately flung them over his face and arms, shivering as he did so, but thrilled by the cold. He got to his feet and turned to face the rising sun. Her rays had broken over the horizon now, and the mist was starting to dissolve under her bright gaze, little twists and snakes of haze coiling up from the ground. His eyes were still sore, and he looked only briefly westwards before turning his face away. The path he had left followed the stream's edge and disappeared amongst the reeds and rushes that stretched all along the valley floor. Before him lay the other side of the valley and, more from curiosity than anything else, he was prompted to climb the low gradient just to see the view that would greet him from the ridge. He could already feel the fatigue creeping back into his limbs, and he hastened upwards before it grew too great. In

a matter of seconds he reached the hill brow, and gazed down on what lay beyond.

The stew was bubbling nicely as Celarent slopped the juices on the ladle, savouring keenly the aromas that rose from the pot. He was really hungry now. The anticipation was such that he could barely refrain from diving a hunk of bread into the mess, and greedily devouring the whole in one swallow. However, he recollected his eminent company, though this was barely sufficient to rein in his enthusiastic appetite. He looked around briefly at the master, and was surprised to see him staring back, with a most beneficent smile upon his face. He turned back to his duties quickly, unused as he was to such a sight. "How goes the cooking, good Celarent?" enquired his superior. "Well sir. Very well. Almost there I would say, sir". He was tempted to add a witty quip, and then was most surprised, for the words seemed to tumble from his mouth quite without permission. "Oh! I could eat the pot as well, I'm that hungry, sir". He felt a horror grip his heart, that he should indulge in such familiarity. Yet, and to his own great astonishment, his witticism was greeted with appreciative laughter. "Indeed. I should say so myself, fellow. I don't know what it is with me today, but I might fight you for the privilege". Celarent looked over his shoulder to ensure that it was indeed the master who was addressing him thus. Yes. There he was, and beaming fit to split his face. This was the strangest of days. Finally, the stew was adjudged completed, and Celarent went to the cupboard and drew out a couple of trenchers, and laid them upon a low wooden table that stood just before the fire. He had also drawn out a couple of fine wooden spoons, and he set these beside them. He made his way out to the kitchen and there he hacked off a couple of large chunks of coarse wheaten bread, and brought these back into the study. He was surprised to see the master had already set to, with some vigour, and wielding his spoon, was demolishing the stew with great enthusiasm. He set down a hunk of bread at the master's elbow, who had barely raised an eye at his entry. "Mmmmphh. Ggggghh. Rawwwllllll!" were the appreciative grunts growled through the air in his direction. The servant hardly knew where to look. He had seen pictures of ravenous wolves setting about their fallen prey with far less gusto than was displayed here. He knelt down at the table's edge, and started to apply his spoon to the concoction, but with slightly more decorum. Usually the master was so fastidious and delicate in his manners and now.... Finally, and with a hearty slurp and a flourish, the bowl was emptied, and the newly exposed gourmand tore off another morsel of bread and began to polish the interior of the bowl with it. "Excellent Celarent. Excellent", exclaimed the master. "Thank you, sir", was the low response. He continued his meal whilst observing, out of the corner of his eye, his better settle back in his chair, and pat his stomach with evident satisfaction. A final seal of approval was vented, and the master wiped away the profuse grease drippings from his lips and jowls with the edge of his sleeve. "Excellent my good fellow. First class indeed. Oh! I was so hungry. I felt like I hadn't eaten for a hundred years, you know", he laughed. Celarent was quite dumbstruck. In all the time that he had known the master he had never yet seen displayed such exuberance. The man was so studious, even studied in his manner. And yet here he was, a veritable monster of appetite. It was such a transformation, and Celarent was by no means sure that the revolution was entirely to his liking. Change was always difficult, but this was quite another matter. "Of course, sir. Your day has been quite arduous". If the master was unprepared to observe the proper politesse it did not mean that all standards were to fall by the wayside; Celarent, at least, was certainly not going to abandon tradition; or not in that sense. He concluded his own meal and was now quite delicately, and maybe a little pointedly, cleaning his own bowl of

the remaining juices. "How long have you served me now, my dear Celarent?" The latter almost choked over his last morsel of bread. "Oh dear. Are you quite right, fellow? Something gone down the wrong way perhaps?" For one awful moment the servant worried that he was about to be struck full upon the back by the master. Eager to prohibit such familiarity he gasped back his reply. "Quite, sir, quite alright, thank you, sir. Yes. It must have been a bit of bread going down the wrong way. Your pardon, sir". "No not at all", replied the master. "Not at all. Now where was I? Ah yes! How long is it?" For a moment he was lost, quite unable to recall the original question. Fortunately he managed to rally his thoughts, and replied. "Er. Four years, I think, sir. Must be coming up to four years. Yes. Just after the second term I began my studies with you". Time seemed to have fled, not merely flown, by. "Four years. Good. And tell me, dear fellow, what precisely have you acquired in the way of learning in that time?" Celarent regarded the man carefully now, for this sounded like some kind of test. He was quite used to the master throwing him a bone now and then, so to speak, to see if he would choke upon it; and thus would a question appear out of thin air. He was never sure if it was intended to further his knowledge or simply to amuse the master, a man who clearly enjoyed such challenges, and especially those that discomfited lesser intellectual mortals. On the other hand, a 'viva voce' was not usually offered in such circumstances, and were generally presented in a much less cordial fashion. Nevertheless he concluded that the invitation should be treated with some circumspection. "I'm quite sure that I've learnt much under your tutelage, sir" he advanced cautiously. He knew that the master detested any appearance of subservience, even when he simultaneously demanded it in fact. But the fellow was behaving so oddly, that any response might be ventured without necessarily guaranteeing an expected reply. "Really!" Hesvee smiled down at Celarent. He could see the fellow was acting cagily, trying to work out how the 'move' should be played. What he did not know was that there was no game to be played at all; well, perhaps not yet! He, Hesvee, felt better and freer than he had in many a long year. He had spent all of his life in this city, and most of it in this very school, this great Academy; first as a student, then as a fellow, and now as Professor of the Archives, and Master of Psychical Studies. He had had such a wonderful, and indeed, privileged career. So many accolades had been his; prizes and awards aplenty, and the respect, if not reverence, of his peers and students. It was true that he had the reputation of a hard task master - if that term might be applied - but then he was all the more eagerly sought out, by those of high ambition. And now here, a tired old man sitting in front of a fire, and his highest pleasure, a belly full of stew and bread. He smiled to himself at this incongruous juxtaposition of elevated academia and sensuous gratification. There were few who were able to observe his life beyond the screens afforded by position and rank. And there he was, poor fellow, the hapless Celarent, having to put up with the tantrums of an old fool who had lost a bit of paper; surely nothing could be more foolish than that. But it was an important piece of paper, and he could not understand how it had come to be misplaced. He felt annoyed with his own heedlessness. Perhaps these were the first signs of incipient mental fragility that sometimes accompanies those of advancing years. His mind, though, felt as agile as in his youth, perhaps a little slower and more cautious, but qualities endowed by experience rather than dotage. He recalled again the excitement he had felt when his assistant had brought to him the dusty bundles of papers from the old archives. Celarent must be a better student than he had given him credit, for he had recognised the seal that lay upon one of the yellowing parchments. The lineage of the Sullak had been pre-eminent. But because of the civil war many valuable records of that time had been destroyed; both as a

result of the hostilities, but also as deliberate acts of vandalism on the part of the rebellious forces. Finally these had been crushed ruthlessly, but not before enormous damage had been suffered by the kingdom. At one point the insurgents had gained partial control of the city, and had only with greatest of efforts been dislodged from their stronghold within the palace. But they had been in occupation for a sufficient time to break into the treasury vaults, in their rapacious search for loot. Frustrated by the fact that the king's forces had anticipated their ambitions and removed all the valuables from these treasuries, they had vented their spleen on the libraries and archives, setting fires to the masses of documents and records stored within. So great was the conflagration that it could be seen for miles around, the brilliant scarlet-red flames sending a rich glow into the dark night skies. When the royal forces had finally managed to regain command they found great piles of burning embers, the only remnants of that ancient heritage. But, as is the way of fortune, some papers had been saved, and these had been placed temporarily in the cellars. With all the confusion they had lain forgotten for many years; that is, of course, until Celarent had stumbled upon them, whilst engaged in his own researches. He had seen the seal and promptly recalled his master's interests in that period. He had returned with them, and set the dusty and unprepossessing bundles of rags down before Hesvee. The latter was about to protest the disturbance when he caught sight of the emblem, which immediately silenced his remonstrance. He had carefully and delicately pulled apart the rotting material and placed each section upon the polished wooden boards before him. The smell of mildew rose heavily in the air, causing him to sneeze repeatedly. On each occasion he had turned away quickly, fearful of disturbing the stack of parchments piled before him. It had taken some time but finally he had separated out all the sheets, and they were spread out before him in as good an order as he could discern. Some of the material was still damp, from the humid atmosphere of the cellars in which they had resided for so many years. He let the dry air of the room draw out this residue of moisture but had been careful to ensure that the shutters remained closed. This had as much been a reflection of a growing secretiveness that enshrouded his activities, as to avoid what in fact later transpired. Some instinct had told him that what lay here should remain undisclosed to a wider public, for the time being at least. There had been nothing so far to encourage this degree of caution; for all he knew the collection might contain nothing of more significance than an inventory of laundry for the palace records. But again, the presence of the seal suggested that these were probably important state papers. Even at this distance in time certain sensitivities might be exposed that would have repercussions yet, distant generations away that they might be. Still, this decision was based more on an intuition than a reasoned judgement on the part of the master. If only his caution had prevailed, and he had not so absent-mindedly left the shutters open! He caught himself again sinking into a mood of purposeless self-recrimination, and shrugged away the burdensome sentiment.

His thoughts again returned to the task. He recalled his great excitement as he had begun to sort through the compendium. Many of the pieces were so badly damaged that he had had to set them aside for a later and more careful perusal. However, a surprising number of sections were in remarkably good condition, and the script upon them, though faint, was of a sufficiently good quality to render translation possible. There were also some of an intermediate quality, and these were set aside accordingly. Finally, he had three, fairly, neat heaps of mouldering paper, to which he now directed the next stage of his efforts. Firstly, it was obvious that he should try to reassemble the documents as closely as possible in their original order whilst imposing his own systematic method of organisation.

He was not aided in this task by the fact that there was no page numbering as such; but that would not have been the case anyway, for that ancient period. Additionally, the sheer quantity of the material also suggested that there was more than one collection present. He had tried as far as possible to preserve the order of the compilation within each dusty heap. It would necessitate quite probably that the three piles would again be amalgamated as he proceeded with his investigation; but at least he would have gleaned a clearer idea of the structure of the work as he progressed. He took the first fragment and began to examine the writings upon it. He had already determined that the script would itself present no problems to his transliterative abilities. The problem was not the language but the dreadful condition of the materials. But then he located the title page of the work, and this was of great assistance. It was evident that the material related to a survey, which concerned some dominions of the kingdom. The introductory pages contained diagrams that, though faintly presented, seemed to resemble the outlines or boundaries of geographical entities of some unidentified territory. There were indicators also of the orientation of the map, with north, south, east and west clearly indicated. Apart from this, the legends depicted were of an unfamiliar type, and it was impossible to distinguish between whether a line was drawn to signify a river or a road. He set aside this section and moved onto the next page, where the main part of the manuscript began. There were missing fragments from every leaf that, together with the water and fire damage, made the process of interpretation most arduous. Age too had drawn the colour from the inks, and he had to peer with great concentration at the pages in order to decipher anything. He had carefully placed a lamp nearby, the better to assist his efforts; for, with the shutters closed, he had denied himself the benefit of the sunlight. Now he recalled the reason why he had so foolishly left them open in the first place. Frustrated by the flickering light upon the parchment he had decided to take the risk of exposing his collection to the elements. He had also brought into service an enlarging glass, to ease somewhat the strain upon his vision, for after many hours devoted to poring over this puzzle he found himself suffering the most dreadful headaches. And even then, when he looked away, he could see the fuzzily edged figures of script dancing in the air before him. But as he probed through this maze of lettering his excitement grew. Even from the broken account that lay before him he was quickly able to determine the significance of the document. It was indeed an inventory of a kind – but certainly not a quantification of linen ware. Furthermore, although the predominant purpose of the review had clearly been intended to render an account of the value of the lands and property thereon, it was also a map of discovery. Whichever lands these papers referred to, they were certainly none that he knew that had been recorded at that time or, for that matter, existed now. The age of exploration had long passed by, and the world had been mapped and investigated thoroughly. Many mysteries remained, but an unknown territory was not one – not, at least, until now. And yet here were demonstrated features, and of which he had no knowledge certainly. He was something of an amateur cartographer as well; such skills were of occasional utility in his researches. To his eye he could not recall a part of any locality, which bore a resemblance to anything displayed here. It was at this juncture that he concluded reluctantly that he would have to consult with another colleague on the subject. He had a reputation for seclusion, and a marked inclination to resist any kind of assistance in his researches. He had to admit that this had caused him difficulties in the past, and frequently hindered his own studies. Thus far he had rationalised it as an opportunity to develop new skills. But there were times when a consultation with an expert in another field was necessary, and really quite unavoidable; and this was one of those. Fortunately,

one of his closest associates in the department possessed the requisite knowledge. At least in this respect he might feel quite reassured, that a complete stranger would not be involved at such an early stage of his exploration. Ferioque was acknowledged to be at the forefront of the cartographic science and his services would be quite indispensable if the Master were to have any chance of making sense of this information. He concluded that he would speak to his colleague on the morn, and see if he could shed any light on the map's insignia.

The young boy looked down upon the open slope before him - and froze. His heart beat heavily, and disbelief gripped his body. He had expected to see the same rolling meadows and pasture land extending onwards up to the mountain ranges, which lay grey blue upon the horizon. Instead, the sight that greeted him was of incomprehensible devastation; a dread vision indeed. He looked behind him on the way that he had come, as if its reality would make a dream or nightmare of that which lay before his eyes. Yes. There it was; the gently sloping valley, the grasses wafting easily in a light breeze, stirred by the slowly heating earth. Here, the little rivulet that sparkled and quivered in the early morning light, and the rushes rustling quietly along its margin. And now, before him, a vast plain ripped apart by some dreadful power, a force that had cut great, deep, black and grey gashes into the ground, as if an awful monster had ploughed the fields with its claws, ripping up grasses and trees, hedges and hillocks, and strewing them insensately all about. It was a scene that he could not imagine even in his worst fears. Yet here it was, and all but a short distance from his own home. It was another world, and one so outlandish as to exceed any horror that might be unleashed in a restless sleep. He gazed about him, gripped by an awful fascination. What could possibly have wrought such devastation in this otherwise beautiful land? He searched through his memory desperately trying to find some kind of explanation for this awful occurrence. He had heard tales of land quakes, and of great fires that had scoured the earth. But the scene before him did not resemble these accounts. He noticed, also, not a sound could he hear nearby: no bird song, no animal calls – nothing. Whatever had done this had seemingly scooped up every living thing, and left behind only a dead wilderness. As he was thus engaged he heard a faint scraping noise that seemed to come from nearby. He glanced around, anxiously seeking the source of this disturbance. It was so slight that he could easily have attributed it to his imagination. It was only the contrasting, deadly silence that emphasised this whisper in his ears. He cast his eyes back and forth; but there was nothing, just the same grey brown, scorched earth, and the flutters of dust blowing desolately across its ravaged surface. Then he caught a glimpse of something from the corner of his eye. For an instant he thought that it might be a dead leaf trapped twitching in the mud. He took a few paces forward and fell to his knees, the better to examine the object. Almost as soon as he had done so the whole ground appeared to heave up before him. He fell back in shock, staring at the apparition that had suddenly erupted from the earth. It was about the size of a young child. In the ground it had left behind an impression, an outline, as if it had been born from the soil itself. Bits of earth and dead foliage clung to its form, with fragments of mud and other detritus falling from its body, or being flung about as it swayed to and fro, seemingly searching for something misplaced. He could not be sure but whatever this being might be, it had not yet spied him; or so he hoped. He could see now that the form resembled that of a human, or some similar species, albeit a very muddy and confused one. He had scabbled back a few feet, driven by fear; but this afforded him a clearer view of the creature. It had stopped swaying and now seemed to fix its attention some distance

away, towards the mountains. His foot slipped, and a rock that had lain close by skipped over the earth and cracked against another. He caught his breath, frozen to the spot; but it was no use. The creature evidently possessed quite acute hearing and it swung round immediately to face him. As it did so yet more earth fell from its body, to reveal a head, and a pallid face stained with mud. He could just detect a pair of gleaming eyes peering out at him from beneath its broad brow. Suddenly the beast took on a wholly human aspect, and much of his anxiety slipped away. He was not face-to-face with some great malevolent force, a demonic incarnation of the earth, but one that appeared to be as discommoded as he. The man, or possibly child, dropped its gaze, and the pale, silvery eyes disappeared from view. However, this disconcerting vision was quickly replaced by a strange, high, wheezing sound, that seemed to emanate from the head. "Whoooo are?" and the question floated away into the air. Melaskkoli guessed that it must be addressed to him, for as far as he could tell there was no one else in the vicinity. He replied quickly, anxious to reassure the fellow that at least one of them bore no ill-will. "I'm Melaskkoli. How do you do?" On reflection the pleasantries seemed a little odd, given the circumstances. It was not every day that one addressed a pile of mud, for that resemblance was still quite impressive. "Howwww dooo I dooo whaaat?" was the slightly prolixious response. "I'm sorry". Melaskkoli realised that although the creature spoke his own language it might hold to a more literal tendency when it came to interpretation. "No. What I meant to say was, are you alright? You seem to have had a bad accident? Well, in fact, the whole area seems to have been in some kind of dreadful storm". There was a long silence. And then there rose into the air again that most peculiar sound. "Heeeeeeee. Heeeeeeee. Heeeeeeee". Melaskkoli decided that there really was no reply to this, and waited for some kind of elaboration. "Yesssss. Youuuu miiight saaaaay thaaat indeeed. An accideeent. Yesssss". Melaskkoli was not at all sure where all this might lead but at least there was no sign of immediate danger. "How did you come to be here might I ask?" There again was a long silence but at least no repetition of that dreadful noise. "Ooohh. It isss a loooong ssstoory and I aaaam quite suuure thaaat it would boore youu terribblyyy". He decided not to press the point, for the fellow showed no signs of wishing to continue. It had managed to recover its composure somewhat, and raised itself from the ground on to its - Melaskkoli was relieved to see - two legs. Now that this creature's full form was outlined against the sky, and no longer partly camouflaged by the mud, he could see clearly that it bore a close resemblance to a man of his own race; but the legs and arms were remarkably long and spindly, and the belly quite protuberant. His new acquaintance was attired most extravagantly, wearing a broad rimmed and pointed hat that fell forward over the face, for the most part concealing the fellow's eyes and other features. The upper part of the torso was hung in a jerkin whilst the legs and feet were covered with leggings of some drab material. Over the whole was draped a long cloak from which the mud and earth still dripped with every motion that he made. The entire outfit was of a dismal brown and grey colour that, together with the earth that still coated it, provided an almost perfect shade for blending into the background. It was no wonder that he had not spotted him until the latter had made his dramatic and abrupt appearance. He had got to his feet himself now, not wishing to be at any kind of disadvantage should the mood of his new companion change. The elongated limbs of the man accentuated the length of his form; but despite this he still bore the general proportions of a child. They were standing on a level and yet Melaskkoli towered easily over the other. This sense of physical superiority reassured him somewhat, and his opposite showed no signs of wishing to offer offence. "Annd whaaat miiight I assk are youuuu doing heeerre, youuung one?" Melaskkoli

considered the question carefully. The manner of address was that of an elder to a younger, and he guessed that he might have misjudged their relative age. He adjusted his response accordingly, and cautiously. "Er well. I'm visiting some relatives of mine in the northern country. I haven't seen them for some time and well ... well then I came across all of this". He gestured about him, indicating the wasted land that lay there. "Are you sure you're alright? And can you tell me what happened here? I mean I've never seen this before". The creature appeared to be listening, but it was hard to tell. He wished that he could see more clearly the other's eyes and face. At least then he would be able to judge what might be passing through the fellow's mind. "Ahhh. Visitiing relaaatives. Yesss. Thaaaat wassss whaaat I tooo was doiiing. Buuuutt ass foor thissss, ittt issss aaa terriblllle thinnng thaaat hasss happened heeer. I cannnot telll youuu yeeet. Mayyyybee soon". At this point the creature collapsed in a heap upon the earth, now apparently lifeless. Melaskkoli stared down at the body, quite uncertain what to do next. It had been a very, very strange day.

The master awoke to the sounds - and quite delicious smells - of his servitor's culinary efforts, as the latter prepared their breakfast. He had slept most soundly and, for the first time in some days, he felt fully rested. He could appreciate now, with the clarity of a calm and settled mind, that he had been overworking and had driven himself almost beyond the limit with his endeavours. He still felt somewhat remorseful, and not a little ashamed, over his conduct of the day before. Nature had a way of rectifying the balance, and the passions of his emotions and the relentless drive of his will had to be brought under rein. Nature, he reflected, contained its own wisdom, and only a fool would neglect her counsel. He stretched his arms and enjoyed the sense of ease that filled his body. His mind was quiet and his senses were alive to life again. It was all very well burying your head in books and maps and dusty mildewed parchments, he thought, but there was a beautiful world out there, and he had spent far too long encrusted about by his studies. He could see a glorious blue sky framed within the window, with great white clouds drifting slowly across its pristine azure face. Even here indoors he felt the grace of this fine day. He swung his legs over the edge of the couch and sat there for a while, enjoying this equilibrium. Long gone were the days when he could leap from his bed. Age tended to impart a slower and more regal pace to one's movements, and the commencement of the day was no exception. From the sounds emanating from the end of the corridor Celarent was busy about his duties. Over the fire had been slung a griddle, and strips of bacon were already sizzling away, soaked in their smoking fat. Celarent entered the room bearing two great flagons of steaming tea, which he placed down on the table before the master. "With honey, of course, just as you like, sir". "Thank you Celarent". "You slept well, sir?" he enquired solicitously. "Like the proverbial baby, Celarent, like a baby indeed", laughed the master. "You have risen long yourself?" "Oh, not long. I must confess to having enjoyed a long sleep myself, sir". "Good. Good. Then we're both rested and we can get much done today". The bacon was almost ready, for there was a slight burning smell in the air. Celarent took some large, thick slices of the coarse bread left over from the previous night and smeared a generous coating of butter over each. Then he carefully - to avoid dripping fat upon the floor - picked up the crispy slices of bacon and placed them neatly onto their prepared beds. He crumbled some herbs over the whole delicious array and presented one of these to the master. The latter bit into the thick hunk without ceremony, relishing the rich taste and texture of the meat; in every way he felt a different man today; life was richer and deeper. It was as if he had emerged from a dream,

a trance that he had mistaken for his waking hours. They ate enthusiastically, the silence broken only by the sounds of bacon and bread being noisily devoured, together with indecorous sloshes of tea descending eager throats.

After only a brief period the repast was concluded, and the two of them sat back to quietly digest their meal. Whist he had been enjoying his food Hesvee had given some consideration to his plans. He would contact his colleague Ferioque on this very day, and endeavour to gain some further insight into the newly discovered archives. The missing piece of paper may or may not have been able to shed some light upon its whole significance. It had carried writing upon it, but in an unknown dialect. It was this characteristic that suggested its importance, and he had intended to return to it later so as to devote all his energies to a preliminary decryption. His annoyance at its loss - which he realised now had been quite disproportionate, and wholly due to his fatigue - had been largely based upon this belief, that it might serve as a key to the whole collection. On the other hand, and this was a possibility that he had considered, the fragment could just as easily have been part of some other collection, and had slipped entirely by accident into the papers that Celarent had presented to him. It was largely pointless now to speculate on the matter since there was no sign of the missing section, and further searches had failed to reveal its whereabouts. It was clear that it had not fallen within the confines of the room and therefore must now be lying on some city wayside, trodden into the mud and dirt by the hooves of passing horses. A more profitable use of his time and energy would lie with examining the remaining contents and focussing his attention on that section that seemed to depict a map. "Ah! Thank you, good fellow. Just what I needed to start a very busy day. Firstly, when you've finished your meal I want you to visit Professor Ferioque at his home. It's important that you speak to him personally". The master looked at Celarent pointedly, to emphasise his command. Celarent nodded his understanding. "There's no need to expand on the matter beyond what you already know". Celarent indicated his acquiescence although such was his limited acquaintance with what was passing that it hardly seemed necessary to be pressed on the point. The latter's manner was decidedly odd but at least he was back to his old self; for him, at least, that was sufficient. It was evident from the master's erratic conduct that the object of his researches had had more than their usual impact. He had never seen such extreme variations in the man's moods as he had witnessed in the last few days; only a fool would have failed to draw the conclusion that there existed some connection between these vagaries, and the documents so recently unearthed. For a brief moment he had even thought that he might be sworn to secrecy; but fortunately that instant had passed. He continued. "If the Professor is unavailable, which is quite likely, for he is, after all, a busy man like myself, then it will be sufficient to leave a message asking him to arrange a meeting at his earliest convenience. He will know that the matter is of some importance for I don't make such requests lightly. Is this all clear Celarent?" Again the latter nodded. The message was clear, as was the fact that something was, as they say, afoot. The master looked at him blankly. "You've finished your meal?" "Yes thank you, sir". Again there was a short silence before Celarent realised that this was his cue to depart. "Then I'll be off, sir. I shouldn't be too long", and with this he got up from his chair and left the room. The master remained behind, silently staring into an unknown distance.

Melaskkoli, although initially hesitant, and shocked by the sudden collapse of the fellow, rushed forward, sweeping aside completely any apprehension that might still linger with

regard to this strange man, creature, monster, or whatever he might be, concerned only to observe the fellow's apparent distress. He knelt down beside him and removed the fellow's hat, the better to examine the condition of his new companion. He was somewhat surprised - and very disturbed - by what was revealed. Truth to say, it was no monstrosity that presented itself to his investigation. His imagination, vivid at the best of times, had already created strange fantasies, horrors indeed, that might be revealed upon an unduly close perusal of this strange being. The visage that demonstrated itself to his exam was, after all, very odd. The most striking feature was the pallor of the skin. He had never witnessed anyone with such fair, indeed bloodless, skin. The tone and texture resembled somewhat the underside of a slug, which might be discovered, lurking under a stone carelessly overturned. However, that brief feeling of revulsion which he experienced he discounted, by considering that the sweat laden and pasty aspect displayed was probably the result of whatever illness the fellow was suffering. But what was even more disconcerting was the man's extraordinarily small mouth. It seemed to be entirely lipless, and of a dimension that surely could not admit more than a few crumbs of food at one time. This narrow aperture would explain the lisping and high-pitched tone of the creature's voice. The eyes were shut, and the other features seemed to broadly conform to the conventional human type. He managed to draw his gaze away from this unusual profile, and recalled the reason for his examination. He looked about the prostrate form and noticed the cloak, which covered the body from head to toe. He pulled the garment aside, there to reveal a water bottle hanging from the belt. It was then that he observed the outline of a distended belly, which had been partly concealed by the voluminous robe. Again this might be a natural feature of the man's body, or perhaps an indicator of severe malnutrition; which, he could not tell. The general impression, though, was that this was no child but a fully formed adult. He managed to draw the water bottle off its strap and, discovering it to be empty, he turned away from the prone form and made his way quickly back up the slope, then downwards upon the other side, to reach the watercourse. He was struck by the incongruity of the whole affair. There was, in this pretty little valley, not a sign of the desolation that lay so close by. He pulled off the stopper on the bottle, and plunged the whole into the cold waters. As it filled, the bubbles of air that were displaced rose to the surface of the pool, there to burst noiselessly. He snapped the stopper back onto the bottle lip, and retraced his steps up the hillside. He reached the brow and looked again on the destruction, which spread in every direction. It was then that he got his next shock. Casting his eye to each quarter, there was no sign of the creature whatsoever; he, or it, had completely vanished. He marched precipitately down the hill, anxious to locate his new-found charge. He reached the spot where he believed he had left the fellow; but there was nothing to be seen. The ground was covered in blackened earth and mud; but no clues at all of his recent encounter. Recalling that it had been exceedingly difficult to see the fellow against this grimy background, he searched about the area, using his hands as well as his feet, lest his eyes again deceive him; but it was fruitless. There was nothing to show that anyone had been there ever; but for the evidence supplied by the water bottle, it might have been a dream. He persisted in his exploration for some time before concluding that nothing further could be achieved by the effort. As his curiosity and anxiety receded concerning the creature's fate, so did his stomach rapidly remind him of his own poor condition. If he did not wish to fall into a similar predicament as his erstwhile company then he would need to find food, and quickly at that. There were no more notches on his belt to tighten, and a diet of cold water would not suffice to distract his belly from its growing emptiness. At least he had obtained one useful tool from the encounter:

the water bottle.

He looked out across the plain. It was completely desolate, and it seemed futile to continue by this way. Indeed, so mournful was its aspect that he felt that it would serve only to depress his already depleted mood, and a more profitable route must lie elsewhere. He decided to return to the stream and follow its course further up the valley; for where there was water there was usually life. As his hunger grew, so did his determination similarly strengthen, to find food - and that without further delay.

He had returned to the stream and, turning to his right, he made off in the direction that lay against the flow of the water, moving in a gentle climb up to the head of the shallow gorge. As he moved further and further onwards the sides of the valley gradually drew closer, and the slopes steeper. He was hopeful that as the space became more confined, that any quarry that he might find would be easier to capture and kill. He had not figured out how he might bring down any prey since he had no weapons, not even twine with which to fashion traps. Alternatively, he hoped that he might stumble upon some kind of human habitation along the way, for water not only attracted beasts but also his own kind. The sun had risen well above the horizon now, and a light breeze brushed across his back. There was no reminder here, at least, of the blasted lands nearby. His endeavours were now devoted wholly to the main question at hand; the location of provisions, dead or alive, that would fill the gnawing cavern that was importunately growing behind his belt. He had been walking for about an hour or so along the valley floor. As the incline steepened the underlying rocks, which had been torn away over so many thousands of years, became exposed. The way was becoming more and more arduous to traverse. He now had to frequently clamber over large boulders, and even wade the waters of the stream to make any progress. It twisted and turned, snaking its way over the ground, the waters tumbling and crashing in a most alarming fashion. He was crawling over one particularly large granite chunk, balanced most precipitously to one side of the stream, when he came to the entrance of a tiny plateau, that nestled tidily between two almost vertical cliffs. On either side the stream had cut away this space, wearing down the rock over an almost limitless span of time. And on this narrow shelf, between one side of the gorge and the other, he found himself standing before a small, wooden hut perched most precariously upon this stony ledge; through an opening in its roof drifted a thin stream of smoke. Someone was at home.

Celarent left his master to his reveries and descended the stairs that led into the street. It was a beautiful and bright morning. The apartments occupied by himself and the master were located right in the middle of the university district, which itself lay to the east of the city centre. Already the street was busy with citizens going about their business. It was not to their employment though that they made their way. At least one day a week the inhabitants took a break from their daily chores, enjoying the amenities of the metropolis, and disporting themselves generally. The only exceptions to this rule were those whose duties allowed no such interruption, the domestic routines that could never be abandoned, and the familial responsibilities that must not be neglected. And, of course, there were those trades that derived their benefit from such holidays. The various mongers of the city took full advantage of this opportunity, and made haste to bring their wares to the markets, to tempt those who might buy their produce. It seemed as if the whole city had decided to take to the streets, and the city thoroughfares were packed with joyful crowds. Celarent

stepped into the roadway and turned right. He was moving away from the centre of town and against the direction in which most of the inhabitants were heading, for it was here in the city centre, that the finest markets were held. He had to force his way upstream, so to speak, always against the pressing flood of people that surged down the narrow avenues, noisily chattering and laughing as they looked forward to the day's bargains. It was a delight to behold for not only was it a regular rest day but also one of the first feasts of that month - the time of Velius - a celebration of the founding of the city. It was the tradition, on this auspicious occasion, that all should wear their brightest and best finery for the celebrations. It had quite slipped his mind, which was hardly surprising considering the events of the past few days, and the rather odd behaviour of his master, and so he was dressed rather sombrelly, in a plain jerkin of rough, brown cloth and sporting rather frayed leggings made of old leather; an ancient ensemble at that. He noted a few disapproving looks cast his way by some of the peacocks and dandies as they hastened past him on their way to the festivities. However, he paid no great heed to their unspoken commentary, and reminded himself that though the rest of the world might be on holiday, a few still had a higher calling; thus he endeavoured to console himself. But the truth was that he rather envied the happy throng, and found himself speculating whether indeed his errand was that urgent. Surely the master could not object if he took just a little time to honour the day? After all, was he not a good citizen! And how could he be held blameworthy, in any respect, should he dutifully carry out such observances? Celarent had to smile to himself. No! Even he could not swallow that one; and he could well imagine the reaction of the Master of Psychic Studies should he choose that course. It would be wiser to continue on his mission, and convey his message to the Professor as soon as possible. If he could complete the task rapidly, the sooner he might join in the party; or at least he hoped so. As he made his way further from the centre the crowds started to diminish in numbers, and he found it correspondingly easier to make good progress through the rapidly emptying streets. But the revellers were so lively and they did appear to be having such fun. He cast one more lingering glance in the direction of a small group that had just passed by. The veritable rainbow of hues that adorned them, the glowing silks of the ladies' gowns and the traditional russet and blues of the jupons and kilts worn by the men, they were so pleasing and attractive in aspect that his longing glance almost caused him to walk straight into a wall. The encounter brought him to his senses, and he realised that he had come to the side street that led to the house of the professor. He turned off the main thoroughfare and began to walk briskly down a narrow lane, lined on both sides by the tall and rather impressive edifices that bordered the district. His master had chosen a habitation closer to the heart of the conurbation and, despite the considerable income he enjoyed as a consequence of his elevated position in the academic hierarchy, the apartments were rather cramped. However, here, on the edge of both the central zone and at the outer boundaries of the university district, there was more room to breathe, and the dwellings were on a much grander scale. Indeed, even the facades of the buildings were of a most ornate, not to say, byzantine style. Although most of the houses in the city were constructed of bricks dug from the clay quarries situated to the south of the city, the grander edifices in the more salubrious areas had marble and stone cladding attached to their exteriors, which produced a most imposing impression to the eye. The underlying material was really not at all suitable to the skills of the stone mason, but these ornamental additions gave a fuller scope to their expertise, and the artisans had not stinted in the application of their craft to those grainy faces; this, and the encouragement of the more financially well endowed citizens, had allowed them a wide range in their endeavours.

Indeed, to the more discerning and aesthetically trained eye, some of the stonework bordered on the excessive, even garish. The more outlandish designs had included a colouration of the stone that, though it did indeed add a livelier aspect to the whole artistic expression, seemed also to overstate the case. However, the same could not be said of the professor's domicile. Here there could be no question of lack of style, or of crude display. The man was of exquisite good taste. There was no room for uninhibited exhibitionistic tendencies in the palette. The whole artistic expression resided in the skills of the sculptor and stone carver. The materials retained their original complexion, and the only artifice derived from the application of hammer and chisel, rasp and saw, to their surfaces. Celarent took a brief moment to regard and admire the craftsmen's work. The whole front of the building had been rendered in an elegant grey marble, flecked with creamy spots, and streaked in the same colour by the more extensive deposits of the mineral. The stone itself had had to be imported from Hthuva, an island which lay some distance off the coast of the mainland. This outcrop was the result of some violent and cataclysmic upheaval from deep within the bowels of the earth, a fiery birth that had thrust its fury above the waves, and had fruited thus. This outpouring from the depths had also thrown forth a complex of minerals, which had produced, with the ministrations of wind and rain, ice and fire, this unique combination within the stone that now adorned the present residence of the esteemed professor and his family. Celarent never failed to be impressed by how the sculptor had so skilfully woven his designs into the fabric of the stone, taking full advantage of its natural qualities, and bringing them to a full fruition with his extraordinary skill. Most of the surface had been left untouched thereby creating the appearance of a natural cliff, which rose from the street surface, and reached right up to the roof tiles. A grand doorway stood at its centre, an impressive archway through which the visitor could pass to the anterooms. Windows rose, rank upon rank, in perfect symmetry, their borders cut in elaborate curlicues, which presented a life-like representation of the boughs of trees, complete with stony foliage and even birds, and with so close a resemblance to the original that one was surprised that these last did not take flight; it was only their perfect immobility that dispelled this illusion. This naturalistic but contrived canvas was so perfectly executed that neither seemed to contradict the other, but instead enhanced the overall effect. Finally, and with some regret, Celarent had to break away from his viewing, and return to the purpose of his mission.

He climbed up the few steps that led from street level to the massive wooden doorway and, clasping the heavy, bronze, metal clapper, slammed it energetically twice against the metal panel. He could hear the impact resound beyond the door, and echo into the house behind. He waited a few seconds. In this side-street, though he was not far from the main highway and could yet see people passing by that route as they strolled into the town, this whole district seemed to be shrouded in silence. He could detect neither signs nor sounds issuing from within the building, or indeed any of the adjacent dwellings, to indicate that someone was at home. It seemed quite likely that they too would have joined the rest of the happy populace on their way to the revelries and entertainments occurring that day. He waited a few moments more and contemplated applying his efforts to the great bronze knocker again. But perhaps this would be a foolish exercise, and might serve only to annoy some of the late risers who were yet abed. He was on the point of departing, resolving to report the matter to the master, and then take his instructions accordingly. But as he turned away from the door he heard footsteps approaching from the other side. He hesitated and listened attentively, to ensure that he had made no mistake. Yes - there they

were again. There was no mistaking it now; the sounds of bolts being drawn, and then the groaning of hinges and the creaking of wood, as the portal was drawn backwards. A face peered at him from within. "Who is it?" The tone was slightly irate, as of someone who had been distracted from a more pressing matter. "It is I, Celarent, attendant to Master Hesvee. He has sent me with a message for Professor Ferioque". The announcement was greeted with more silence, and then a low muttered curse, the precise wording of which thankfully remained beyond his hearing. He could still not make out the form of the janitor, and was about to chide the man for his inhospitable reply. But then the door was dragged further aside, again accompanied by some muttering and imprecations. "Damn door!" was all he could hear. Finally there was a creaking and crashing noise, as the door base managed to violently negotiate some obstacle, and then it swung wider still. As more light was admitted to the interior Celarent was surprised to be greeted by the sight of the professor himself. He quickly swallowed his expression of indignation. "I'm sorry, sir. I didn't mean to disturb you. Well. I mean I did mean to call upon you, but not discommode you in any way". "Well, well, fellow. It's Celarent, isn't it? No. Don't worry about that. It's this door. The servants are away today. Some foolish festival or something. I've been meaning to get it fixed. Keeps on jamming. Somebody said something about it, but I quite forgot. Anyway. I remember now eh?" "Yes sir. Of course. Thank you", replied Celarent. The professor finally managed to drag the protesting mass of wood to one side, and urged Celarent to enter. He was carrying a lighted torch aloft in one hand and it was by this, and the small amount of daylight penetrating through the opening, that one was able to make anything of the interior, so dark was it within. It seemed not only had the servants been neglectful in this area of maintenance, but they had also omitted to draw back the shutters that covered the upper windows. Celarent guessed that such failings could only be attributed to the eagerness with which they had probably departed the building, excited no doubt at the prospect of the day's beguilements. "Come in, fellow. Come in", the host beckoned him. Celarent managed to push his way through the narrow gap and then, by putting his own back to the frame, returned the wood to its former position in its hole. It crashed behind them, and the noise echoed through the great hallway in which they were now both standing. The small circle of flickering torchlight around them only hinted at the space that lay beyond, concealed as it was by the grey gloom. The professor made his way back into the house, with Celarent following a few paces behind. From time to time he would glance to one side, eager to catch a glimpse of the interior; but the servants had been thorough in their negligence, for not a chink of light showed through from any direction. As they proceeded, the sharp clacking of their shoes upon the stone floor changed soon to the more friendly clunking sounds of leather upon wood. Celarent almost stumbled, but quickly regained his equilibrium, as a shallow flight of steps appeared beneath him. He had reached out to keep his balance and, in so doing, had brushed his hand against his guide's back. "Ah! Yes. Sorry, fellow. Should've warned you. Mind the steps". He acknowledged the professor's postponed warning, and moved forward with considerably more caution, for now he recognised that he could not necessarily rely completely on his guide to get him to their destination without mishap. Fortunately, it seemed that the steps were the only barrier to be encountered on this journey, and shortly afterwards, at the end of what seemed a very extended corridor, they arrived at a doorway, one of a considerably smaller dimension than the last; and certainly more easily negotiated. The professor entered, and made his way across to a small table placed in the middle of the room "Here we are. At last." He set his torch into a bracket on the wall and, by its flickering and uncertain light, made his way over to the other wall. He reached up

with both hands and vigorously pulled back on a pair of shutters there. Shockingly the sunlight exploded into the darkness. Celarent raised his hands to his eyes, so blinding was the contrasting brightness to the previously blank obscurity. “Ah! That’s a little better”. Ferioque seemed rather oblivious to the luminary effects. He turned to face Celarent. “Well. I’m sorry about that. We’re not usually this sinister”, he laughed. For a moment the attendant was at a loss. “Sinister! You know? Dark, obscure, gloomy, mysterious”. The professor roared with amusement at his own witticism and Celarent thought it polite to nod his appreciation of the word play. “Not at all”. He was busily searching his mind for a suitably adroit and witty response; but it seemed that that facility had been rendered somewhat dull, by overexposure to this premature dusk. Finally, he could not see how he might work any observation into the conversation, and abandoned the attempt at a sally or riposte. He settled for a rather trite, “Of course, sir. Very good”. He hoped that this might not be interpreted as a dismissive and condescending reply. He knew too well that his own master had a peculiar sensitivity to any suggestion of criticism on the part of others, most especially by those he regarded as his intellectual inferiors; and in his world that meant the majority. However, Ferioque was of quite a different type. Both professors were of the same age - not quite venerable, but fast approaching that condition. But the resemblance, in terms of both physique and temperament, stopped there. Whereas the master was of a broad and sturdy frame, the cartographer was quite lithe, indeed scrawny, if this is not too indelicate a way of putting the matter. He, too, was dark skinned, and this merely served to emphasise his thin build. His hair had disappeared long ago, to expose the burned and parchment-like skin beneath. The veins across his temples were most pronounced, and extended like a fine network across the whole surface. His eyes were blue, a very light blue and, because of a weakness in one of these, he tended to observe people from the other angle. This gave his whole manner a quizzical but friendly mode, which encouraged most to feel comfortable in his presence. He was very popular with his students, for though he was very precise in his methods and stringent in discipline, he was equally generous in praise, of both their efforts and accomplishments. He was a tall man, which again lent emphasis to his slender stature, and he stood bolt upright with shoulders thrown back, indicating perhaps a more vigorous mode of living than that enjoyed by Celarent’s master. He was examining the attendant now closely, with a slight smile on his lips. “So tell me, Celarent. How fares my old friend? How long is it since I’ve seen him?” The attendant was about to attempt a reply, recalling that the last meeting would have been the Ceremony of the Gowns, the award of distinctions for outstanding scholarship, which had been held some time ago. But before he could reply the former dispensed with the matter. “Ah! Probably too long. A strange thing friendship. The less indulged, the greater the bond. It would seem that frequent proximity does not always promote this condition. I wonder why that is?” The question floated in the air, but Celarent had learnt from past experience that there was no accompanying necessity to venture an opinion. It did seem that these fellows displayed at least one common characteristic: a great fondness for their own views. He quietly scolded himself for this unkind observation, but could not help acknowledging some validity to his analysis. “Is it that friendship truly resides in the individual’s perception of the matter, and that the object of the relationship is purely secondary – a mere stimulus? For example, how often do friends overlook the deficiencies of their comrades? Do we ever really perceive truly virtue and vice in our fellows, or is it something that we merely cloak upon them, as a pretext for a species of indolence? Let us say that I were to admire someone’s bravery, which after all is only an inferable condition, and albeit that there is an objective basis to the

judgement; nevertheless, I cannot clearly see into the soul of the hero, and therefore must miss the true root of his action. And if I were to discover there some ignoble motive, would I not recoil in horror? Or perhaps dissemble the matter, and choose to avoid the inconvenience of the evidence? And again, one need only observe the rapidity with which an amicable relation can turn to deep hostility, and that sometimes upon an inherently inconsequential misunderstanding. It cannot be said here that friendship can truly sustain itself if it relies upon such weak foundations. Yes. It's something to think about". Celarent remained silent throughout this somewhat self-absorbed and tangential monologue. However, he did recall he was there for a reason, and chose, at this moment, to remind the householder of his presence. Nothing more complicated than a slight cough should be sufficient. "Hrrrrmpph", he managed. "Yes", responded Ferioque vaguely. "Yes", he repeated more firmly, as he returned from his reflections to the present company. "So, my friend is well, I trust?" On this occasion it seemed that Celarent could proffer an opinion. "Yes indeed, sir. Very well. In good health and working hard as usual. In fact it's with regard to his present project that he instructed me to seek you out, and request that you meet with him. He's arrived at a point in his current researches where he would value your assistance". "Really", observed the professor. "Well that is most unusual. We've collaborated on a number of studies, but very rarely. Can you tell me the nature of the enquiry?" "I cannot I regret, sir. The matter is quite confidential and the master has not seen fit to make me privy as to the full content of his study. However, he has impressed upon me the importance of his efforts, and would therefore appreciate it greatly if you would take the time to advise him". The older man stood silently pondering for a few moments, apparently searching his mind for any pressing matters that might require priority. "Important, you say?" he demanded. "Yes indeed, sir. Quite, I mean I think 'very' important, if I may judge from my master's manner". At this added qualification Ferioque's interest was pricked further. It would have to be something of great moment for Hesvee to display any kind of enthusiasm for a project. He was of a nature to scorn vain expressions of fervour, regarding such outbursts as unprofessional, and indeed verging on the hysterical. Similarly, for him to request assistance suggested that whatever it was he was engaged upon, it had to be of some fundamental significance. Celarent's presence, and the substance and manner of his report of the master's work, had served to whet his appetite. "Very well. I have to say that the little you have communicated here has only served to amplify my curiosity. Return to my friend and inform him that I will see him at his home within the hour. There are a few minor but necessary matters to take care of before I may depart the house. The servants may be forgiven their neglect, but my wife is not so generous with me. Yes. Tell him I shall be there shortly, and we shall see what we shall see". "Thank you, sir", replied Celarent. "I shall inform him of your decision". Celarent looked around him as if to depart, but then recalled that he would not know his way, the route hither being a little obscure. Ferioque saw his hesitation. "Don't worry. I'll escort you back", he laughed. He again picked up the torch from its stand, and led the way back to the main entrance. Here he bade the attendant farewell, and repeated his assurance. Celarent made his way along the side street towards the main thoroughfare, satisfied that his duty was now done.

The landscape stretched away into the grey distance, beautiful in its desolation. A low humming sound filled the air, but its source was oblivious to this unconsciously trilled melody. "Heeeeeeeee. Heeeeeeeee. Heeeeeee", it went, softly floating over the dark and shattered earth. These thin and reedy tones keened from a pinhead-like orifice, which

was centred upon the lower part of the face of the wanderer. Its location and form would suggest a mouth, but its dimensions did not. The possessor of this remarkable aperture was presently engaged in reflecting upon that meeting with the young man-creature. "A close call that", he thought. But he had handled it well enough, though not as craftily as would generally become one of his race. The young chap had caught him napping. They had told him, had they not? "You'll get into trouble one of these days. The dark ones will stumble upon you when you least expect it, and then where will you be?" The question has been posed to him by his friends; and had he a suitable answer? Well, obviously not, for precisely what had been predicted, to the letter in fact, had come to pass. The young one had almost fallen over him as he lay on the ground, and whilst engaged in his feeding moreover! It was fortunate that the child-fool was clearly not acquainted with his kind. If he had then he would surely have made a swift withdrawal from the encounter. Instead, and much to his surprise, a conversation had ensued. This had been totally unexpected, in every respect. It was the first time that he had ever had the fortune - or misfortune as he might have considered it prior to this eventful interview - to meet one of the sky or surface dwellers, as they were called amongst his people. Much information had been garnered concerning their species for they had been closely observed, albeit from a distance, regarding their habits and customs. His kind knew that closer contact would result in no benefit to them and, indeed, if the last occasion was anything to go by, only a disastrous outcome could be expected. So the elders had reflected carefully on the matter, and concluded that the two races should never meet, or not at least until the time was fortuitous. It would seem that this occasion was approaching more rapidly than anticipated, and the circumstances did not bode well for the surface dwellers. Still, he shied away from those dark thoughts, and returned to his musings on the latest accident. How could he have been so foolish? It was a matter of instinct, and moreover a deeply ingrained skill, that they should never been seen by men. And yet he had been caught out like some novice scout. He could only put it down to being utterly absorbed in the delicious though unsatisfying tastes and textures of the surface nutrients. It was a luxury, indeed, to be able to partake so liberally of this fresh vegetation, which flourished under the almost unbearable sunlight that glowed down upon the outer surfaces of this world. It was said that many generations ago his people, too, had lived on the outer crust of the earth. They had worked and played under the great, open heavens, just as the sky dwellers did now. Until recently most of his people rarely ventured upon the outer skin; for so long had they lived and died, without ever seeing the blue firmament above. But things were changing rapidly, and the time was approaching that.... But he quickly banished those thoughts from his mind. The young human had seemed quite shaken by their meeting; it must have been something of a shock. Usually the colouration of his garb would have hidden his form from discovery; but the young creature had approached so silently that even his acute hearing had failed to hear his footsteps; that and those delicious green stems! His mouth watered, recalling their succulent taste. And then he had to lose consciousness! Such a coincidence of bad luck it would seem; but he still felt the fault. Fortunately he had recovered almost immediately, and as his new acquaintance had disappeared, so too, he concluded, should he similarly extricate himself, and withdraw quickly back into the landscape. It was not simply that his garb and adornment were most suitable for blending into the background of this devastated land. He and his kind also had a chameleon-like ability to merge into whatever surface they stood upon, and indeed adopt completely invisibility if required. It was a voluntarily exercised skill and one that he had neglected, presumably for the same reasons that he had been caught napping. Beware

always that fatal complacency! The grasses were indeed delectable, and he still salivated at the thought. But things were getting out of hand now. In the past, when a new source of such delight was discovered upon the surface, his people had exercised much caution in harvesting the fare. But matters had changed, and there were some amongst his race that had grown quite bold, and carelessness and foolhardiness had quite replaced caution. He subscribed to the last quality but could see the way things were going; and it was not well. For instance, and with this last escapade, in the not-so-distant past the foragers would have returned home, and presented their reports on the food source. Those responsible for such things would have convened a meeting, with the harvesters despatched to make a preliminary survey to assess the manner in which this new food supply might be exploited. Present in all their minds would be the need to ensure that their activity should not attract the attention of the sky dwellers in the locality; after all, the vegetation in which they were interested was of no importance to the latter. For these particular grasses their only competition would be from those quadrupeds, which the surface people grew for their own sustenance. However, they had learnt that the brutes were generally restricted to certain fenced locations and, if his people's conduct did not conflict with those interests, there should be no reason for anyone to be the wiser. The vegetation would be collected in such a way as to draw little attention to their labours. They were also careful not to deplete the food supply beyond a certain point, recognising that to do so would be to sacrifice prudent stewardship for greedy and immediate gratification. Unfortunately, certain matters had arisen in the lands below where the former policy, if it could be called that, had been displaced by a more demanding exigency. A new generation had arisen, and in great numbers, who were no longer willing to proceed in measured steps towards their final goal. Impatient voices now rang out loudly, drowning under their rancorous bellowing the counsels of more prudent men. In fact, the reason why he was on the surface this very day was due to an outbreak, which had taken place on the previous night. It could no longer be ignored that the rapid population growth of previous years had forced up the demand for food, and had placed enormous pressures on the farmers and hunters of his world to support that insatiable burden; this, of course, was further exacerbated by the very nature of his people's unfathomable appetites, which did nothing to lighten the load. These factors had coalesced and, with the increasingly careless and aggressive attitudes displayed in some quarters, this had led to the night raid. Literally thousands of his fellows had come to the surface and rampaged over the district, ripping up the precious vegetation in a desperate attempt to satiate what essentially could not be satisfied. Driven by the extremities of hunger and inordinate greed they had literally stripped the landscape for miles around, before again descending to their dark lands deep below the ravaged surface. The first reports of the raid had rapidly filtered back to the Council; it would have been quite impossible to conceal such a massive incursion. Its members were gravely alarmed that the sortie had taken place at all, but they were even more apprehensive about the motives that might lie beneath the action. There was a suspicion that a political impetus lay in the background, and that there were forces at work that might seek to overthrow this governing body; that someone somewhere was trying to force their hand. There was a great deal of anger directed at the suspected ringleaders, and many voices were calling for swift and violent retribution. But more moderate tempers had prevailed, and it was decided that an investigation should be carried out before any kind of response, violent or otherwise, was prepared. He, iDarii, had been sent to the surface to assess the damage, and it was to this end that he had been directing his attention when the surface dweller had discovered him. He berated

himself again for his carelessness, but he could not deny his own nature. He should have taken the precaution to feast well before ascending to the surface. However, the turmoil that the raid had engendered, together with the sense of urgency that prevailed generally, had infected him too, and he had foregone this consideration in his haste to arrive at his destination. The hunger had been upon him before he had realised it; for when those of his race had to feed, it took absolute priority over all else. Thus had he been about his meal when the young human stumbled upon his prone body. He resolved to banish these regrets from his heart for the last time. There was nothing more to be done on the matter; so let there be an end to it.

He hesitated there for a while. He was mindful of his last surprise encounter with that odd fellow on the plain. It was a day - and a night - of surprises, and he was reluctant to repeat the experience. Despite his extreme hunger caution held him back, and he carefully examined the area about him, for any clues as to the inhabitant, or inhabitants, of the hut. Apart from the thin trickle of grey blue smoke that issued from the roof opening, there was no other sign, or sound of occupants. The splashing and gurgling stream rushed by him, its waters sending a crashing echo off the steep walls of the canyon. He hesitated again but could not deny the mutterings coming from his belly; where there was smoke there was fire; and where there was fire there might be food - and hot, tasty food at that, so his imagination informed him. His appetite rose; and with this, his resolve. He took a few cautious paces towards the hut, all the while keeping his eyes and ears alert to any danger. But still the stream rushed by, and the smoke crept lazily into the sky. He approached the shack from the side and, ever so quietly, made his way round the corner of the dwelling, standing some way out so as to be able to observe any who might seek to conceal themselves. He was much relieved to discover no sign of an ambush. As his immediate fears were allayed it occurred to him that perhaps it might be prudent to call out. If there were someone within would it not be wise to give some warning of his presence? He was now standing directly in front of the building. It was a simple structure, composed essentially of four wooden walls constructed of roughly hewn planks, these arranged vertically upon a frame, and topped off with a ragged and lopsided roof. The only openings that he could see were a small, low doorway, and the gap in the roof through which the smoke trailed. Finally, he summoned up sufficient courage and, looking about himself to make sure of an escape route, he called out firmly but nervously; "Hello. Anyone at home?" His voice echoed off the rocks, and joined the soft slushing sounds of the stream. The noise of his call died away quickly, and he was left with a dull silence.

Melaskkoli hesitated. It seemed that there was no one in. The doorway both beckoned and repelled; but his stomach again decided the issue. He approached the hut, treading almost on tiptoes. It would not have mattered so much for the ground was covered in what appeared to be grass, but which on closer investigation turned out to be a coarse moss. It flowed over almost the whole surface with an occasional grey rock forcing its way through the soft mantle. Still there was nothing to indicate that anyone was within and, bolstered by his rumbling intestines, he made his way slowly, and very, very cautiously, up to the doorway. Now he stood just outside it. The door was fast closed and he was most reluctant to advance further. He reached forward with a closed fist and, summoning up his breath, rapped firmly on the wooden panel. He stepped back quickly, readying himself for the expected attack. His nerves balanced upon a precipice, and the strange silence of this small valley did nothing to reassure him. Again - not a sound. He was faced with a choice,

and nature again rose to determine his conclusion. He stepped towards the door and raised his hand, but this time with the palm extended towards the knotted wood surface. He braced himself and, taking a another deep breath, pushed against the wood; it gave way easily. He had expected to meet some resistance, but whoever or whatever lived here obviously did not place much reliance upon locks or bolts. It swung aside noisily and he could see within. It would have been pitch dark except for the glow of a fire that was burning in the centre of the cabin. He stepped over the door jamb and took a couple of paces into the hut. Gradually, as his eyes adjusted to the dim light, he could see that the place was quite empty. The fire had burned quite low, which suggested that it had not been tended for some little while. He looked carefully behind the door but was relieved not to meet any creatures of evil intent lurking there. He smiled somewhat at his foolishness; surely he was far too old to be scared of the dark. Had he not just marched through the night, all by himself – and yet come to no harm? He pulled his shoulders back, noticing for the first time the tension that had built up in the muscles there. Reassured by his inspection so far, he stepped further into the interior of the cabin, and moved closer to the fire. As he did so he noticed some bundles hanging from the roof rafters on the left side of the hut. As his eyesight adjusted to the relatively sombre light, so he could see they were joints of some kind of smoked meat, which had been stored out of harms way. He looked about, searching in dark corners for any signs of life; but the place was completely empty. He looked again at those delicious cuts of meat and, without further hesitation, reached up to one hunk and pulled it down from its hook. Now, driven by his intense hunger, he turned towards some cupboards that lined one of the walls and, pulling them open, ransacked their contents. He could not help but feel something of a thief, coming stealthily thus, to pilfer from some innocent's abode. But his appetite reined supreme, and any moral niceties were swept away in its flood. His hands fell upon the bone handle of a sharp knife. He returned to the table upon which he had placed the meat and, without a falter, hacked off a generous chunk of the grainy flesh. He raised it to his mouth and bit into the succulent morsel. It was the most delicious thing that he had ever tasted, or so he thought, and he wrought havoc upon it, devouring it with unrestrained delight. If anyone had happened upon him at that moment he doubted very much whether he would have left off from his feast for one instant, so demanding was his hunger.

After sometime, and when a quite considerable quantity of meat had been sheared off the joint, he noticed that his mouth was dry, from the salt used to preserve the viands. Then he recalled the water bottle hung about his neck. He eagerly unplugged the stopper, raised the neck to his mouth, and took a long, deep draught of the slightly warm water. Some of the excess fluid ran down his chin and on to his tunic, but he was far from concerned with matters of decorum. He pulled up a stool and sat down to continue with his meal, the urgency of his hunger having abated a little. The worst ravages of his craving now satisfied, he had time to look about, examining the contents of the hut, hoping to gain some clues to its erstwhile occupant - or occupants - and as to why apparently they might have left in such haste. There was a low couch set to one side in the corner, which intimated the place was inhabited only by a solitary individual. Other than this there were the usual furnishings, rough and ready that they were, that one might expect to find. The furniture was basic and roughly crafted. There was a plentiful supply of firewood stacked over against one wall and, of course, the meat supplies hanging from the ceiling. He guessed that the owner might be a hunter for there was no sign of any cultivation nearby; neither the land nor the locale were really suitable for farming. Further, there were no tools

in the hut that would be associated with that trade. No. Melaskkoli concluded this had to be the domicile of a huntsman, for everything pointed to that employment. However, he could still not see why whosoever lived here should leave the place so carelessly, and unsecured. It is true that such fellows were not generally renowned for their tidiness, or with a great concern for domestic duties; but to leave a fire unattended, this was foolhardy in the extreme. It was possible, of course, that the occupier might have stepped outside to attend to a call of nature, and could still be in the neighbourhood. But he had been here for some time now, and did not think that the explanation. He consumed the last portion of meat with a degree more delicacy, now the edge had been turned upon his hunger, and then resolved to take another look outside the hut before continuing with his exploration.

His eyes had fully adjusted to the low light within the building; now, as he departed, he had to squint against the bright sunlight once more. Again he looked about him. The stream bubbled merrily on its way as it flowed down from the hills above. He could see a small waterfall at the head of the gorge, spilling its waters into a swirling pool, before it continued its lively course along the valley floor. It really was quite beautiful. Now that he had the leisure to appreciate this vista he found it quite delightful in every aspect. This place, indeed, would be an ideal spot for someone who preferred his own company, a refuge set well away from the bothersome intrusion of his fellow men. The thought passed through his mind, that his presence here might provoke an extreme response, a brisk reply to his infringement upon their desire for privacy; it might well be good policy to make as rapid a departure as possible from the environs, and thus avoid such a confrontation. He had satisfied all his immediate needs and there only remained the requirement to refresh his water bottle and perhaps borrow, if it might be phrased that way, one of those delicious cuts of meat; then he might continue on his way securely provisioned. His conscience with regard to the latter question had recovered some of its force now that his immediate physical demands had been answered. He resolved that he would, at the first opportunity, return to the place, preferably in the company of some friend, and make full recompense for his uninvited withdrawals of victuals from an unconsenting, but generous host. He concluded his survey of the scene, and made his way back over to the stream to fill the water bottle. Once he had finished this task he again entered the hut. He had no bag in which to carry any of his newly acquired supplies, but he was quite sure that he would find something that would serve that purpose within. As he had thought, he quickly discovered a pile of sacks, which must have served as flour bags before. He took one of these outside and gave it a vigorous shaking, removing all the dust from both inside and out. When he was satisfied that it was mostly clear of dirt and rubbish, he returned to the hut and, reaching up, unhooked a fair sized haunch of meat, and placed it into its new but makeshift container. He also determined to take the knife that he had found in the cupboard, again with a firm resolution that he would make full restitution for this at the earliest opportunity. He had slung the sack over his shoulder and slid the knife into his belt, and was just turning to leave, when he heard a scraping sound from outside; he immediately froze.

iDarii continued his slow but steady progress over the riven countryside. All around, and as far as the eye could see, the earth presented a devastated aspect to the traveller. Gone were the great plains of waving green and brown grass fronds, and uprooted were the little copses of trees that had punctuated the meadows. The only signs that remained of the original landscape were the faint rivulets that drifted slowly between the great, brown

mounds of stripped earth. The horde had denuded the whole countryside; not a leaf, not a stem remained. This catastrophe would be quite impossible to conceal; it was evident that the creatures that had passed by this way had essayed no attempt to dissemble. The farmsteads of the humans lay to the other side of the plain, and much closer to the eastern edge, and followed the line of the mountains, which ran along the border. These farmers were a sturdy breed, but not foolish; they were unwilling to take unnecessary risks, and steered clear of this part of the territory, lying closely as it did to the badlands. It was predominantly a deserted region, though the occasional traveller did venture this way from time to time, as iDarii had already observed. It was only a matter of time, however, before the word spread amongst the nearby farms, of what had passed here. The rumours would then disseminate to the towns and cities of the province, and there could well be trouble from those authorities. His encounter with the young one led him to believe that the latter's reaction indicated complete ignorance of the possible causes of this event. His exclamations of surprise, and indeed undisguised horror, at the form of one of the Gaki – the name by which they called themselves - hinted at a complete unfamiliarity with their kind and, therefore, there was every chance that the responsibility for this destruction would not be laid at their door. He had briefly considered killing the young creature, but an unaccountable sense that this would be wrong had assailed him, and had prevented him from carrying out the act. It was not the case that he felt any pity or sympathy for the fellow; it just seemed an unnecessary step to take, given the probable future trend of events; yet again his mind recoiled from consideration of this. Despite the fact that he was not encumbered excessively with such sensibilities, nevertheless he had to acknowledge that there were certain acts from which even the most hardened of hearts might shrink.

It was at this moment that he noticed the ground falling away beneath his feet. This had nothing to do with it having a sloping surface, but rather his own carelessness. Even though there was no one to witness his progress through the wasteland, he could not afford to neglect his training. It was one of his, and of his breed's, physical peculiarities, that due to a strange disproportion of some elements in their material composition they had a tendency to float somewhat above the ground; under the right conditions, that is. Underground this did not tend to be a problem, for there was usually a rocky ceiling to limit any excessive vertical movement. But here, in the open, the potential for a disastrous elevation might be more serious; And so he re-applied his concentration to the business of returning to terra firma. It was simply a matter of mind control and, as he had not risen too far above the terrain, in a few moments his feet again made contact with the ground. Another peculiarity - perhaps even more significant from the point of view of the untutored - was that this same elemental constitution also lent itself to a tendency for their physical masses to coincide occasionally with that of others, the conventional boundaries operating between each being rendered supervenient. Thus, the untrained novice who, having acquired somewhat the skill of remaining fixed to the earth, would sometimes overcompensate as it were, and find their lower appendages sinking into the ground. This caused no damage to the practitioner; but might be a source of considerable embarrassment nevertheless. It was considered not only to be a matter of great, personal dignity, to be able to sustain a coherent form that did not merge disreputably with other forms, but in the case of the observer sent above ground to spy upon the surface dwellers, it could provoke unwelcome interest on the part of these same individuals. iDarii, fortunately, was not frequently prone to such miscalculations, and managed to retain his equilibrium to the extent that the manner of his propulsion would appear quite normal to

the casual, or even the more inquisitive observer. His attire was equally designed to avoid undue comment by strangers since it covered his unusual profile quite adequately. It was unfortunate that the young human had had the opportunity to examine him closely; but there was nothing to be done about that now. He was still somewhat surprised that he had not followed his first instinct and dispose of the boy. Yet it would have been quite a superfluous act. But he was not at all sure that this restraint had been prompted solely by such a consideration. No matter! Even if the boy should recount his story to another they were more than likely to discount it as the wayward imaginings of a foolish youth. And then if his story were to be verified by a subsequent history it would be too late.

It was thus he made his way across the plain, drawing closer and closer to the mountains. About him the air was filled with that strange keening sound of which he was quite oblivious, so entrapped was he in his own musings. The sun was far advanced across the sky, and the light fell slantwise upon his body, pushing his dark shadow to the side of the path. The monotonous murmuring, that emitted constantly from his tiny mouth, had softened somewhat as he roused from his reveries. His journey, or at least this part of it, was nearly at an end. The countryside had already reverted to its customary form. Although the extent of the erosion had been considerable it was not as bad as he had at first estimated. It was true that his initial inspection had carried a terrible import; but now that he had surveyed the area thoroughly it would seem that only a relatively small region had been affected. This was bad enough though. The bizarre nature of the incident was inevitably going to arouse a curiosity, an inquisition perhaps, that his race would rather avoid. There had been some heavy storms in the area that had been accompanied by minor flooding. It had been nothing of great consequence but his hope was that the damage might be attributed to some natural phenomena such as these. And then again, perhaps even a native superstition might be encouraged, for there were some who still believed in the old gods, foolish as they were. As he approached the pass by which he had made his entry into the plain, and by that same route he was returning homewards, he started to feel the first pangs of hunger rising again in his cavernous belly. It was a trait of his race that they were always in a state of disquiet, most notably with regard to the physical demands of the body. It was thus that neither could their need for food nor drink ever be fully satisfied. Indeed, the horde that had surfaced on the previous night had not been driven by the ordinary demands of their bodies. The hunger, of which he was experiencing the first symptoms, would be equated amongst humans to the normal stirrings of a quite natural inclination to nourish the body. However, amongst his race, this urge was sometimes multiplied a hundredfold, and drove its sufferers to the most extraordinary lengths, to satiate that drive. The raid upon the surface had been but the last of a number of incidents, which were increasing with worrying frequency. There was something occurring within the Gaki physiology that was spurring on that appetite to even greater depths. Their scientists had sought an explanation for these visceral upsurges; but their researches had yielded little result. It was for this reason that there was a growing discontent amongst the under dwellers. Their own food supplies were rapidly being exhausted, both by the increasing demands of the existing population, and by an almost exponential growth in their numbers. These two factors had combined to produce a crisis that no one knew how to resolve. Earlier that day, when he had been discovered by the young one, he had had a mild attack of the condition and, until he had attended to the yearning, he had been quite helpless against its onslaught. Now, however, he was sensing the normal demands of his body, but his appetite had so augmented of late that he

had become fearful of what had been a regular, physiological need. He paused briefly, and turned aside from his path, to attend to this importunate demand. He had noticed that the grasses nearby looked quite delicious, and it would be sensible, he reflected, to allay his desire before continuing his journey. He was not at all sure what he might encounter once he returned to the settlement. He lowered his face to the succulent fronds and, with considerable force, sucked one into his mouth. The pressure of the inhalation was considerable, and more than compensated for the narrowness of the aperture through which both the stem and its leaves were now disappearing. One after the other they were drawn into his maw and, in but a short space of time, he had consumed enough to clear the ground for a distance of several feet around him. The bald patch thus revealed was of no great significance, for the land was pitted, here and there, with earthen mounds and dips, and it was unlikely that a chance traveller would remark the bare sections. As he fed he could feel the hunger subside. When he was satisfied, or as replete as it was possible for one of his race to be, he resumed his path into the mountains.

The pass in which he now found himself was a deep cut between two, high granite ridges. His people called this Fangway, its resemblance to this form being quite striking. It was one of their major routes into the mountains, and mainly so because it avoided the attention of the brigands, their hostile neighbours, who dwelt in large numbers on the mountainsides. The Gaki saw the mountain dwellers as an ill-organised rabble, who were not worth the effort to subdue. They knew, too, that the plainsmen feared and despised these savages, and that there was little chance of much contact between the two communities, still less a military alliance. It would suffice that the former be left alone, for the time being anyway. The outlaws were a much less significant problem; it were best that that the Gaki should focus their energies on the former, and leave the last to what destiny might bring.

He moved deeper into the pass. The mountains crowded up on either side, their great granite buttresses reaching high into the darkening sky, like the shoulders of some immense giant, which carried the burden of that infinite vault above the world. Far overhead he could see the squadrons of grey-white clouds scudding higher and higher over the peaks, running before the winds that whipped up over the land. As the blasts of air struck his body he felt the chill upon his face, and shivered under its lash. It was important that he gain shelter quickly, for soon it would be impossible for him to retain his poise above ground, subject as he was to these random gusts. Gratefully he saw before him a great, dark gash gouged into the wall of the gorge; it was towards this that he made all haste. He had just entered into this gloomy opening when the skies above exploded, in a titanic display of lightning, and the clouds collapsed in the sky, sending down a torrent of freezing rain. The whole mountain range crackled under these energetic discharges, their bright spiked tracks racing across the dark sky, to strike upon those granite turrets, before splashing out again into the valleys beneath. The rain fell like a vast waterfall, emptying its belly onto the dry land beneath, then rushing down the gorges in bursting floods that spread out over the plain below. When iDarii saw this his hopes rose. If the storm continued with such ferocity then all signs of his fellows' incursions would be concealed; and the horror that might have followed could be delayed; or, at least, for a little while longer. Yet again he was surprised at his fervour. It really was quite unlike him to be at all concerned for the welfare of anyone other than his immediate family; even his own race figured not greatly in his estimation. They were largely an unemotional people; and he was

typical of his species. It occurred to him that these strange outflows of sentiment might, in some way, be related to the deviant excesses of appetite, which he and the others had been experiencing in recent times; he could think of no other explanation. He remained there for a while at the cavern's mouth, immersed in the wonder of the violent storms that ranged athwart the heavens. He was, at heart, a true creature of the darkness. But even he could not turn away from the magnificence of this mighty power. Within his cold body there could no more be denied the stirrings of the sublime, and the response of the fundamental within him to the elemental carried in the great storm outside; the light and thunder of the skies, and the cold silence of the earth.

It was much quieter now as he retraced his steps through the narrow streets toward his master's abode. Most of the crowds had made their way to the centre already. As he debated the matter he thought it more prudent to return to Hesvee, present his report on the interview, and only then ask permission to join the festivities. The professor was not a tyrant after all, he reflected. Surely now, with the scholar in a much improved frame of mind, he would easily gain permission to absent himself for the remainder of the day and evening. The height of the festival was the post-tenebral celebration. There would be food and wine aplenty, and always a lively firework display to amuse and amaze the populace. Yes! He could almost taste those delicious traditional roasted sweetmeats, delightfully melting in his mouth. In anticipation of the night's revelries he quickened his pace, eager to discharge his duties and join the fun. He quickened his pace back to the university quarter, and turned into the street in which the professor's apartments were located. The sun was still high in the heavens, and the sky was a gorgeous pure blue, empty of everything but that exhilarating sense of unlimited space. Even though this was framed between the high roofs of the buildings that lined this narrow street, this very earthly confinement, if anything, accentuated the enormous sense of freedom and expansiveness which such vistas always conveyed to Celarent. Such was the exultation and excitement in his heart, already roused by thoughts of the coming bacchanalia, that he could barely contain his mounting sense of excitement, and he now sprinted along the street. He reached the doorway to the dwelling and raced up the stairs to their rooms. He thrust his way through the doorway and only just caught himself in time, and abbreviated his headlong pace before entering the professor's room. He saw his master had once again returned to his perusal of those rare and evidently important documents. As he he crossed the room he noticed of the heaviness of his own breathing. Fortunately the scholar was so mesmerised by the objects of his scrutiny that it was unlikely that even if one of those large fireworks - so popular at these festive events - had been ignited in the room, he would probably have not remarked the explosion. Celarent remained as still as his beating heart would allow, and waited until his breathing had returned to a more even depth and rhythm. Finally, he had recovered his equilibrium sufficiently to be able to address the man. "Sir?" he ventured. There was no response. "Sir I'm back" he repeated, perhaps a little unnecessarily. Again there was no reply. He hesitated whilst considering the possibility that if his superior were to be so unaware of his presence when he was there, so much the better if he should remove himself entirely. He toyed with this thought, of withdrawing from the room as quietly as he had noisily entered it, and was on the point of taking a step backwards, still disputing within himself the matter. Unfortunately, because of his rearward, but careless progress, he inadvertently stepped upon a creaking floorboard, and its almost soundless protest drew the master's attention to his presence. Celarent cursed this paradox, and ceased his retreat. "Ah! There you are, dear fellow. Where have you been?"

It appeared that the master had forgotten the errand upon which he had been despatched. "Oh yes", he recalled. "And how of my friend? His response? You did speak to him directly, I hope?" "Yes, sir. The professor was at home. He instructed me to tell you that he'll be here shortly. He just has to attend to a few domestic chores and then he'll be free. Most assuredly, sir". "Excellent", replied the master. "We must get on with this business as soon as possible. I need to clarify a few things with Ferioque before we depart". Celarent remained silent for a few moments, his heart rising with both recognition and surprise; recognition, perhaps, that the master had belatedly realised that the Velian festival was being held; and surprise, that he seemed to be proposing that they might both attend the feast. "Well yes, sir. That would indeed be fine". Hesvee eyed him for a few moments. "You think so, sir". He seemed to be somewhat suspicious of Celarent's enthusiasm. "Well yes, sir. It should be an excellent evening. I think almost the whole city must have gone down to the central square. There were lots of people going that way when I was outside". Again the master gave him a curious look. "What are you talking about, fellow?" Celarent became uneasy. It seemed that there might be some misunderstanding between them, for there was nothing to suggest in the master's attitude that he was looking forward to a celebration. Indeed, a frown now hovered about the man's face indicating, if anything, a burgeoning irritation. "Er, sir. I mean the festival. Lots of people will be there". His increasing sense of nervousness, exacerbated too by the master's darkening demeanour, seemed to unleash a bold, but very foolish, recklessness in his next utterance. "I was wondering, sir, of course with your permission, and only if it causes no inconvenience, if I might absent myself, sir". He paused to measure the response. "I mean it would be very kind of you, sir, if you were to permit me to go to the festival". A silence followed whilst the professor seemed to regard his servant with incredulity. "Festival? Festival?" he repeated. With the last repetition it was obvious that the master was quite unclear about Celarent's ambitions, or indeed their object. Then the light suddenly dawned upon the master, if not upon the servant. "Oh! Yes! The festival. Velius, of course. Quite forgot. Yes. Yes. Of course you may go; but it was not that to which I was referring". Before he could continue with his explanation there sounded a loud knock upon the door below. "That must be the Professor, Professor!" exclaimed the slightly bemused servant. Somewhat relieved at the interruption, and more so the opportunity to remove himself from the situation he, without prompting, left the room, and made his way quickly down the stairs. He opened the door and there was Ferioque, holding his side, and grimacing slightly. "Shouldn't have walked so fast. Really must get more exercise, eh Celarent?" "Please come in, sir", replied the latter. "Thank you", puffed the older man. Celarent led the way upstairs, and showed the visitor into the study. The two scholars greeted each other warmly. They had been friends for many years, and met regularly, though sometimes infrequently, both socially and professionally. "Come, magister. Sit down" Hesvee joked, employing the formal mode of address. "Bring us some wine won't you, Celarent? It's not too early for you, sir?" he enquired of his friend. Ferioque made the appearance of considering the question carefully before responding. "Well! It is a feast day. I see no reason why we shouldn't. After all, the rest of the city are probably well into their cups by now", he laughed. "Ah yes. Celarent was just reminding me. I'd almost forgotten. Well, and how have you been, my friend?" "Flourishing sir, but a little stiff in the joints. And you?" the venerable professor asked. "Most interesting. Most interesting. I've just discovered....". He paused, and looked over at Celarent. "Now, my good chap. Just bring a flagon and a couple of glasses, and you can be off". Celarent realised that his absence was encouraged; Hesvee might wish to continue his discussion in private with his

colleague, and thus his servant's desire to join the festivities might have a dual advantage for both of them. Celarent went to a cupboard in the kitchen, and pulled out a bottle of a moderate, vintage red claret. He knew it to be most appetising, and from his own experience, for he had had occasion to sample the contents; but politically, of course, when the master was out, and only on special occasions. He collected a couple of glasses in the other hand, and returned to the study. The two men were standing side by side, both peering down at the desk, and shifting through the papers, which covered every inch of its surface. He poured out two generous measures, knowing his master's fondness for this particular tittle, and further guessing that Ferioque would probably err more on the side of generosity than relative abstinence. He set the bottle down, and addressing Hesvee's back: "With your permission, sir?" There was a moment's silence before he observed Ferioque nudge his colleague's arm. "Ah yes. Thank you. Of course. Off you go then, and enjoy yourself". The master was about to turn away but then recalled. "But you will need to be ready first thing in the morning. So imbibe in moderation, my good fellow". Both professors laughed, knowing that it was easier to proffer such advice than to follow it. Celarent smiled and withdrew from the room, leaving the two scholars absorbed in their studies. It was a matter of moments before he stood once more outside the door; and this time he was looking down the street towards the city centre. Already he could hear the sounds of the revellers, noisily proclaiming their merriment to all about.

Moments ticked by like eternities. Melaskkoli held his breath, remaining stock-still, desperately straining to detect any more sounds from without. His heart pounded, like a dog straining at the leash, eager to escape its owner's control; but he could hear nothing. Nevertheless, he stayed motionless inside the hut, not daring to open the door for fear of what he might discover upon the other side. He had almost convinced himself that he had imagined the noise when it sounded again; this time there was no doubting it. It was loud and clear, and seemingly just on the other side of the narrow, wooden partition. Again he froze, desperately searching for some escape route; but it was a fruitless gesture, for he already knew that there was no other way out of the dwelling. He had but two choices: remain where he was and hope that whatever it was would leave; but then, of course, it might enter the hut, and he would be trapped with it; or he could force the door violently open, and hope that the element of surprise would be sufficient to give him time to make his escape. It never occurred to him that its cause might be benevolent; perhaps just a loose plank of wood, say, swinging in the breeze, and striking upon the outside of the hut as it did so. But there was a deliberateness about the vibration, which defied that interpretation. It seemed that he might loiter here forever, so did time appear to suspend its progress. Sooner or later one of them would have to move. He retreated slightly, and braced himself upon one leg, the other poised to kick the door open. He made sure he had a good grasp on his makeshift satchel, and then lunged forward with his whole body. The door went crashing out into the open, and he threw himself after it, clean through the newly exposed hole. He had only taken a few paces before he turned, to observe the fulcrum of his flight. Such had been the force of his exit that the door frame itself had been partly detached from its mounting, and the whole now leaned precariously over the ground. Some of the wood had splintered, and fragments lay all over the ground near the entrance. However, apart from those few signs of his vigorous egress, there was absolutely no indication of any visitor. He had been quite sure that he would be greeted by the appearance of some dread and malevolent creature, a being bent solely upon his painful destruction; and yet there was nothing, just the pitiful remnants of the door, its splintered

frame adding yet more to the increasing inventory of restitution that already lay upon his back. He groaned inwardly. Here he was, an unwanted guest, a thief who had taken both food and tools from this stranger's home, and then, upon his departure, had succeeded in destroying the only means, albeit unemployed, of securing these quarters. Was it possible to have a worse guest in one's own home? He was forced to admit that it was very unlikely. He placed his satchel upon the ground and returned to the doorway, the more closely to inspect the damage. As he did so he could not help but feel a strange presence in the vicinity. He glanced around, searching for some clue to confirm the root of his unidentified fears. But apart from the stream splashing nearby, and a slight breeze drifting over the poison green moss, there was nothing to signify any other person; he was completely alone; but he could clearly see the ruined entrance. He reached up to the broken door frame and, with a little effort, managed to push it roughly back into position. He thought momentarily to inspect the hut for some tools, and perhaps to try and effect some repairs; but then he concluded that the longer he remained here the more likely it was that he would add to his rapidly growing tally of debt. He shoved the frame back into place and, gripping the door in both hands, he carefully restored it, as far as possible, to its original closed position. Fortunately, the wood was sturdy, despite splintering badly with the impact of his foot and, from a distance at least, the wreckage did not appear so bad. However, there remained quite a few bits of detritus strewn about the earth. He contemplated clearing this up but knew that it would contribute nothing to safeguarding the place. He reflected that it might seem that he was attempting to hide the evidence of his undoubted crime, and did not want to add the appellation 'hypocrite' to his deserved reputation of 'thief', 'home wrecker' and 'felon'; 'leave bad alone' was his departing thought. He took one last look around before returning to where he had left his bag; but it had disappeared. He could feel the panic rising in his chest. He fell to the ground, reaching out with his hands in a desperate, and quite irrational, attempt to locate the missing object. He could still see a slight depression in the moss where the package had rested just a few moments before; but now - nothing.

With the sounds of explosive thunderbolts crashing off the sheer cliffs, and flaming sheets of incandescent light sweeping across the dark skies, iDarii turned his back on the scene and, with his heart filled with gratitude, made his way into the welcoming darkness of the cavern. To the surface dwellers' vision the dimness would have been totally impenetrable. To his eyes, however, the illumination was sufficient for him to be able to traverse the smooth path with considerable ease. As the light display behind him reduced in intensity he could see more clearly the soft and pale hues of dull luminescence, which grew ever stronger, as he began his descent into the depths of the Gaki realm. The source of this strange, cold light was revealed, as the path he followed made a sharp turn, and then fell steeply before him. One who did not know the way would have fallen here. He, however, had travelled this route many a time, as he set forth on his excursions to the surface dwellers' world. On the low outcroppings of rock, alongside the path upon which he set his course, he could now see the small mounds of green moss-like plants, which sent forth their drear light into the surrounding gloom. It was a pitiful light indeed, casting its sickly glow upon his pale features. And yet, to his sensibilities, this was the warm and welcoming illumination of his home. The plants were a natural species of this underworld, and his fellows had spent many centuries cultivating these forms selectively, seeking always to produce a type that would display the highest effulgence. They were really quite extraordinary for they were the only known species that actually thrived in the dark,

feeding primarily upon the cold moisture that pervaded this underground atmosphere and, through a mechanism similar to photosynthesis, transforming that substance into the radiance, which now shone on either hand.

The sights and sounds of the storm had abated now. All that could be heard was the lowing rumbling of thunder, its power still penetrating this far underground, shaking the massive granite roof that weighed overhead. Finally, that too subsided, and he was left only with that low, keening hum, and the soft shuffle of his feet upon the damp, rocky ground. Constantly the path took a downward trend, and this gentle incline speeded him on his way home. As he drew closer to his own lands he relaxed his guard, and the posture and habits that he had trained in gradually fell away, as his body drifted down the slopes, his feet sometimes sinking into the smooth rock surface as his material substance merged with it. Many generations had come and gone since his kind had had to rely literally upon their feet and legs to support them. They had suffered much, but at least this particular burden had been removed. The moss grew more and more abundantly here, at the deeper levels, and it shone so brightly that it seemed like the daylight of the surface world, though a pale and wan imitation. His normally pasty face took on a quite unearthly colouration from this softened glow, and he would have presented a frightening aspect to any who wandered here by accident. It was rare indeed for outlanders to stray into the heart of the mountains, and even rarer to these depths. No one had ever returned to give an account of what lay beneath their fellows' feet, here in the dark world of the Gaki. The path wound down and down, ploughing ever deeper into the core of the mountain.

It was some hours later that the subterranean traveller finally came to the end of his long trek. The path had flattened out, and was almost level now. The mosses were growing in profusion all about, though the murk still lingered in the recesses, which gaped on either side. The way made another sharp turn and there, before him, lay a solid wall of heart stone. This substance was composed of a deep, black mineral, flecked and finely ingrained with what appeared to be gold; but an experienced miner would recognise it as a quartz compound, which mimicked that precious metal but possessed the texture and fragility of glass. However, it was much prized amongst the Gaki, and was frequently used as a stone to embellish much of their jewellery. It had the advantage of being of low density and therefore very lightweight. For now, however, he had no time to admire the beauty of the scene, and hastened up to the rock face, eager to return home. It would seem a futile act for there was no obvious path by which he might surmount this obstacle. But he knew the secret of the barrier and, without hesitation, he marched directly towards the dark mass. He recognised the signs by which to navigate, and turned obliquely as he was almost upon it; then, in an instant, he was inside the stone itself. There were, upon its surface and in its body, marker stones, which had been inserted by the designers of this gateway; for that was indeed its purpose. The mineral had some unusual properties, and these had been exploited fully by the artful Gaki masons who had worked this seam so shrewdly. His body had a natural ability to merge with other objects under certain circumstances. Generally, this would only allow a marginal interweaving between different forms before the density of the material would prevent any further coalescing. However, a way had been charted through the rock, which would allow him to pass, so long as he remained between the markers of metal quartz. He slid easily through the apparently impenetrable surfaces, his pace only slightly reduced by the drag it imposed on his own mass. It was only a matter of moments before he arrived at the other side of the barrier,

and was once again within yet another cavern; but the scene was quite different here. Gone was the pale light of the moss; instead the whole scene was ablaze with the radiance of a thousand torches, burning away merrily, and illuminating every surface. A few feet away from the rock surface whence he had just emerged ran a narrow roadway, which led between these ranks of glowing lights, and then onwards, out into the vast cave, which had opened up before him. So high was its ceiling that this dimension could not be gauged from where he stood. But in other directions, and with the aid of that sea of torches, he could see a huge, underground city, one of the many that had been constructed by his race, built inside deep fissures, which penetrated the mountain, and infiltrated the entire, subterranean kingdom. All around him he could hear the low hum of their voices, and the sounds of their industry, a city vibrant with the comings and goings of the under mountain dwellers. The section by which he had entered the city was quite deserted. Not many ventured this way, and any that might have dared were discouraged, with horrific tales of the multitudes of bloodthirsty demons that inhabited these parts. These stories had been encouraged by the elders, for they preferred to keep these secret ways unknown to their people, and deter them from indulging an undue curiosity in the superior regions. However, recent events clearly pointed to the fact that these measures were no longer having the desired impact. The worsening conditions under which the inhabitants now lived were pushing them to more and more desperate acts, and the recent outbreak had been but the latest in a whole string of incidents. The authorities were becoming increasingly worried and, with a growing sense of their own impotence, concerned to halt the trend. This had been the main reason for his present mission, and itself occasioned the urgency with which his report must be delivered. He looked around to see if his exit from the rock wall had been observed. The rulers of this realm had other reasons for wishing to keep the barrier secret. It is sometimes useful, especially for a ruling administration that might be growing unpopular, to have a means of escape of which others knew little. It appeared that such a policy could prove to be necessary - and soon - given the present turn of events. But he could see no one nearby and set off again, satisfied that at least this secret had been preserved for now. The same assurance could not be reserved for much else in his world.

Once Celarent had made his departure the master and his guest settled down to study the documents. Ferioque had already had his curiosity piqued by the nature of the summons. Hesvee was not a man who either experienced profound changes of mood, or displayed much in the way of emotion. Obviously, Ferioque had not been witness to his friend's aberrant behaviour of the last few hours, for he would have been mightily shocked. Nevertheless, there was no doubting the man's excitement now. They had dispensed with the usual exchange of courtesies and, armed with their glasses of wine, proceeded immediately upon their examination of the papers. Hesvee gave a brief commentary on the nature of his discovery, and recounted briefly, and somewhat bitterly, his carelessness with regard to the errant fragment. Ferioque restrained his natural instinct to chide his friend on such a potentially grievous error, but could not hide his disappointment. "I know. I know. Don't say it", anticipated the master. "I really don't know what came over me. I have to confess that for a brief while my mind was most unsettled. I really can't explain it". Ferioque acknowledged the man's discomfiture with his usual generosity of spirit, displayed especially when encountering that rare quality, humility, in another. "Never mind", he asserted. "There's plenty of material here. I'm sure that between the two of us we can make some sense of this". They remained standing, their heads bent forwards,

carefully lifting and replacing the papers, as they scrutinised each carefully. After quite some while Ferioque placed the piece of parchment which he had been holding up to the light, back down upon the desk. “You know. This map you discovered?” “Yes?” replied the master. “You thought it to be of a terrain with some adjoining coastline?” the cartographer enquired. “Well yes”, replied the master. “I don’t think that I can recall any territory that resembles this in the least. Of course it’s not possible to measure the scale since there’s no magnitude to indicate it. We could be looking at the line of a whole continent, or just a few hundred measures of a small cove. But I don’t think that’s it either”, Ferioque observed. “Oh”, Hesvee exclaimed. He waited for his friend to elaborate, but this one showed no sign of wishing to do so. He again picked up the rag, and held it up against the torchlight, the better to examine the inscriptions upon its surface. “No. I’m pretty sure that’s no coastline. But I do think that it’s a map of something”, he added somewhat redundantly. Let me think now”. He retired to a chair with his glass, and sat down, deep in thought. Hesvee recognised that this would be a good opportunity to take a break in their investigations. He was about to suggest some food when the fellow leapt to his feet. “Got it. I knew it. I’ve seen something like this before. The legends seemed familiar but they were slightly different from the usual conventions. Let me see again”. He picked up the paper once more and examined it closely, his eyes now aglow with the fervour of recognition. “It’s a mine”, he exclaimed. “Mine?” For an instant the master thought his fellow investigator had lost his sense of propriety, and property. What did he mean 'It's mine'? He was on the point of remonstrating with him when Ferioque continued. “See here. It’s a map of an underground settlement of some kind. Not just a mine but something much bigger. Much bigger”. The light dawned. “You’re sure?” queried the master, relieved that they were not about to debate the ownership of this archive. “Yes. It’s underground. These lines here you took for roads or streams or some such, they bear the wrong colour; and the lineation is different anyway. It’s an old system of subterranean cartography; but I recognise it now. And what’s more, this triangle on the top left shows the scale”. He pointed to the faint outline of a figure, which Hesvee had simply taken to be a piece of ornamentation. “The length of the sides indicates respectively a local latitude, longitude and depth. Do you realise what this means?” Finally his full attention had returned to Hesvee. The latter nodded dumbly, but was reluctant to admit that the discovery that this might be some large-scale, underground, prospecting plan did not exactly enthral him. In fact, to tell the truth, he was rather disappointed. Ferioque, for his part, could see by his friend’s expression that he had not realised the import of what they were examining. But then, why should he? It was not his speciality. But it was HIS. He, Ferioque was actually in the presence of THE map: the map of distant myth. He could not contain himself at all. “This th-, the map”. He was so excited that he had become quite incoherent. In times of great stress he had a tendency to stutter and was desperately trying to avoid this, so anxious was he to transmit clearly the magnitude of the discovery. But he managed to calm himself sufficiently to frame the explanation. “This is the map. It was thought to be a myth itself. You had the right era when you recognised the seal, the mark of Sullak. But there’s more. At that time the dominant religious belief was that only members of the royal lineage held the key to immortality. They, and only they, and their kin, could ascend to the heavenly realms, that is of course, subsequent to their physical dissolution. There, they would enjoy a life of bliss and ease, untroubled by earthly concerns. For the rest of the population, however, they would have to content themselves with incarceration in an underworld, where they would roam forever, neither dead nor alive, and subject always to longings that no mortal appetite could ever contain. Their condition,

though not unbearable, so much approached it that absolute extinction itself would seem a privilege, but remaining always just out of reach. Needless to say, this would be an unappealing prospect to anyone. However, the convention had been upheld amongst anthropologists that this was simply another one of those 'heaven and hell' myths that have proliferated throughout history. But there had always been a suspicion, in some circles, that there was a literal basis to the story. Some research was carried out with which I was personally involved, and even expeditions despatched to investigate selected underground sites; but all to no avail. For the most part the view still prevails that these accounts are simply legends, and are to be treated accordingly. However, if this map - and the information with it - is to be taken as factual, then this is the first real evidence that there may indeed be an underground world, and one of which we have no direct knowledge. Of course, I wouldn't go so far as to say that in reality it's peopled by beings such as are described in the stories that come from that time. Nevertheless, it does suggest that there may be underground workings, perhaps on a vast scale, that form the basis of that part of the historical record". Hesvee listened to his friend's account with growing interest. So these were not just a record of some ancient mining operation but might be a guide to a mythic history, as yet unknown. It had been a long time since he had felt so excited. There may have been some intimation in his consciousness of the deeper significance of these ancient records, which had led to his bizarre emotional uprisings recently. He was a little relieved that his heightened sensibilities might have some form of rational basis. A man of his temperament was not easily roused, and he found it most disconcerting to discover his customary equanimity disturbed without just cause. It would appear now that there was perhaps sufficient reason for his unusual animation. "If it's true what you say, my friend, then we must determine the validity of this find". Ferioque looked at his colleague, with eager, sparkling eyes. "Yes. Yes. Of course. Firstly, we must investigate everything that we have here, and glean as much insight as possible. Then we'll be in a better position to assess the whole import of what might be contained within the collection; and decide, then, on how we should proceed". Both men turned their attention back to the heap of dusty papers spread out on the desk. The day had drawn to a close, and the first stars were gleaming fiercely in the skies; but to this beauty they were entirely oblivious.

It was no good. The bag was gone, and it had happened in just a few moments. He had heard not a sound, nor a sign of any kind that there was anyone but he on that small, enclosed plateau; and yet the evidence could not be clearer. Perhaps a large bird, descending swiftly from the skies, might have lifted the satchel bodily heavenwards; otherwise he could see no way that it could have disappeared unobserved. He cast a last look around, but in vain; the longer he remained in this place the more grew his uneasiness. There was something very strange here, and he concluded that it would be better to make a swift retreat rather than risk any more inexplicable events, especially those that might intrude upon his person. However, he still lacked provisions for the journey, and there remained supplies uncollected within the hut. The fear and shock had subsided but he felt - and quite reasonably under the circumstances - an almost overwhelming desire to race headlong from the spot. His heart was pounding heavily, and it was all he could do not to follow that prior inclination. But the reasoning part of his mind was yet in control, and urged him towards a more prudent response. He forced himself to return to the hut and again pulled the door open. He glanced behind quickly before going inside, hoping, but also fearing, to catch sight of his hidden companion. With the greatest

of alacrity he pulled another haunch of smoked meat down from the roof rafter where it was hanging, and placed it inside another sack, which he had pulled from the same pile as the first. He left the hut speedily and, recalling that he still had some obligation to his involuntarily benefactors, pushed the door tightly shut behind him. The urge to flee had not left him, and he was more than keen to make his departure promptly. He warily surveyed the landscape once more, and then noticed a faint path leading out of the valley, but away from his original course alongside the stream; he decided that it would be more prudent to part company with his old guide. It could be the case that it was not only he who was following that particular route, and that a diversion might serve his purpose well. He had no clearly formulated plan as to what his final destination might be but, for the time being, he had a very clear idea, certainly, of where he did not wish to remain. He made his way up the shallow incline and over the top of the bluff, which rose above the plateau. He looked behind him at the hut, and at its surrounds. There was no indication of any pursuit. Much relieved he turned his back on the scene, and made his way down the slope that lay on the reverse side.

Ahead of him stood the mountains of the north. He had changed the general direction of his course slightly, but this had only been because of the convolutions of the stream, as it wound its way into the uplands. He had little knowledge of the region and was reluctant to continue in this direction, knowing as he did the ill repute of the inhabitants. However, he could not go back by the way he had come; nor to the east. But as he proceeded, further and further from his home and his past, there arose within him a sense of adventure that had hitherto lain dormant. Though he was young he was of an age when youth feels impervious to the forces of nature, and time and space can hold naught to impress fear upon the spirited heart; the dangers of the road though real, as he had already discovered, yet seemed to hold no real threat for him. In some this might be called foolhardiness, to wander where the prudent soul would caution against such acts. But then the urge to venture into unknown regions could be described as the essence of the human spirit, and the impulse to set forth into lands uncharted lay at the centre of a man's character, whether that journey lay within or without. Melaskkoli, but he knew it, was from a long line of ancestors, of those who would dare where others would rather step back from the brink. Presently, however, he felt far from the bold explorer, but rather a tired and lonely fellow in a land that was growing more and more unfriendly – and unfamiliar - with each step deeper into the unknown, and into lands populated rather by enemies than by friends. He had not come to any harm yet; but he could only conclude that this was due rather to good fortune than anything else. Still, there was the way ahead, and until another direction presented itself as more or less desirable, then that would be the bearing to pursue. It seemed to the young man that the choices he might make on this journey, or indeed in life itself, might be governed more by circumstance than by personal design, a reflection that he both enjoyed - and feared - simultaneously.

The sun was descending rapidly, and the shadows grew long about him. As he climbed further into the foothills he felt the air grow colder, and the winds blow stronger. Far away in the distance he could see a mighty storm beating against the mountains, with flashes of lightning, and the low mutter of thunder as it grumbled around the hillsides. For now he just felt thankful that he was not travelling by that way on this eve.

The red glow of torchlight permeated the whole district. The wavering and flickering

plumes cast their warm shadows over the walls and roofs of the dwellings, which marched, rank upon rank, across the wide floor of this vast cave. The buildings themselves were largely composed of adobe, a material drawn from the banks and beds of the underground rivers, which flowed across these under lands. The sturdy and rounded outlines of these structures, together with the warm illumination cast by the torchlight, lent a comforting air to the whole setting. As he made his way down from the outer perimeter of the city, and into the outlying suburban districts, he was filled with a sense of pride in the beauty of his city; it was truly breathtaking. The tall spires and minarets formed an elegantly punctuated horizon, rising almost defiantly over the sea of flat roofs, which stretched into the distance upon every side. All his life he had lived here, from the very moment when he had entered this world so long ago. At first he had been bewildered by his new condition. There had been that strange transition between the old life he had left behind, and the new one that he encountered deep below the surface. At first he had found it most disconcerting, to discover the tendency of his body to float some few inches above the surface; even more so when, on that first occasion, his body had merged with another. He could still recall the sense of fear that had thrilled through his body. It was only the presence of his mother and father that had allayed this anxiety, their reassuring presence an oddity in itself given the length of time it had been since he had last seen them. Indeed, things had not at all been entirely as he had expected; and he was not quite the person that he remembered. He had some understanding of this, but only in the sense that he was not altogether different from the man that had lived before, nor was he identical. It was an extraordinary sensation, to both be, and not be, who you were. But again there were people near, who were ready to help with this crossing over into a new world. Many tears had been shed, for he had encountered some individuals that he had known from his past life but who, in that odd way, were not the same at all. It was not simply the physical differences, though these had been awkward enough to come to terms with. It was more the way in which he and they experienced this new realm. And even now the feeling persisted that he had lived here all his days, and yet he was but newly arrived. Yes indeed. That period of adjustment had been painful for all, but it was a well-trodden path. Today, the memories of his previous life had faded to such an extent that they seemed but a dream, barely recollected. But finally he was here; and this was his home.

He moved deeper into the great metropolis and as he did so the sounds of his fellows rose up all around him. The high pitched hum of their speech filled the ether to the very vaults of this world; yet, of their bodies, there was not a sign. He glanced downwards, and was satisfied to see nothing of his own form. The lineaments that he had adopted for his foray into the upper regions had fallen away, and he was now revealed, so to speak, in his true array. It had been found, from experience, that daylight ventures into the upper realms were more efficacious when utilising the camouflage that he had chosen. Their odd physical configuration was better obscured through the use of voluminous clothing than complete imperceptibility. There had been some extremely unfortunate mishaps where scouts had chosen to retain their natural guise. These early experiments had inclined latter excursions to be conducted in a less obtrusive way. It would appear strange that there could be anything less obtrusive than invisibility; yet, sometimes, the best concealment is none at all. However, on night-time ventures it mattered neither way, and it was left to the discretion of the agent to decide upon the better disguise.

All around him he could feel the bodies of his fellows press upon him, jostling against each

other as they went about their affairs. Truly, they were fully indiscernible to that common sense of sight; but easily ascertained by his other sense, the insight, in which all his people participated. With this facility he could 'see' them as easily as ordinary sight would reveal physical form to the surface dwellers. It is impossible to explain this ability to one who does not possess it. In some respects it was a superior perspective for not only was the bodily outline fully perceptible, but also the inner character of the individual, in an analogous fashion, was revealed; it was as if the outer, and the inner man, were revealed simultaneously, and in the same mode. This had been most disturbing for iDarii when he again encountered his parents. In his previous life their outer aspect had been apparent and, over the passage of the years, he had believed that he had grown to know them well. It was only when he awoke here, in the realm of the Gaki, that he realised that he had not truly 'seen' them at all. It had been both painful and exhilarating to discover the true nature of those who had been his progenitors in the world before and here – a kind of enlightenment.

Periodically, as he proceeded through the city thoroughfares, he would see someone that he recognised and exchange the traditional greeting; a loud "Heeeee" would shrill through the air as they acknowledged each other. But he was eager to give a full account of his expedition to his superiors and unburden himself fully of that responsibility before he would allow himself time to meet with his friends. He passed swiftly through the crowds and strode onwards along the broad streets, which finally merged into the wide avenues and plazas of the hub, a central zone from which all the other city roadways radiated. The central square, or to be more accurate, circle, was a vast area, packed with those who gathered there to converse, and generally to socialise. It was here that a major part of the business of the metropolis was transacted. It was also an opportunity to engage in that social activity that seems to be universally most popular amongst all species; the exchange of information about one's fellows; or as it is better known, gossip. If there was anything to be found out by anyone, it was to this place that one should come: secrets, confidences, apocrypha and the truly arcane; all were brokered here. However, it might be considered that in this place all reputations were broken, smashed, and reduced to a mere bagatelle; for nothing was sacred in this circle. He could see, as he drew closer, that it would be quite hopeless to try and negotiate the throng that saturated the centre. Instead, he decided to proceed on his way by the more circuitous, but doubtless less time consuming, route, and circumnavigate part of the circumference. Here, at least, there were fewer obstacles to avoid, and there was some prospect that he might arrive at the Ministry by the allotted time. He had made rapid progress around about a quarter of the circle before he saw an opportunity to cut across the hub again. His objective lay not quite directly opposite the point at which he had entered the centre. On this side the crowds were thinner, and he was now in a position to view the building towards which he was headed. The Ministry of Security was not one of the more imposing edifices in this quarter, otherwise renowned for its impressive architectural expressions. But its rather plain appearance, coupled with its apparently restricted dimensions, concealed an enormous structure, a veritable warren, most of which lay submerged beneath the ground. To the casual observer it was an unassuming edifice, something of a box, its blank windows staring out upon each face, and with a minimum of any external decoration. It would seem that the builders had done their utmost to construct something of little aesthetic interest. Perhaps it was this quality that most attracted the present occupants of the structure. The Ministry, it should be said, had a certain reputation, and its activities

were such that it was preferable they should not be too widely broadcast. Most people knew of its existence, and many had had direct dealings with its officers; of the latter, a large proportion of these would rather not have had that privilege. It was not a place that was eagerly sought out by sightseers and, if anything, the dominating predilection was to give it a very wide berth. iDarii, however, did not have that choice, and counted himself fortunate that he was in their employ rather than subject to their scrutiny. However, it would also be quite accurate to say that even the Ministry's employees would choose to have as little contact as possible with their superiors. Many of them carried out their functions, not so much from choice, but more as having been press-ganged into that role. It was accounted an honour by the state to be selected for this obligation; but amongst the general populace it was seen rather as a punishment. Still, he reflected, the sooner he was in, the sooner he would be out. He found himself now at the bottom of a flight of steps that led upwards into the main entranceway of the building. There was nothing outside to indicate the functions of the Ministry. But then there was no need to advertise its function; everyone knew its character. He paused momentarily and, with beating heart, made his way up the steps, and into the monolithic structure.

Late into the night the two men sifted through the papers, shifting one fragment to one pile and then back again, piecing together a history that had, until this moment, lain deep in the distant past. It was thick darkness outside and they worked only with the aid of torchlight, which at the best of times was an errant servant to vision. Undeterred, both were so fixed upon their goal that such inconveniences barely registered. It was only after several more hours, and when the watches of the night was far advanced, that they heard the sounds of Celarent returning from his excursion. The outer door slammed loudly and this drew a smile and a quick comment from Ferioque. "Your fellow, I'd surmise, has enjoyed himself, perhaps excessively, tonight?" "Eh?" was Hesvee's vague and inattentive response. However, he caught the gist sufficiently to admonish his servant's behaviour indirectly to his colleague. "Ah yes. Indeed. And he'll know fully how much pleasure he imbibed in the morn, eh?" Both laughed. There was no further sign of the servant. It seemed that he had made his way directly to bed. The interruption did, however, serve to remind them of their own needs. The lateness of the hour suggested two courses of action; either to retire themselves, or reinforce their energy and concentration with a hot drink, before continuing their researches. It was inconceivable that the former option would be selected. So it was that Hesvee placed a pan of tea over the fireplace, and brought a couple of mugs in from the kitchen. He poured the fragrant infusion into the two receptacles and carried one over to his friend. The two colleagues sat down to enjoy their drinks, and a break from their endeavours. "So?" opened Hesvee. The other paused, quietly savouring the rich taste of the fluid. Finally he spoke. "Well. There's no doubt in my mind. I think that everything that we've seen so far confirms my original view. The documents are largely irrelevant. As you've observed, they're largely a survey of property and asset holdings. I'm of the view that at least two sets of records have become mixed up. Even the quality of the parchment suggests that it derives from different batches. The inks themselves seem dissimilar, which I believe tends to confirm my assessment. However, the map I think is the central point of interest. The papers relating to that are, for the most part, and rather unfortunately, indecipherable. The few sections that I've been able to interpret simply expand somewhat on the legend used in the map and are, in this respect, purely conventional, as I first thought. The key to the scale - the triangular iconograph - is most helpful. We can certainly locate the workings to which it refers, by its designations. Apart

from that, there's no way of assessing the information further without visiting the site itself". Hesvee listened to his friend's analysis with a growing sense of both satisfaction and anticipation. "Excellent. Then that's what we'll do". Ferioque regarded his friend with some surprise. "Do? You propose that we, the both of us...", he pointed to himself at this juncture, to emphasise the point, and his attendant disbelief, "...go there?" "Why of course", responded the master. "You said it yourself. We can't confirm any of this other than by a direct examination". "Well yes. I mean I did say that the site would need to be investigated. But I didn't mean to imply..." At this point he was cut off by Hesvee whose rising excitement had overwhelmed his usually well-mannered custom. "Of course. Of course. Who else but ourselves? And soon, at that". Ferioque seemed to ponder the question. "I can't just dispose of my current responsibilities. The new term starts soon... and there are my graduate students. And quite apart from that, my own researches are....". Again the master interjected. "Can't you see? Surely it must be clear. This could be one of the most significant finds of this century. Why! If it is what we believe it to be surely you cannot contemplate passing up such an opportunity?" Again the former paused. He was a cautious man by nature, and one not so easily animated by the appearance of good fortune. However, and up to this point, he would have regarded himself to be the leader of the two in terms of this quality, when it came to such mutability of emotion. The fact that the master demonstrated such enthusiasm and verve could hardly fail to make an impression upon the venerable cartographer. He could hardly imagine a more unlikely pair of adventurers, and yet he felt himself swept up within this apparently contagious spirit of exhilaration. 'Who knows', he thought 'when I might have this chance again? The years move always forwards, never backwards'. One last expedition might be a most suitable entry on his obituary. He saw nothing morbid in the thought, for he was a man who had faced the realities of life and death with ease, a composure gained through years of reflection upon the essential fragility of mortal existence. 'Yes. This would be a good fashion in which to make a modest departure from this present existence'. "Very well", he replied, in measured tones. He had, after all, striven equally arduously to maintain an appearance of gravitas, and it would ill-become his station to appear unduly excited. "You're quite right. On second thoughts I can make other arrangements for my students and studies. It's not as though we're talking about a long expedition. Fortunately, the map seems to locate the position of the site in the Northern mountains, and not at a great distance within them. Most of our journey will be relatively easy, except for the last few leagues. However, we must give some thought to the composition of our party". Hesvee had not yet arrived at that point in the planning, being still quite overwhelmed by the enormity of their discovery. Ferioque, thankfully, was of a more practical bent than the master, and was already proving to be a great asset to the venture, that is, quite apart from his contribution to the analysis thus far. "Well, Celarent, of course", opined the master. "You think that he'd be willing to join the group?", for Ferioque did not share his fellow's assurance that the servant would necessarily wish to participate in the adventure. "Yes. Yes. Don't worry. He discovered the papers in the first place after all. Don't worry about him". Ferioque concluded that the master knew the servant best. "You do realise the implications of going into the Northern mountains? They're not the most hospitable of regions. The natives have a reputation, you know?" Hesvee paused. "In my judgement we should go, just the three of us, that's all. A larger party would draw attention. We can pose as three poor wanderers. Surely they won't bother us? Rich merchants are what they seek, the mountain dwellers. What use would we be to them?" But Ferioque was far from being in agreement with the master's

optimism, at least not in this respect. The latter seemed to place a naïve faith in the purely pecuniary ambitions of these brigands, and had, perhaps, discounted that cruel streak in humanity that derives its pleasure - and recompense - purely in witnessing the suffering of others. However, he was probably right that a smaller party would pass by places where a large group would attract unwanted interest. "Well. The three of us it is, assuming that Celarent's agreeable?" The question was left hanging in the air, and the master's expression indicated that that is where it should be left. "The journey is overland - a distance of some two hundred leagues I estimate. I'd say that, for the most part, we can proceed along the main ways until we reach the foothills of the Northern mountains. We should allow maybe ten leagues a day for the easy section; but after that I'm not sure at all. We must get to our destination well before the snows set in. After all we can't guarantee that we'll be able to winter in the mountains, and then we'll have to ensure that we've left that region behind us, and long before the worst of the storms. This map, if it's reliable, can take us all the way there. But it's my belief that we might still need to find a local guide to assist us. My experience is that maps are never quite as accurate as they purport to be. We'll not need to take much with us on the journey, nor do I think should we, at any stage, thereafter. Other than sufficient provisions, if we encumber ourselves with an excess this will only slow us down, and make us a more attractive target for the ne'er-do-wells who occupy those parts." Again Hesvee listened carefully to his friend's exposition, well pleased that he had had the extraordinary good sense to invite the fellow to join his expedition. "I concur completely. The only thing to be decided now is the day of our departure. This will govern the schedule by which we need to abide to ensure that we're off speedily". "I suggest the end of the week. That gives us three days in total. But firstly we must advise Celarent of our plans". Again the master's assured demeanour suggested that this was a mere formality; Ferioque was not so sure. "Perhaps we should rest now, and recommence our planning on the morn", suggested the professor. The master nodded his agreement. He walked over to the window and pulled aside one of the shutters. He was surprised to see the first hints of dawn light breaking over the line of the surrounding hills. "Yes. A couple of hours rest should see us right. You, of course, will stay. It is late, or perhaps too early, for you to make your way home now. Please use the couch and rest awhile. I will off to my bed, though I doubt if I'll sleep this night". Ferioque laid himself down upon the couch, drawing the wrap over his body, as the master left the room. The torches upon the walls were sputtering violently now, their oils gradually burning away. Finally, the light faded until the last one gave up its flame, and was extinguished in a small plume of purple smoke.

As the darkness fell so did Ferioque descend into a deep, but dream-filled, sleep. The master, too, had taken to his bed. He could also hear, quite clearly, the stertorous breathing of the man's attendant in the next room. Evidently Celarent had partaken liberally of heady liquor that evening, for its auditory effects were rebounding even now throughout the apartment. The master lay in the darkness, his mind awl with the night's discoveries. He was yet in shock, struck down by the boldness of his plan. He had observed also, by his colleague's reaction, that the surprise was not limited to him. 'It was extraordinary really, wasn't it' he thought, 'how little we know others? But even more so - how small is our knowledge of ourselves?' Perhaps this was just another symptom of that strange mood, which had possessed him since he had come into possession of those ancient papers. But there was no doubt, he reflected again, that whatever had transformed him had also aroused a sense of liveliness that he had not experienced since

he was a young lad. Life was filled with mixed blessings truly. Unknowingly his eyes closed, and he fell into a deep slumber.

Melaskkoli passed further and further into the uplands. The skies had grown dark overhead; the storm that he had observed earlier, and still far away, seemed to be coming closer by the hour. Fortunately it appeared to have vented the worst of its anger against the mountainsides. Yet still could he see the long trails of dark rain pouring down from those black clouds, which glowered over the lands far below. Occasionally his gaze fell upon the trail by which he had passed. The events of the last few hours had done much to unsettle him, and he could not shake off the feeling that his progress through the low hills was being closely observed. He had even turned about swiftly, as if hoping to catch his stalker unawares; but, on each occasion, there had been nothing to see. He somewhat shamefacedly scolded himself for his foolishness, but could not resist the temptation to indulge this morbid fancy. He was not at all sure what he might have done if he had been confronted by this imaginary, and presumably malevolent, companion; take to his heels perhaps? But to flee where on these lonely hillsides? There was very little cover. The trees and thickets that covered the lowlands and pastures of his district had long been left behind. As he climbed higher into the hills this vegetation had become increasingly sparse. Now all that could be seen was a sea of waving grasses that lay upon every side. Here and there grew feeble bushes, their outlines stunted and distorted by the powerful winds that blew up the valleys, and into the mountain ranges ahead. These strange shapes wove themselves into his mind, and presented a sinister aspect to his already overheated imagination. But beyond all of this, and even more disconcerting, was what was taking place within his own conceptions. Ever since he had left behind the farm, and his unhappy past, his whole history seemed to have taken on an increasingly surreal tone. He could quite clearly recall he had, in fact, lived once with his mother in their cottage; that is before her life had come to its premature conclusion. He could even just remember his father, though only vaguely, for this man had departed this life while Melaskkoli was still an infant. But even his uncle's face, the man he had left but a matter of days ago, already his features seemed to have coalesced into an indistinct blur. It was as if the lineaments of his countenance had become combined with those of other folk he had known, and who had been closest to him; but it was more than this. The features of friends and more distant relatives, even strangers, seemed to have merged into a coalition, until all individuality had been lost, and the face that presented itself to his mind's eye was a mere representation, of an humanity as it might be embodied in singular form. It really was most distressing. The more he exerted himself to revive within his mind's eye those once so familiar, the more they eluded him. His mother's eyes would float before him in the darkness of his consciousness, only to merge with those of his father, and his uncle, and so on, until there was nothing left but an impersonal gaze staring coldly back at him. He tried to shrug off the sensation as if it were merely the onset of a fever, or an hallucination, or a simple delusion perhaps. But try as he might, the generalised impressions became stronger, and the distinctiveness of these individuals receded further and further into the background. A fear started to grow deep in his belly that he was losing his mind. Could it be that the experiences that he had undergone had upset its balance, and that his adventure was, indeed, misconceived? Surely this must be the case if these episodes had such a grave effect upon his psychic states? It occurred to him that it would be wise, given his growing fear, to retrace his steps, and return homewards at once. There could be no shame in acting thus. After all he was but a young lad, and could deal with any punishment that his

uncle might choose to mete out upon him. But again, the oddity of his experience asserted itself as he reflected on the prospect. He had a sufficient recollection of the way that he had come. He was skilled enough in topography to be assured of his ability to retrace his steps. He had, without conscious effort, retained a sense of his whereabouts, always charting his progress by reference to natural landmarks as these presented themselves. He recognised the general lay of the land, with its outcrops of rock and the outline of the hills in the distance. All of these would serve as more than adequate guides should he choose to go back on his route. He was even confident that he would not need to follow the path exactly (setting aside the fact that it would be most imprudent, indeed, to return to that little valley with the hut). But here again he encountered that outlandish quality that pervaded his mind. In a part of his consciousness he could easily perceive his road and yet, at an increasingly more obtrusive level, it seemed to be a return to nothing but which was alien. Home, in this sense at least, was no longer home. The past was not a refuge, neither welcoming nor otherwise. It had an uncertainty and unfamiliarity about it that was more akin to an intimation of the future. It was as if the two times had merged; and neither forward nor backward held the greater allure. So affected was he by his sentiments that he stopped in his tracks. Ahead he could see the hillside rising, slowly and inexorably, to greet the white peaks of the mountains. To his right the storm still hovered above the great, grey summits that lifted there. To his left the sun shone brightly in the heavens, the white snows all the more resplendent for her friendly radiance. Finally, behind lay the lowlands, and the strange creatures that dwelt there. And here he was in the middle of it all; a heart and centre of he knew not what. His brain whirled under the pressure of the extraordinary sensations, which flooded in from every direction. He sank to his knees under this onslaught, this storm. His eyes closed, and a thick darkness fell.

The under lander entered the dark hallway of the Ministry, leaving behind the glittering arrays of lights that glowed across the city, their soft traces of gentle radiance shimmering on the smoothly moulded surfaces of the elegant homes and workplaces that extended into the distance in every direction. Inside the building a few torches burned in the darker corners. The general impression though, was one of gloom. This was a deliberate ploy on the part of the Elders, those who were responsible for running this particular office of the state. It was their intent to induce within the visitor that particular sense of foreboding, which was so conducive to a degree of servility. Experience had shown that even with such a subtle influence as light, it could be most effective in producing the proper responses to any inquisition that might be conducted within the premises. They were, after all, a civilised race, and there was no need to resort to primitive methods of coercion – not immediately anyway. iDarii, though he was familiar with the surroundings and knew well the purpose of its masters, nevertheless even he felt his heart grow sombre, and quite in tune with this mournful atmosphere. He ascended rapidly, by way of a broad staircase that led to one of the upper levels, and then turned to the right towards his destination. The noises from the square outside had fallen to a low hum, and the building seemed deathly quiet by comparison. Again, it had been part of the strategy of the designers of this environment to prevent the intrusion of any sounds from without, and thus heighten the solemn mood. Chatter, or any unnecessary speech, was strongly discouraged, and certainly on the part of the regular occupants. It was a paradox, perhaps, that this very ambience seemed to have a reverse effect on those who might be called the clientele of the Ministry; many a tongue had been loosened by such a combination of factors.

After some time iDarii came to the doorway leading to his section. He pushed it open and entered yet another long and dark passageway. Upon either side of this, and at periodic intervals, lay the entrances to the various departments which made up the sub section within the Ministry; that of the “Overland” or “Sky Dwellers”; sometimes casually referred to as the “Uppers”. His superior’s office was situated a few paces along this corridor. The layout of the building was certainly reminiscent of a warren or maze, and where the newcomer could easily become lost. There were no signs on the walls to indicate directions, and none of the doorways carried any information that would reveal the activities conducted behind their dark brown facades. He entered the anteroom of his director, Gorval. There was a minimum of furnishings in the room. Since the entire office was located deep within the interior of the building there were no exterior windows, and so absolutely no daylight could enter the pervading murkiness. All that could be seen was a large desk, with a solitary chair located behind it. To one side there was a series of large cabinets, which housed the records for this section. Other than that, a superficial survey of the room would indicate that it was quite empty. But with his peculiar vision he could clearly detect the presence of Gorval’s personal assistant. It might seem a strange etiquette to us but neither his name was known to iDarii, nor iDarii’s to him. However, they were sufficiently well acquainted to recognise each other by ‘sight’, and his colleague indicated, with a brusque shake of the head, that he should immediately enter the inner sanctum. Without a further exchange of pleasantries he knocked on the door; and waited. After what seemed a long delay a sonorous “Come” emanated from within and, with some little trepidation, he opened the port.

The director’s office was no more elaborately furnished than the anteroom. There was a desk located towards the back wall, and a chair placed behind that; other than these requisites, there was nothing. Even to his sharp vision, accustomed as it was to such light levels, it would have been impossible to detect anything other than the general form of the director, for the latter had chosen to adopt a visible presence for this interview though his face was quite draped in darkness. This general principle, of obscurity, was what the whole Ministry was predicated upon; that is, to create fear and uncertainty. He remained silent, awaiting the invitation to give his report. There was no sign that Gorval was engaged in any kind of work. There were no papers on his desk; but then there never were. On past occasions, whenever he had entered this office - which was quite infrequently fortunately - he had always been presented with this same aspect. The moments passed by, but interminably. He could not tell whether he was being observed or not. What he did know, however, was that he would not open his mouth until instructed, such was the disquiet engendered by his superior’s department. Finally, a low hum emitted from the dark figure behind the desk. It was the customary greeting, to which he gave the customary response. “Yooooor repooooort?” enquired the director. “Wooooorrrthy siiiirrr iffff ittt maaaaay pleeeeeease yooooou yooooour huuuummble seeerrrvaaant begs toooo connnnnveeey thee folllllloooooowing infoooooormaaaation”. As these words were uttered he fell to the ground, and prostrated himself full length upon the floor, his head pointing in the direction of the feet of his chief. “Contiiiiinuuue”, was the monotonic and emotionless response. iDarii proceeded to give a full account of his expedition, recounting every event that had occurred since he had left the city, right up to the present moment. His story was greeted with complete silence. He gave, additionally, an approximate estimate of the extent of the damage, which that impromptu raiding party had caused upon the surface lands, together with his assessment of probable repercussions. He did,

however, omit one detail that even he found surprising. He referred not at all to his encounter with the young surface dweller. Generally, such a meeting would have been regarded as highly significant, and certainly should have featured in any description of his mission. To fail to communicate such matters would inevitably invite severe punishment should the oversight ever be revealed. Yet something within him obstructed this part of his report. He could not have explained why he chose to keep silent about an occurrence he should undoubtedly have declared. As he continued with his story he sought to justify the slip to himself, and argued inwardly that either it was an inconsequential thing, or that Gorval would not have been interested anyway. He knew neither to be the case. In the end he was completely flummoxed, for he could neither render a satisfactory reason for the lapse to himself nor, if he had been asked, to any other. It felt like some kind of power obstructed his will, and led him down quite another path, one that he pursued most reluctantly. He sensed within himself a powerful desire to blurt out the whole episode; but an even more potent force bade him hold his tongue. The latter impulse held sway, and he finished his story without a single reference to Melaskkoli, and what had taken place between them. The statement was greeted with a long silence. "Gooooood", commented the director, finally. "Yooooou haaaave donnnne weeeell". The scout remained quiet, slightly shocked by the warmth of this compliment, but even more so by the consciousness of his own deception. Paranoia was a central trait of the Gaki personality, perhaps hardly surprisingly, and it seemed to manifest itself most prominently within servants of the Ministry. His heart was filled with mixed feelings on hearing this comment. His first thought was that it was some kind of ploy to throw him off guard. But he considered that Gorval could not possibly have any intimation of his concealment. He had to conclude that the response was genuine, and not intended to deceive. There followed another long silence before Gorval indicated, with a wave of his hand, that the interview was terminated. With considerable relief iDarii turned upon his heel, removing himself, as rapidly but decorously as possible, from the room. Just as he reached the door he heard Gorval's voice addressing his departing back. "Weee wiiiiill reeeecaaaall yooooou soooooon. Maaake yooooourseeeelf reeeeeaaaady". So impelled was he by his anxiety he dared only to turn quickly and bow, before he exited the room. His chief might have interpreted this as discourteous but he was keen to make his departure, and this overruled his usually cautious nature. With a considerable sigh of relief he closed the door behind him, and made his way back out of the shadowy building.

Now that the decision had been made there could be no further delay in making preparations for the expedition. Both scholars, though for the most part inhabitants of a predominantly intellectual realm, were discovering their aptitude for applied action when required. Celarent was consulted by the master, and in accord with the latter's prediction, raised no objection to participating in the venture. He was assigned the task of obtaining pack animals, supplies, and other requisite equipment, for the initial stages of their journey. Both Ferioque and Hesvee concluded their examination of the papers, and selected those parts that seemed to have the most bearing upon their present purpose. Three copies were made of the original map of which, it had been decided, each one of them would carry a facsimile. If one copy should be lost, due to misadventure or worse, then at least two would remain, as well as the original. Fortunately, the bulk of the papers referred to predominantly extraneous matters; and these could be dispensed with. There was left only a small bundle, which bore a direct relation to the present project. The documents were placed carefully inside a waxed paper envelope, and the whole further stored inside

a waterproofed, leathern purse. It was agreed that Hesvee would serve as expedition leader, and that he would carry the original, plus one copy of the map. Celarent and Ferioque would thus bear the responsibility for the carriage of the remaining copies of the guide. The planning and execution of the preparations proceeded rapidly. Celarent, in particular, seemed to have a real flare for organisation and, in a matter of one day, had made all the necessary purchases. Additionally he had been given the role of locating the most up-to-date guides, and the routes that they were to take into the Northern mountains. These regions were well charted, it would appear, from these cartographs. However, the road they had chosen did not go by the most populous areas of the region, and it would be prudent to avail themselves of that guidance which was most extant. Despite this, for most of their journey they would be but a couple of days' distant from the nearest town or village. Even should an emergency arise, aid would be close at hand. For Celarent, the prospect of this unexpected expedition was strangely appealing. He had never thought of himself as the adventurous type any more than he might have so regarded his two superiors. He, like they, was primarily a man devoted to the quest for intellectual knowledge. Although it was occasionally necessary to conduct in situ examinations, for the most part his researches revolved around the examination of documents much like those, which had been the subject of their recent investigations. However, now that the opportunity had presented itself, he had been quite astonished at his readiness to embark on such an endeavour; the exploration of unknown regions, and all the accompanying dangers that this might occasion. Indeed, he found his heart quite uplifted at the prospect, and an excited anticipation flooded his whole body. The master and the professor consulted with the university authorities on the question of the allocation of their duties whilst they were absent. Such was their eminence in the establishment that though a few eyebrows were raised, and even the occasional lip pursed, and with this an expression of disapprobation elegantly but restrainedly imparted, no serious objections were raised concerning their quite impromptu departure. It was a fact, they discovered, that there was a more than adequate reservoir of colleagues who were quite happy to adopt their respective roles; how else, otherwise, to advance upwards than by the fortune, or misfortune of others!

So, in a very short space, everything had been arranged and all plans set. It was to be on the morrow, at first thing, that the three travellers would set off on their journey into the wilds of the north. Both Hesvee and Ferioque had been quite circumspect when it came to making any kind of precise disclosures of their plans or itinerary, or indeed anything to do with this outing. It had been decided, partly from prudence but also from a natural competitiveness, that the fewer people who were acquainted with the foray, its nature, and the potential rewards, the less chance there would be for any unwanted attention from certain quarters. There was no shortage of unscrupulous characters, both here in the city, and the world generally, who would naturally assume that cryptic maps and hidden cities might imply wealth unimaginable. Vistas of hidden caves packed with treasure would doubtless excite these untutored imaginations, and lead to a folie and distress, with a corollary maleficence for the expeditors. Similarly, and certainly to the minds of the two academics, professional pride (and a zeal to be the first to unveil the hidden secrets of the long lost caves) could not permit any other to pre-empt their disclosures. Such an eventually had, for them, far more baleful consequences than those which might derive from brigands and thieves, eager to garner yet more treasure. So the story was put about to those who enquired, that the three were engaged in a field study, but that it was to be

located at a fairly recent, but relatively well-researched, site; no mention, at all, was to be made of distant mountains. Celarent was instructed that only provisions sufficient for a local journey need be acquired, the better to throw off the scent any who might seek clues from this quarter. Further supplies could easily be obtained at other stops along their proposed route.

It was not even dawn and already the trio were up, and saddling the pack animals that would carry their necessities. Celarent had purchased six mules, all sturdy creatures, or so it had been claimed by the vendor. Celarent was no expert but they presented a sorry sight. Lank, iron-grey hair fell about their bony bodies, and they exuded a scent that could not be called appealing. It was, however, the doleful expression in their dark, and rather blank, eyes that had inclined him to conclude the purchase. It seemed that it could only be considered an act of compassion on his part, to free these tormented souls from the evidently well-fed clutches of their previous owner. He had been informed by this last that they were indeed fine beasts of burden. Celarent could only hope that the term 'burden' extended solely to their ability to bear the weight of their loads rather than anything that they might subsequently impose upon their new owners, as a result of their emaciated condition. Anyway, and regardless of this, or indeed any further consideration of aesthetics, the deal had been struck, and instructions had been given to bring the animals, together with their harness, to Ferioque's house on the following morn, at the agreed hour. The merchant had arrived, true to his word, and somewhat to Celarent's surprise, given the man's dubious appearance. The fellow had also agreed to supply, as part of the purchase price, enough animal feed to last for a few days into the journey. This, in itself, would constitute a major part of the load of at least one of the beasts. The three travellers had decided to embark on their journey from Ferioque's dwelling. The master had no yard in which to load the animals, and so the professor had volunteered this facility. Since they were to make such an early start both Celarent and Hesvee had stayed overnight at the Professor's house, that they might leave more promptly on the following day. As soon as the animals had arrived the three of them set to with great vigour and, in only a couple of hours, they were ready to make off. Ferioque bade his farewells to his wife, promising her again that they would return soon. Even she had not been made privy to their true intentions for it was felt that to do so would unnecessarily encumber her with worries about her husband's well-being. However, he was not such an inconsiderate husband to ignore the possibility that things might go awry. He had taken care to deposit a letter with his lawyer, to be delivered to his spouse should he fail to return later than one year after his departure; or on his death, if earlier. Both he and Hesvee had deliberated on the matter of scheduling, and had concluded that one year should be more than sufficient to carry out their mission. They had also, following the same logic, concluded to leave wills which made, variously, provision for any family members, friends, and even the university, in the event of their departure from this life. Neither Celarent nor the master had any close living relatives; the matter was relatively simple for them. For the servant, too, his pursuit of the scholarly life had meant that he had not so far acquired much in the way of pecuniary advancement, and he cherished (and hoped) that this little jaunt, as he humorously depicted it to himself, might prove a changing tide in his fortunes.

The street and the city were still cloaked in darkness when the three wayfarers set off; an early start had the added advantage that this might serve to obscure the true intent of their voyage. They quickly gained the main thoroughfare and, with the soft clicking tread of the

unshod beasts' hooves as a quiet accompaniment to their progress, they made their way through the centre of the city, and then outwards to the suburbs. Within the hour they had arrived at the outskirts of the metropolis. Along the roadway they had passed only a few other solitary citizens going about their business. These were mostly the watermen carrying great flagons upon their carts, full to brimming, to every household throughout the city; and the victuallers who brought in fresh supplies of meat, fish, fruits and vegetables, ready for the early markets. Other than these few folk the road was clear and, with the way illuminated by the bright moonlit skies, they made good time. As they approached the perimeter of the city they could see the great walls rising up in front of them, the vast ramparts interrupted only by the imposing eastern gate. Again it had been decided that they should leave the city at this egress since this would further render unintelligible the true course of their endeavours. As these barriers drew nearer they could see the state of disrepair into which they had fallen. The huge, sandstone boulders, which had been hewn from the nearby quarries and transported thence to the site, there to be shaped by legions of stonemasons, and finally laid in position by the builders; these great stones had, over the intervening centuries, decayed greatly. Wind and rain, and the occasional bombardments during the civil wars, together with a general lack of maintenance, had resulted in great breaches appearing in the ranks of stones. This neglect had not been mitigated by the fact that the original necessity, which had dictated the erection of this massive boundary, had long ago disappeared. The city had not required protection from those intent upon conquest for many generations now. City taxes, levied to ensure that this barrier remained effective, had long ago been diverted into other channels - and frequently other pockets - and the consequence was that these magnificent fortifications would now have been totally inadequate against even the most desultory of assaults. They remained merely as a reminder of greater and more dangerous times. It was towards these sad remnants that the trio now advanced. Finally, they stood before the massive eastern gateway itself. At one time it had not only been a construction impregnable to the most fiercest weapons of war, but also a work of great sculptured elegance. One could just distinguish the fine contours of those imposing figures - the guardians of the city - which had once been so gracefully carved into the columns that framed this edifice. But the same elements and complacency, which had led to the corrosion of the walls, applied here equally. Worse than this, the great wooden gates, which had blocked this way to all but the invited, now lay mouldering in the dust upon either side of the opening. The wood, from which they had been constructed, had once possessed remarkable properties of endurance, enhanced by the dry conditions that prevailed in this part of the country. But even these had not been sufficient to ensure that the great portals retained their integrity and solidity. They lay like the sad bones of a great, once indomitable beast, defeated and quite ineffectual, prone upon the sands that had drifted up against the city walls, great dunes dumped by the easterly winds that blew almost continuously in these parts. The party paused for a while, to survey the melancholy scene. It struck Celarent how little he had seen of the outside world over the past few years. When he was younger he, and his parents and little sister, had regularly ventured beyond the city walls, to explore the arid countryside nearby. He recalled with pleasure those little picnics they had all enjoyed, sitting beside the banks of that broad and shallow river, which wound its way across the plain to just below the city wall. The watercourse entered the city here, on its eastern edge, and then continued through to the southern section, feeding most liberally the plants, animals and people of the municipality. Over the years its flow had gradually declined and sometimes, when drought struck, it forsook its

waters completely, and became a strip of dried mud, snaking through the land, a network of ancient channels which had been hacked out of the land by the city dwellers over the course of many centuries. During these periods fresh water supplies had to be drawn from the numerous wells that were dotted about the area. Or alternatively, when even these failed, caravans were sent regularly, a score of miles away, to a smaller watercourse, which retained its water flow even when its larger neighbour failed. There had been periodic discussions, and over a number of years, on the question of diverting the waters from this more fruitful source, and thus augmenting the city's supplies; but a failure of investment, and a lack of will, had led to no fruitful consequence. Now, the three travellers, having cast a last lingering look behind them, proceeded underneath the great arch, and out onto the open plain. Ahead they could see their road snaking away into the distance. The desert fulfilled its name completely here for they were quite alone in the grey light; or so they thought. But dark eyes were observing them closely, even now, as they and their mules moved into the soft morning light, a cool dew lying all about them upon the sands, the droplets sparkling under the dawning sun's gentle touch.

Some time must have passed since he had lost consciousness. The sky had grown darker, and the air cooler. Fortunately where he had fallen had been free of rocky outcrops. He shuddered to think what might have occurred should he have struck his head. In this wilderness there would be no one to come to his aid, and this incident emphasised the precarious nature of his position. He still sensed that strange disorientation that had affected him earlier. The strength of the sensation had subdued somewhat, but still his memories seemed to grow dimmer by the hour. But for now, he thought, his priority must be to find somewhere of safety, which would provide him with some shelter for the approaching night. He looked about him; but all he could see were the slopes of the hillsides stretching ever upwards before him. The ground itself was uneven and hummocky, and the vegetation much sparser and enfeebled, as he made his advance upon the uplands. There were but a few hours of daylight remaining, and he concluded that he should make the utmost haste to press on with his travels. Surely there had to be somewhere that he could lie up for the night and rest? His enforced break had partly renewed his energies. He knew, however, that as the night fell the temperatures would similarly depress, and he could not afford to be caught thus exposed to the elements, not at this elevation certainly. If the storm should reassert its influence then he would be in great danger of hypothermia and, even with his limited knowledge of the condition, he knew that could be fatal. He reached for his water bottle and took a generous swig of its contents. One thing that there would be no lack of in these parts was fresh water. He set the flask back upon his waist and, swinging the package over his shoulder, resumed his march up the hill. The ground was still soft underfoot and the going not at all rough, though he would still occasionally stumble over a hidden mound of earth, the remnants of some poor creature's burrow; but he would quickly regain his balance, and continue on his way. To his relief the storm now seemed to be drifting away from where he stood. But he could still distinctly see the flashes of lightning lashing out across the heavens, and hear the low grumble of thunder as it murmured around the hillsides. The slope had grown slightly steeper, and the ground increasingly uneven beneath his tread. He watched his way carefully, wary of falling and injuring himself again. It did seem that this terrain might afford some kind of shelter, a cavity in the earth that would serve as a shelter for the night. He could feel the air growing colder on his skin. It was fortunate that the breeze was gentle, even at this altitude; but the night was drawing close. And then he

saw up ahead of him, albeit indistinctly, a dark patch upon the hillside. Although it lay slightly off his present course he thought it worth investigating, and in a short space of time he had approached closely enough to find a shallow depression, lightly etched into the earth. He looked around but could see nothing that offered a more suitable abode for the night. In these parts, when night fell, it came down a-tumble, and he knew that he had little choice. He examined the dip and could see that its base consisted of earth, with some pebbles and larger rocks mixed in. The storm he had observed earlier seemed to be moving away steadily, but the winds had picked up. If he could dig himself into the ground then he could make a small nest that would be sufficient to protect him against the worst of the elements. He would use his jerkin as a kind of small tent which, when placed above him, would serve as a makeshift roof. He knew, however, that if the rains should come his way, then this poor haven would be of little avail. He studied the sides of the hollow carefully and noticed a piece of flint, about the size of his hand, lodged into its surface. It would furnish a most useful tool to cut out more earth and stones. Using this implement he would be able to work on some of the larger fragments, loosening them, and then pulling them up from the surrounding soil. He took a grip of its edge with both hands and heaved upwards, extracting it like a tooth from its socket, and then held it firmly, balancing the stone in his hands to test the weight; it was just right for the job he had in mind. He scrambled down into the little pit to begin his task. Grasping the small wedge-shaped boulder he began to attack the ground, using the rock like a hoe, hacking into the earth to break it up. Fortunately, the material was very loose, and in a short space of time he had removed quite a large section. Then, using his hands like a shovel, he drew out the dirt, tossing it away from the pit, before again resuming his assault on the remaining loam. He made good progress and within half an hour he had dug out a further three feet in depth, and as much again in width. Part way through his efforts the morbid reflection did cross his mind that he might be excavating his own grave; but with a wry smile he dismissed this foolish notion. He was kneeling now in the bottom of the pit, busily assailing the earth, and quite determined to add a couple more feet to his demolition before the light had completely gone. He had encountered a particularly stubborn patch, and it seemed that maybe a larger rock lay concealed just below the grimy surface. He had worked away around the area in an attempt to dislodge whatever it was. However, despite these efforts the ground remained obtusely resistant to his labours. Finally, and with more than a little exasperation, he lifted the flint high above his head and, with all his power, brought the edge down upon the recalcitrant earth. What happened next was a blur; and a messy one at that. With a soft whooshing sound the ground vanished, and he felt himself falling into a darkness, which had opened up beneath his feet. He did not descend vertically, but rather found himself sliding down a steep slope. Earth and pebbles, larger rocks and, from the sounds of it, quite sizeable boulders, were tumbling all about him. He had instinctively drawn his hands up over his face, and his body was curled into a tight ball, as he rolled down the incline. After what seemed an interminable age he finally came to rest, with the hissing and cracking reports of unseen fragments flying about him. The plunge, and the shock, had quite driven out all the air from his lungs. Whilst falling, he had held his breath, diving as he was clumsily into the earth; and it was this that had probably saved him from drowning in that sea of dirt that swirled all about him. Now he drew in great gulps of air, but very, very carefully, to avoid any violent motion, and thus risk dislodging the unstable ground further. He lay quite motionless in the darkness, trying to adjust to his new circumstance. It struck him as incongruous that he no longer need have any concerns about falling foul of the elements; at least not the heavenly ones. It would appear that

these dangers had been replaced, and by one from a most unexpected quarter; the not so 'firmament' beneath his feet. His hand, with which he had been exploring his immediate vicinity, unexpectedly came into contact with something other than earth and stone; it was the package of meat. Not only that for he found that his jerkin had tumbled downwards with him, and lay only a hand's breadth away from where he was now lying. Miraculously, too, the water bottle had not been separated from his belt during the fall. He was more than a little relieved there would be no immediate risk of dying from starvation or thirst. Tentatively, he raised himself onto his knees, careful not to lose contact with his recently discovered possessions. The ground seemed solid enough here although he could still hear little streams of dirt and smaller rocks trickling down the incline. He looked upward to discover if he could see daylight; but there was not a glimmer from that direction. Perhaps the hole through which he had fallen had become blocked again, he reflected. It did not really matter now. He could see no way of escaping by that direction. He pulled his jerkin on carefully, and drew the bundle closer to his body. He extended his hands forwards, but all he could discover was the dry and dusty earth stretching out into the darkness. This 'night' had seemed quite impenetrable at first. As his sight adjusted, however, he believed that he could make out some lighter patches within the enveloping gloom. He moved his aching body round so he was once again sitting on the ground. He squinted fiercely at the murk, as if this additional effort would penetrate the fog. Yes. He was quite sure now. He remained still though, until he was certain that his eyes were not playing tricks upon him. He could just about see the mound of earth on which he was perched. He guessed it was mainly composed of the material that he had dislodged in the course of his fall. He could also barely make out a rock surface, which lay a few feet away. He carefully scabbled down the slope, slithering like an exhausted snake, and anxious to avoid any further risk of falling. He groaned as he slid down over the rough dirt, the cuts and bruises all over his body protesting their presence; he had no desire to add to his already extensive collection. Finally, he felt his feet resting upon a firm, resistant and, most importantly, steady surface. Now he was sufficiently confident to try his luck. He raised himself fully to his feet, but readied for catastrophe at any moment; the ground remained solid. He took a step forward, to test its stability: terra firma at last. He reached down and picked up the thoroughly battered package which contained his last remaining supplies of food. He swung it over his shoulder, and again scrutinised his surroundings carefully. The darkness was still profound but it did seem slightly greyer, rather than pitch black, to his left. He was disinclined to proceed but knew that he must, and promptly. The recollection of his latest accident was still clearly imprinted, not only on his memory, but upon his aching body, the torn flesh but recent evidence of this mishap. He took a step, testing the ground, then trusting it with his weight and, with one hand outstretched, he proceeded into the greyer darkness. Carefully, and with every movement expecting to walk face first into an unyielding rock wall, he stumbled into the gloom. It came as something of a relief, therefore, to observe that the grey patch towards which he was heading, was growing in size and brightness, and colouration. It is a trick of the eyes, sometimes, to misperceive colour, especially under conditions such as these; for what had appeared grey now showed up as a pale green luminescence. Though it was still too faint to light his way clearly, it was sufficient to reinforce his audacity. He continued his slow advance, wary of more scrapes but eager to leave that dreadful sepulchre behind. Finally, the muted glow pierced the darkness, and the opening to some kind of passageway was revealed. Thus encouraged he speeded his pace; and yet a native caution abated his eagerness somewhat. For these were unknown regions and who could know what might be the

source of the illumination? He had had so many strange experiences and encounters, even in this short time abroad, that he had grown more judicious in his explorations. There were no other sounds than those of his muffled footsteps on the granite floor, and his slightly laboured breathing, his lungs heavily drawing in the dry and slightly odorous vapours that filled this subterranean cave. He was now at the entrance to the passageway, and it was evident that whatever was producing the light must be located at some distance away. The glow was steady, but of a distinctively unknown quality. He turned to review the way back; all he could see was an unremitting blankness, which disappeared finally into a empty darkness. He had no other recourse but to enter the stony corridor and investigate the source of this strange and unearthly radiance. Girding up his courage, he stepped into the passageway.

Gorval watched the rapid departure of his underling with what might have been described as mild humour; that is, if he had possessed such an attribute. iDarii's report had been substantially correct, and had been borne out by the accounts given by other spies who had been sent into the field. It was the policy of the Ministry to ensure that its employees were zealous and punctilious in their endeavours. But Gorval and his fellows were well schooled in the realities of the Gaki temperament. His people had a tendency to become distracted by their appetites. Sometimes these diversions led them to fall short of the requisite attention to detail, a precise standard which their superiors commanded; hence the need to send out a number of scouts, to cross check the veracity of the information, and to ensure a thorough and accurate, final testimony as to the unfolding events in the upper world. However, what had been of the greatest significance was the failure of the fellow to recall his meeting with the young surface dweller. Normally such an omission would arouse his wrath; in this case, no such response was dictated. Things were proceeding as they should, or as predicted, at least. Gorval knew well that if he had questioned his inferior on the matter the latter would have been quite unable to account for his deception, even had he sought to. What iDarii did not know, however, and what Gorval and a few of his associates were privy to, served his people's interests for now. The Gaki had been observing developments, both within their own realm and that of their proximate neighbours, and for some considerable time now. To the uninitiated such apparently disparate events as the recent uprisings, and consequent raids upon the surface world, would appear relatively random; to Gorval, and to that inner circle, these all formed a pattern; a pattern around which the young surface dweller played the focus. It was ironic, therefore, that he, who was most ignorant of the play of events, actually constituted the centrifugal force driving them. The Seers - of which Gorval was one - were a small group of adepts within the Council of Elders who, as their name suggested, possessed an aptitude for insight, which far exceeded that of the generality. It was they who were charged with the responsibility for guaranteeing when the time of the Great Change came, that nothing should prevent it following its preternatural course. So far everything had advanced as expected, and the conclusion now so contiguous that the scout's omission was of relatively little import. He had recently received information from the other scouts located in Stela, that a small party had been observed departing the city in the early hours of that morning; thus, yet another piece in the schema was moving into position. Soon all would be ready, and then what would happen, would happen; the world would never be the same again. He sat there quietly, the dark settling about him like a heavy cloak, his thoughts drifting into the ether.

The first rays of the sun were spreading over the plain. At their touch the cool dew started to evaporate above the desert floor, sending up a low mist that twisted and spiralled in small snakelike currents, flowing sinuously over the damp earth. The walls of the city were falling away behind them and, when Hesvee had judged that they had travelled a sufficient distance and were out of the sight of any prying eyes, the party turned away from its eastwards march, to make a new course northwards. The going was easy, and all three felt invigorated, eager to make a good start upon their adventure. The earliness of the hour and the quietness of their surroundings inclined none to idle chatter. Instead, they accompanied their footsteps with silence, and reflective thought. Hesvee was still grappling with the surprising turn of events, as was his friend Ferioque. The former had rarely stirred from the city apart from occasional trips to visit relatives, or to attend conferences with colleagues, at assemblies hosted in some of the neighbouring cities of the region. His studies in psychical research necessarily conduced towards a more solitary observation and introspection. He had conducted some experimentation with volunteers, but these efforts had turned out to be rather inconclusive. He had found that he rather had to concentrate his attention more acutely upon obscure, esoteric sources, where practitioners of the art, if it can be called that, gave a fuller account of their own aptitudes. Obviously the authors of these accounts were long gone, and he had developed some skills as an archivist whilst in pursuance of these researches. It was these that had been the occasion for his first encounter with Ferioque. Clearly their areas of study were quite independent though it had struck the master that, in some respects, they were both map makers; for one examined the physical terrain, whilst the other was more a cartographer of the human mind. However their friendship was rather founded, quite paradoxically, on a mutual dislike of social contact and, at some level, a personal and indefinable empathy. For his part Ferioque was equally bemused with what he regarded as the profound folly upon which this whole project had been projected, and as an exhilarating and inspiring departure from the well-trammelled routes of his quotidian routines. Unlike Hesvee he was well accustomed to travelling in foreign parts, though usually not on such short notice, or to quite as unfriendly regions. However, he did not fundamentally regret his decision to join the party, and anticipated eagerly the outcome of their undertaking. But Celarent walked in a kind of daze. Although he was accustomed to debouching promptly his bed to attend upon the master, he had never developed a penchant for early rising, and it was truly not the best time of day for him in any respect. He was more naturally a man of later hours, and for him the dawn was an assault upon the consciousness that he would much rather delay as long as possible. That is not to say that he was of poor temper, but that not all his faculties were aroused synchronously, and therefore a time lag, between the opening of his eyes and the effective functioning of his brain, must needs occur. However, the air was brisk, and the new sun kindly in its aspect, and these seemed to engender a nascent liveliness, which helped him adjust to his novel situation. He plodded on resignedly, leading the docile team of mules behind, his gaze, like theirs, firmly directed groundward.

The plain across which they travelled was flat, and largely featureless. The walls of the city were just perceptible against the horizon, for their sandstone construction rendered them all but invisible against the backdrop of the desert. Here and there were small clumps of trees, indicating where the water table came closest to the surface. Far ahead stretched a wasteland; but it was not such an inhospitable region. Its aspect might appear unforgiving, but to the natives of this territory it presented a pleasing view. The broad vistas, the clear

vault of the silver-white skies above, and the deep ochre sandstone bluffs marching away into the distance, all endowed a sense of freedom within the heart of the observer. This was a place of simple, elemental form. Nature had dispensed with her usual frivolities and lay fully exposed in her raw essence. Earth and sky, above and below, and the dividing line an imaginary frontier that no one could ever reach. Besides, the land was not as vacant as it might seem to the neophyte. It abounded with wildlife, with lizards, snakes and small burrowing mammals, each preying upon the others during the day and night hours. Here, too, were flying creatures that skimmed the ground; bats under cover of darkness, trawling for insects, which laboured in the sands in their millions; dune swallows by day, flying swiftly in swarms of hundreds, darting over the surface in search of the smallest bugs upon which they feasted. Such was the abundance of vitality that the trio of travellers knew that they would encounter more than adequate water supplies along their route. For this was not the deep desert after all; it was but a taste of that truly inimical territory. But finally their journey would necessitate passage through these inhospitable lands. It sufficed presently that they remain on this course; then they might not fear any danger other than that which commonly exhibited itself to the unwary, and unprepared, traveller. After all, it was the merest day or so's journey before they would come to their next habitation: the small town of Zikar. It was here that they planned to replenish their supplies, sufficient for the remainder of their journey.

The sun continued on its upward course into the heavens and, with its ascent, the temperatures, too, climbed rapidly. The party were well acclimatized to such conditions (though not so accustomed to these in conjunction with hard physical activity). At midday, by general agreement, the three of them decided to rest, for a while, at an oasis, which lay near to their route. They turned off the road and, with considerable relief, set themselves down under the shade of the tall, broad-fronded trees that outlined the small pool of water. There was much evidence of wild life in this place, for that tiny, dirty, brown pond was essential for the many species that subsisted hereabouts. The mules were unloaded and led down to the pool. The beasts drank eagerly whilst the three men set about their midday meal. Cheese and bread were withdrawn from one of the bags, which had been carried hence by their charges. These, together with a flask of water and a small allotment of wine, constituted their rations for lunch. Hesvee advised his two colleagues to indulge but sparingly on the latter since, he cautioned, an excess of liquor under hot temperatures might have the gravest of consequences. Otherwise, he volunteered, they should take in as much water as possible since they were more likely to suffer from under indulgence than over indulgence in this case. Both listened to his advice politely, but the occasion served as a reminder of their leader's occasional predilection to state the obvious. However, it had to be acknowledged that the advice was sound nevertheless, and they acted accordingly. The meal was eaten in silence. The increasingly oppressive heat, and the unaccustomed ardour of their travels, had left the three scholars quiescent. After they had finished their repast, the aforementioned factors together with a full belly, suggested an afternoon siesta and, laying their blankets upon the ground, they settled down for a nap. It did not seem to have occurred to their leader it might be prudent to post a sentry. But too late, for all had fallen into a deep sleep.

His step was noticeably lighter as he finally exited the grim Ministry, and re-entered the central hub. The day - to adopt a conventional measure, for such diurnal divisions were not employed underground - was already far advanced. His people did not sleep as such

although there were periods when they became less active. Because of the nature of their metabolisms, and consequent appetites, the Gaki preferred to take their resting periods after extremely heavy meals. These would happen periodically; but not 'daily', so to speak. In these cases they would remain effectively comatose - but not fully unconscious - for considerable lengths of time whilst their latest meal was properly digested. Otherwise, they would remain active for even longer periods, constantly moving to and fro about their business; they were, by nature, a most restless race. iDarii found that when he rested the incessant physical pain that he experienced would become more apparent, and intrusive. He could only gain some degree of respite from this distress by keeping his body continuously mobile. This was a condition universal amongst his race, and was one of the main reasons that the central hub was always so busy. In many instances the majority of the population were engaged in those trades and occupations necessary to their own support and, of course, that of the larger colony. However, a large proportion of those presently within the hub would be engaged in simply circling about its vast circumference. It seemed that not only could the pain be abated by this practised mobility, but additionally ameliorated, if conducted in the presence of their fellows. And so they would circumnavigate the area, sometimes for hours on end, or even days at a time, their low keening cries drifting upwards to the stony cavern ceiling. Fortunately for the scout he had been so busy about his, and the Ministry's, affairs of late, that the fact of his own physical discomfort had mostly receded from his consciousness. But now this proximity to his less fortunate compatriots had had the effect of hastening him in his removal from the city centre. His escape route, on this occasion, lay on this facet of the hub, and he had no need to traverse against the stream of Gaki who perambulated there. It was a short distance again before he turned away, and moved through the torch lit streets towards the perimeter of the city. He marched briskly along the boulevards, the ways filled to brimming with the ghostly population, the ubiquitous torchlight casting its benevolent glow upon the scene. The contrast with the gloomy environment that he had just departed could not be starker. To an outsider this place might proffer a dismal aspect; but this was home for the Gaki, and a precious place in his own soul. His heart glowed as brightly as those thousands of cressets, which sent their fiery beams into every crevice and corner of the town. He strode smartly along, eager to be home and to greet his family once more. He was quite certain that both his mother and father would be there to welcome him. They always fretted when he went on one of his missions to the upper lands. They were fearful that he might be discovered, and then ill used, by the barbarians who dwelt above. It must be said that their expectations were largely governed by the predominant prejudices that held sway amongst the under people; for they themselves had never ventured into these lands. Rumour and gossip abounded on the habits and customs of the over landers, with much redounding to their disfavour. It seemed that the predilection of attributing to the unknown the worst possible qualities was common to all peoples. iDarii was quite sure that the sky dwellers would hold an equally unfavourable opinion of his fellows, if they but knew of the latter's existence. Fortunately, perhaps, for both races, the Gaki remained as yet unknown. Finally, he arrived outside the door of his home, and entered quietly.

As Melaskkoli advanced along the path the light became gradually stronger. Its unearthly green radiance gave the walls of the rock corridor a strange and unsettling aspect. The place was deadly quiet, and the whole provoked a growing anxiety, which symptoms rose up through his chest and into his tightening throat. His breathing became even more uneven and rapid, as he braced himself for what he was sure would be some terrible

shock. It was in vain that he inwardly tried to console himself, and that he would come to no harm; all the evidence suggested the converse. Finally he turned a shallow corner, and found himself, at last, face-to-face with the basis of his supposed fear. As far as he could see, and extending into the gloomy distance, were clumps of some strange substance, which lay dispersed widely over parts of the granite wall. It was from these that this odd illumination dispensed its bizarre glow. He moved towards one of them and bent closer to examine the phenomenon more closely. He was relieved to discover that it resembled some kind of moss rather than of a more sinister provenance. The primitive vegetable seemed to be growing directly out of the mineral. There was no sign that it had lodged itself into a crack in the hard surface and, by these tenacious means, had thereby gained a purchase; it emerged literally, and directly, from the stone. He reached forward tentatively, curious to touch this unusual flora. It glowed brilliantly indeed, and he half expected to feel its heat upon his face; but there was none. Encouraged by his preliminary examination he ventured to touch the foliage. He was surprised to discover no sense of radiant energy. He brushed his fingers across the close packed fronds; and then withdrew them. He observed, with some consternation, a greenish deposit had now appeared upon his skin. Still there was no sensation of heat, and no indication of any maleficent effects. He remained there for some minutes, carefully scrutinising the whole area. The way back looked dark and rather foreboding. Then it crossed his mind that if he were to coat himself with this peculiar matter it might serve as a means of illuminating his way in the darkness. He energetically scraped some of the fine moss of the walls and proceeded to smear it liberally upon his clothes, avoiding, for the time being, applying it to his skin. He had suffered no immediate harm as a result of his earlier experiment; but who knows what the longer term effects might be. He retraced his steps up the corridor and re-entered the cave into which he had descended so violently from the surface. With the assistance of his new-found light source he was able to see more clearly the mound of earth, which had accompanied him on his arrival. He looked upwards in the vain hope that he might now see a way by which he could return to the surface. However, the candlepower generated by this strange plant was insufficient to penetrate to that height. He concluded that he must proceed by the only route that seemed available, and go back into the corridor.

He entered the passageway again and, with slightly less trepidation than before, he made his way at a brisk pace forward, watchful always for any sign of danger. Who knows what men, or what creatures, might inhabit these unknown parts? The way was not onerous for the floor was level, and largely clear of obstructions. The surfaces were rough-hewn for all that. Nevertheless he felt sure that some creature had constructed this route, or at least had widened a natural fault within the rock, so that they might pass by here with greater facility. He found this thought both consoling and worrying by turn. He quite dreaded the notion that somehow he might be the only human inhabitant condemned forever - so he fancifully reflected - to wander these stony paths, alone and quite separated from his kith and kin. On the other hand the prospect that he might encounter one of these underground dwellers was equally worrying, for he had no idea of what sort of welcome he might receive. His imagination commenced upon its course of exploration within this particular theme and he had to make a determined effort to push these thoughts away, and well to the back of his mind. His first priority must be to find some way out of here. It was more likely that any harm which might befall him would probably originate from lack of food or water, rather than the wicked intent of some, as yet, unknown indigenes. The indications were not promising, however, that this particular road led back to the surface.

The incline was gentle but downwards, and no other alternative had presented itself. For the time being he was compelled to follow his present course.

The mosses at this deeper level seemed to grow in yet greater profusion, and the way was now brightly lit. It could not be a coincidence, he reflected, that these grew here, and in such quantities. This served to confirm his growing suspicion that there must indeed be some form of intelligent life that dwelt in these parts; yet again that uneasy feeling of hope and fear coincided in his heart, and jostled there with each other. But the practicalities of his condition took precedence, and thus he strengthened his resolve. He must have been travelling for some while now but he had no distinct idea of the passage of time. All the normal indicators of this were, of course, absent in this gloomy place. The only guides that remained to him of its passing were his fatigue and his appetites. He did not, however, feel in the least tired, for he had hardly to make any great exertion. He had stopped occasionally to take a sip from his water bottle, but still did not feel any great inclination to eat. Moreover he was surprised that he had still seen no sign of any side passages. He was no speleologist but he felt sure that he should have encountered at least a few side turnings along the way. The conception grew ever stronger that this traverse had indeed been constructed by artifice. He had to wonder at the energy and enterprise of those who could have driven a shaft, and of such dimensions, through solid rock. He paused periodically to look over his shoulder, to observe if he was being pursued; but these impulses were occasioned more by irrational inclination than sound judgement; for, as far as he could determine, there was no one here but he.

It was quite a surprise, therefore, when he turned a corner and was suddenly presented with a sight such as he had never witnessed, and which quite took his breath away. The passageway had opened up into an enormous cavern whose walls and floor extended in every direction until their features disappeared into the vague distance. Such was the contrast with the relatively narrow confines of the passageway in which he stood that he felt quite fearful, to step out into this immensity. Instead he remained on its margin, staring with wonder at this unbelievable, and quite breathtaking, vista. The sheer scale of this huge space beggared even his lively imagination. The rocky corridor by which he had made his way hence might well be of the devising of intelligent creatures. But the vastness of this was beyond any capacity, human or otherwise. When man and nature are set side-by-side to display their talents, the artifice of one is impressive, but stands dwarfed by the power of the other. On either side the cave walls extended as far as the eye could see, both in length and height. As he gazed upwards, to better gauge that dimension, he could not see even the beginnings of a roof to this enormous hole. But what grasped his attention mostly was the topography which presented itself to his scrutiny. The ground directly in front of him was quite smooth. But as he let his inspection proceed he was most struck by the unusual rock formations, which unfurled across the landscape. Here and there, vast towers of rock rose precipitously from the ground, continuing upwards until their heads were quite lost in the darkness. The rest of the terrain proceeded in swells and hollows, much resembling in contour, those hills and valleys of the surface world. However, the swirls and striations upon the rocky faces were largely unencumbered by any form of plant life apart, of course, from the ever-present mosses. In this place, and so far underground, there was no wind or rain for Nature to sculpt them, but evidently some form of mechanical activity must have played a part in their configuration. If anything they imitated the texture of a dough mix, which Melaskkoli had seen his mother

contrive when she had been baking bread. The flour and yeast and water, all combined and then kneaded, pulled and punched, tugged and twisted, until its surface would present a coiled and smoothed appearance, reminiscent of what he was now examining; but this was a living rock. The mosses grew in patches across the prospect, but the greater dimension they sought to illuminate mitigated their intensity. Nevertheless, it was still sufficient to light his path. Now the only question was - which way to proceed? He had more choice of action, but this greater liberty, if anything, compounded his indecision. Finally it would have to remain an arbitrary selection, and the outcome would depend upon fortune rather than correct judgement. The best course would seem to be directly ahead. With a conscious effort he overcame his initial trepidation, and stepped out of the corridor and onto the plain.

It was Celarent who first wakened from his postprandial slumbers. He looked across at the others who were still fast asleep. The sun had conducted itself past its noon-time peak, and was now descending into the eastern horizon, the temperature falling correspondingly. He shuffled forwards until he was sitting upright. He brushed the sleep from his eyes, and stretched his limbs to ease them back into motion. The slight noises occasioned by his actions finally aroused his two companions. Hesvee raised himself upon one elbow and looked across at his servant; and then at Ferioque, who was stumbling to his feet. "Ah", he exclaimed. "Excellent. I think the weather's temperate enough for us to continue, don't you think, my dear fellow?" "Eh?" was Ferioque's questioning reply. "I was saying that I think we can be on our way again, now that it's cooler". "Of course. Of course. I agree. Just got to wake up though I'm not at all used to sleeping during the day. I try and avoid it as much as possible. It seems to tire me out more than revive me, don't you find?" Hesvee nodded. Celarent was instructed to feed the mules whilst the others readied themselves. In a short space of time they had returned to the roadway, and continued with their march. The rest of the evening passed without event, and they made no further stops. It had been agreed before they set out that they should follow a pattern of early starts, and thus take advantage of the cool of the morning. They could also extend their daily journey with some late marches into the night. As they had already discovered the noontime temperatures were too oppressive for any kind of hard physical activity, and would deplete their energies unnecessarily. At the moment the moon was in its burgeoning phase, and the skies clear of cloud. These opportune conditions further extended their progress well into the night. The main meal would be taken just before they retired, readying them for an early start on the following morn. It would be on the next day that they would arrive at Zikar where they planned to stop briefly, and top up their supplies before pressing onwards.

As they ambled along, imitating very much the pace of their mules, the two men continued their debate on their present project as well as upon other matters that had taken their professional interest. Hesvee and Ferioque discovered that, whereas they held many views in common - and on a wide range of subjects - they similarly held quite disparate opinions on others. Foremost amongst the latter was that which was the very basis of Hesvee's subject area: psychical studies. It must be said that, by temperament, Ferioque was very much a materialist. He was sure only of what he could measure, and consequently steered well clear of any purely subjective perspective. By necessity, of course, Hesvee could hardly make any advances into his own researches other than by consultation and investigation into what was hidden, and sometimes deeply, within men's

minds; and most notably, his own. And so they would argue, back and forth, in an old debate, as to how one could demonstrate to the other the validity of their assertions. Ferioque would triumphantly point to his maps and his research, the cross indexing of references, and the corroborative evidence supplied by other scholars, and so on. For his part the master would draw upon very similar exemplars. There was a wealth of material available, and usually quite widely disseminated, that lent credence - or so it was claimed - to some of the mental phenomena that were the object, and subject, of his explorations. However, there were no scales to apply, as in cartography or the other sciences, and no measurable indexes or objective standards against which to estimate their value. Ferioque worked constantly within the parameters of the quantitative though these frequently involved some degree of evaluation, especially when it came to the selection of data and method of study. Hesvee, however, had recourse to more qualitative judgements. There was exceedingly little that could be subject to any form of mensuration. The final arbiter, in any case, could only be his own experience and judgement when it came to the veracity of the evidence with which he was presented. Ferioque was quite happy to acknowledge that psychical studies made no claim to be an science, certainly not in the sense in which he and his fellows would use the term; but at the same time it was not an art or humanity. So his contention essentially was that if it was not one, and it was not the other, and nor was it a synthesis of the two, then what finally was it? Hesvee would generously acknowledge the problem, and even accept Ferioque's objections, but he would not concede that simply because it could not be framed within the usual categories that this somehow invalidated its enquiry, its scope and its methods. And so they proceeded to and fro, merrily exchanging views and opinions, with considerable fervour, and always good humoured. Celarent had been a frequent witness to these dialogues but he rarely participated. It was not that he did not have his own views on the subjects under discussion, but simply that he would have found it difficult to edge an opinion into the exchange, so narrow were the gaps in the discourse. However, he was always pleased to hear the two men talk for though they rarely arrived at an agreed conclusion the enthusiasm with which they attacked the subject was an inspiration. This, and the fact that the toil of an otherwise wearisome journey was alleviated by their contest, inclined Celarent to listen, with close attention, to their scholarly bartering.

Night had well and truly fallen by the time that a halt was called to the day's or rather, evening's journeying. They were all tired, hardly surprising given that they were men who were unaccustomed to such arduous, physical demands. The evening meal, its preparation and consumption, were executed with great dispatch, and the three of them prepared to retire. It had been decided that they would adopt the practice of keeping watch from now on. This was not undertaken because of any particular peril presented by the inhabitants or wild life of the region; rather, that it would be a good discipline to adopt prior to the time when they would need to employ such measures when they entered less hospitable territories. Hesvee volunteered to take the first watch, to be succeeded by Celarent and in turn, Ferioque. Barely had Celarent's head hit the rolled-up blanket which served as a pillow when he found himself being awakened by his master. "Come. good fellow. Your watch. I must turn in soon. I can barely stay awake as it is". The servant groaned, feeling distinctly cheated of his night's rest; it seemed to him that he had had none. However, as Hesvee settled down, he took up his post just outside their little encampment, and began his surveillance. The desert was quiet, with not even the frittering or clicking of insects to disturb the calm. The fire had died down to a dull, red

glow. There had been no need to feed its flames further once the cooking had been completed, and the night was still warm though the skies were sharply clear. The land lay outstretched, bathed in a silvery moonlight that covered the whole scene like a shimmering, silken cloak. Under its strange lustre the landscape took on a most ethereal quality. The browns and ochres, the yellows and blacks, all had been replaced by a sheen of white that glowed upon every surface. The whole effect, and with a deep purple-black sky above, had a most calming influence. As Celarent swept his gaze away from the heavy moon, which floated magically over the land, its ghastly pale face peering down from the heavens, he could see a brilliant dusting of stars, spreading out across the firmament. The stillness of the scene prompted within his own mind a growing sense of tranquillity. It was odd to see how busy his thoughts had been. All day long and into the night, and even within his dreams, these notions and fancies would dart about like shoals of fish, flying through the shallows, and flitting about the reefs under a dark blue sea. But unlike these natural formations that moved as one, his ideas would jostle continuously, sometimes colliding, sometimes shifting, but without a measure to structure their pace. But now, under this calm midnight sky, he found these errant conceptions ceasing from their frantic terpsichorean endeavours, and revolving languidly if not lazily, finally to rest gracefully within his mind. It seemed that he could perceive more clearly the contents of his consciousness as it lay so uncluttered before his stilled review. Random thoughts would pop up here and there, but his mind lay calm and serene, drinking in the vastness of the space that embraced him. In the course of these casual musings he reflected on the conversation that he had observed earlier that day between his two seniors. It was strange, he thought, that no matter how long and how frequently they argued their positions, nor how coherently and clearly they sought to arrive at a consensus, none ever occurred. It was not the case that there was no will to reach this synthesis; it was simply that it did not appear to exist. The dichotomies seemed intrinsic within their deliberations and, if anything, the debate served only to widen the gulf between their perspectives rather than narrow it. He noticed this same chasm occurred within his own experience. How many times had he found himself trying to reconcile opposing views within his own conceptions? And more significantly, how little he knew himself at all? Here was he, a man of some years, and yet he was quite sure that he could observe nothing of himself that could be held to be determinate. In fact, on any occasion where he might describe himself to be the possessor of this or that trait, and conversely devoid of their opposites, within but a short space of time subsequently he would display these very same, but apparently absent, qualities. Of the world he could honestly say he knew little its nature, its causes or its future; and if it were possible, even less concerning himself. But here, under the calm and quiet light of this night sky, these confusions and self-deceptions seemed of little consequence. Now and here, the bright moon cast its effulgence upon all; and there was nothing, not one thing, to be added to the scene. It was complete within itself; and he felt complete within it. These two were one. And he was one.

There was complete silence within the Ministry. Gorval was quite, quite alone, with his thoughts and reflections. He was still pondering over his subordinate's report. It seemed that everything was moving in the direction that had been predicted by the seers; but not in every detail. They could discern the general outlines of events, and even some of their specific features occasionally. These last would intersperse themselves into the weave of destiny, those adventitious outcrops that in themselves had no great significance, but whose main purpose served to confirm the general trend. He could feel a strange shiver

wafting about his mind, and he knew that the others were now summoning him. He was a novice to this Inner Council and it was his function to report to his superiors, and to follow their sequent instruction. He possessed the sight to some extent, but his development was immature, and it would take many years yet to develop to fruition. But time was running out and, if things followed their course, then perhaps he would not be present to witness this epiphany. Now the mental vibrations were becoming more importunate, and he could no longer delay his attendance at the meeting. He rose from his chair and silently crossed the room towards the opposite wall. There was nothing of note upon its surface; just the same bare monotony of colour and texture as the rest of the room; or, at least, to the untrained eye. He walked directly up to the wall and entered its bland substance. The material of which it was constructed was of the same nature as the barrier by which iDarii had passed when he had re-entered the home cavern. The same principles applied to passage through this way, though, in this instance, the direction was downwards. Gorval slipped through its substance with ease, his progress further assisted by gravity. This exit had been constructed to ensure the greatest secrecy. Most of the employees of the Ministry were completely unaware of this department's ultimate function; that is, to serve the seers. No one knew of this route other than a very few; and not all could pass here. In addition to navigating the material structure of the rocky shaft the wayfarer had also to possess the appropriate mental attributes to penetrate its depths; and these qualities were possessed only by those with the correct genetic and physical dispositions. It was one of the functions of the Inner Council to distinguish these characteristics amongst the newborn Gaki, and identify those who would be the more suitable candidates to join their ranks in later life; Gorval had been one of these. As he sank, layer-by-layer, he reflected on his first meeting with the seers. He had awoken in his 'new' parent's home, and was recovering from the shock of being reunited with them in this familiarly strange world. It had been only a short time afterwards that a young visitor had called upon the household. Gorval had been introduced to the man at which point his parents, somewhat to his consternation, had left him alone with the stranger. The fellow had chosen to materialise into full visibility, and had instructed the young Gorval to do the same. He was typical of their species but for one noticeable feature: his eyes. They were quite colourless, but of an extremely percipient nature. So much so, it seemed to Gorval, that once the other had caught his gaze he found it quite impossible to break the connection. They had remained silent, for what seemed an age, before the stranger nodded, and left the room; not a word had been exchanged. His parents had returned, and from that day onward no mention was made of the encounter. It was some years later, when he had come of age, that he was summoned to the Ministry, and had remained there ever since. Moreover, from that day forward, he never had any further contact with either his mother or father, or even returned home; the Ministry had become the place where he dwelt, and the seers his new family. He had not experienced any particular distress at the separation for it seemed a completely natural transition in his life; he had been well chosen. Shortly after his arrival at the department he had been assigned a mentor. This fellow had tutored him not only in his duties but also in that long and demanding discipline, which was to develop and tune his natural talent for the sight. Over the years he had been minutely observed, and his progress assessed, as gradually he was acquainted more fully with the activities of his confederates, and the future that was to unfold for them all. As their confidence grew in him he was finally shown the path to the council chamber - the one he was presently navigating - and inducted into the council as a junior member. He was permitted to attend some, but not all, of their meetings.

Now he recalled his presence. As his physical form drifted downwards, via the shaft, he experienced his descent rather by touch than by sight. Much familiarity with this journey informed him that he had arrived at a sufficient depth to have passed below the foundations of the Ministry itself. Now he was entering the rock that formed the base of the city cavern. Finally he felt his feet touch upon an impenetrable substance. He turned about until he was facing in the opposite direction, and took a couple of paces forward, and emerged from the wall. He saw before him a small antechamber, which was occupied by a single figure. The Gaki nodded at his arrival, and gestured to him that he should continue through a doorway, which opened to his left. He passed through here, and into the council chamber beyond. The room was not large, sufficient perhaps to accommodate twenty of his kind. It was a precise circle in form, and lay upon two levels. The outer orbit was a narrow pathway, which followed the line of the circumference. Along its length were a series of short stairways leading down to the inner circle. Dotted about the room were torches, which dispensed a modest light upon the otherwise darkened space. A table, that mirrored the shape of its containing room, filled most of this central area. Around this, at regular intervals, were positioned twelve chairs. When the full council met all of these would be occupied. Occasionally, especially with a full session, it was necessary that the junior members would stand nearby in attendance. For now, however, the room contained but a single figure. As Gorval entered he noted this individual's presence, and waited wordlessly to be addressed. Again that strange vibration swept through his body, and the greeting signified an invitation to take one of the seats. He moved quietly round the perimeter until he came to a short staircase; by this means he made his way down to the inferior level where he took the closest chair. What passed between them after that cannot be recounted, for the nature of their communication would be quite alien to both human ear, and human comprehension.

Melaskkoli had made some considerable progress across the undulating rock that constituted the unyielding floor of this vast, underground land. The absence of vegetation had made his way easier, and the light from the mosses was quite adequate for his purposes. This, together with that same substance which he carried upon his person, ensured his transit was straightforward. The ease of his journey enabled him to observe closely some of the structures that lay along his path. The massive towers, in particular, were quite intriguing. He had never before seen anything that quite resembled them. They extended above his head to a height that he was unable to determine. Their bases were ample; many times wider, indeed, than he could encircle, even with fully outstretched arms. They bore the greatest resemblance to tree trunks, but broader in diameter than any such that existed in the upper lands. Naturally these stony columns were quite bare of any branches or foliage, and their surfaces were of a texture identical to that of the rest of this subterranean world. Other than these large vertical structures the ground rose and fell much like the surface of an ocean, but with waves and troughs fashioned from solid rock. It was then that it struck him, and with some force, the exactness of this comparison. They were extraordinarily similar to that watery element, but as if frozen in time. They swayed motionlessly, as it were, great flourishes of unyielding rock that rolled across the landscape; yet still, so still, that they might never have moved for an eternity. This strange notion, of walking across an sea, played within his mind, and almost distracted him completely from his path. The entranceway, by which he had come into the cave, had now disappeared completely into the receding distance. He had not even thought to recollect

his route should it become necessary for him to return by that way. It seemed that such precautions would be fruitless since there would be no hope of egress there. Only one way remained, and that was forward, and wherever it might take him. He was truly cast upon an ocean's surface, left to the whim of the elements, and with fortune to determine his fate.

The house was unexpectedly silent as iDarii entered. Generally, on his return home, he could expect a cheery greeting, at least from his mother. But it would seem that the place was quite deserted. He moved through the atrium, and passed under an archway into the main living area. This was a rectangular room in which most of the activities of the household were conducted. From here a number of doorways led, respectively, to the kitchen, the sleeping and washing areas, and then finally, to a small courtyard where the household gathered at the end of each 'day' to chat and exchange the latest news. However, as he moved from room to room, he found that, as he had at first thought, there was no one at home. This really was quite unusual for though his father still worked as a merchant in a nearby storehouse, and might yet be engaged in some business there, his mother was usually to be found here at home, occupying herself with domestic responsibilities. Up until recently she had worked at the same premises as his father but had been obliged to resign her duties due to increasing ill health. She had largely recovered from her ailment yet had felt no great desire to return to her former employ, and contented herself rather with maintaining the home. He did not give the matter any further thought, except to conclude that she might be visiting friends nearby, or had gone out on an errand. He felt slightly aggrieved at their absence because of his recent experiences on the surface world. Of course it was quite out of the question that he would give an account of what had occurred, and most certainly not to his parents. All they knew of his duties was his assignment to the Ministry; they knew nothing of his 'field' operations, as they might be termed. They believed that he was employed as an administrator, and this was an opinion he did nothing to dispel. However, he felt a kind of pressure within, and a growing need to disclose something of what had passed; a little idle chatter would have helped to dissipate the strain he was feeling. Although he did not know the full implications of what was passing in the upper world, and of the activities of the Council with regard to these, nevertheless he was sufficiently astute to realise that they were living in dangerous times. He felt impelled to warn his parents of the increasingly proximate - and potentially disturbing - future, that might be fast approaching. But, taking into account the close security that surrounded what little information he possessed, he could not have framed the warning in any form that would have made sense to them. Indeed, all that he might achieve by this would be to cause needless anxiety. None of this reasoning, however, really lent to him any form of relief from the burden that he bore; for now, he would have to manage somehow.

He went into the kitchen and found some morsels of bread in a storage bin. He returned with these to the living area, sat himself down upon a stool, and commenced to chew delicately upon both the bread and his reflections, whilst he awaited the return of the rest of the household. The evidence he had witnessed of the Gaki raid was most shocking, as were the accounts he had heard of other such forays, which had been launched from a number of cities in the region. So far they had been fortunate, and no attacks had been launched from their own cavern. When he had made his report to Gorval he had not really expected any kind of reaction, for that was not his superior's way. He would return to his

office on the morn, and perhaps then he would be able to glean some further news on developments. As he sat there, turning these thoughts over in his mind, he heard the door open. and his mother's voice call out. "Darii, arrrrre yooooo hooooome?" She used the personal form of address, omitting the customary title. "Yeeees. I'm iiiin the liviiiiing roooooom". This last piece of information was rendered redundant, for she was entering the room as he spoke. "Helloo, myyyy deeeear". She smiled. He rose to his feet and bowed, before they hugged each other. "I see yooooou've founnnnd yooooour meeeeaal, deeeear". He glanced at the dry hunk of bread in his hand and grimaced. "I hoooope thaaaat thissss isssn't diiiinner, beloovved mooootherrrr", he responded with a mocking respect. "Ah poooor thiiiiing. Yooooou are reeeeaally quiiite helplllesssss, arrren't yooou? Yooou annnd yooooour faaather. Weell! At leeeast yooou'rree not quiiite aas baad aas he. Issss it not truuuuue that he thiiinks thaat boiliing waater isss coooking? I reeeeaally thiiink yooou might boooth staarrve buttt foor mee". iDarii laughed at a very old joke. "Yeesss mooother. Yooooou'rree quiiite riight. But iiiiin the meeeaaantiime haave coompaasssion on mee annd please doon't let mee diie of hunnnger". She laughed. "Doon't worrrry, helplessss one. The fooood wiill bee reeaady sooon aand yooour faather wiill doo what hee dooes beest with ittt, and eeat". She left him to his thoughts, and made her way into the kitchen area. Soon there were the reassuring sounds of the daily meal being prepared, and iDarii was left again to his reflections. A kind of conversation was carried on with his parent whilst she worked away; mostly upon the relatively mundane matters that they usually discussed. However, she had now returned to the living room, and was sitting opposite him. "Therre. It's cookinnng aawaay". He could smell the most delicious aromas drifting in from the kitchen, and his mouth was already watering. "I wasss viissiting my friiend, Lenvasssta, toodaay". He nodded his recognition. She and his mother had been close for a long time. He observed that his mother's face demonstrated some anxiety. "Sshee waass teelling mee of ssome trooouble with the surrrffice woorld". She was looking at him somewhat quizzically, and he began to feel a little uncomfortable. "Trooouble yooou saay?" He tried to appear nonchalant but, recalling his recent experiences and his own conjectures, she could not have timed her remarks more inopportunely. "Yeess. I wasss wooondering wheether yooou haad heeaard anythiiing, yooou knooow, woorking at the Sssecuriity deeparrtmeent?" Again he tried to appear relaxed, even slightly bored, at the line of questioning. But his own curiosity got the better of him, and he could not refrain from pursuing the matter. "Waat sort of trooouble woould that bee then?" She looked at him closely, for she knew him well enough. The non-committal way in which he had replied gave much away. "Weelll. Sshee saiid thaat therre'd beeeen soome sort of disssturbaance. Maaybee even aaa fiight". She was watching him closely, seeking some kind of clue from his expression, or lack of it. He was starting to feel distinctly trapped. "Welll, yooou knooow Lenvasssta, moootheerrr. Shee haas a biitt of ann iimaaagiinaaation. It'ss proobaably juusst a biit ooof siillly goosssip". He recalled, gratefully, that it was indeed fortunate that no such raid had been made upon the surface by the people of his home city. It was forbidden for the Gaki to ever leave their own neighbourhood, that is other than with the express permission of the council; which was rarely forthcoming. It was by these means, at least, that their superiors hoped to ensure the growing crisis could be kept under control. But there was a degree of communication between the elders of each cavern; and then, of course, there were the scouts like himself. It was really quite extraordinary that these recent raids had not become more widely broadcast; this, in itself, was a testimony to the efficacy of their security measures. It was inevitable, he supposed, that someone, somewhere, would

mistakenly or not, speak out of turn. This news from his mother was probably an indication that the secrecy was starting to dissolve. It was at that moment that he heard the sound of the front door opening. This signalled both the entrance of his father and the end, thankfully, of what was beginning to feel like an interrogation. They greeted each other, whilst his mother, interrupted in her inquisition, returned to her preparations in the kitchen. The man was blanketed in dust, head to foot, from his labours in the storehouse. It was a dusty place at the best of times, and he had brought a large proportion of this home with him upon this day. Since the business was his, and two of the workmen had been taken ill that day, he had no choice but to don overalls, and help heave sacks of grain onto the drays, before they were distributed to the merchants of the city. His business dealt mainly in the storage and wholesaling of cereals, though he could turn his hand to most things if there was a downturn in trade. But for the time being demand was on the up, and the enterprise was going well. Their conversation was perfunctory, for the fellow was anxious to bathe before dinner. He left his son in the living room, to ponder on his mother's questions, whilst he conducted his ablutions. iDarii was by no means sure how to deal with the news that she had conveyed to him. If he reported the conversation to Gorval it would be certain that she would be implicated, and required to attend an interview; and that was something to be avoided at all costs. No. He would have to find some other way of broaching the news to his superior. The problem was he could see no way of achieving this objective. Gorval would inevitably demand to be acquainted with the source so as to expose the weakness in their security. He would just have to remain silent for now, at least until he had figured a way out of this apparently intractable dilemma.

The three of them passed a peaceful and uneventful night. Despite the watches Celarent felt much refreshed, notwithstanding his doubts on the eve before. He had a sneaking suspicion that he had fallen asleep at some point during his guard duty, but fortunately had woken in sufficient time to rouse Ferioque for the last watch. They had breakfasted early, and had set out on their journey well before dawn had broken. They would reach their next destination, Zikar, before noon. As the night faded the road ahead was slowly unveiled, still draped in mist, a diaphanous flow of vapours that drifted sinuously over the ground. As the sun rose this slight fog lifted, to reveal the desert landscape in all its morning beauty. The clear, blue sky rose above in a perfect dome, its purity unsullied by a single cloud. A virgin light accentuated the colours of the wasteland, as that golden orb rose higher and higher into the heavens; the land truly glowed like a gown of jewels. So intense was its radiance that Celarent needed to narrow his eyes against the glare of those aurora born gems. But the light bathed not only their bodies but their minds and hearts as well. Who would not feel uplifted by such a vision, of dawn in her waking hours? Only the most benumbed sensitivity could fail to be aroused by this beauteous vision. They marched along with a lively step, their footsteps lightened by the hour of the day, and the visions that lay upon every hand. Even the mules, whose usual demeanour betokened a grudging acceptance of their servile existence, seemed exhilarated, and lifted their hooves like youthful yearlings, betraying perhaps a nobler lineage than their present appearance might exhibit.

Time passed quickly, and soon they had their first sight of Zikar. The three of them had come to the crest of a low rise. As they breasted this they could now see the whole town below, lying at the base of that gentle slope. It was not a large conurbation, perhaps no more than four or five hundred inhabitants; but it was ancient, and an established

settlement of many centuries. It had grown up, like most desert settlements, around an oasis, which fed this spot with its sweet waters. The early settlers had been descendants of those nomadic tribes, which had wandered the wastes, moving from water hole to water hole, and from one grazing to the next, feeding their herds, and resting awhile under the gentle shades of the great palms that flourished nearby. Some of their number had concluded that this life was no longer for them and had, instead, settled upon the oasis. There they had channelled its waters, and constructed an irrigation system of some sophistication, which would support the more intensive production of crops. More and more of their fellows had joined them, to set up their homes here, until the present modest population had been reached. The life-giving waters could not sustain greater numbers and, apart from the travellers that passed by this way, the town had remained at its present size for many generations now.

The sun was at its zenith, and temperatures were rising rapidly. The three travellers made their way down the slope until they reached the outskirts of the town. Even from some distance away they could see the townsfolk going about their business, by the narrow streets and lanes that dissected the settlement. Finally, they passed through the perimeter of the village, by a narrow track that wound into its centre. Within the narrow doorways of the mud brick dwellings, which lay on either side of their path, they would catch an occasional glimpse of one of the occupants. These people left their doors unclasped, for they feared neither neighbours nor visitors. Not the former, for in such a small community all knew all's business, and not one would betray their fellows by a foolish act. In the case of the latter, if a wayfarer be so foolish as to harm any of Zikar's inhabitants, they could be sure that retribution would be harsh and swift, and quite unforgiving. The townspeople may have abandoned the desert for their present surroundings, but they had not wholly relinquished the strict laws of their forebears. But a law-abiding voyager had nothing to fear, for this people had a reputation for the most generous hospitality, and were widely reputed as of the greatest probity in commerce. It was for this reason, primarily, that Hesvee had decided that Zikar should be where they would rest on their way to the Northern mountains, and where they might purchase further supplies. As they proceeded into the centre of the small town they noticed that the streets had largely emptied of the citizenry. As the day's heat rose higher the dwellers had retired into the interior of their thick-walled homes, to enjoy the relative coolness of those surroundings. The travellers had arrived slightly later than planned, delayed somewhat by their deep absorption in the glories of the morning's vista. However, Hesvee was hopeful that they would still find someone at the waterside who would be able to assist them. Their intention was to remain the rest of the day here, and then, on the following night, resume their journey. They continued on their way through the narrow streets of the town, now entirely devoid of any of the population. Finally they arrived at its focus, and a view dominated by that most beautiful of sights for a desert dweller - the oasis - around which the whole of the area's life revolved. All were relieved to observe that some of the residents were still about their business. They approached a man who was busy watering his beasts at the side of the large pool. It really was a most impressive watering hole, some forty spans in diameter. The oasis itself was bordered by a narrow reed bed. Interspersed amongst these grasses was a multiplicity of water plants, their vivacious blooms sparkling with water droplets, which had been thrown up in sprays that erupted from the wings of the numerous water fowl disporting themselves amongst the greenery. Here and there were a few solitary, but regal, lotus blossoms, which had drawn themselves out of the mud, and now flaunted their

delicate hues under the hot sun. The waters were quite clear except where men and beasts had stirred up the mud; here, the otherwise limpid fluid resembled more a thick broth. It was because of this that it was the custom in this place that people should take their rations from the pool before the beasts received their allotment. The fellow had been somewhat tardy in this duty, and was hastening to carry out the chore before the heat of the day rose any higher. As the three of them drew nearer, he heard the noise of their shuffling steps upon the sandy ground, and briskly turned to face them.

He presented a somewhat forbidding appearance. His skin was burnished dark, both by the heritage of his ancestors, and the harsh light and heat, which beat down upon them relentlessly. In contrast to this almost stygian tint, the whites of his eyes and his teeth seemed to take on an almost unearthly brightness, emphasising further the warmth of his smile. The vision was slightly marred for he seemed to bear the evidence of some ancient contest; an old, white scar divided his face in a diagonal, from right to left, the result of a blow from some kind of blade perhaps. "Halloo", he called, as they drew near, and he bowed in the customary fashion. Hesvee followed suit, and indicated to his companions to do likewise. The man waved them forward and bade them take their ablutions. They required little encouragement and enthusiastically ducked their heads under the cool waters, to remove at least one layer of the dust that had accumulated upon their bodies and clothes. They were hardly deterred by the rather brownish aspect of that element, and their host encouraged their efforts. Hesvee was the first to cease his lavings. "Thank you for your hospitality. May I introduce myself. I am Hesvee from the city of Stela, as are my two companions, Ferioque and Celarent. We hope to purchase some provisions here, and remain overnight, before continuing on our journey tomorrow". The man looked at them appraisingly. He was friendly, but no fool, and it never did any harm to get as much information about a stranger before giving away aught yourself; but they seemed harmless enough. This fellow Hesvee, he thought, was a well-spoken man, and their accoutrements suggested that they were men of some substance, though not rich. He was a trader, and he knew the signs of money. "You're most welcome" he responded, nodding to the others, who replied in kind. "You're most welcome here. And of course you may remain the night. We're well accustomed to travellers passing by this way; and you're even more valued should you wish to make some purchases". He laughed at his own wit, and the others thought it politic to smile. "Come. When you're finished here I can show you where you may stable your animals. Then perhaps I can be of some further assistance". The master nodded his agreement, and they followed their new host as he led them away from the oasis, and into one of the many side streets that radiated away from its waters. As they walked along he called over his shoulder, as if an afterthought, "Oh! By the way, I'm Alaste". They followed him quietly, in a file, through the passageways of the old town, the thick walls of the buildings protecting them somewhat from the fiercesome sun, which flared ever downwards.

Gorval and the elder remained in the darkness of the chamber for some time whilst the former related the latest report from their servant, iDarii. He was not mentioned by name, for this was an irrelevancy; nor was his omission commented upon for, similarly, it was deemed inconsequential, that is, in the greater scheme of things; it had always been so, and always would. The nature of their communication could not be described in terms that would make much sense to a human being. To say that it was a form of telepathy would be partly the truth; but that would suggest merely a cognitive transmission of knowledge.

There was much more to it, however, than this. There was also conveyed in the interchange that which referred to levels of deeper consciousness, which for most men would be quite unrecognisable, but yet formed an essential part of the message, fully expressed. Suffice it to say that by the end of their discourse much more had been imparted than mere content. Gorval had his new instructions, and the seer would shortly meet with his fellows to consult. In brief, it was decided that iDarii need not make any further trips to the surface. For the time being he would be assigned desk duties in the ministry whilst the new measures were introduced. The latter were not intended to change the course of what had already been predestined. There was naught that could be done in that circumstance, other than smooth the way for the inevitable. The seer and his fellows were mainly concerned to ensure that the transition was conducted as smoothly, and as painlessly, as possible. The raiding parties on the surface were unavoidable, as was the likelihood that the news of these acts would permeate through the rest of the subterranean community eventually. Order could be preserved for now; but for how much longer, no one knew. Gorval's superior indicated to him that the interview was at an end. The latter rose from his seat, and proceeded out of the chamber and back into the anteroom. The other Gaki had remained at his post throughout the interview, completely silent and utterly immobile. Without hesitation Gorval re-entered the column of stone by which he had made his descent, and began the upward journey back to his office. This was a more arduous route unassisted as he was by gravity, but he arrived at his destination without mishap. He resumed his seat and returned to his reflections. Others would take responsibility for communicating to iDarii's his new instructions. He need not trouble himself with those matters. He immersed himself again in his dark contemplation.

The frozen sea seemed to stretch away endlessly on all sides. There was not a sound in this vastness except for the scratching and shuffling of his sandals upon the smoothed surfaces of the rock, as he marched determinedly forward. It is strange, indeed, that the most unfamiliar of experiences can rapidly transmute themselves into the ordinary. He had been travelling for some time now, and the initial novelty of his surroundings, which had made such an impression upon him, had now receded, into a kind of monotony. He realised that what he missed most of all here was the simple variation of colour. Everywhere he was surrounded by a grey darkness, broken only by that green light exuding from the ubiquitous mosses. Grateful as he was for their assistant luminary properties he was beginning to long for the sight of a blue sky, and the warmth of the sun on his face. Despite the vast emptiness that surrounded him the sentiment that he had already been consigned to a grave struck his consciousness with some force, and he could feel his breath labour somewhat as if he lay entombed already beneath the heavy earth. The realisation that above him lay an infinite weight of stone and rock, this imposed upon him a greater sense of oppression, not only upon his body, but also upon his spirit. He was, by nature, a surface dweller and, remarkable as this world might be, his entry here was unsought, and increasingly burdensome. Still, he was a realist, and knew that if he was to find a means of escape this could only be achieved by further exploration of this strange and dark land. Yet his mind was increasingly filled with visions of wide-open spaces, of great rivers and azure skies, and the sounds and smells of the life which abounded above. Here there was nothing, no movement other than his own, and he longed for some relief from this monotone realm.

Melaskkoli would occasionally halt on his journey to rest, and to eat some of the dried

meat that he was thankful he had had the foresight to obtain. For the time being, at least, there was no prospect of running short of supplies. He found also that his appetite here seemed strangely diminished, and this despite his considerable physical exertions. Although the ground levels varied constantly, the slopes themselves were gentle, and required little effort, either to ascend, or descend. He did seem, however, to be consuming rather excessive quantities of water, and this he attributed to the extreme dryness of the atmosphere here underground. He was not yet unduly concerned about future water sources for he was quite sure that the cavern could not continue forever barren; there should be considerable waterflows beneath ground. After all, the rain must end up here, as well as in the watercourses upon the surface. Of more urgent moment, however, that he should not run the risk of returning upon his tracks within these largely featureless caves; but here the towers of rock proved to be invaluable in excluding this error. He would take a bearing upon a column, preferably at the greatest distance from his present position, and then approach it directly. As he neared his target, this would he line up with one still further away and that, in turn, would represent his next goal. In this manner he was quite sure that he had avoided a peril, which can befall any novice, and confident that he proceeded straight upon his course. The greater problem, from Melaskkoli's perspective, was that he had no way of judging for how long he had been travelling, or even the total duration of his sojourn underground. The fact that he had not rested thus far must put some upper limit to the extent of his stay in this world; hunger, however, seemed not such a reliable indicator. Even the distance he had covered could not be measured other than by the paces marched, and he had not bothered to keep an account of these. A slight panic rose up within his chest as he considered his position, but he forced himself to dismiss these speculations, and to keep his mind firmly focussed on that first objective; to find a way out of this sombre land.

Time floated inscrutably by, and Melaskkoli plodded steadily onwards across that stony sea. The unmitigated regularity of the landscape, its atonality, and the deadly silence which coated everything like a dust, conduced to an increasing self-absorption. Again he was struck by the apparent spontaneity of his decision to depart the farm. He hesitated to refer to this as 'home' for he had neither resided there any great time, nor had he formed an affection for its environs, and neither for that matter, its other inhabitant, his uncle. His home lay far away, and with it the memories of his mother. He could see her now, her beautiful, raven dark hair cascading over pale shoulders, her sparkling and smiling eyes gazing at him, as the two of them played some foolish game together. The image of his father floated vaguely in the background, an indistinct figure, but real for all that. He had been very young when the man had died; and then not much older when his mother had departed this life. The circumstances of both their deaths had been hazy. His uncle had arrived at their cottage shortly afterwards, and had taken him away to live on the farm. He remembered how the neighbours had gathered around the wagon, as he and this new relative made their preparations to leave the village. He was too young to understand what had occurred, and no one had thought to tell him. All that he did know was that something terrible had come upon them, and that his life would never be the same again. He recalled how he had looked over his shoulder as the cart trundled along the track, and that little group of people standing there, staring silently in his direction. He could still hear the sobs of some of the women, but those cries had quickly faded. He had looked across at his uncle, this stranger, but the man spared him not a glance or a word. So there he was, left with those few memories, and an imagination, which filled the gaps with its own

faint inferences. As soon as he had arrived at the farm his life had commenced the course that it was to follow for the rest of his stay. It had been made clear from the start that his uncle regarded him, at best, a source of labour, and at worst, a weight upon his back. By turns he would either beat him or ignore him, and these actions would be solely dependent upon the man's mood, not upon Melaskkoli's behaviour. However, he was a bright lad, and quickly learned how to avoid the harm that he might otherwise have had to endure. 'Work hard and keep quiet' were his bywords, and this strategy served him well whilst he served his term of indenture. But none of this had really been influential in his decision to depart that slavish existence. It had become bearable within its limits; but he had concluded that, as soon as he came of age, he would make his own way in the world. No. There was another explanation for his sudden and wholly impulsive departure; but of this he was not yet conscious. And so he plotted his course in the dreary realm of the under lands.

Dinner was served, and they settled down to their meal. His mother made no further mention of the conversation she had had with her friend; iDarii, for his part, was not at all anxious to resume the subject. His father seemed quite non-committal and more inclined to concentrate his attention on the delicious food that his wife had prepared rather than engage in chit-chat. It was customary in the household to resume a visible, physical appearance whilst indoors, since this was the custom amongst their people. It was only in the public arena that one would adopt the hidden form. But at home, or at work, it was the convention to be of "form as well as substance" as the saying went. iDarii examined his father covertly as the man devoured his meal with considerable gusto. Given the constraints of their anatomy, and their enormous appetites, mealtimes could sometimes extend over a considerable period, especially if the hunger was upon them; but even if not, the quantities to be consumed were considerable. A strange high-pitched squealing would precede each mouthful, as the small morsels of food - the only size that could navigate the pin-like orifice of their mouths - would be sucked in, there to be chewed and swallowed. Fluids presented less of a problem, of course, but still their intake was accompanied by a considerable din. Both the process of ingestion and the associated noisy accompaniment meant that there could be little indulgence in conversation, even if the participants should be so inclined. His father appeared quite fatigued. He was a hard worker and invested a great deal of time and effort in his business. But the years were passing by, and time was taking its toll second-by-second, day-by-day. Yet again he felt that sadness, which so thoroughly imbued his witnessing, of the ageing of those most dear to him. It seemed a great cruelty that they were to be parted once more; and the sorrow was the greater for the inevitability of it all. Every creature, it seemed, was doomed to live and die, to die and live, and there was nothing that could alleviate or bring to an end that dreadful process. Life was sweet, but always tinged with a remorseless knowledge that on one day or night, that that final breath would be exhaled, and once again a poor soul would be sent out into eternity to voyage, in one form or another, to the very end of time. But then who could say that that time itself did not endure, an endlessly revolving cycle, a treadmill inescapable to all? He desisted from his examination for fear that he should be observed, and that they might guess what was passing through his mind. Finally he cleaned the last grain from his plate. He rose from the table and, making his excuses, explained that he had some errands to run for a friend. Both looked at him and nodded. "Beee carefuuuulll noooww, liittttle onnnne", his mother exclaimed humorously. It was a term of endearment that she had used since he was born. In his present mood it seemed to possess a poignancy that was quite unbearable. He knew that he must leave quickly, and disguised his melancholic

temper with a brief laugh.

He made his way out of the room and onwards into the street. He felt quite overwrought and was not at all sure whence this turmoil of emotions had come. The roadway appeared, and was in fact, devoid of passers-by. He was grateful for this mercy, and decided that he should go down to the river. There was a spot that he favoured, just by where the waters flowed over a small fall, and it was there that he directed his steps. The sounds of the tumbling waters, gently rushing over the rocks, helped clear his mind, and subdued those unruly emotions. He took a route, which led by the back streets and alleyways that criss-crossed this district. So it was that he ensured that he was unlikely to meet another who might observe his state. His grief - for that is what it was - was essentially private, and he protected this sentiment carefully. The watercourse was a short distance away and he was soon standing beside its dark rush, watching the wavelets and eddies dancing their way into the interior of the city. This distributary was one of a number of small rivers, which fed the water system of the metropolis, and supplied the drinking and sanitary needs of its inhabitants. It was not much visited by most of the locals since its appeal did not run to their tastes. He, however, had found it to be an invariably reliable source of tranquillity when he was disturbed. Even if his mood was of an even tenor he still enjoyed the company of the swiftly flowing currents, as he observed the bubbles burst upon the surface, or float along errantly, born by the dark tide. He would sit here, just gazing into the waters, immersing himself mentally in their cool depths. He took up his favoured position and looked across towards the other bank. He was quite alone, as he had thought he would be. It was the meal time and across the city most folk would be engaged in their extensive feasting. He reflected a little on his conversation, if it could be called that, with his chief, Gorval. There had been no reaction and no comment on his observations; and no sign of apprehension or distress. He considered that perhaps he might have exaggerated his own worries as well as losing all perspective on the recent disturbances. It was true that these raids were unusual but, taking into account a longer history and a more distant past (when there had been a greater frequency of contact between the over- and underworlds), there had been many such conflicts between the two races; there was a precedent for these encounters, and such events might be no more than the precursors of a renewed contact between the two species. He dwelt upon this argument, and tried to convince himself that these episodes were just that: forerunners of more peaceful times. However, his deeper intuitions were telling him something quite different, and he knew that he was only seeking to mislead himself. As he sat there, gazing deeply into the shadowy waters, his mood grew darker and darker, and with it the presentiment that something dreadful was about to emerge into both worlds; a catastrophe from which there could be no escape, or retreat. And that time was drawing ever nearer.

As Alaste led the three travellers back into the interior of the town, Ferioque took the opportunity to examine the dwellings that lined their route. These habitations were quite exquisitely constructed, and he was able to observe, where the facades had sometimes broken away, the underlying structure of their composition. They were based upon a system of interlocking stacks composed of solid mud bricks, upon which an ornamented plaster layer had been applied. On this surface had been incised intricate traceries, with delicately inlays manufactured from the same material, but artfully positioned to embellish these elaborate surfaces. It was obvious from the quality of the workmanship that the townspeople of Zikar excelled, not only as hosts and traders, but also as artisans in their

own right. These were no longer the savage hermits of the desert, but a settled race of high culture, and possessing great discernment. It was these artistic exhibitions that reminded Ferioque of what had drawn him to his present discipline of cartography. As a child he had always fancifully imagined what it would be like to travel the world and meet such cultures as these. He would sometimes pore over the maps held in the great city library, and depict in his mind the lives and habits of those who dwelt in distant lands, even far away across the great oceans, those which divided the three continents of his world. But here he was, a little over a day's travel from his own city, and he had already encountered such beauty, and such merit. He called to mind his own house, and why he had chosen to live there. He had to admit, though certainly not to his wife - a far more practically-minded individual - that it was that wonderful aspect, its sculpted frontage, which had primarily influenced his choice. He had made his own amendments and additions to the display, but the major part of the work was already present before he and his family had taken up residence. It was evident that these people took the same joy and pleasure in such artistry, albeit on a more modest scale, but certainly with as much enthusiasm as he. He thought sadly that he had spent too many of his years in study, and too few in enjoying such impressions as these. Still, he was in a position to remedy that now; and he resolved to do so, and with a vengeance. So absorbed was he in his reflections that he almost failed to observe that they had arrived at their destination. Alaste had turned into a narrow doorway that lay to their right, and the other two had come to a halt as he did so. Bit Ferioque did not see this in sufficient time and bumped into Celarent, who stood just ahead of him in the file. "Sorry, dear chap," proffered Ferioque. "That's quite alright, sir", responded the good-natured Celarent. "Almost came a cropper myself". Alaste had disappeared into the house. The travellers could hear the sounds of orders being issued, accompanied by a flurry of activity from within. Shortly afterwards their host re-emerged, and stepping to one side, and with something of a flourish, bade them enter his humble abode. One by one they crossed the threshold, and made their way into a shaded interior of blessed coolness. It took a few moments before their eyes adjusted to the shadowy forms of the anteroom, but soon they were able to follow their host as he led them down a long hallway into the depths of the residence. It became rapidly apparent that though the front of the building presented a modest and compact aspect this concealed its true dimensions. As they advanced further within, it seemed that they left the noonday heat proportionately behind. On either side of the corridor along were small apertures, which led off to other parts of the household. Finally, and after what seemed a long time, they arrived at the entrance to a small courtyard. If Ferioque had been impressed by the artistry and elegance displayed on the outside of the building, it was nothing as compared to the creativity displayed within. Despite the fact that the quadrangle they had entered was exposed to the open skies, the insulating qualities of the surrounding buildings ensured that it retained a coolness prevalent in the rest of the interior of the complex. A small fountain at the centre of the yard sprayed its waters upwards, which both cooled the air, and added a pleasing humidity to the surroundings. The mud walls had now been replaced by delicate traceries, carved from some unknown material. The floor was covered in a layer of stone tiles, which glistened under the gentle mists that permeated the atmosphere. Dotted about the enclosure were large earthenware pots from which grew small, delicately leafed trees, that gracefully draped their branches above the scene. Upon the traceries and extending up the walls were climbing plants, which carried upon their vines great bowls of brilliantly coloured petals that exuded a scent, which lingered sweetly throughout, permeating the air with beguiling

odours. All three newcomers were completely overwhelmed by the exquisite smells and sights that encompassed them, and it was evident that their host thoroughly enjoyed their unspoken admiration. It was Hesvee who first broke the stunned silence. "This really is quite marvellous, sir. Who would have thought that in the midst of the desert, even near an oasis, that such a garden of delight should exist?" If it were possible Alaste's smile became even more generous, and he nodded his appreciation at the compliment almost frantically. "Oh yes. Yes. Indeed. This is my pride and joy. All those long hours at work, and the hot sun always above. This is my true sanctuary, my pride and my deep joy. However, sirs, always should one's greatest treasure be reserved for last - and I would not break that tradition". He called out, and two women entered the courtyard from one of the adjoining rooms. "May I introduce to you, my beloved wife Tellesa". He indicated the older woman, as they turned towards her. She was most elegant in form, not quite as dark skinned as her husband, but with the same brilliant white teeth that she now displayed, as she smiled at them warmly. She was of mature years, and a little overweight - indelicate as it may be to comment upon this; but her face was that of an angel. Her features were very fine, quite delicate in fact, and time seemed not to have touched her physiognomy so fiercely as might be guessed from her more ample build. Her dark eyes glowed intensely, indicating both a passionate and generous nature. She was dressed in a long, white robe that swathed her from head to foot, the bottom folds of which she had draped gracefully over her head, to shield her face somewhat from the slight light. They were well suited as a couple. She extended her hand in a gesture of welcome, and the three visitors bowed in acknowledgement. "You are welcome, sirs. Be as in your own homes whilst you remain with us." The traditional courtesies exchanged Alaste now turned to the other woman. "And my daughter, sirs, rivalling only my beloved wife in my affections", he laughed. "Erame". It would be true to say that at least one of the party was already exceedingly preoccupied with her presence. Hesvee and Ferioque, being men of more mature years, had cast glances in the daughter's direction, but only in that most surreptitious and guarded manner, as befitted their station and years. Celarent, however, a relative youth, had not been so circumspect in his observation, and was caught quite unawares by their host's introduction; he was entirely mesmerised by Erame's appearance. It would be to do her an injustice merely to describe her as a younger image of her mother. However, there is more to the being of another than their physical manifestation, and there was a quality within this girl that made a formidable impression. Her beauty was indisputable; those dark, flashing eyes and elegant stature, with midnight black hair that curled down over her shoulders and fell fully to her waist, a mane that shone with a bright lustre even under the subdued lighting of the courtyard. All of these she had surely inherited from her mother. Her even white teeth, which displayed those iridescent tones of pearl as she smiled at the visitors, these were undoubtedly a birthright derived from both her parents. But in all other respects she was a unique and singular individual. Her expression communicated both keen intelligence and an acute curiosity about the world. But there was something beyond even this, and which pervaded every atom of her body; an aura of great strength and power, which radiated from her being with such a force that it was quite irresistible. It was this more than anything else that impressed itself most forcefully upon the senses, and upon the intellect of the visitors, and most especially upon Celarent. This is not to say that he was not aware of her physical attractions, but they were as if nothing besides these other, more indeterminate, qualities. As she smiled at the three strangers it seemed that any response would have been quite superfluous. Suffice to say that her welcome was greeted appreciatively, if in silence. It appeared that their host was not unused to effect

that his daughter had upon the uninitiated, and to the close observer, who was not completely beguiled by Erame's aura, they might have witnessed a look of proud amusement playing across his face as he observed the reactions of his guests. As if a gesture of mercy, he precluded the need for any further exchanges by indicating to his spouse and their daughter that they might now leave the four of them to their discussions. There was not only the matter of entertaining one's guests, but also an opportunity for some business to be infiltrated into the conversation. He was a shrewd merchant and found hospitality a useful lubricant as a prelude to matters of commerce. He had discovered that many a trading venture went so much more to his advantage where his customers had been introduced to the captivating presence of his beloved daughter, and prior to any negotiations. It would seem that even the most hard-headed amongst them would melt like warmed butter in her vicinity. Occasionally, his wife had chided him for such tactics, claiming he had no right to use his own daughter to gain such a financial advantage. However Erame herself seemed amused by the whole matter, and reassured her father that it caused her no great discomfort. She loved him very much, and knew that he would never do anything to harm her. She was quite sure that it had more to do with his fatherly pride than any commercial advantage that might accrue, and that it was the former motive that accounted for these displays; such was the innocence of her youth. The two women left the men to their discussions and retired to their own quarters. A house servant was sent for, to bring some cool refreshments for the host and his weary guests. "Of course you must remain here overnight, my friends", insisted Alaste. Hesvee was about to demur, but was quickly overruled by the householder. "No. No. I won't hear a word. You must remain as my guests, for otherwise my family and I would be very disappointed. And besides, you'll want to wash, and perhaps take a rest before we dine. And then, of course, if you're so inclined, perhaps I can be of some small assistance in the matter of your supplies. But please, feel under no obligation concerning this matter. I will happily introduce you to some of my colleagues who, I'm quite sure, will be able to meet your needs most adequately should you feel that any indebtedness to me might sway your judgement". Both Hesvee and Ferioque immediately protested they would be more than happy to purchase those necessities from the merchant. In brief, the four men observed the due proprieties before concluding that they would be quite content to come to an arrangement with their present company. The servant returned to the courtyard, bearing upon a silver salver four tall glasses, and a pitcher of iced tea. He placed these upon the table in front of each in turn, and then took his position behind the master of the house. Another servant followed closely upon his heels, carrying baskets in which various pastries and other delicacies were distributed, and similarly placed these in the centre of the table. Alaste dismissed them both, and the small party were left to enjoy their modest meal. Above them floated a pure blue sky, empty and endless, and all around the town lay quiet and calm, resting quiescently under the burning heat of the sun.

For a day or more, or so it seemed to Melaskkoli - for the matter was largely guesswork - he had made his way across this grey stone sea, and still had no idea of where this road might lead. The landscape continued on ahead, unfolding changelessly. The same great towers of rock pierced the gloom, as they disappeared into the vaults of the granite heavens above. The green mosses spread in every direction, great patches of glowing light that cast their sickly radiance upon his path. His food supplies were holding out but he could foresee a time in the not-too-distant future where he would need to refill his water bottle. As he had already discovered, the arid atmosphere increased his thirst, and he

would not be able to sustain life for very much longer after this precious fluid had run out. He felt no particular tiredness; it seemed that he could maintain this present pace, if not indefinitely, for some time yet to come. He peered into the haze that constituted his horizon, but there seemed to be nothing there to distinguish itself greatly from the view that lay behind. He was in the middle it seemed, of a vast underground desert and, he reflected - and very drily at that - ,by definition, these regions were not renowned for their flowing streams and extensive lakes. He observed his mind was more frequently turning upon the question of water. He knew that he would have to find a new source, or be in serious danger of perishing in this alien world. As he marched along he cast glances from side to side, increasingly anxious to discover a solution to this predicament.

Some time had passed now since his last halt and, more out of a sense of conserving his energies than of an immediate fatigue, he was about to take a break from his journey when he thought he caught sight of something ahead. He paused momentarily to examine more carefully the phenomenon. It was difficult to tell whether he was witnessing something real, or a trick played by the dim light. He stared directly ahead. He could have sworn that the darkness on that bearing seemed slightly lighter. He shook his head as if this would clear his vision, and rid his eyes of any obscuration. But one thing was quite clear. He had not seen any variation of this nature in the entire time that he had spent in this enormous cave, and he was quite convinced that such a change could only herald something to his advantage. Why he should hold such a belief it cannot be said, except perhaps that a growing desperation lends a weightier account to any source of hope. All thoughts of resting had disappeared and, keeping his sight fixed firmly ahead, he marched onward with much increased vigour. He was thankful that he seemed to possess almost unlimited reserves of energy, for now he was all but sprinting over that grey plain, eager to confirm what this lighter region in the 'sky' might be. It was as he was climbing a gentle rise when the ground suddenly seemed to slip from beneath him, and he fell forward violently, just having the time - and presence of mind - to put up his hand, and so cushion the fall. He tumbled down upon the unfriendly and abrasive surface, the impact pushing the air forcefully from his lungs. He lay there for a few seconds, gasping for air, and quite winded by the impact. The shock of the plunge had temporarily distracted him; but as this receded he noticed that his knee was bruised, and was beginning to throb most painfully. He examined that area and could now see a slow trickle of blood ebbing from a slight gash in the skin. He raised himself until he was in a sitting position, and studied the cut more carefully. It was no more than a graze, and there was some slight bruising around the incision. He was about to stand up but as soon as he placed his weight on the limb he could feel a sharp pain shoot through his patella, and he cried out. He rested for a few moments more but knew that he could not remain here indefinitely. Finally, overcoming his reluctance to undergo further discomfort, he struggled to his feet. Again there was a stabbing pain but it seemed less acutely uncomfortable this time. He did not think that he had done any really serious damage, but his injury was going to make walking quite onerous. He reproached himself for his impatience. If he had been more careful in the first place this accident would not have occurred. Fortunately the mood passed quickly, since it could serve no purpose in his present circumstances. If anything it spurred on his determination to replenish his water supply, and find a way out of this dungeon, as he was now coming to see it. He put his weight carefully upon the damaged leg, and was relieved to feel the pain had abated. He retrieved his sack of provisions that had fallen upon the ground nearby, and began to hobble along his original track. As he exercised the joint he

found that the stabbing shocks had receded, and that he was now able to maintain a brisk pace. However, the accident had reminded him of how vulnerable he was, alone, and beyond human aid, it would seem; a more serious incident might result in an outcome that could be fatal. With an elevated sense of caution he resumed his quest across the plain in search of escape.

The pain had gradually lessened until only a slight limp was discernible in his gait. He had made good headway, and could clearly see the darkness ahead was slightly less oppressive. Even this moderate difference had the effect of raising his flagging spirits, and his heart rose in anticipation of the possibility of an escape from the cavern. He hobbled along eagerly and it was only with the greatest of self-discipline that he restrained himself from once again breaking into a run, the quicker to reach his destination. The darkness ahead had now given way to a fainter shadow and then, as he drew closer, that was in turn replaced by a more powerful radiance. The source of this luminescence was still unknown, but it grew steadily brighter, and he was quite sure that he was moving in the right direction. Finally, and experiencing something akin to astonishment, he could observe once again a rocky barrier directly before him. In his imagination he had almost come to believe that the cavern might go on forever. His intellect naturally contradicted this impression, but sometimes the imagination recognises no bounds, and intelligence is a weak rein upon its influence. It was unquestionably a sheer rock face which now presented itself to his view. Set in the middle of this massive barrier was a narrow opening, and it was from this that a brilliant, golden white illumination was radiating. The contrast between this powerful beacon of light, and its paler counterparts, the green glowing mosses, could not be greater. Their feeble rays were drowned out almost completely within the sharply incandescent beams that now flooded into the cavern. He eagerly moved towards what might herald his salvation, unmindful of any potential dangers that this could betoken. It seemed such a friendly radiance in opposition to that sickly glow, which had been his ever present companion in this gloomy environ. Fortunately, there was still some distance to cross before he would reach this rock fracture. It allowed him a little time, at least, to accustom his sight to this potent force. Now he was close enough to examine the fracture within the rock more precisely. Upon either side he could see the vertical walls disappear back into the gloom. Behind him lay the green tinged murk of the cavern; and ahead, a bright, but still unknown destination. He had quite unconsciously anticipated that with this light would come an equally powerful source of heat, yet the air here remained quite cool. He approached closer still, to gain a better view of the fault's dimension. It did appear that he would be able to enter by this way, but there was no clue as to what lay within its recesses. As always it seemed that there was only one course of action; to move ever forward. He took one last look behind him and, with little regret but some hesitation, moved forward. He averted his eyes slightly to the blazing light, and entered the fissure.

At first the light was so intense that he feared that he might be blinded, and he closed his eyes until they remained mere slits in his face. It was in this fashion that he made his way along the corridor, which intruded behind the gap. It was just wide enough to take his whole frame although his shoulders would bump occasionally against the rough rocky outcrops that lined its walls. There was sufficient headroom fortunately, and he did not need to bow his head often, though he did glance upwards from time to time, to prevent any such contact. It would not do at all to suffer an injury of that type, and an abrupt

contact between his skull and this hard mineral, whatever it might be, would surely be quite unforgiving. It was not at all obvious whence the light emanated. As far as he could determine the rock itself seemed to be the source; but he could not determine by what mechanism. He carefully squeezed his way along the length of the passageway, turning from time to time, as it wound and twisted through the depths of the earth. His gaze was mostly directed towards the ground, not only to avoid tripping over but also because from this vantage the glare was rendered more bearable. He could not tell for how long he had been navigating this crevice but finally he noticed that the gap had widened minimally during his advance. He could now reach out, with both arms at full span, before his fingertips came into contact with the glaring rock surface. It seemed also that the light had dimmed somewhat for he was now able to open his eyes, almost fully, and survey his surroundings. The path still toiled back and forth, but he had, it appeared, traversed the narrowest portion, and the walls of the corridor continued to fall away on either side. In front of him he could see the glow remained quite concentrated, but slightly less for all that. In a matter of a few score paces he emerged once again into another large cavity in the earth. But the view that now presented itself to him was as different from what he had left behind as the surface world was to the under realm itself; and if anything, still more fantastic.

iDarii remained by the water's edge for some time. He loved being here, so alone, with his thoughts and emotions. The dilemmas that constituted his life seemed to ebb away under the influence of this peaceful place. His world was composed of much that was unyielding. The very ground under which they lived moved but slowly, awakening from its slumbers occasionally, with a sullen shifting of the earth, or a rare, dramatic outburst of molten magma from deep below, buried far within the bowels of the planet; even the warm air of the cavern was a testimony to that violent influence, even from such a great distance. The currents rarely blew more than a light breeze; otherwise the atmosphere was quite still. Even the underworld's inhabitants were, by nature, unemotional except when the hunger arose, and then they would indeed be quite transformed. Gorval was quite typical of these. His cool responses at the interview had been entirely characteristic of both him and their people. It was, of course, the case that the Gaki possessed heightened sensitivities, and intuited with great facility any variant emotional phases that their comrades might be undergoing. It was perhaps for that very reason that they had acquired the ability to moderate their responses, and accordingly thereby reduce the impact that these might have on their fellows. It was fortunate that the hunger was only an intermittent condition, and rarely swayed the whole mass of the population simultaneously. It tended to manifest itself within sole individuals, and therefore was the more easily contained by others in their vicinity; or at least this had been the case up until fairly recently. The raids were an indication that instances of the hunger were becoming more frequent, and synchronistic within whole groups. If the trend continued, and there was every indication that it would, then the next catastrophic outbreak would occur very soon. There were no authoritative historical records of the last occurrence. All upon which they had to rely were those accounts that could at best be described as mythic. The increasing activity within the Ministry had been a reflection of the growing urgency that these incidents aroused in the hearts of the Council members, and the consequent need to take every measure to mitigate the impact of the rapidly approaching calamity. Still, he reflected, there was not much that a single Gaki could do. He had followed his instructions; the rest was up to his superiors. For some reason, however, this self-imposed

perspective did not seem to offer much reassurance. There was the matter of his father and mother, and of his friends in the community; even his work colleagues. He could not ignore them, or pretend that he was unaffected by their possible fate. But again the reality struck him that all he could do was continue with his duties, and hope that some means of tempering the blows of an inimical destiny might be found.

He paused in his reflections and looked up. From this slightly elevated position he had a fine view of his own neighbourhood. It was, in most respects, like many other parts of the city. It did not possess the grand edifices of the centre; the great offices of the government, the trade corporations, the financial district and ecclesiastical quarters, and all those ancillary services that supplied their needs. This was the quarter for the professional classes, those who enjoyed a good, but not over generous, mode of living. The quality of the buildings, and their generally stylish aspect, suggested a society that took not a little pride in their community. They were, by Gaki standards, quite a friendly and hospitable herd. He had spent all of his life in this part of the city. He and his friends had played in these streets, and had frequently been admonished by the elders for their sometimes boisterous behaviour. But they were not bad lads; just high-spirited. Mostly their mischievous conduct was overlooked, though necessarily commented upon; 'boys will be boys' as the saying goes. But that was many years ago; now he and they were grown up. They had, each one, passed through the rituals that marked entry into adulthood. But the streets were quieter these days, and there seemed to be fewer youngsters. Rarely now did he hear the noise of play, the rough and tumble of youth, always careless of the future and living only for the present. Again that sadness, which was part of his nature, came flowing into his heart; for all things change, and time was implacable; and nothing was fixed and invariable. He looked out again at the scene before him. The city was quite beautiful. The whole of the cavern was lit up, by the tens of thousands of torches glowing from every aspect, through windows and doorways, and along the main thoroughfares of the metropolis. It was the custom of the inhabitants, after they had dined, to go up to the flat rooftops of their dwellings and pass the time sitting and gossiping, perhaps drinking a little tea or wine each according to their taste, and maybe pausing now and then, to admire the view. This was an opportunity for idleness, to catch up on other people's business; but mostly to enjoy each others' company. The Gaki were sociable within their own households, but quite reserved with each other. This, however, did not inhibit them at all in that most universal of pastimes, an abundant curiosity concerning other people's affairs. Predominantly this habit was imbued with good humour, but there were instances where an unduly prurient interest might have been pursued, and into the questionable moral conduct of a relative or friend, especially where these had led to unfortunate repercussions. But these were rare events, and the Gaki generally preferred to maintain a decorum conducive to social equilibrium. It was this even temperedness itself, however, which brought into high relief the extremes of conduct that were prompted by the arising of the hunger. This was, it might be said, the most terrifying aspect of such a condition. A Gaki in thrall to the hunger was indeed quite dreadful to behold; but worse, a tribe, or even a whole society of such; this was too awful to contemplate. iDarii shuddered, for he could not contemplate easily such an extremity of violence. The time was drawing near to depart. He had lingered overlong with his own thoughts, and these were beginning to incline him to a state of despondency. Never before had this place failed to rouse his fortitude, and yet his spirits were sinking. He realised that he must leave or descend further into the pit of his own despair. He got to his

feet, and retraced his steps homewards.

The conversation drifted pleasantly by between the four men as they relaxed in their chairs in the cool shadows of the courtyard, with its pretty fountain sending softly sibilant sprays of moisture into the still air. It would be truer to say that most of the discussion took place between the host and Hesvee. Both Ferioque and Celarent were quite content to allow the master to give an account of why three such fellows should find themselves on the road, and with two of their number somewhat advanced in years. Alaste was a skilful host, adept not only in trade, but also in its necessary accompaniments; the ability to develop a rapport with a potential customer. He was a true merchant by nature. He had learnt the mechanics of his trade from his father, who had passed away many years now. But his instinctive grasp of commerce had been with him, even from early youth. He recalled fondly his mother reprimanding him for his rather overenthusiastic bartering, warning him that if he were not careful he would end up a rich man, but with few friends. He respected his mother greatly, and took her advice much to heart. From that moment onward he had never allowed the temptation for a good profit to insinuate itself so deeply into his heart as to place in jeopardy an opportunity for friendship. He was unique in many respects for he was not only widely regarded and respected as a merchant, a man of integrity and honour, but also as a good friend, and even reputed to be forgiving of his enemies. From the attention he displayed towards Hesvee's account he was evidently most curious - quite apart from any commercial considerations - to discover what brought these obviously erudite and learned men into the desert. As had been already agreed Hesvee had adhered to their original story, that the purpose of their expedition was to visit a site of great archaeological interest in order to review some of the findings of earlier explorers. Alaste was a man of broad interests, and took great pleasure in learning from such histories as these. It was not unheard of for parties such as these to venture into the wilder parts of the land in the pursuit of knowledge. He did, however, remark on the small size of their party. Surely such an investigation would require much greater manpower? He pleaded his ignorance on the matter, but noticed Hesvee was keen to respond; and maybe a little too glibly. The master pointed out that their purpose was not to open a new site, but rather to investigate existing excavations so that they might confirm, or refute, various theories which had been suggested by previous research. "But aren't you concerned for your safety?" asked the merchant. Hesvee had been inclined to trust their host, at least up to a point, and had revealed that they were indeed travelling to the Northern mountains to pursue their enquiries. It seemed pointless to dissimulate another direction now that they were here in Zikar, a town that bestrode the main route to that destination. He could have persisted with their fiction, but there was something inherently trustworthy about the merchant that inclined him to dispense with any unnecessary lies. He was not a man given to untruths, even of the harmless variety, and much preferred straight dealing on every occasion. He did sense in Alaste, at least in this respect, a kindred spirit. However, he also recalled that the man was a trader, and thus he recoiled from a complete disclosure of their mission; after all, a profit was a profit, and who knows what they might discover during the course of their enterprise. He knew that he was not dealing with a fool; the man's questioning revealed a mind that was sharp, and missed no incongruity. "Well there is that. But we felt, my friends and I", and at this point he nodded in their direction. "We thought that there was much less chance of an encounter with any brigands if we kept our numbers small. The alternative would have been to fit out a full-scale expedition. And to be frank, the university finances would not run to that, its purpose

being a review rather than for new exploration". The merchant nodded his understanding of the practical realities of economic life, but inwardly reserved his judgement. These were quite evidently senior men in their professions, as was their assistant, but to his mind it seemed mere foolishness to send out a small team to carry out work of this nature, and moreover in a region notorious for its lawlessness. But then he recognised that he was far from an expert, and that they probably knew what they were doing. He kept his doubts to himself but resolved to revisit the matter later. He had found in the past that the best progress can be made by going quietly rather than quickly, and that this principle was particularly effective in the case of discovering the motives that frequently lay hidden beneath those otherwise asserted. He decided to try another tack. "How long do you expect to be in the mountains, sir? If I can be of assistance to you in the matter of your supplies then clearly the duration of your endeavours will be of some consequence". Hesvee had already calculated that to cover the distance of approximately two hundred leagues at a rate about ten leagues a day, they should arrive in the foothills in approximately twenty days. Thereafter, the time scale was less clear, for they would be moving into mountainous country, and would thence have to depend upon the ancient map they had acquired. He observed that the merchant was awaiting his reply. "Well I would reckon some twenty days to the foothills". He paused, searching for a credible figure to fill the unknown blank. "And maybe twenty days there, and then the same back again. Yes. I would say the round trip would be no more than sixty days in all, probably less". Hesvee again glanced towards his companions, seeking the quite irrational assurance that his masquerade might have convinced at least them, who were, after all, already in the know. "But we can replenish our supplies right up to the foothills. Vsquala is the last town before the wild lands. So we'll only need to carry enough for the twenty days that we're away from civilisation. We would very much appreciate your advice and assistance in making a good estimate of what necessities to purchase. It's a long time indeed since any of us have conducted a field survey, at least of this type". There was a protracted silence while the merchant considered this information. He was still quite unconvinced he was being given the entire facts of the case. But then he recalled that he had frequently had recourse to stopping short of a full revelation of his own trading position, notably where this might be more compatible with his particular interests. "Well you're quite right. It would be foolish to try and carry any more than you actually need, and indeed beyond what you can replace on the way. On the other hand it's better to overestimate how much you might require and have a surplus, rather than the converse, and then find yourselves in deficit, and suffer the consequence. Let me give the matter some thought and I think that I'll be able to supply you with an inventory that will admit a correct balance between the two. In the meantime, my friends, you must desire to wash the dust from your feet, and rest awhile. It's the custom to take a siesta whilst the sun is at its most ferocious. You'll feel the better for this evening's festivities". The three of them looked at the fellow, somewhat nonplussed. "Festivities?" ventured Ferioque. "Well of course, my friends. You surely cannot expect our hospitality to fall short of a feast in your honour, most especially for men of such eminence. We may be a rough people of the desert", he commented with a mocking self-deprecation, "but learning is always worthy of respect". The scholars accepted the compliment as modestly as they could whilst seeking to avoid giving any offence to their generous host. The latter called out, and one of the servants entered the courtyard. "Here! This fellow will show you to your quarters. Please make yourselves completely at home, and be at ease. You face an arduous journey and should take every opportunity that affords itself to enjoy the comfort of our household. You may long for

such fond memories as these when you are trudging through the wild lands upon your quest”.

The three of them rose and followed the servant out of the courtyard, and back into the quiet interior of the house. He led them through a maze of dark passageways before they emerged again into a suite of rooms. From their rich decoration, and the ornate embellishment of their furnishings, it was obvious that these were reserved for more distinguished guests. The fellow showed them around briefly before departing. Each had his own room, though all were connected by a series of doorways. There was a sleeping area too, which was composed of a mound of down-filled cushions overlain with a thin sleeping rug. Another doorway led into the communal bathroom, and it was towards this that they next addressed their attention. The tiled pool, which filled the entire room, was already overflowing with clear tepid water that had been pumped from a heating pool outside. With little hesitation the three men stripped, and promptly immersed themselves in its scented waters, there to float whilst the soft waters brushed away the grime and sweat, the dust and dirt, of their travels. As they resided there, soaking in the fragrant waters, it was Ferioque who was first to speak. “So what do you think of our host, my friend?” addressing himself to Hesvee. “Well, a fine chap, I think. Certainly most generous, and not unintelligent”. The latter observed Ferioque’s questioning glance, and realised that the enquiry required a more percipient response. “If you mean do I think that he believed our story? I really don’t know. He was very insistent about the dangers of the journey. And of course he was quite right. We knew from the start of the possible perils that might lie in wait. But if he does suspect anything I don’t believe that he’ll raise the matter. He’s no fool. Besides, what’s it to him if three fools decide to go wandering in the mountains? No. I think he’ll be quite happy to advise us according to his skills, and leave the matter at that”. Ferioque appeared quite unconvinced by his friend’s assertions; for that matter Hesvee was none to sure himself. The trader was quite astute, and had demonstrated this clearly in his assessment of their venture; and that without even knowing the true breadth of their possible folly. “I’m not so sure. Also I formed a very favourable impression of the man. One has an instinct for these things, and I like to think that I can mark a man well, even on a casual acquaintance. You said yourself we are relatively inexperienced. It might be well to win the aid of such a fellow as this. He must be well travelled, if his occupation is anything to go by; and he seemed to be well acquainted with the region to which we are directed. Wouldn’t it be prudent, perhaps, to consult him in more detail on what we are about? It could do no more harm I believe, and might be considerably to our advantage”. Hesvee could concede Ferioque’s argument, but was still undecided. It was then that Celarent, who had remained discreetly silent throughout the discussion, interjected. “If I may be so bold, sirs”, he volunteered. “Yes. Celarent?” responded his master, encouraging him to continue. “Well it seems to me, sirs, that this evening would be an ideal opportunity to sound the man out. We’ve only had a brief opportunity this afternoon to gauge his character. Perhaps over dinner, this evening, you might raise some of these matters, in a most indirect way of course”, he added, “and see how the land lies. After all, if there’s some kind of commercial advantage attached to our expedition, it may be that we’ll need the assistance of someone with his particular skills and expertise”. Hesvee quietly considered his assistant’s advice. He was aware of the possibilities the latter had raised, but had never proceeded so far as to consider the consequences; what the fellow said, however, did make sense. Neither he nor Ferioque, nor indeed Celarent, had any kind of experience when it came to business undertakings.

In the same fashion that he had decided to consult with Ferioque upon his discovery of the ancient archive, and subsequently to invite him on the mission, so it seemed prudent to consider the merchant as a possible partner in their enterprise. He remained of the view, however, that the group should be kept as small as possible; the fewer tongues that might wag, the less risk of unsolicited interest from other, more disreputable, quarters. But then there was the real prospect that the fellow, if he indeed possessed good sense, might not want any kind of involvement with their project. After all he had family responsibilities. Why, therefore, should he abandon a prosperous life at home to go wandering around the badlands for what would probably be little recompense? It was a ridiculous notion. It even gave him some pause for thought at his own impulsiveness. Still, it was too late to go back on that decision now, and he dismissed those doubts promptly. "What do you think, Ferioque? Are you in agreement on this?" "I think so. The fellow has made some sound observations. I think we should at least pursue the matter this evening, and see what occurs". Hesvee again fell silent, weighing up the advantages and disadvantages of the proposal. After some little while he nodded his agreement. "Yes. Very well then. We'll see how things go. Of course the fellow might not wish to get involved". "Ah! I think he's something of an adventurer that one", observed his colleague. "He has an inquisitive nature. He'll surprise us yet". "Well! We shall find out in either case, won't we", concluded Hesvee.

The three finished their ablutions, and then returned to their rooms. Despite the cool temperatures of the interior of the house their bodies quickly dried, and each took advantage of the opportunity to rest. How long might it be, as their host had pointed out, when they might yet again enjoy such luxury? As they slept, the sun continued its steady course across the skies and, beyond the shimmering horizon, night waited to greet her.

The seer remained in the council chamber, digesting the full substance of Gorval's report. There was nothing of great note here. It had been confirmed by the other councils - those of the adjoining caves - that there was growing unrest amongst the Gaki race. The raids, though still quite sporadic, and on a relatively small scale, were nevertheless becoming more and more intrusive upon the upper lands. Their spies, those located within the cities of the surface dwellers, were able to confirm that though stories of these incidents were beginning to circulate amongst the rural population, that most were based on hearsay, and were frequently dismissed as delusional; or, perhaps more humorously, as the products of drunken revelry on the part of the hapless eyewitnesses, those unfortunates who strived to convince their fellows of the causes that they had directly, but accidentally, observed. There was no question, of course, that there existed some physical evidence for these events; and no one doubted that some kind of phenomena were responsible for these. But most attributed the origins to freak storms, or even fires, which had sprung up and scorched the earth, only to extinguish themselves spontaneously, and shortly, after their brief manifestation. Far fetched as some of these notions were in themselves, nevertheless the idea that a breed of strange creatures from below the earth were responsible for these occurrences, these were dismissed as mere alcohol-induced nightmares. In vain did they struggle to communicate the danger they foresaw; finally, exhausted by the ridicule and occasional opprobrium heaped upon them for their reward, they ceased their efforts. As if to confirm their neighbours' contempt, some indeed took to the bottle as a relief from that terror, which had penetrated deeply into their souls. If the country folk took little heed, it was certain the urban population would take none. There

existed between these two communities a considerable degree of distrust. Within the cities the belief was generally held that though the former carried out work, which was universally acknowledged as vital, they were not to be regarded as particularly sophisticated, nor indeed well educated, and even, in some quarters, considered to be a little dull; mere toilers of soil and herders of beasts, these were the tasks for which they were best suited. As for the civilised arts and sciences, for politics and administration, one needed a modicum of intelligence, and in these their country kin were sadly lacking. Fortunately these 'toilers of soil' and 'herders of beasts' had a corresponding complacency when it came to their own innate talents. They regarded the city dwellers with an equal, if not greater, measure of pity, attributing to the latter all manner of deficiencies, both in the moral and practical spheres, and most notably with regard to the business of 'keeping one's feet on the ground'. Indeed, it was a widely held belief that the urbanites would not last a week if they had to live off the land, a view for which there was some justification. Thus each community regarded the other with a lively condescension and generous contempt, which pleased both and enabled each to live securely within the sense of their own native superiority. There were, quite naturally, exceptions to these prevailing philosophies in both camps, but these were quite rare. Their saving grace, however, was the indisputable fact that their mutual well-being was founded on co-operation and, despite their reciprocal mistrust, this had never extended so far as to an actual breach between them. The Gaki, for their part, were much relieved that this state of affairs existed between the two blocs. Such an attitude of mutual contempt ensured that any reports of the raiding parties would be scorned or dismissed, a reaction that suited their purposes admirably. Of equal concern, from the point of view of the council, and indeed the Inner Council, was that as far as possible the Gaki population should not learn the true extent of what was happening in the world above their heads. The time would come soon enough when it would be quite impossible for rumours of these incidents to be suppressed. Finally, if the predictions were true it would no longer be necessary to maintain the present fictions. The last piece of this puzzle had yet to present itself - and in the manner foretold - whereupon Fate would truly enforce her presence; and then both human and Gaki would bow before her demands. Patience and more patience would be their watchword; time would take care of all else.

The blazing light, within which Melaskkoli was immersed as he emerged from the corridor, was such a contrast to what he had become accustomed underground. The brilliant golden glow was everywhere, and seemed to emerge from everything about him; from the ground beneath his feet, the walls besides, even the very air seemed to carry a radiance within its body. Fortunately he had developed a moderate tolerance towards its overwhelming intensity as his eyes accommodated to the higher luminosities. Now he found himself at the entrance to another cavern. The walls extended a number of leagues upon each side, their glowing ramparts moving away from his present position at an acute angle. If one can imagine a cave, of ovoid shape, and his entry at one apex, whilst the furthestmost point away was the opposite terminus of the figure. The roof stretched far above, and it seemed that the light intensity was greater in this direction. What was more noteworthy, however, was the landscape that filled his view. At first, he found it difficult to interpret its contours. The only comparison that he was able to make was its resemblance to some kind of maze. There was clearly a network of passages that ran across the whole floor of the cave, with the heights of the intervening and interlocking walls being some several spans. The ground directly ahead descended some distance before merging into

what appeared to be the entrance to one of these corridors. His first impression suggested that its design indicated some kind of intelligence behind the construction; but its more localised structures suggested that it might be the product of a natural force. It is impossible to convey this apparent confusion between sensate and insensate origins, but its flowing forms were very reminiscent of the main cavern from which he had just departed, and these had appeared quite naturalistic. Further, it was on such a scale that it was impossible to conceive that this could be the product of human, or non-human, endeavour. But then again, what kind of natural force could possibly have contrived this remarkable landscape? The furthest aspect of the cave was not clearly visible, and the glare of the light made it impossible to distinguish any of its features. What he could see from his present position was that the corridors themselves were quite dimly lit and, from his present vantage, he felt strongly inclined to remove himself from this penetrating luminosity, which thoroughly pierced him with its power. Indeed, he could feel a headache developing, apparently induced by his body having to withstand the light's penetrating force. Since he could contemplate no other alternative he concluded to take refuge, at least, at the maze entrance, until he might recover his sight somewhat. He walked carefully down the slope towards the maze. As he did so he looked from side to side for some indication of an alternative to his present course; but none presented itself.

He arrived at the entrance, and stepped inside the welcoming shade of its walls. It was a great relief to be removed from the glare of that harsh radiation. As he looked above him he could still see its powerful rays playing over the whole landscape. By contrast, the walls of the passage way were quite dark. They appeared to be constructed of ordinary granite; he even brushed his hands over their surface as if to reassure himself on that point. It was as if he felt sometimes that he was losing touch with the ordinary nature of things here, in this bizarre world. He had been subjected to so many extraordinary circumstances that he could almost sense his sanity slipping from his grasp. He longed for the sight of the commonplace and the ordinary, the banal and the nondescript, thus was his psyche stretched and distorted, by this constant exposure to such a perverse environment. Accompanying this relief for his visual sense he felt that the air also seemed cooler within the confines of the maze; and not only this, but there was a distinct sensation of a wind current blowing against his cheek. The underground world was not totally devoid of such breezes, but they were generally weak and quite erratic. This, however, though not a strong draught, was nevertheless of a vigorous and even invigorating quality. It occurred to him that this draught might be channelled by the narrow chamber in which he was now standing, and could indicate a source that derived from the upper reaches of this world, perhaps even from the surface itself. He decided that it should be a simple hypothesis to test. All that would be required was to ensure that his face was always presented to the gusts directly and, by this means he might find his way through the labyrinth, and finally to the source of these refreshing zephyrs. He hesitated momentarily for he knew that if his theory was wrong how might he find his way out? But again he had the misfortune - or fortune, dependent upon one's outlook - to have few options, and this very paucity of choice eased his dilemma, uncomfortable though the experience was. He took his first few steps into the corridor, anxious to continue on his way before indecision would provide another obstacle to his escape from this prison.

On the following day iDarii made his way to the Ministry offices. He had received word, when he had arrived home on the previous evening, that he should present himself to

Gorval. The streets were busy as usual, but he passed with practised ease through the masses of invisible but quite tangible bodies. As he approached the environs of the Ministry he noticed a few of his fellow workers proceeding in the same direction. He observed the usual custom and refrained from acknowledging any of them. However, he could not help himself when he caught sight of one in particular, who also happened to be employed in same department as he. He increased his pace to catch up with the fellow before he disappeared into the main entrance. "Heeyyy!" he called out, occasioning some disapproving glances from passers-by. His friend turned round quickly, recognising his voice. "Heeeellllo iiiDarriii". Larache was rather formal in his manner of address, and equally reserved in his deportment. For those who did not know him, and even for a Gaki, he could seem quite imposing. But iDarii had discovered that this outwardly cool display masked an individual with a warm-hearted nature. Since the Gaki viewed with suspicion anyone who tended towards overt emotional display, he had learned that it was more diplomatic to be even more Gaki than the generality; and this camouflage had proved most efficacious, and so much so that many in his own section did not even know his name. However, and the reason was never quite clear, the two of them had got on well from the moment they had met, and nothing had occurred to challenge that friendship. Larache displayed a rather dry sense of humour, a quality that could almost be characterised as anarchic in their society. It was not wise to exhibit any of these attributes other than in one's own household, and then only in private; public display was very much frowned upon. "Waasss itttii quite necessssssarrrrry tooo draaaaw ssssuch attennnnntion toooo yooourrrssself?" His mocking caution iDarii recognised, but ignored with an equally facetious response. "Myyy apoloogiesss, friieend". Larache remained silent. "Commmme. Wee haavve woorrk tooo dooo". For an instant iDarii was taken aback. The fellow seemed a little abrupt today, even by his standards. It crossed his mind that perhaps he had somehow genuinely offended the fellow with his raucous outburst; even he could not be sure sometimes about his friend and his moods. He fell into step with his colleague, and together the two of them entered into the dark halls of the Ministry.

They continued up to the higher levels of the building. iDarii was just about to turn to enter his section when his companion plucked his tunic sleeve and, with a nod of his head, indicated that he should follow him. They walked down a long corridor, occasionally passing another of their fellows in the dim silence. The entire trip was made wordlessly. iDarii was starting to feel rather uncomfortable, and indeed wondering what this might all be about. His friend seemed curiously secretive, and he could feel that certain anxiety begin to well up within his chest as if in anticipation of a reprimand. It was an old, familiar feeling, which he recalled well from his youth while still attending school. He could remember one occasion, and not the only by any means, when he was summoned to the school director's office on some disciplinary matter. The punishments meted out had not been particularly harsh, but, nevertheless, there was still that cold dread that invaded the heart at such times; and now here it was again. He brushed aside these thoughts, dismissing them as mere foolishness, and returned his attention to his friend's uncharacteristic behaviour. Suddenly Larache turned to his right and, pushing open the door, invited his friend to enter. iDarii stepped into the dimly lit room, half expecting to be greeted by his old schoolmaster. It was empty. There was not even a desk or chair; just four blank walls. They were quite alone. Larache closed the door behind them. As he did so he glanced up and down the corridor as if seeking someone. "Sorriry foorr thiss, myyy friieennnd". "Iiii thoughtttt yooou weerre plaaayinnngg soomme kiiinnnd oooff

jookke”, he replied, growing increasingly annoyed at what he considered to be silly play-acting. ‘Really’, he thought, ‘the fellow should grow up’. “liii knoooooww aaaboouut thee raaiidssss, yoouu knoooww”, commented his friend. iDarii was taken aback by the revelation, and he hesitated. He could see that he was being closely observed. “Raaiidssss?” This one word response was the best that he could summon up. “Yeesss. Thee raaiidss. I knoooww off theemm. Buutt diid yoouu knoooww thaatt theeeyy arree spreeaaddinngg, myyy friieennd?” He could see that it was pointless to pretend ignorance, and he was curious to discover more from Larache. But he was more determined to give away as little as possible. He would bide his time, for there was nothing to be gained by blurting out what he knew until he could determine the extent of his associate’s knowledge. “littt’s allriightt, my friieennd”, continued Larache. “Theee Miiniisstry isss nott sooo gooood aatt keeepiingg seecreets as itt thinks isss iittt?” he laughed. In a flood of words Larache went on to reveal what he had heard from a variety of anonymous sources. iDarii was very surprised at how much information the fellow had gleaned. It was true that he was employed at the Ministry, and thus had access to information not generally available to the wider public. Nevertheless, it would seem indeed that Gaki security measures had proven to be quite insufficient in this case. The fellow even knew about the raids that had been launched from the other cities, and that civil order was starting to break down there as well. The authorities had hoped to limit the scope of the disruption and, by creating quarantines, had attempted to restrict what increasingly had come to resemble an outbreak of some form of psychic contagion. The relative autonomy of each of these city-states had supported this strategy but there was inevitably a degree of contact between these entities, and rumours were spreading more rapidly, and more freely, than ever before. The fear was that their own city would be ‘infected’, and they too would be drawn into the burgeoning chaos, which threatened to tear this society apart. When Larache had finished his detailed appraisal it was iDarii’s turn to speak. “Theeree isss noott muchhh moooree tooo beee saaiid”, he observed, almost petulantly. “Yesss lii kneeeeww a liittle ooofft thiiss. lii haavvee beenn caarryyyiinngg ooutt miisssssiions myysself, yoouuu knooow, iinntoo thee suurfacce woorrldd”. He told his friend of what had taken place on his latest mission, and even included his meeting with the surface dweller in that account. At the merest mention of the encounter Larache’s expression changed quite dramatically. He became extremely animated, his sibilant breathing growing almost frantic in its frequency and intensity. “Aaaahhh. Ssssuurffacce dweellerr. Aaa yoouunng oonne, yoouu saaayy. Dessscriibbee thiiss onne tooo mee”. iDarii did his best, but had to acknowledge that when it came to the overlanders each looked much like his fellows. He was only midway through his attempt when the fellow interrupted him again. “Nooo maaatteerr. Buutttht thiiss isss verrry innnterresstingg. liiss theeree aannymoorre yoouu caann teeell mee?” He shook his head. “Veerry weelll. Wee shaaall taalkk agaaain, mee aann yoouu – buutt noott noow. Noott heerree. Buutt teeell noo oone off thiiss. Doo yoouu unndersstaannnd?” iDarii nodded. “Goooddd”. The two of them left the room and returned to their respective offices. Before they parted Larache warned iDarii once more not to mention their meeting to anyone.

He sat under the soft flickering of the torchlight and began his attack on the pile of paper work, which had accumulated on the desk during his absence. He shuffled the documents to and fro, mulling over his recent conversation. It had certainly been an eye opener. He had had no idea of the extent of the disruption that the hunger had caused in the

neighbouring caverns. However, what was much more significant was his friend's reaction to his meeting with the young human. Larache seemed to attribute to it a significance that so far evaded him. What matter that he had mistakenly fallen in with the boy? It had been an accident and that was it. It was bound to happen sometime. In fact there had been a number of such incidents in the past, but nothing had come of them. But there was no dismissing the Gaki's excitement at this news; and then there was his enjoinder, that he should speak to no one. Again he found himself placed in that invidious position, of whether to betray a confidence or not. In the first instance it had been with respect to his mother's comments, but now it had arisen with a colleague. He was duty bound to report to his superior Gorval anything that might have a bearing on security, and these questions certainly fell within its scope. And yet he hesitated. If this crisis were to continue, then so too would these dilemmas, and thence the heavier the burden of responsibility to be borne by him. He sat there in the semi darkness, turning over in his mind the import of the conversation, and the unknown repercussions it might unleash. He could see no answers – yet.

The sun had returned to her haven, and the skies already darkened when the three travellers were awakened by a servant who had been sent to their quarters to summon them to the evening meal. Celarent dressed quickly, and brushed some water over his face, paying a little more attention than usual to his hair. He was not a man inclined to be unduly concerned by his appearance, though he was fastidious in his ablutions. But he thought that he would make some more modest effort on this occasion. It might have been to do with the anticipated presence at the meal of Erame; but who could say? He was not conversant with local customs; that is to say as to whether womenfolk would attend such a formal occasion as this. In the city, of course, where folk were so much more sophisticated, there would be no question that both men and women would be present. However, it might be that these descendants of the desert tribes would cling to the old forms, and that only men would be admitted to the celebrations. 'Still', thought Celarent, 'it would do no harm to make an unassuming effort to present oneself in the best possible light, regardless of whom his dinner companions might be'. The servant escorted them down to the dining hall. It would have been quite impossible to have found their own way, for the building was a veritable warren of corridors and passages; rooms leading off from each other, to dead ends and large cupboards, and so on. Again Celarent was struck by the sheer scale of the dwelling, compared to its modest frontage. It seemed that at least part of the house was constructed underground for, on a number of occasions, he found himself descending considerable staircases, which must have carried them well below the surface. He concluded that such subterranean structures would be most suitable residences for the desert dwellers, affording as they did such excellent insulation from the extreme temperatures that existed upon the surface. These descents were frequently succeeded by ascents of an apparent equivalence, and thus the comparison he had made with a warren seemed most apposite. The only way in which he could truly estimate whether they were above ground or not, was by the occasional presence of a window that admitted external light.

The three of them, with their servitor, finally found themselves once again in the company of Alaste. Celarent was more than pleased to discover that urban, rather than desert traditions, were pre-eminent here, and that both their host's wife and daughter were already seated upon cushions, patiently awaiting the arrival of their guests. Alaste

indicated to each to take their place. As they did so, more servants appeared, and placed bowls of scented water to the right hand side of the diners, together with a napkin for their hands. "I trust you slept well, gentle sirs?" enquired their host. "Indeed", responded Hesvee. "A much needed rest as well, I should say. Slept like a baby". Alaste laughed, and appeared well pleased by the remark. "Good. I'm sure that your endeavours have given you a bold appetite. I apologise for the meagreness of our offerings, for if we had been forewarned then we would have made more adequate preparation". At this he waved to the servant who stood at his elbow to commence serving the first courses. It quickly became clear that if their host's apologies were to be taken at face value, then indeed the feast would have been sumptuous beyond imagining. Celarent was not acquainted with all the dishes served, but this lack of recognition subtracted in no way from his enjoyment of the meal. Braised desert quail in a light wine sauce served as the introduction, to be followed by a green salad of leaf radish, red kale and finally, couscous - to cleanse the palate. After a brief respite the next course was brought into the guests. Its main ingredient was unknown to the newcomers but Alaste explained helpfully that it was a species of small deer, which thrived thereabouts. The meat had to be hung for some time before it was ready to be cooked; but when fully matured it was a prized delicacy. With their mouths full of the succulent flesh, none of the visitors seemed inclined to debate the point. The delicious viand was served with vegetables grown in their own gardens, together with black rice, and a hot sauce that lent a considerable zest to the whole dish. It would take far too long now to list, in detail, the delicacies with which they were presented; and, indeed, some might consider such an exposition indelicate, bordering as it would upon a depiction of gluttony. Regardless of such concerns, suffice it to say, that by the end of the repast the guests were filled to repletion, and indeed, were more prone than upright in demeanour at its conclusion. This condition might also be accounted for by the generous servings of a variety of wines, which accompanied every stage of their epicurean journey, each one rendering them increasingly immobile. It seemed that their host was quite determined to ensure that not one iota more of food could they ingest before he was satisfied that he had fully discharged his duties to his guests. At last the meal came to its quiescent end, and all present were more than grateful that this did not signify their immediate departure, for such would have been quite impossible. They remained where they were, silently ruminating on this gastronomic deluge. During the gamut of the meal the usual inconsequentialities had been exchanged; of work, acquaintances and so forth. Both women had been curious to discover the latest news from the city, as had their host. However, none of the three scholars could have been accused of being in touch with the fashions - and scandals - of the metropolis. In this respect they had fallen far short of their duties as guests. However, within these polite exchanges, at least four of those present eagerly awaited the main course, as it were. After a sufficiently decorous interval the two ladies of the household made their excuses, commenting upon the lateness of the hour, and bade their guests farewell. It was somewhat morosely that Celarent witnessed Erame make her departure, but consoled himself with the thought that she seemed to have reserved a particularly warm smile for him as she had left the room. The servants were dismissed, and the four men were left alone. After a brief pause, it was Alaste who spoke up. "Well, gentlemen. I've given some thought to your requirements and believe that I'll be able to guide you in the best way to proceed. As we've already discussed it would be best to replenish your supplies in Vsquala, the last settlement at the base of the Northern mountains. I've a friend there and would be happy to write for you a letter of introduction explaining your needs to him. I'm quite sure that he'll assist you to the best of his ability,

and will ensure that any charges you incur will be proportionately fair". Hesvee listened carefully to the merchant's proposal. "We're most indebted to you, sir. Not only for your aid but also for the most generous welcome you've afforded us as your guests". He paused for a moment, glancing across at his confreres, before assuming a nonchalant air that fooled no one, especially the merchant. Hesvee was undoubtedly a scholar of great merit and knowledge, but as a dissembler he was quite hopeless. Nevertheless, Alaste decided that the better policy was to assume an air of naïveté, which would complement Hesvee's clumsiness, and so encourage the latter to show his hand. "We wondered if you'd been born in this district yourself, friend?" The merchant considered this opener, and responded fluently. "Well I must admit - no. I'm not a native of these parts though my more distant ancestors were wanderers of the desert. A matter of only a few generations ago some of them decided to explore the northern regions, and settled in the mountains there themselves. That was why I was so interested to hear that your journey led that way". Inwardly Hesvee congratulated himself, on the success of this opening gambit. For his part Alaste was quite enjoying the game though he might have wished for a worthier opponent. "Ah really. That is interesting. So you might say that your forebears were explorers as well?" enquired Hesvee, assuming as innocent expression as he could muster. "Yes, they settled there. In fact some of them founded the very town that will be your last halt. I lived there myself, that is until my later youth. That's how I came to know the fellow to whom I have directed you. Many's the time that I've wandered in the foothills, on my own little expeditions if you like. But my elders would always warn me against travelling too far into the badlands. It was only later that I decided to come here, to return to my desert roots. I started in business under the tutelage of my father but decided later to strike out on my own account; and so I came to this delightful place. I have remained ever since though I still make the journey northwards to visits friends and relatives from time to time. The life of a merchant suits me greatly. In what other trade might I turn a small profit and see a little of the world at the same time?" The others nodded, assenting to the fellow's astute observations. Ferioque, however, noticing his colleague's somewhat clumsy efforts, and not a man possessed of an enduring patience when it came to negotiation, decided to intercede at this point. "So you've some detailed knowledge of the regions into which we'll be passing then?" Hesvee was both surprised and annoyed by his friend's intervention - but a little relieved too - and it was this last sentiment that won out. Alaste, sensing that Ferioque preferred the more direct approach, decided to take the bull by the horns. "Look, gentleman. I don't wish to offend such eminences as you, but I sense that there's something beneath your comments and questions. I know those regions well enough to find your declared purposes for being there, shall we say, difficult to accept". He raised his hand quickly, to avert any protests, and to signify that no insult was intended. "Please be so kind as to let me continue. I'm sure that we will thus avoid any misunderstanding, and perhaps even advance towards our objective with greater alacrity". He took the others' silence for acquiescence. "I make no claim to such proficiency as you, but I'm a man of modest education and take an interest in all manner of disciplines. However, it's true that I'm a native of the region you propose to visit, and thus well acquainted with the area. Now the question that I would ask myself would be - why would eminent fellows as yourselves take such risks as to sally into lawless lands, unless what you were seeking was of considerable value?" He paused, but briefly, and then continued. "I mean by 'value' not necessarily monetary, though I wouldn't exclude it; but such a venture is not undertaken lightly, and for no good reason". The three of them remained silent this time. Their host proceeded. "What I do know, from my own

researches and from those accounts passed down by my forebears and others amongst my people, is that the mountains hold many secrets, and ancient ones at that. Now it may be that what I know, and what you seek, could be linked. Perchance the only way to discover that fact is to be frank with each other". Alaste paused again, to observe the effect of his relentless candour upon the three visitors. They remained still, reflecting upon his assertion. Hesvee was the first to recover his composure, and responded to their host's invitation. "Thank you for your perceptive comments". There was a slight hint of irony in his voice but he admired the fellow's guileless approach, and his estimation of him rose accordingly. "You're quite right in what you say. We were in two minds whether to confide, in any degree, our true intention. But I'm sure you'll appreciate, especially after you've heard what we have to say, that we couldn't risk disclosing too much, especially on the basis of a relatively casual acquaintance. It may well be that you can assist us in more ways than we had originally thought". From this point onwards Hesvee recounted the whole of their business, omitting no detail, right up to the present moment. From time to time he would look towards the others, but saw no indication there that he should desist from his tale. Finally he fell silent; and all three waited expectantly.

The lower levels of light within the corridors of the maze were a welcome relief from the glare, which filled the rest of the cavern. It was with relative ease that Melaskkoli was able to pass between the narrow walls. He could still feel the light caress of a cool breeze kissing his face. Fortunately, the flow of air remained quite steady, and he was able to plot his path with some ease. The passage proceeded in a convoluted fashion, sometimes turning at such a sharp angle that he would swear that he was returning directly to his starting point. As he advanced he would encounter smaller paths leading off from his own, and these too would split into two, three, or even four other routes. However, by the simple expedient of testing the airflow, he was able to make his selections with some assurance. Naturally, he had no guarantee that this method would lead him from his present predicament; but then he knew of no other alternative, and this fact simplified his position. Far above him he could see, nay feel - so powerful was the light - an intense golden glow that pervaded the whole area, and still there were absolutely no discernible landmarks to measure truly his advance or retreat. He had no idea of the passing of time since he had begun the traverse. He did notice, however, that the deeper he advanced into the maze, the lighter grew the colour of the adjoining walls. This transition was quite subtle, and it took him a little while to recognise the phenomenon. Accompanying this transformation he was slightly concerned to observe a variation within his own body. For most of his stay underground he had been struck at how little fatigue had affected him. It was indeed odd that, given his experiences, and with the duration of time, he should not feel some greater degree of weariness. And yet, apart from a slight aching in his joints, he felt as fresh now as when he had first fallen through the earth. But paradoxically, since he had entered the labyrinth he had begun to experience, with each step he took, the life energy being drained from his limbs, as it were. Suddenly, he was assailed with an overwhelming sense of vertigo. So abrupt was its onset that he raised his arm in surprise, and was forced to lean against the wall until he had regained his sense of equilibrium. He could feel his heart pounding heavily, and his breath had grown deep and laboured. His body and mind told him to rest and recover from his endeavours, but a deeper instinct impelled him onwards. He realised that if he stopped here he might never again see the blue skies of the upper world. He urged himself forward, with each step an enormous effort, the exertion extending even to his eyes, for now sleep sued for his attention. He

had to use his hands to draw himself along the wall, for the way ahead had become blurred. It was only with the aid of that oncoming breeze that he was able to maintain any sense of purposeful action. His sight dimmed, and he could no longer see clearly what lay directly before him. He staggered once and almost fell, but managed to regain his balance. Then, a few paces later, he stumbled, and fell heavily to the ground. In vain he clawed at the harsh rock with his hands, desperately trying to gain some purchase, and so pull himself upright. A profound darkness descended, and he was quickly enveloped within its embracing shroud.

Strange visions came rushing up to greet him as he fell into the void. Who he was, and where? He had no recollection. He could not even determine if there was a 'he' that might be present. All that existed was an endless emptiness; and the sense of falling through eternity. Then, in the distance, a small light appeared, and whatever possessed him rushed forward, as if bidden by a great hunger. Like an eagle falling upon its prey, the light was devoured, and then extinguished. From far away a voice echoed through space and time: "Seek beneath. Seek only beneath".

The ache grew in his back, and with the pain his senses revived. Melaskkoli awoke to find himself lying prone, upon a hard and unyielding rock mattress. He remained motionless for a few seconds, desperately trying to penetrate the fog that had enclosed his mind. He had a vague remembrance of some manner of vision, and an encounter within an embracing darkness; but the more he concentrated, the further away slipped the memory. He felt a strong pressure upon his arms as something sought to draw him upright. At first he offered no resistance, but then remembered abruptly where he was. His sight was still befogged, and he shook his head to clear this. He could distinctly feel someone, or something, holding his arm quite firmly, and a strange, sibilant voice whispering in his ear. "Coommmee. Driiinnkk thiissss, yooounngg onnee". He tasted some water dribbling into his mouth, and he eagerly gulped down the cool liquid. As his vision cleared he looked sideways; to his surprise - and horror - he could see nothing; yet he could still feel that strong clutching upon his elbow. He recoiled and with a great effort pulled free of its grasp, scrabbling away furiously upon his hands and knees, looking upon all sides, in a desperate attempt to identify the source of this strange occurrence. "Cooommeee nooow", hissed the voice again. "Ahhhh. Fooorrggiivveee meeee. Iiii quiiittee foorggoott". And with that utterance a strange creature seemingly dissolved out of the air directly before him. Now that he could see clearly his unbidden assistant, he was not at all sure that he would not have preferred whatever it was to remain invisible. But there was something very familiar about the creature's aspect. Or was it the voice? He recalled his encounter on the surface world, and concluded that this must be the fellow himself, or at least one of his closer brethren. "Who, who, what, what...?" This was the best that he could manage. "Yesssss, myyyy yooounngg frriieennd. Fooorrggiivve meee. Yooouu aarreee noottt aaccuusstommed toooo sssuucchh aasss usss". Melaskkoli struggled to recover his composure. The creature showed no signs of wishing him ill, despite its unprepossessing appearance. Whatever it might be it bore the same distorted form that he had partly observed in its kin on the devastated plain. This one wore no cloak, and its bloated features were the more clearly exposed. There were the same extraordinarily distended belly, the withered and elongated limbs, a countenance with ice cold eyes, and that small pin-like orifice that would serve, he assumed, the function of a mouth, given its position on the creature's face. He struggled to prevent himself from turning away, so obnoxious was

the aspect presented by the creature; but, he reflected, it might be unwise to provoke it in any way. He forced himself to speak, hoping that any conversation might distract it from any hostile intent yet unexpressed. "Sorry. You startled me there". "Yeessss. Nooottt uusseeed tooo ouurr kiinndd aarreee yooourrs. Yooouu feel beettteer, liii hoooppe?" "Yes thank you – kindly sir". There was no harm, after all, in being polite. As the creature had not offered any threat he was beginning to believe that he might survive this rendezvous. Somewhat emboldened he ventured a question. "May I ask who you are, sir?" "Oooofffff coouurrssee yooouu maayyy. Myyyyy naamme isss", the fellow hesitated momentarily, before continuing, "...Gooorrvaall. liii aamm aatt yooourr ssserrriice". 'Well', thought Melaskkoli, 'that's encouraging at least. If he is to kill me at least he will be polite about it'. "Really. Well, thank you, Mr Gorval. I'm quite unfamiliar with this world. I fell through the earth and...." At this point the creature held its hand up. "Pplleeeaaasse. liiii knooow aalll, yoonngg oonnee". "You do", responded Melaskkoli, with some surprise. "Weee haavvee beeenn waattchiinnng yooou foorr soommee tiimmee. Pplleeeasse to fooolloow mee. Yooouu caann sttaannd?" The last question obliged the attempt, and he managed to get to his feet, but shaking considerably with the effort. All the while he kept a close watch on his new-found acquaintance. "Yes. I seem to be alright, thank you. Perhaps you can give me directions from this place?" Gorval, it seemed, was not inclined to engage in further discussion, and signed that he should follow. The creature walked, or rather seemed to float, over the ground, beckoning him onwards. He had little choice, and so fell into step behind his guide.

They continued in this fashion for some time, Gorval moving at a steady pace with Melaskkoli following after, torn between keeping a respectable distance from his questionable ally, but eager not to lose sight of his sole means of escape from this gaol. The wind currents yet blew softly upon his face and he concluded, with a degree of satisfaction, that his theory might still be accurate. It did look as if its providence might be a guide to liberation; that is, if his present company proved unwilling to fulfil that function. One peculiar thing that he observed - amongst the many others with which he had to contend - was not only did Gorval seem to float rather than walk upon the ground, but periodically he would appear also to sink into its mass. Further, that when his shoulders touched the walls of the stony walkway, they would seem to merge partly into its solidity. At first he thought that his sight must still be suffering from that debilitating attack. However, and after a few such instances, he became quite convinced that what he witnessed was in fact the case. Not only did it seem that these creatures could become visible - or invisible - at will, but the actual density of their bodies was also variable. It passed through his mind that this is what must have occurred in his first meeting with one of their kind. A shudder went through his body as he reflected that the creature might have been standing there all along, right next to him on the stricken heath, and when he had believed that it had left the scene. Then he remembered the strange events that had occurred, in that little hut in the valley. Had they been there too? Quite unawares, he came to a halt, so absorbed was he in his surmising. It was then he noticed that they had come to the end of the maze. The rock walls had given way to open space, and they were facing the entrance to yet another cavern. He should not have been surprised, but there it was. He tried to repel the thought from his mind but he could not resist the growing conviction, that perhaps he would never escape from this crushing, grey world. The longing grew and grew within his heart, to once more stroll under clear blue skies and wander across the open meadows of the over lands, instead of scurrying underground like

some poor burrowing creature. He observed that Gorval had stopped, and the fellow was waiting patiently for him to catch up. He approached, but kept a few paces clear between them. Gorval watched the young human carefully. He could see the look of confusion and fear on the boy's face. He was not a creature greatly inclined to compassion but even he had to remind himself that, pitiable though the sight might be, there were matters of greater moment to be considered, and he could not allow himself the indulgence of such transient sentiments. In the vast cycle of events that were revolving here, we are but instruments of fate, he reflected. The boy had arrived, and had successfully passed by the maze. True, he had almost succumbed to its embrace; nonetheless he had overcome the barrier. There was nothing left but to ensure that he completed the rest of his journey; then what would be, would be. He beckoned the human onwards; and the two hastened on into the waiting darkness.

"Good", responded Alaste. "What you've described to me isn't entirely unfamiliar. I've heard of the mine-workings in the Northern mountains. The region has been mined for centuries past, and gold, and other precious metals and stones have been excavated from the earth. But those were worked clean a long time ago; that, and the fact that it's a good deal more dangerous to venture by those ways, deters any further prospecting from being conducted. But what you describe is something of a different order. Underground cities! Now I've never heard of those. Might I be permitted to examine the documents, especially the map that you have?" Hesvee considered the question quietly. He looked across at both Ferioque and Celarent before replying. "Of course"; and the last residue of reserve had slipped away. Alaste called for one of the servants, and the fellow conducted Celarent back to their quarters to pick up the purse, which contained the ancient papers. He returned quickly, and passed the bundle over to Hesvee. They waited while the servant cleared away the dinner things. Only when he had departed did Hesvee draw out the packages, and unwrap the precious scrolls from their protective envelopes. He laid them out, in some sort of order, for their host's inspection. "Well! I can save you some work, gentlemen", he laughed. They looked questioningly at him as he went on to explain. "This is all gibberish to me. Maybe the map will make more sense". Ferioque passed to him his copy of the map while Celarent busied himself rewrapping the remainder of the papers. Alaste spent some time studying the yellowed piece of paper, turning it carefully this way and that, trying to fathom its orientation. Suddenly he stopped, and exclaimed. "Well. Don't hold me to this but I think that I know where this might be. Or at least the district. I don't know about the other markings though. But these", and here he pointed to a series of wavy lines alongside the base of which ran a thick line. "If I'm not mistaken this is the mid-part of the western section of the Northern mountains. These three peaks form a kind of triangle between them, and parallel to the base is a river, the Belasso. It's the largest in the region. One of its tributaries feeds the water supply for your destination, Vsquala. If I'm right then it's a simple matter to follow these. At least it'll take you into the immediate area that the map outlines. I know of no other formations like these in the range, if indeed these symbols represent what I think they do". The visitors held firmly to every word. Ferioque took the map back, and examined it carefully. "You're reasonably sure of this?" he asked Alaste. "Well, as sure as I can be", he replied. "I know of no other hills and rivers that would match so closely". "Good", replied the cartographer, as he smiled broadly. He continued. "We knew the general location from the documents, but the legend on the map - the triangle - it can only provide us with a local scale. If correct, you have provided us with the missing connection between the two". Ferioque turned to his two

colleagues. “So all that remains now, is for us to reach the locality that our friend has so fortunately pointed out, and the rest should be quite straightforward”. A bellow of laughter accompanied these observations. The three turned to their host, wondering at his outburst. “One small point, gentlemen. Just one small point”. They looked at him expectantly. The fellow stabbed with his finger at a spot on the map that signified their destination. “Just one small point, sirs. Where you are going happens to be the most notorious part of the bad lands. You really couldn’t have picked a more inauspicious goal. Believe me! The last place you want to be is there”. The transition from the pinnacle of hope to the trough of despond could never have been more rapidly descended than did the spirits of the voyagers that evening. Just when it seemed that the map had revealed all its secrets, and the way lay clear, they had omitted to recall that most enduring of barriers: the wills and desires of other men. The room fell silent as each digested the implications of their host’s outburst. His assessment might not be safely discounted. It seemed that the door had slammed fast in their faces, and that with a resounding and final crash.

Celarent looked at his colleagues. If ever one had wished to see how dashed hope displayed itself upon the faces of men, then an examination of the countenances of those three would have more than sufficed. It was not so much a blow to Celarent, of course, but for Hesvee, certainly, the realisation must have been devastating. They had all known that there were great risks attendant to their mission; to hear it directly from the mouth of one who was more intimately connected with the land – well, it could not be denied; the hand and heart had reached out eagerly for the prize, only to have it ripped cruelly away. Alaste observed carefully the reactions of his guests. He had not made his remarks either carelessly or purposelessly, for he was a man of depths, of which even his own family was unaware. He played the role of merchant well, for that was truly his trade. But he revealed himself only according to necessity, and at a time and place most fit. In part he had revealed some of the truth but, despite appearances, he was a close-mouthed fellow, and had not been entirely open with his guests. It was surely the case that as a young man he had frequently travelled into the foothills that surrounded Vsquala, relishing that lively energy and enthused freedom bestowed by youth. He was an adventurer by heart, and his inclination towards trade was mainly driven by a fondness for some degree of risk. But he did not make foolish decisions nor was he driven by mere impulse. He relished the skills of his trade, yet there was nothing to surpass that sense of achievement, of moving outside the usual bounds, and still bearing home the prize. This deep-seated inclination within his nature he had hinted at to his guests; but not the full scope of its power. He did, indeed, love to travel, and such a passion could only partly be satisfied in his role as trader. Yet oft-times he felt that his life had become a little tame, perhaps routine, and he would find himself dreaming of those days and nights when he had wandered far from his home, venturing deep into the foothills, and even to the wild mountain passes themselves. He had not, of course, mentioned these riskier jaunts to either his father or mother, for he was quite sure what their response might be, and with this the accompanying reprimand. But it was his mode to go a little beyond what was sanctioned, to investigate just the fringes of the mysterious, and step outside and away from the regular thoroughfares of life from time to time. He was fast approaching middle age and, much as he loved his daughter, her developing maturity reminded him of his own advancing years. It would be ludicrous to suggest that he was already in his dotage. Yet the days and weeks flashed by, and soon all that he might have to console him, as he sat by his hearth, would be the memories of a life past; then death would finally draw her veil over him, and he would join

his ancestors within that long resting place to which all beings are bound. And now these three wise fellows, or maybe fools, and two of who, at least, were older than himself, men of learning and of the city, and unworldly in every sense that he recognised the word, they had left their safe lives, the trappings of their accomplishments and the regular conduct of their business, left it all behind to pursue a dream, a phantasm sketched out on a ochred piece of parchment. Alaste felt almost shamed by their daring, and once again sensed that old stirring in his chest. He glanced across at Hesvee; an old fool perhaps, or a hero of the olden times! For a few moments he had the strangest notion; a vision passed behind his eyes, of the elderly scholar, adorned in the leathern armour of a bolder, simpler age. Gone was the clerkish demeanour, and its place the soul of a fierce warrior stared out of an old man's bleared gaze; and so it was with both Ferioque and Celarent. They, too, were no longer gentlemen of the city, whose manners and physique demonstrated a life devoted largely to intellectual pursuits. These had been transformed into the ardent and fiercesome fighters of a distant time, proud of bearing, and masters of their own will; no challenge too great, and no hardship beyond endurance to these sturdy men; so did the company appear to the merchant. It was as if they had summoned up from within him a spirit that had for too long lain slumbering. But how to communicate this to his guests? They did, indeed, appear most despondent now. "But of course you must have realised this, my dear friends". The words were uttered both as a statement and a question, and perhaps a challenge. "Well, yes. We knew there were risks attached to our venture; but then you're familiar with this territory. We're not fools. There seems little point in risking one's life foolishly....". Hesvee's voice trailed away into nothing. Alaste realised that his testimony might have been a degree bombastic. The warrior heart may yet inhabit those languid frames, but a little coaxing might be required before this more vigorous nature would reassert its natural place. "Of course, sir. It would indeed be foolish to pursue such ends; but with a guide the odds might dramatically improve in your favour; that is, one who's conversant not only with the country but also a little of what lies beneath it". He could not resist spurring the issue forward somewhat. "A guide, you say?" Hesvee's shoulders straightened and his eyes brightened again. The others leaned forwards, eager to hear their host's suggestion. "Would you know of someone who would be willing to conduct us there?" Alaste hesitated. He was a man who enjoyed high drama and this really was too good an opportunity to miss. He had his audience, all now straining at the leash. One faction within his nature remonstrated with this modest cruelty, but the greater revelled in the performance. "Well I might. You recall that as a youth I spent some considerable time exploring the foothills. Perhaps I didn't quite tell the whole story. It certainly would have been extremely unwise for me to have disclosed all that I found in my little jaunts at that time. After all I was but a foolish young fellow, and prone to take quite silly risks. Sometimes it's better to err on the side of obscuration, especially if it comes to one's parents, wouldn't you agree?" Hesvee could barely contain his excitement. "You know this district then, beyond what you've told us?" His voice was shaking, and his gaze earnestly fixed upon the man. Now the merchant could see, that within this fellow might run passions as deep as his own. "I know something more of the range than mere maps might disclose. There was one occasion when I was away for a whole week from home. My mother and father were quite furious when I finally returned. The fact is that I had become quite lost. I didn't tell them where I'd been. In truth, I wasn't quite sure myself", he joked. "I survived, I believe, more from good fortune than good judgement. My father always said that the gods smiled upon me, for otherwise my life would've been forfeit long ago". Alaste paused and then continued; his audience was primed. "Anyway, I had

decided to take a walk around. As I ventured out the day was fine and clear, but then a thick mist descended, and before I knew it I was quite askew. I wandered deeper and deeper into the mountains. Finally, I came upon a small stream and followed its course, believing that it would lead me back down onto the plain; but it took me further into the heights. Then it disappeared deep underground, losing itself amongst the rocks that bestrewed the floor of the little valley in which I found myself. I managed to make my way out of this place, and found a cave in which I spent the night, all but exhausted by my efforts. I was quite convinced by then that unless conditions changed I would perish in this spot. When morning came I was relieved to see that the fog had disappeared, and I could find my bearings once more. Now I could discern the line of hills, which would take me back to the plain, and to my home. I looked about me at the land, and saw those three mounts that are indicated on your map. It's extraordinarily accurate. The lines on the paper depict, and most precisely, the profiles of the mountain peaks as they must present themselves against the skyline. It could only have been drawn from a spot not far from where I stood. I could even see that river that ran by their bases. The reason I hesitated earlier to mention all of this, was that I was surprised to see it so clearly drawn in your chart. But that spot is deep inside the badlands, and very few travel by that way. As far as I know no other has mapped this region". He paused briefly before continuing with his tale. "Well, needless to say, I didn't spend too much time admiring the scenery. I knew I'd wandered well inside bandit territory and I couldn't count on my relative youth to protect me from their merciless natures. I made my descent fairly easily, and thence back down onto the lowlands. Fortune continued to smile upon me, and I returned home without further incident. The warmth of my welcome, as I have already mentioned, was considerable, and I might have suffered a gentler welcome from the brigands; but perhaps not", he concluded, laughing. It was Ferioque then who commented. "So you know the area first hand. But you've confirmed what you said earlier. If it's the case that the region is infested with thugs and robbers, the danger yet remains?" "This is quite true. The danger remains, but if the reward is sufficient then who might not dare? So now I come to the second part of my account. I'm quite sure that it's not at all by accident that you come to be here. Perhaps my father was correct..". Their host seemed to be on the point of a digression before Celarent, quite forgetting his manners, and moreover his station, interrupted. "You were saying. About the second part?" Alaste smiled. Maybe the young one had not had all the spirit educated out of him yet! "Yes. Forgive me". Both Hesvee and Ferioque gave their junior a reprimanding look, but the latter was so enraptured by Alaste's tale that he quite missed their disapprobation. "It was many years later and after I had moved here to start my own business. In my line of work you encounter a good deal of people, and with these no shortage of a tale to learn. I love a good yarn myself and so long as it entertains then I mind not if it be true or false. But from time to time a story will crop up that'll be more than just idle chatter. Well it happened that a fellow came by this way. In those days, and we're talking a few years ago now, when the town was much smaller. Anyway, he came by on his way to.... Oh! I can't remember now. But I was interested because he'd come from my old stamping grounds, and I thought maybe we knew a few people in common. But then it turned out that he'd travelled all the way down over the Northern range. Now mind you, he was a wild-eyed fellow as I recall, and I had him down for a madman or a simpleton, or both. I mean nobody, but NOBODY, crosses through the mountains. Along the foothills maybe, or for the more adventurous souls, like myself", he added wryly, "a jaunt into the valleys - but never, ever, across them. You might as well slit your own throat and have done with it. So I had him pegged down for a liar as

well as for the former. He did speak strangely, and I would have dismissed him the quicker if he'd not particularly amused me. Still, I felt sorry for the fellow, and gave him more time than I would more judiciously have done otherwise. Anyways, he goes and mentions the three mountains. It's at this point he's got my interest truly, for as I said there were not many who knew that particular district. From the way he spoke I could tell that he knew the area directly, so at least that part of his story rang true. But then he went further. It seems that if I'm a fool then he must have been a relative of mine. For more or less the same thing happened to him as did with me. He, too, had wandered into the mountains but in this poor fellow's case he'd not had my good fortune. The fool had heard some rumours of a great treasure buried away there. Now these stories abound; and there's always some idiot who will believe them and go off in search of their fantasy. Now undoubtedly the fellow must have been lacking in good sense, even before his venture into the mountains. But whatever had come to pass there, it must have fair driven away what was left of his wits. He'd set off with a mule, and a few provisions. The matter was ill conceived and within a short space of time he was quite lost. The fogs that I had encountered are by no means uncommon, and can come and go with a frightening speed. Well he'd managed to hang on to his mule and his life, and wandered around in the mist for who knows how long. At least he had some food with him so he was not going to die from hunger; at least not for a while. But the cold and the damp can be deadly, and caught on an open hillside he wouldn't have lasted long, even with the leather jerkin, and trousers and coat that he was wearing. Anyway, fortune smiles on fools such as him and me. During his meanderings he came upon an old, stone shelter that must have been the home of one of the locals. Happily, the owner was not in, and my poor friend - the fool - stayed the night under its protection. Come the following morning the mist still lay thick around, but had lifted a little. He had but one choice. He could remain where he was and run the risk that his unwitting landlord might return; or take his chances back out on the mountainside. He figured that if he could get onto lower ground the fog would clear, and he would find his way out of this mess. He was not a man of great patience, and it did seem as if the way was brighter. So he chose the second course and, leading his mule, he struck out again. As luck would have it the mist did rise shortly afterwards, and it was then that he saw the three mountains, and the stream that ran past them. From his vantage he calculated that he could follow the watercourse out of the mountains". Alaste paused briefly, to catch his breath and observe his listeners' reaction. There was not a sound in the room; his guests were utterly transfixed by the tale. He went on. "So the fellow scabbled down the hillside, anxious to take full advantage of the clear view, and get to safety. He and his mule did make it down the side of the mountain, and he found himself next to the river. He started to follow it, believing that he might yet make it out of the mountains with his life. It was then that his story became a little vague. He became very agitated; kept on talking about monsters, and all sorts. He was very confused. But it turns out that the mist fell again, just as he was following the river path. Fortunately he now had at least one guide, and even when the path swung away from the waters he could still hear its waves breaking against the banks. It was then that these monsters of his came out of the fog. He said that he didn't even hear them approach, that they flew at him like winged demons. He tried to get away but they were too fast for him. The next thing he knew they were dragging him into the gloom, and then finally into the mountainside itself. He completely broke down at this part of the story, and fell to sobbing hysterically. He became quite incoherent. He started babbling on about being led into a vast cavern, which glowed like the sun. He said that all around him, in every direction and as far as the eye could see, there was gold; that it

glowed so brightly that he had to close his eyes". Alaste regarded his audience. Not a muscle moved. All were intent upon his every word, treasuring them as if they were composed of that same substance. "Now, of course, I thought the poor fellow had completely lost his mind. I mean, who would not after suffering such an ordeal? Or maybe he was one of those tricksters trying to get some money, or even just a meal, off me? But then he asked for nothing". Alaste fell silent. His audience, too, remained quite wordless, seemingly quite overwhelmed by his account. Ferioque interrupted this hiatus. "Well. What do you think? Was he telling the truth?" "As I said", replied Alaste "I can't say for sure. But you have this map and I think there must be some connection between the information that you've found there, and what I've recounted. Of course, I think that the poor fellow's ravings about monsters must be treated as proof that he'd finally lost his sanity. Anyway, there are always such rubbish circulating, and I suspect that the mountain folk encourage them. Now that they are monstrous, true enough! But such wild tales can also serve to keep unwelcome visitors at bay". "Whether or not this is the case, do you have any ideas of how we might proceed?" inquired Hesvee. Alaste regarded the company calmly; a plan was beginning to unfold in his mind.

From the steep declination of the path it was evident to Melaskkoli that they were progressing deeper and deeper into the heart of the mountains. His new-found guide showed little interest in him, other than an occasional glance over his shoulder to ensure that the young human was keeping pace. The air had grown noticeably warmer the further underground they ventured. The brutal glare of the cavern had long ago receded back into the darkness. Once again their only sources of illumination were the green mosses that grew on every side. It seemed to Melaskkoli that either the darkness had become more profound, or the luminescence shed by these primitive plants had increased, for they did seem to shine more brightly here. He had little time to observe these, for the ground here was rough and uneven, and he had to watch his footing carefully. However, this posed no problem for his companion who, now that he could observe the fellow more clearly, was able to drift easily over the sharply undulating surface. Although this being's appearance - and bizarre abilities - still caused him some alarm, he had dismissed all notions of escaping this strange world on his own account. Like it or not, this fellow Gorval remained his only possible means of liberation from this underground prison. He had lost all track of time; it might have been the brightest noon above, or the darkest hour of the night for all he knew. The one hope to which he clung was that the creature had shown no overt hostility; and despite its unprepossessing appearance it might still prove an ally.

They continued, it seemed, forever downwards, and then down some more, into the very bowels of the earth. Fortunately, though the path underfoot remained jagged and occasionally treacherous, there was plenty of room overhead, and to either side. Whoever, or whatever, had been responsible for its construction, they had clearly spared no effort in carving out its dimensions. From time to time they would pass the dark mouths of side passages which, from their smaller scale, suggested that the route they were immediately following must be some kind of main artery into the underworld. Each time they passed these turnings he would stare into their pitch black maws, trying to fathom the darkness that might conceal an imagined horror. He could not help but fancy that there might be some strange predator lurking within, ready to leap out and fall upon him. Then he would hasten his pace somewhat, the quicker to pass by. As they continued their descent so did his hopes fall, that he might soon see the open sky; for wherever he was

being led, it was certainly not to the upper world. Finally, so wretched did he become that he overthrew his fear, and called out to his guide. “Stop”. Gorval came to a halt instantly, and paced back towards him. “Whhaaattt issss itttt, mmyyy yoouunngg friieeend? Yooouu neeedd tooo reeessttt?” “No it’s not that. I must get back to the surface. But this way just leads down. Where are you taking me?” The creature regarded him solemnly before replying. “Pleeeassee doonn’t coonnceerrnn yoourrsseelf. Alllll wiiilll beeee weeeelll”. With that dismissive reply he turned on his heel, and continued down the dark path. Melaskkoli had no choice but to follow, obliged to resign to whatever the future might bring.

The path went on and on, down and down, and the air grew warmer, and then warmer still. He could feel drops of perspiration welling up on his face and neck, to become trickles that ran generously down the small of his back.. He still experienced no great fatigue at his exertions, but his feet were becoming sorer, as they blistered angrily from the rocky ground upon which he marched. Gorval showed no signs of slowing his pace and, since their last conversation, had not even bothered to see if the boy was still following. He must have realised that Melaskkoli had nowhere else to go. Then, suddenly, the path levelled, and its surface became quite smooth. Gorval halted. “Waaaiitt heerreee, yoouunng oonnne. liiii wiiilll beeee baacck ssshooorttly”, and with that he disappeared around a corner, and thence completely from the former’s view. Melaskkoli waited patiently and quietly, in the dark.

Gorval reflected, as he left the poor fellow behind, how evenly matters had proceeded. He had thought that the human would put up much more resistance, but he had followed quite meekly. He had no conception of how demoralising it might be for a surface dweller to spend so much time underground. But the human’s acquiescent manner had certainly made things a lot easier all round, and it was just a case of getting him back to the home cavern; the council would then take over responsibility for his charge. For now he must concentrate on finding the right path so that they could complete their journey efficiently. He was well aware that humans did not possess the ability to pass directly through matter, as did his people. They would have to take a more circuitous route, but one that no human would ever detect. Memories of times long past had not dimmed in the Gaki mind, neither the last encounter with that surface species, nor the lessons they had learned from it; none of these had been forgotten. This youngster might not seem much of a threat and, if all went to plan, it mattered little if he discovered the secret ways; but no unnecessary risk should be taken, certainly when such was not required. Gorval reached out in the darkness, to find what he sought. He placed his foot carefully against a part of the rock wall, and pushed against it steadily. There was a low rumbling sound, and a small section swung back, to reveal a smaller and narrower passageway, which would lead the way deeper into the Gaki world. Now that it was fully exposed the tunnel entrance looked much like the many others that they had passed on their journey here. Gorval returned to where the human waited, his minute mouth emitting a low keening sound of satisfaction.

Finally the merchant spoke, and in a few words opened up another pathway into the future. “Well. Perhaps I might serve that purpose?” He quickly expanded on what had been in his mind for sometime now, perchance to embark upon some little adventure; perhaps the gods, growing tired of a deficit of fools, had sent them his way as a sign of their ennui. His guests smiled at this reference for they found little to fault within the

analysis. “May it be we can pool your knowledge and my experience and find ourselves this hidden city. Of course, I must confess that though I fully believe that these tales be the product of grave delusion, or the fantasy of a heated imagination driven onwards by greed, nevertheless my curiosity has always been irrepressible. I would never forgive myself if I didn’t at least try and find out if it’s so. And I’d never be so uncouth as to deprive the gods of their amusement. What say you, my friends?” There was barely a moment’s hesitation before Hesvee grabbed Alaste’s hand and proceeded to shake it vigorously. “Well said, sir, well said”, he exclaimed. The others, too, chimed in with their approval. “But there still remains those cut-throats of the hills. How might we evade them?” enquired Ferioque, who was the first to regain his composure. “Monsters of one form or another exist in those passes, that’s for sure”, added Celarent. “Indeed. But I think your original plan is well conceived, and a small party does have a better chance of passing undetected. And if we are going to carry out the major part of our explorations underground then we’ll have relatively little to fear from the mountain folk. They’re a superstitious bunch, and dread to pass by those ways. It will only be while we’re above ground that we must fear their attacks”. “And the gold? What if it’s true? We couldn’t carry that back on our own”, Celarent called out presumptuously. “Now hold on”, Hesvee rebuked his increasingly outspoken attendant. “Firstly we must get there and back. Personally I don’t think that there is any gold, and it’s not something that I’m going to expend my energy and thought upon”. Celarent fell silent, smarting somewhat from the remonstrance. It seemed to him eminently reasonable to consider the possibility, and to make plans accordingly. Alaste observed the young fellow’s discomfiture, and in a quiet aside tried to reassure him. “Never mind. You’ve a good point, and I for one will give it some thought. These fellows are good men but have no commercial acumen”. He nodded at Celarent, and the latter recovered his poise somewhat, but remained mute from then on. “One thing I’d suggest, gentlemen, if we’re going to proceed in this way. I’d advise avoiding any of the towns on the route henceforth, and proceeding by a more direct course to the mountains. All the supplies that might be needed I can provide, but I feel that the fewer people who observe our passing the better. Loose tongues and so forth...”. He put his finger to his lips to emphasise the point. “We’ll have to carry more provisions, but I’ve some skill as a hunter, and we can supplement our needs accordingly”. Both Hesvee and Ferioque nodded their agreement. “But setting aside my young assistant’s outburst”, and Hesvee again cast a look of censure in Celarent’s direction, to the latter’s mounting chagrin, “What arrangements should be made to remunerate your efforts? We’re quite capable of recompensing you for the provisions, but I’m not at all sure about the rest. I mean if the worst comes to the worst, your family.....” His voice tailed off as he recalled the possible fatal, and final, consequences if they should encounter the vagabonds of the Northern mountains; or even those other more mysterious monstrosities. “You need not concern yourself on that account. My family’s needs are always provided for, even in the case of my death. My wife and daughter are well acquainted with my inclinations towards such occasional adventuring, and will acquiesce”. “There’s the question too”, Hesvee persisted, “concerning financial matters. This is essentially a mission of research. You must understand that we’re not rich men”. Alaste laughed. “As to money, do not discommode yourselves further, sirs. I’ve more money than I need, and the riches I seek are beyond mere common accounting. But if it really troubles you then I will only ask for a quarter share in that little cavern of gold that I mentioned”. At that point he looked across at Celarent and smiled. “Yes. If we should come across it, just give me licence to hack a little piece off some wall, and bring it back with me. I’m sure that will more than adequately

cover my expenses. And if it all be true, well! We can return with an army at our backs, and carry off every last rock, eh sirs?" He roared with laughter at his own wit. The two scholars were quite unsure how to respond to their newly discovered and somewhat boisterous comrade, and smiled weakly in reply. But Celarent felt that things were going to get a sight more interesting from now on. "The hour is growing late and perhaps it would be best to bring the discussion to an end. There is much to think about, and much to plan, and this should be done with a clear head atop a rested body", averred their host. The others agreed, and a servant was summoned to show them to their rooms. After the three guests had departed the merchant remained alone, sipping on a glass of the wine as he gazed into a vague distance, and ruminating upon the turn of events. As he was thus engaged he was surprised to see his daughter Erame enter the room. The night was well advanced, and it was unusual for her to be up so late. "Well, my dear", he addressed her warmly. "What! Are you not abed, my pretty one?" She smiled at his question. "The strangest thing really, father". She sat down next to him, but with a strange and slightly pained expression in her eyes, that belied her smile of greeting. "I was asleep, but had the most extraordinary dream". He looked at her questioningly. "Yes. Quite odd. Shall I tell you about it?" He nodded. "Well, it was most unusual. I'm not sure where I was but it seemed to be in the mountains". He looked at her sharply, reminded of that recent conversation. "Yes. In the mountains, but they were nowhere that I knew. The really odd thing was that I could fly. It was quite extraordinary. When I looked at my arms all I could see were these great, golden wings. And when I raised them I was simply flung into the air, carried aloft. I couldn't see the rest of my body at all; just this pair of wings. And like a bird, I could fly anywhere, at will. I remember very clearly floating past these great mountain peaks, and then out over the plain below. There were no towns or cities, no people at all. Nothing but the space above and the land below. At one point I could even see a great sea in the far distance. But the most striking thing of all was that I seemed to be searching for something. There was this intense loneliness in my heart, and it felt as if I had lost some great treasure, and I was desperately trying to recover it. I flew everywhere. But no matter how hard I tried I never came upon it. It seemed that I was flying forever, and the sky grew darker and darker, and finally I couldn't see my way at all. And it was then that I woke up". Her father regarded curiously. She had had these dreams before, vivid and full of wild imagination, as children do. He brushed aside any connection between what she had described, and his earlier discussion with the travellers. It was mere coincidence, and he was not going to succumb to any fanciful notions on that score. Erame noticed her father's thoughtful expression. "Are you alright, father? I've not disturbed you I hope. I'm sorry if I bothered you with my silly dream. It is a dream after all". She looked up at him apologetically. "No, my dear. I was just wondering at it. It must have been exciting to be able to fly. You know what I'm like. Just floating up there in the clouds instead of down here watering the animals, and so on". They both laughed, for they were of a similar disposition. She may have inherited her mother's exquisite beauty and elegance, but her father's smile, his humour, and a little of his folly too, these were his bequests to her. But then she was grateful that her feet were not too solidly planted upon the ground, and that her imagination had scope to fly beyond the bounds of mundane gravity. It passed through Alaste's mind to divulge to his daughter his latest plans. He knew that she would be excited for him, and a little afraid for his safety; but she would never seek to discourage his purpose. His wife, too, would not oppose his schemes. Still it was late, and the time was not right for such debate. It would keep until the morning when the fears that seem greatest in the night hours always returned to their proper

dimensions in the light of day. No. He would reveal his plottings on the morrow, and then what would come to pass would come to pass. “Come, daughter. Off to bed with you now. Perhaps your wings await yet in your dreams. Then you can fly onwards, and find what you’re searching for. Your old father must take his rest now. I can’t take these late nights like I used to. I’ll be fit for nothing in the morning otherwise. Off with you”. She jumped to her feet and kissed him quickly on the cheek before departing. He remained where he was for a few more moments longer, gazing out through the window, and watching as the first golden touches of dawn kissed the deep night sky. Yes. It was time to sleep, and weave a few dreams on his own account.

Melaskkoli observed the creature’s return as he/it – he still was not absolutely sure on these questions - drifted slowly around the corner of the rock face. For a few moments he suspected some kind of dreadful trap had been laid; but then there would be no need, for he had no idea how many of these creatures there might be in this strange world; only that he must be at a disadvantage. No. If this fellow had wanted to cause him harm he would have acted before now. Gorval nodded to him to follow, as he again disappeared from view. Melaskkoli did as he was instructed, and was just in time to see the fellow pass into a narrow opening, which was set into the rock wall nearby. He hesitated for a moment, but reflected that it was too late to retreat. Taking a deep breath, he passed into the shaded passageway, and fell in behind his guide. The walls were much closer together here. It was fortunate that the ever-present mosses grew in great quantities, not only on the floor and walls, but also in clumps that extended over the low ceiling. It was only by their weak light that he was able to avoid bumping his head against some of the rocky outcrops, which hung down from the roof. Their pace had slowed slightly, to accommodate the narrower confines of the tunnel, but otherwise the terrain remained much the same. He thought that they must arrive at some destination soon, for fatigue was finally starting to catch up with him, though it could have been the increasingly warm atmosphere that was causing him to feel drowsy. The air seemed thick and heavy, and he found himself staggering slightly under these oppressive influences. His companion appeared completely unaffected, and carried on, wholly indifferent to Melaskkoli’s fate. As they proceeded downwards the passageway seemed to be growing ever tighter in girth, and so much more difficult to negotiate. And then the inevitable happened, and he hit his head a sound blow against the rock. The impact was severe, but not sufficient to cause him to lose consciousness. He reached up to touch his brow, and could feel the sticky, warm flow of blood seeping from a shallow cut. He had let out a yelp of pain, at which point his companion paused. The fellow turned back and approached him cautiously. Reaching up with his thin, bony hand, Gorval carefully examined the wound. It would seem he recognised for the first time that the young human might be growing weary. “Pllleeaassee beee caarreeffuuull, boooyyy. Weee haaaveeee nooootttt mmuuucchh ffuurrrttheerr toooo gooo”. At last there might be some kind of end to this torture, thought Melaskkoli. He wiped his sleeve across the cut to prevent the warm fluid seeping into his eyes and obscuring his vision. He reached into his pocket and found a rag there that, though a little dirty, would serve to staunch the trickle. He applied it firmly to the abrasion, wincing slightly as the rough cloth touched on bruised flesh. He then motioned to Gorval that they could proceed. As they proceeded Melaskkoli continued to dab at the cut until it seemed the dribble had stopped. The corridor was continuing to shrink in size, and Melaskkoli doubted if he would be able to pass through its increasingly narrow confines; and then, quite abruptly, the pair of travellers came to the end. Gorval waved to him to move

carefully. As he stepped up the opening that had appeared before them he could see the reason why. The exit did not lead onto level ground but instead yawned outwards, breaching upon the side of a very sharp slope, the bottom of which was some distance below. The gradient was such that it would have been quite impossible to simply walk down it. They would have to climb down the face, though it was not so steep that they would need any ropes or equipment; but it would certainly require much caution on their part. However, this was not what had fixed his attention. Directly before him, and filling the whole vista, was an enormous cavern, and this in turn, occupied entirely by a vast city, whose structures extended to every quarter. Its scale was really quite breath-taking. As far as the eye could see lay a sea of flat roofs that disappeared into the hazy distance. Interspersed at frequent intervals were towers and minarets, which piled up to great heights into what might be called the sky. The whole scene was lit up by array upon array of flickering torches that dispensed their red incandescence upon every surface and every angle. The city glowed, in pinks and reds, scarlets and fiery ochres, except where the shadows of the streets and alleyways cut across its face, leaving dark tracks to divide the scene. The whole panorama was redolent of a multitude of delicious smells that drifted up from beneath him; of rich and pungent stews bubbling over an army of fires, as thousands upon thousands of households prepared their meals. And everywhere could be heard that soft, murmuring rumble, of a populace going about their business. All of these suggested a densely populated metropolis yet not a single citizen could be seen. It was true that the pair were still some way from the city boundary. Nevertheless, even at that distance, it should have been possible for them to see the crowds passing through the boulevards and squares, which lay spread out below them. It was then that he recalled his companion's unique skill for camouflage, and concluded that this ability must be quite universal within this strange race, and perhaps even represented their natural state. He withdrew from these reflections to observe that the Gaki had already climbed some way down the gradient; without further delay, he followed his example. He was a little nervous at first, but quickly found his first foothold, and then the next. He refrained from looking downwards to estimate his progress for the ground still lay some distance beneath. He felt quite dizzy, both from the physical exertion, and the slight loss of blood he had sustained from his wound. He kept his face firmly towards the rock wall, and reached down slowly but steadily, making sure to get a good grip with both hands before feeling with his foot for the next lodgement. It was no long at all before a hand on his shoulder indicated that they had reached ground level, and a safe footing. He turned to look across the city again. Without hesitation Gorval was already moving out across the small plain towards the outer fringes of the town. As they drew nearer to the outskirts Melaskkoli could see that the structures were mostly single storey, their walls pierced at intervals by rectangular gaps. It was through these that he caught sight of the torchlight glowing within. As they approached even closer he could now hear sounds emitting from the interior of the dwellings; of people talking, and the crackle of cooking fires, all the clamour to be expected in any domestic setting. But still he caught not a glimpse of a single person, not even a child playing in the street. It was a most unsettling sensation; a vast conurbation and not an individual to be observed. In his musings on the subject he considered whether they had the ability to perceive each other, even when invisible. He made a mental note to discover this fact at the earliest possible opportunity. Although fear still had a grip upon him, his natural curiosity reasserted itself. He felt a little more confident that he might not come to immediate harm; or, at least, not from this fellow. They had now entered a long and narrow street, which seemed to lead towards the city centre. On either

side could yet be heard the sounds of families, their voices ringing along the glowing avenue; but not a hair seen.

Dawn had risen. Hesvee was awakened from his slumbers by the morning light, which now glittered through the vents in the shutters barring the windows. It was not for security that these barriers were employed, but rather to repel the night airs; or those which the inhabitants believed carried inimical vapours. They were of a more practical use during the heat of the day where they served to keep the temperatures low inside the buildings. He raised himself from his sleeping pile, and shuffled across to the window. His body and head ached painfully from the previous night's celebration. He really was getting too old for these late night parties, and even more for adventuring, so he thought. He recalled the conversation of the previous eve, and felt a twinge of doubt as to whether they had been wise to take the trader into their confidence. But the fellow was undoubtedly a shrewd man, and would prove quite invaluable in their quest. Obviously he did not know the man as well as his colleagues, Celarent and Ferioque, both of whom he trusted completely. Still it was a risky venture, and one should not embark upon such with an overly cautious heart. As he opened the window the noise brought the other two out of their slumbers. He heard Ferioque groaning feebly, "Oh! Not enough sleep. Really do we have to arise now?" The question did not seem to be addressed to anyone in particular, but Hesvee decided to respond. "I know how you feel. But if, as our new friend said, if we're to proceed, there are plans to be made to meet our new requirements. I don't think that we'll be starting today anyway. And you can catch up a bit, this afternoon, with your sleep". Ferioque muttered something under his breath, but joined his colleague at the window. Although it was an early start for them, the rest of the town was already busy. The animals had already been taken down to the waterside, and were being led back along the streets towards the edge of the town, and to the pasturage that was situated there. The sound of lowing cattle seemed to echo from every quarter. From the window they could see a herdsman below, patiently goading his beasts, flicking a long reedy stick over the angular rumps of his charges. The streets were filled with people, marching towards the pasture land that surrounded the oasis.

Celarent had also risen by now, and joined them at the window to observe the scene below. He seemed to have weathered their late night festivities more lightly than his two elders. The three of them conducted their morning rituals, before a servant arrived to conduct them to the breakfast table. Their host was already present, and seemed painfully ebullient, both in appearance as well as in manner. It seemed that the prospect of adventure had renewed and enhanced his already natural zest for life, and all the challenges that it might bring. Neither Hesvee nor Ferioque could quite bring themselves to match this display of enthusiasm so promptly in the morning, and set themselves upon the serious business of consuming their first meal of the day. Alaste recognised that the two elder men, at least, were disinclined to engage in discussion. And so he turned his attention to the youngest of the trio, leaving the former to introduce themselves to this day at a gentler pace. However, he did enquire as to whether they had enjoyed a good night, a question to which all soberly assented. "And you, young sir? I expect that you slept well. The desert air agrees with you?" Celarent was a little taken aback that the host had chosen to address him directly. He had become used to occupying the junior, and slightly subservient role, in the group, and to be spoken to in this fashion was somewhat disturbing. In fact he even caught himself looking towards Hesvee, seeking permission, as

it were, to respond. But it would seem that the master was more intent on eating, and quite heedless of their host's enquiry. Alaste had observed in the young fellow a certain lack of confidence. He was anxious to encourage Celarent to emerge from his self-imposed, and unduly diffident shell. It was important, he believed, and in this venture at least, that all felt that they could speak up, and act freely when necessary. There could be no standing on ceremony or reticence of action when, and if, they arrived at their destination. All this passed through his mind in a flash as he awaited Celarent's reply. "Oh! Very well indeed, sir. Very well". "Is this your first expedition of this kind, young friend?" Again Celarent felt quite disconcerted with such familiarity, and that especially from an elder. But there was something in Alaste's manner that encouraged him to continue. "Not my first certainly, sir. But the previous ventures haven't been into territories that we now propose to explore". "I'm pleased to hear that, my friend. It's very important that we all understand the potential risks attached to this expedition". At this comment the other two looked up briefly, aware that the remark was not solely directed at their younger colleague. Alaste continued. "But you're looking forward to it nonetheless, I trust?" "Well enough indeed, sir. Despite some anxieties I have to confess that the prospect of advancing into such unknown lands does have a certain appeal, though I'd still prefer to emerge from the experience with my throat intact". Alaste roared with laughter at the young man's humour. "Good. Good. I'm with you there, sir. How could we keep our food down, gentleman, should there be an additional portal opened beneath our lips, eh?" The other two laughed, albeit a little nervously, at their host's bold humour. Alaste saw again that neither of the two were quite themselves yet. "Perhaps we shall take a little walk around after breakfast, sirs? We can combine some sightseeing perhaps with the purchase of our supplies". Hesvee, feeling more sufficient within now that he had taken in some supplies himself, and with the blood flowing to his head more freely and warmly, replied. "A good proposal, sir. It would be interesting to see more of your town. A good time to take some fresh air, in the early hours". "Well. Not quite the early hours, sirs, but close enough", laughed their host. The four of them continued with their breakfast, with only the occasional inconsequentiality exchanged.

After a brief interval, and when all had sufficiently recovered their poise, their host led them forth into the busy streets of the town. By this time the herd animals had all been safely ushered from the precincts, and were grazing on the pasturage nearby. It should not be thought that these were either luxuriant or verdant. The grasses in this locality, though rich by comparison with their poor cousins - those that survived in the surrounding desert - were composed of a rather unprepossessing, wiry and dry-fronded vegetation; yet the beasts here had been bred to survive upon these poor rations. A more bountiful profusion of herbs, flowers, shrubs and trees grew around the spring itself. This area, however, was reserved mainly for kitchen produce, and was now being tended by another small herd, that of gardeners, who were busily applying their trade after the grazing animals had departed the oasis. Over the many years that men had lived in this place they had done much to exploit the life-giving waters. An ingenious irrigation system had been devised, with many channels and water pumps, which in turn transported the water from its main location into the many acres that surrounded the well itself. Not only had this land been put into useful production but it served also as somewhere that the local citizenry could visit, and find relaxation in those more temperate hours, of the early day and evening. Beautiful gardens had been laid out here, with gravel paths that wove their tapestry between the rich borders of flowering shrubs, while copses of elegant silver skinned and copper barked

trees dotted the whole area. Between these was a sea of wild flowers of every hue and shape, bearing great bell-like petals, or blooms resembling delicate many-coloured flakes of snow - if such a thing were known in this place. The scents that floated in the gentle airs were truly intoxicating and these, together with the vivacious visual display, composed a scene that was a delight within which to immerse the senses. Their host took obvious pride in the achievements of his fellows, and seemed eager to draw their attention to every possible detail. He invited them, finally, to sit in a small arbour. Within this were provided a few seats so that people might rest their weary feet, and perhaps take a cool drink from one of the stands nearby. "Well" commented Alaste. "What do you think of our little garden?" "Truly splendid", replied Hesvee. "Yes indeed. Quite beautiful", added Ferioque. Celarent remained silent, preferring to express his admiration in that fashion. Alaste's smile, if anything, became broader so that one might have feared his face would split asunder. "Yes. The work of many generations; but a miracle nonetheless. Even now I come here often, and am quite intoxicated by its allure. The spell never seems to abate. When we've taken a little break we'll go to the market, and place our orders for the necessities of the journey". He could see that his guests were sufficiently roused to get down to the serious business of the day. They remained seated for a short while only, drinking in the splendour of the place before their host rose again, and they once more set off upon their day's labours.

There were a number of markets located around the central spring, and it was towards these that they headed. There really was an extraordinary profusion of produce on display, and Alaste explained that not everything was from this locality. Many traders travelled, sometimes covering great distances, to bring their wares to this spot. Much of the commerce was between merchant and merchant, this being a convenient junction to make such exchanges. Leather ware, pottery, precious metals and stones, incense, wines, spices, and a myriad of other goods, were laid out on colourful carpets beneath the cooling umbrella of the palms, their welcoming shade covering most of this part of the town. However, the travellers were more interested in food provisions, especially those comprising dried meats and fruit, grains and so forth. The trader suggested too that the neophytes might like to purchase some weapons as an addition to their defence. Strange to say, and despite their knowledge of the risks that they might encounter, it had not quite sunk into their consciousness that such measures might be necessary, an omission that testified to their lack of experience. Hesvee, for one, took note of this, and it reinforced his sense that he had been right to include the merchant in their plans. With the assistance of that fellow they rapidly made a round of all the stalls. It was then arranged for their purchases to be delivered to Alaste's house before evening fell. Some more pack animals were also purchased to carry the additional supplies, and these too were to be brought round to his home before the end of the day. Finally, and as the heat of the afternoon rose about them, the four, in common with most of the other inhabitants, retired to their quarters to take a siesta. It had been a good day's work, and they would be able to make an early start upon the following morn.

For the most part iDarii's life settled back into its usual routine. There was no suggestion that he might be called upon to make another excursion to the surface world. He had not seen or spoken to his superior since their last interview. Indeed, the rumour was travelling rapidly within the department that their chief might himself be off on some kind of reconnoitring mission. Although the Gaki were quite a private people they suffered from

that common flaw of all intelligent beings, an insatiable desire - amongst many such of their species – and an overweening interest in the business of their neighbours. So it was that the stories scurried about, that Gorval had already travelled to the surface world to make a full assessment of the situation, and to corroborate the accounts so far delivered by his scouts. Yet more tales circulated that he had been called to a meeting between the councils of the nearby caverns; such an event was extremely rare, given the tendency of their neighbours to remain very much aloof. He, iDarii, had heard many of these rumours, but was unable to determine their accuracy. At last he concluded that the best course was to mind only his own business, and to leave that of his fellows to theirs. However, he found that he could not dismiss his last meeting with Larache so lightly. They had had no further contact since that mysterious exchange. He, for one, was starting to believe that it had grown to an exaggerated importance in his own mind. Perhaps he was reading too much into his comrade's manner? Maybe it was one of his little jokes, to play the secret agent? But what with the tales and the circumstances with which he was directly familiar, he had a sneaking suspicion that the questions would not come to an end there.

But then, as frequently happens, he was seated at his desk, engaged in sifting through some security files - mostly routine matters relating to petty offences committed by some well-known malefactors within the cavern – when that very fellow arrived. He indicated wordlessly to his colleague to accompany him, and vanished abruptly from the room. Larache had that same conspiratorial air about him, and it was with not a little relief that iDarii abandoned the somewhat tedious reports, and followed the Gaki into the corridor. “Cooommmeeee. Weeee shaaaall leeaavveee theeee buillldddiiinnngg. Fooolllooww meeee”. The two of them proceeded rapidly through the corridors, and then down to ground level, before departing the ministry. The square was packed to brimming with the usual crowds of invisible citizenry. If anything they seemed to be present in even greater numbers than was normally the case. They agreed that it would be easier to pass round the perimeter of the hub in order to arrive at their destination than to try and cross it directly. Larache led the way, and iDarii followed him at a short distance. After travelling almost a third of the way round the crowd's edge his guide turned away from the square, and launched himself into one of the radial streets that led from the centre. This, too, was quite busy, and it was only with some effort that they were able to push their way through the dense throngs of their fellows. Finally the numbers thinned somewhat, and they made easier progress. Without warning Larache turned to the right, and then as swiftly to the left. They had now left the main highway behind, and were entering a warren of narrow corridors that criss-crossed this section of the city. iDarii was growing more and more anxious with each step they advanced for this was one of the more disreputable quarters of the region. Moreover, it was inhabited by a few of those very characters whose records he had been reviewing only a short time before. Larache, however, seemed quite at ease, and extraordinarily familiar with his whereabouts. iDarii gave up trying to recall the route by which they had advanced this far and reluctantly placed himself, both physically and mentally, in the hands of his associate. With each pace they took they moved further and further into the depths of the ghetto, and the appearance, and smell, of some of the dwellings by which they passed grew increasingly rank. The area was quite repugnant, and he was rapidly regretting ever setting off on this ill-conceived escapade. He was just on the point of retracing his steps from of this unwholesome burrow when Larache stopped, and was now banging vigorously with his fist against the door of one of the hovels. After some time the portal cracked open very slightly, and he could just overhear

his friend addressing someone within the building. After a brief exchange the doorway was edged open a mite further, and a hand emerged from the darkness, beckoning them inwards. Larache pushed his way past the unseen host. After a moment's hesitation iDarii followed, involuntarily holding his breath against both the smell emanating from inside, and braced mentally against what might greet him from within the gloom.

Gorval walked, or rather drifted, along at a brisk pace. Periodically he would glance over his shoulder at the young human, not so much to ensure that he was following - for his companion had little choice given his predicament - but the more clearly to observe his condition. It was evident from the child's demeanour that the human had no idea of what was occurring, and even less a clue as to the events that were to unfold. He could even feel the vaguest stirrings of pity for the chap. Though he lacked somewhat in compassion he had sufficient imagination to place himself in the human's shoes and conceive the confusion which might have seized that creature's mind, and perhaps even a sense of the desperation and hopelessness that could accompany such a circumstance. He could see the young lad looking about him, as he painfully attempted to make some sense of these alien surroundings. The young fellow was undoubtedly unaware of the furore that he was causing in his wake. He was indeed blissfully - if it could be called that - ignorant of the fact that all that separated him from the masses of Gaki, who were even now pressing upon them from on all sides, was the small detachment of guards, which had met them both at the city's edge. Gorval had tried to time their arrival with the quietest period of the daily routine, that is when most of the population would have retired indoors for their evening meal. But it was quite hopeless. The mere appearance of this strange being would naturally invite the curious attention of the inhabitants, and word of their arrival had got round like a whirlwind. People streamed onto the streets to witness the travellers as they made their way into the centre of the metropolis. Viewed from above, they would have appeared like a vortex, with the crowds surging around them, trying desperately to catch sight of this oddity. "liittsss a huummmaann" went the whispers, floating through the cavern. Most of them had never seen such as Melaskkoli although all had heard the myths. There had been many rumours circulating the city for some time now; even more than usual. Tales of their brethren's activities in the neighbouring caverns were passed from mouth to mouth, each account being eagerly devoured like a rich morsel cast upon the floor by a master to his hungry serf. As the crowds grew ever more densely packed, and proportionately more importunate, Gorval signalled to the escort to follow, and the party turned from this thoroughfare, and ducked into a side alley. Gorval knew the ways of the city intimately, and judged that a less obvious route might be used to pursue their course towards the Ministry, for that was where they were headed. The alleyway was only just wide enough to allow them to walk in single file, and this suited his purpose most admirably. He led the way, while the human, still quite unaware of the interest he had excited, followed cautiously, and behind them the rest of their escort. They were able to advance more rapidly now. Gorval threaded his way through the city suburbs, ever holding tenaciously to his final goal.

It really was quite bewildering. His guide had suddenly turned off the main way, and into a narrow side turning. All about him the sounds and smells of the city floated in the air. From time to time he heard what sounded like a low rumbling, as if of waves crashing gently on the seashore, and he experienced the strangest feeling that he was being closely watched by myriads of eyes. But the space about him was empty except for that

strange creature striding directly ahead. They had entered a cramped corridor, which was just wide enough for a single person to pass through at a time. The walls of the buildings on either side rose high above him, and increased painfully his sense of being hemmed in; he felt like an animal, being herded into a pen. However, he had little chance to ponder the matter, for the fellow was moving at an even faster pace, and it required all his attention to keep up. But stranger than all of this was his memory, for it seemed to be playing tricks with him. His recollection of the past was becoming progressively obscure, and even events that had occurred recently were waning opaquely to his recollection. Everything seemed to be receding into a dream-like mass, bundled up, as it were, at the very edge of his consciousness. He could dimly recall a world, overflung by a vast blue field. He seemed to vision great plains that stretched away into the distance, covered with waving fronds, which danced easily in a gentle breeze. He almost fell to his knees, so vivid were the impressions, and so overwhelmed was he by the immensity of the space that surrounded him. With each step the world in which he now found himself seemed ever more familiar. The grey walls of the cavern, the red mud structures that covered the whole surface of this vast cave, the flickering torch light that pervaded every corner of the city, all of these felt like... The recollection was just there on the tip of his mind. The whole place seemed like... home. And there it was. He was no stranger here. This was where he had always been, and these were the very streets he had roamed a thousand times before. Where had he wandered? He asked himself this question again and again. He almost called out to his friend, to a man he had never met before, but who was oddly a stranger no longer. He wanted to tell him what passed through his mind, but something warned him against too bold a pronouncement. The dread and despair that had filled his heart for so long, now it seemed to ease away like a cave fog, drifting away to disappear into the deep darkness. Yes. He was home; and he wanted to shout it to the world. However, there were still great blanks in his mind, and he could not account for the apparent absence of the other inhabitants; but he knew they were there.

The sun had risen, and now was falling in the sky. The heat had also reached its zenith, and descended in concert with the quotidian cycle. The household was still entrapped in sleep, quietly dozing within the cool recesses of the dwelling. They had returned home, the four of them, all excited by those prospects for the future. However prudence, and the lack of sleep, inclined all to catch up with their rest, mindful of the exertions of their coming expedition. But now the siesta period had ended, and again the household congregated. On this occasion both Alaste's wife and daughter were present, the latter much to Celarent's delight. Drinks were served as they settled down to consider their plans. Alaste had informed the family of his intentions. If they were distressed neither woman showed any sign, and indeed both seemed of hale spirit. Celarent was moved to observe this, and could only applaud the bold complexion of the ladies of this noble household. Privately he regarded himself as of a somewhat timid nature, and certainly not endowed with an adventurous disposition; but he would not display such reservations in front of his colleagues, and certainly not before women of this tempered metal. Erame, it seemed, was the most affected by their mission, and expressed the regret that she could not be part of their voyage. It was clear from the look of admiration in Alaste's eyes that he greatly valued and loved his daughter, and could not bear the thought that she might come to any misadventure. She scolded him for his weakness, but with good humour, and the party settled down to the serious business of anticipating their journey. The route towards the Northern mountains was simple enough, if they followed the usual paths. But Alaste

again cautioned against that choice, for it might provoke much interest, and thence consequent inquiry. No. It would be best if they cut across country. It might slow them a trifle, but by only a few days, and such a brief diversion could be counted little against any delays that they might incur through unwelcome attention, and even interference, in their plans. The unmetalled route was neither arduous nor dangerous, and it would only be when they reached the Northern mountains that they would truly need to be on their guard. They had ordered more than enough provisions, some of which had already been delivered, and they could supplement these with some freshly killed game en route. The city dwellers shuddered somewhat at their host's proposal, but acknowledged the virtue of his advice, and realised that they would have to shed some of their over-sensitive city ways if they wished to proceed from civilisation, and into the wilderness. Once they arrived at the Northern range, he assured them, he would easily retrace his route back to the locality they sought. From that point onwards the party would depend upon the map they possessed, and the cartographic skills of Ferioque in interpreting it. This last seemed quite confident that he would decipher both the legend and its accompanying scale, and with sufficient accuracy to get them to their final goal, that is if such existed, for there was no way of confirming the issue other than trial by evidence. And so they laid down their plans. When they had concluded their deliberations the little gathering settled down once more to eat their evening repast, perhaps the last they might consume in civilised surroundings for some time to come. Celarent imaginatively threw himself into the future. Already the obstacles of the journey had been subdued. Every enemy had been vanquished and he had returned victorious, the bold hero and paragon of adventurers, from a strange and toilsome land, now bedecked with glory, and inestimable riches. He even permitted himself the pleasant delight of picturing himself winning the hand of the beautiful Erame, this damsel now quite bedazzled by his audacity and fame; thus are dreams fashioned, and thus too great disappointments. But for now he indulged this passionate notion, and was fantastically transported by his imaginings into prospects and possibilities far distant. As the night drew its black cloak over the land, the guests returned to their quarters whilst Alaste remained with his wife and daughter. "We, too, must sleep. I'd be at my best tomorrow. The city farers will be quite lost, and I think that the responsibility will lie with me, for a little while at least, to get them through the first part of the journey. They're good men. And the young fellow in particular, when he overcomes his reticence, will prove a bold heart. And we're going to need that on this venture, my beloved ones". His daughter bade him good night and retired. Shortly thereafter both the merchant and his wife made to their bed. Darkness had long fallen upon the town. The only noises that floated up from the streets and alleyways were the cries of the wolves, calling into the night sky, their yelping drifting upwards into the cold, dark sphere, there to greet the stars above. A great calmness swept lightly over the land. The town dwellers slept peacefully and securely in their beds, guarded by a vast desert that stretched away in every direction, with the oasis, a jewelled refuge, lying at its heart.

Even to his eyes, that were well accustomed to penetrating the gloom of the underworld, iDarii found it almost impossible to distinguish anything in the darkness into which he had now stepped. What he could detect was a most foul odour, which seemed to permeate the whole building. It was with some difficulty that he restrained himself from emptying the contents of his stomach upon the floor. He could hear some shuffling sounds nearby, issuing from some unknown source within the murk, and he strained to determine what they might signify. He felt a hand grasp his arm. He was about to shake himself free when

he heard his friend Larache address him. “Doooo nooottt beeee feeaarrffulll. Youuuu aarrreee quiiiteee sssaaaaffeeeee heeerrree”. He had to remind himself of their friendship for, in these circumstances, he was less than happy to concede the point. However, the grip remained rigidly upon his arm, and he was pulled deeper inside. He almost tripped as his foot encountered an obstacle, and then he realised that he was standing at the bottom of a flight of stairs. Cautiously, and with one hand outstretched to steady himself against the wall, he made his unsteady way up the incline. It was with some relief that he could see a glint of light ahead and, on reaching the top of the stairwell, he observed that they were about to enter another room from which this welcome illumination came. He stepped forward behind his friend, and could see now that there were other Gakis present. There were two, and both were fully visible to ordinary eyesight. Their appearance, however, belied very much their surroundings. He had half expected to see members of the lower castes in such a place as this, but these fellows were clearly not of that origin for each carried robes and accoutrements that demonstrated considerable wealth and rank. He was unable to see their features since they had chosen to keep the cowls of their gowns pulled downwards, thus almost completely covering the face. One of them waved iDarii to a seat opposite, a request with which he quickly complied. He felt slightly more at ease now, for there seemed to be no immediate threat of violence. He noticed that Larache had remained standing, and he was more than a little disconcerted when one of the Gaki signed to his friend to leave the room. “liitttt isssss alllriigghhhh, youunngg fellllow. Youurrr friieenndd haasss caarrriieeed oouutt hisssss duuttieesss”. He observed Larache depart, and with very mixed feelings. What duty was it that he had carried out? he wondered. “Youuuu aarrreee iDarii arre youu noottt, youunngg onnee?” He nodded, feeling that to risk his voice at this point might betray his nervousness. “Wee aaree oofff theeee Innneeerrrr Coouuncilll”. Now he was truly surprised. He had never encountered any of these council members, and certainly not the seers of that group. “Dooo nooottt beee surrrpriissed. Weee neeed too speeaakk inn priivaattee. Tellll usss offff youurrr meeettting with theeee eeaarrth dweelleeerrr aabboovee”. He hesitated for a moment. Such accounts were for the ears of his superiors only - and sometimes not even then - and he had no confirmation that these were who they claimed to be. “SPEEEAAAAAKKK NOOOWWW”. The power of the words rocked his body violently. It was not that the fellow had raised his voice. If anything the sounds seem to snake towards him quietly, insinuating themselves into his consciousness, and draining his will to resist. He had heard stories of the power of the seers, but had never witnessed it directly. He heard his response, as it tumbled forth from his lips unrestrained, its flow pausing only briefly before being prompted by one or the other of his interviewers as they mined every detail of his encounter. He had no idea how long he was subjected to their interrogation. But then the questions finished, and he felt an enormous fatigue sweep through his body. “Youuu haaavveeee doonnnnee weelllll, friieennd. Youuu maayy leaavee. Gorval willll giivvee youuu furrtheerrr inssttrruuctioonnns”. GOOO!” The command was given. Before his mind could respond his body had already raised itself to its feet, and they were escorting him out of the room. Outside, Larache was waiting for him, and they again made their careful way back down the dark staircase, and out of the hovel. As he descended the stairs he noticed the vile smell, which had seemingly pervaded every corner of the place, had quite disappeared. Even the darkness, which cloaked every nook and cranny of the dwelling, seemed diminished. Shaking slightly from his recent experience, and with fear still girdling his heart, he and his colleague returned by the way they had come, back towards the Ministry. Neither seemed inclined to

converse, and they walked side-by-side, in complete silence. It was only when they reached its main entrance that Larache turned, and bade him farewell. It was an odd parting, for there was something about his friend's manner that suggested a finality to the adieu; his expression conveyed a sense that their paths would not cross again. He felt impelled to ask his friend to explain. Before he could do so, Larache had turned on his heel, and was already disappearing into the crowds of Gaki nearby; he was left to return to his desk. It seemed that he must await whatever Gorval might determine, and whenever that might be.

At that very moment, as iDarii was engaged in his interview with the seers, Gorval and his charge were approaching the Ministry. His tactic of avoiding the main routes had worked well, and they had made very good progress. Apart from the occasional, and very surprised, passer-by, the small party had crossed a considerable section of the city, and were nearly at its centre. Gorval knew that it would be extremely foolish to enter the building by the usual method. He had already concluded to employ one of the secret ways by which he and other council members entered and departed that place. They were almost upon the main square when he turned to one side, and led Melaskkoli into a small courtyard. The quadrant was quite empty. Their escort remained in the street outside, to ensure that none might follow. Gorval reached down to one of the flag stones that lay upon the ground, and pushed his hand into a recess set into the ornate design upon its surface. Melaskkoli could not see precisely what his guide had done. Almost immediately, however, there was a low grating noise, as if stone was rubbing against stone, and the paving slab slid to one side to reveal a dark aperture in the ground. His heart fell when he saw this entrance to yet another underground tunnel make its appearance. He had had his fill of such subterranean ways but, despite his increasing familiarity with these surroundings, there still remained a sufficient fraction of the old Melaskkoli who yearned yet for the great, open spaces. The ample dimensions of the cavern had sufficed so far. However, he really did not relish the prospect of once again being buried alive, as it were, in yet another dark and narrow coffin. But he had little choice and, as he observed Gorval descend into the depths, he made up his mind to follow. The gap was quite narrow and so he prepared himself to squeeze into the hole. He was relieved to see that just below the surface lay the first step of a staircase, which led steeply downwards. Gorval had already disappeared into the darkness. He hesitated momentarily, for he could see no more than a few paces ahead. It came as quite a shock when he heard a small explosion, and then bright light flooded upwards, completely filling the grotto; evidently his guide had lit a torch. Gorval could now be seen, standing at the bottom of a small flight of stairs, and awaiting his descent. Guided by the illumination he had no difficulty distinguishing his footing, and rapidly joined his companion below. As his head fell below ground level he could hear the paving stone draw close above him once again, concealing this entryway from prying eyes.

Finally, he stood upon the bottom-most step and observed Gorval, with a torch held high in one hand, striding along the path into the gloom ahead. He fell quickly into step, anxious not to be left behind. They proceeded like this for sometime. It was with some relief that Melaskkoli observed they were not descending any further into the earth. In fact there even seemed to be a slight upward trend to their progress. Suddenly Gorval came to a halt. "Coommmeee feeeelllooowww. Weee muusstttt gooo bbyyyy thiiissss waaaaayyy". He caught up with his guide, and looked to where the fellow pointed; his heart fell like a

stone. His short-lived hope that they might once again ascend towards the cavern above was dashed. Before him he could see what appeared to be a vast well, which plunged into the depths of the earth. It was some distance in diameter, and he could feel a strong breeze blowing up from below. The current felt warm against his skin, but he shivered nonetheless. He could not quite make out what it was that Gorval intended. But then he followed the direction of the creature's pointing finger, and saw a narrow staircase that wound down like a massive spiral along the walls of this vast chasm. There was no railing on the outside edge, and the shaft dropped away sheer to one side. Melaskkoli could already feel the nausea rising in his stomach at this awful prospect. Gorval began to advance down the long, winding staircase that followed the perimeter of the shaft. Melaskkoli held back, fighting the horror that was rising through his body, even to his throat. He could feel it tightening now, and constricting his already laboured breathing. Gorval noticed his hesitation, and came back up the stairway to observe him more closely. He could see the fear in the young human's eyes and, for an instant, he was at a loss to account for his condition. He followed the young fellow's gaze, and realised that it was directed to the shaft that stretched away beneath them. Then he understood what was passing through the lad's mind. He approached him, and looked directly into his eyes. "YOOUUU WIIIIIIIII FOOOLLLLOOWW". The voice echoed through his mind like a detonation. Gorval immediately resumed his descent, this time not even bothering to see if his charge had complied with the order. Melaskkoli found his feet moving as if of their own volition, and already he had set foot on the top stair of this precipitous descent. His terror rose, for he discovered himself to be completely unable to control his movement. The fear had not gone, but his body seemed to have taken control of his actions completely. Step by step, his heart beating like a hammer, he followed his guide down this deadly road, with just the flickering light, its flame driven wildly about by the winds blowing up from the depths, to guide his terrified steps. And thus they made their way into the great deeps of the under lands.

The sun had not yet raised her head above the encircling horizon of the great desert. The cool of the night lingered over the ground, dressing the earth in a soft raiment of dews, and waiting to be disrobed by the bright aurora. The household had already risen, and the servants were busying themselves, loading the pack animals with their supplies. Alaste, his wife and daughter, had already breakfasted before the three scholars finally made their way into their company. "Ah! My friends. You slept well?" enquired their host, with his usual enthusiasm. "We'll just have to accustom ourselves to the early starts again, I suppose", observed Hesvee, with a complete dearth of zest. "No matter, gentlemen. We shall be off soon. My servants have already loaded the beasts. All that remains is for us to eat, and then be on our way; though we shall have to be our own masters - and servants - in future, of course". The three of them settled down to the small meal, which they hastily consumed to avoid any further delay. Then the whole party made their way outside to greet the rising dawn. Alaste turned to both his daughter and wife, and embraced them warmly. The others turned away, a little embarrassed to witness this expression of affection, and feeling that they intruded upon what might be a private and, indeed, final separation. Again, neither of the women displayed any distress, and were in good spirits; evidently they were well used to the master of the household setting off on such ventures. And then the farewells had been concluded. It but remained for him to instruct his steward on the running of his affairs during their absence, and the three of them were set to go. Hesvee, Ferioque and Celarent bade their own adieux to the ladies, Celarent with much

awkwardness when he came to Erame. However, he was heartened to observe that same warm smile directed towards him, which revived somewhat the fanciful notion that perhaps there existed a degree of affection there beyond mere friendship. Alaste took his position at the head of the small column and, grasping the halter of one of his mules, he started to draw the beast forward. The train fell into line behind the lead animal, and the trio of scholars fell into step alongside. The only sounds that could be heard in this early morning hush were the shuffling of hooves upon the softened, sandy ground, and the huffing breaths of the beasts, as they expelled great clouds of vapour into the cold, dank air. They had decided to time their departure to avoid the morning rush-hour, when the herd animals were being brought down to the oasis. They did not expect their exit to excite much interest beyond that of any other expedition conducted by their host. He had suggested, however, that some people might be surprised at the rapidity of their leaving; but then again he was a trader, and must needs go where the profit lies. Celarent cast a last look backwards, once more to savour the beauty of the Erame. But he was disappointed for he could see that she had already disappeared into the building. Only her mother, Tellea, remained, to gaze after their departing backs. Thus, the heart, subject as it is to the vagaries of passion, must rise - and then fall - enslaved in its dependence upon fortune. Erame's premature absence suggested that his presence might not pre-eminent in her mind after all. He steeled himself against the onset of disappointment, and returned his attention to his comrades as they led their beasts through the town. The hour was early indeed, for there was not a sight, nor barely a sound, of any of the townsfolk yet risen from their slumbers. They strode quietly through the gardens that surrounded the spring, and then onwards through the narrow streets until finally they came out into the open desert. The sun had risen above the edges of the surrounding hills, and her beams cast their enlivening heat across the surface of the sands. Wherever she laid her touch there sprung forth a gleaming stream of glinting diamonds, as the fine dewes sparkled under her regal influence. And then these diamond points were, in turn, transformed into curling wisps of mist, which danced softly upon those gossamer gems. Now they were wading through a low sea of silken coolness that flowed gently all about them, its steaming heart lifting higher and higher into the cool dawn air before disappearing within the fiery orb's embrace.

They followed the main route from the town before turning off this track, and striking out into the virgin sands of the wasteland. It was not a difficult matter to navigate their way here, for all that was required was to keep the rising sun to their left, and they would surely be headed north; in this trackless void there were few landmarks to guide their path. Their host assured them that he was quite confident in holding them to their course, even in the depths of the night, but only so long as the skies remained clear, for the stars would show their path as clearly as the bright sun, but in their own cool way. It had been agreed to travel as far as possible into the evening, and recommence their voyages in the early matinal hours, for this would ensure that they conserved both their energy and water supplies. Their main concern was not so much for food but water, for themselves and for their beasts. Arid as the desert appeared, Alaste reassured them that he was well acquainted with the springs that lay along their route, and that they would, at least, not die of thirst. But he could not resist that one aside when he added his emphasis to the phrase "at least", and threw a glance at Celarent, winking at the young fellow. Both Hesvee and Ferioque seemed to miss the joke or, if they understood it, did not show any great appreciation for their guide's wit; but Celarent smiled solemnly at the allusion. Their trail

was remarkable only in its uniform character. On either side the desert stretched evenly and remorselessly into a vague distance. The sun rose relentlessly in the sky and, as the heat grew, so it was that the abundant wildlife retreated to their protective quarters below the surface; in truth, this was a far from desolate land. All about them could be seen the desert's habitants, each pursuing those ends most suited to their sustenance. These were, for the most part, smaller creatures, and better suited by size to this environment. Everywhere great numbers of dark-haired rabbits sped over the ground, darting this way and that, carelessly indifferent to the travellers as they passed by. They bounded into the air, leaping as if in a sheer exultation for life. From time to time a sand cat would make its furtive way over the dunes, its sharp yellow eyes ferociously seeking the next meal. Occasionally, brightly coloured lizards would flit across their path, anxiously pursuing smaller prey, mostly insects, flies, ants, and even smaller lizards, which formed the mainstay of their diet. Far overhead, and almost lost in the blue distance, could be seen the lords of this realm, the great eagles that floated the air currents, roaming over the wilderness, calm and detached, far removed from the mere worldly concerns of men and beasts.

The travellers moved at an easy pace, conserving their energy but, nonetheless, covering the ground rapidly. Their way, though unmarked, was easy. The ground was level, and the sand soft beneath their feet, gently cushioning each step. They moved out deeper and deeper into the desert, with the clear azure skies soaring overhead, and the sun scaling their heights steadily. Already far ahead, floating and twisting in the heat haze of the pale horizon, could be seen the outlines of the great Northern mountains. Alaste had reckoned that it would not be too long before they gained their foothills. Celarent found himself staring eagerly in their direction, straining to pick out any detail in their vague masses. It was sometimes difficult to distinguish between those mighty grey bulwarks, which heaved their mist shrouded shoulders over the horizon, and the flickering and shimmering mirages that danced magically and beguilingly, coaxed forth by the sun's influence. There was something indeed intoxicating about this strange prospect. Sometimes it seemed as if a great sea lay before him, and he would swear that he could hear the sounds of crashing waves beating upon this desert shore, the white frothing surf flung high into the air. And then the scene would shift, and a forest of shuddering trees would present themselves to his eyes, their boughs fluttering and shaking in an intangible breeze. He was familiar with such phenomena but it was easy to see how the unwary might be trapped by such bewitching images. As they passed across the great sands Celarent would cast a wistful glance along the route by which they had come. There he might catch a glimpse of one of the sand cats quartering its territory, anxiously hunting down prey before the noonday heat would burst upon the ground. Alaste had informed them that they would arrive at their first watering hole long before that time arrived. It seemed sensible to discontinue their day's march then, before that violent heat descended upon their heads; they could remain there by the waterside during the day, resting and sleeping, before enjoying the cool of the evening briefly, and then again setting off upon their travels during the latter hours. Celarent was amazed that their new-found friend could pursue a path through this desert with such certitude. There were no landmarks that he could decipher, beyond that given by the position of the sun in the sky. Finally, his curiosity overcame his natural reticence, and he quickened his pace until he had caught up with Alaste, who was still heading the column. Meanwhile, both Hesvee and Ferioque walked beside each other, exchanging but few words, their attention inwardly directed.

Alaste heard the approaching footsteps but continued his march without looking back. "Sir!" called Celarent. At this the guide spared a glance round, but still did not slacken his pace. The younger man fell into step beside him, and they walked along in silence. It was Alaste who prompted the question. "So, lad. How are you bearing up? Is the heat too much for you yet?" "No indeed, sir. Not at all. We're accustomed to such temperatures, although vigorous exercise is not such a usual accompaniment". "Of course you are", commented Alaste. "Still we'll reach the water hole soon, and take our rest there". "That was what I was going to ask you, sir. How can you be so sure of your path, sir?" "Well firstly, my friend, please stop addressing me as 'sir'. I can quite understand that that's most appropriate for our more elderly companions, illustrious scholars as they are. But I'm a humble merchant, and don't require such civilities". "Very well, ss...", replied Celarent, stumbling in his efforts to break the habit. "Very well, Alaste", he added cautiously. "But I'm very curious as to how you're able to gauge your path?" "Ah well. That might be a mystery indeed, might it not?" added the merchant, with a mischievous smile. "I might attribute it to the mystical arts. Or portray myself as an adept of the desert ways. Or perhaps it's a simple case of knowing where you start from, and then fixing your aim on a distant target. So I regret to say it's the last. All I needed to do was to set my course by that", and he pointed with a finger into the distance. Celarent followed the direction he had picked out, whilst narrowing his eyes against the light, the more clearly to see. He could hardly distinguish anything which might serve the purpose that their guide asserted. "I'm afraid I can't see anything but dust; or maybe dust and mirages, and the distant mountains". "Ah well you see, I've lived in these parts many years, and the horizons here are as familiar to me as the back of my hand. So I do serve some purpose as a guide after all", he laughed. Celarent had to concede the point. "I guess so". "Now don't worry, my friend. We'll find our water, and the desert will not dry your bones so soon. And another secret". He leaned towards Celarent as if to whisper in his ear. "I can smell the stuff as well". "You can smell water? Now you're undoubtedly pulling my leg, sirrah". "No. It's quite true, my young friend. Water has a smell all its own; and the greater the thirst, the stronger the scent". Celarent gave the fellow a glance, formed half way between incredulity and belief. But Alaste seemed quite serious. The former thought it better not to pursue the discussion further, and thus avoid giving offence. They trudged along side-by-side while Celarent scanned the distant horizon, looking for clues from within its grey brown mists.

Behind them, Hesvee and Ferioque watched the two leaders, both of whom seemed to be enjoying some kind of joke. "Well. Here we are, Hesvee", opined Ferioque. "I don't know about you but I still feel like I'm going to wake up in my bed, safe at home, instead of going off on this harebrained scheme. I don't know what's got into me?" he added jokingly. "I think that it must be the same thing that set me off, friend", replied Hesvee. "Old fools and all that, I believe the condition is thus described". "You could be right. Still, it was time for a change, and who knows? The map may indeed lead us somewhere. Anyway, I think we're in safe hands, at least for the time being. As for what awaits us in those mountains up ahead, well?" "Yes. But there's truly only one means to discover that end. Let's hope it's not too final", replied the master, with grim humour. And so the party toiled across the wastes, to meet with a good or bad end, whichever fate felt inclined to dispense.

The pair continued into the deeps. Melaskkoli was entirely helpless within the grip of that

relentless force, from which he sought fruitlessly to free himself. He was partly hampered in his efforts by the realisation that, should he succeed, he would find himself precariously positioned at the immediate margin of an apparently bottomless pit. The sheer terror that had invaded his body seemed to have slightly receded now; for even that horror could not be physically sustained for very long. It really is quite extraordinary how adaptable both the human frame and psyche are, especially in circumstances that make the most grievous demands upon each. That is not to say that the dread had faded completely. He was very much aware of his predicament, and it was only too clear what fate he might encounter should his step falter but one iota. From time to time his tread would displace a few small stones, which were scattered upon the pathway before him. They would clatter over the ground towards the path's edge before disappearing noiselessly into the depths. He did not dare to observe more closely their descent, but he could hear no sound, not an echo, of those rocks striking even a distant surface. He moved, step by step, much in the manner of a puppet suspended by strings, awkwardly and joltingly, down the seemingly endless ranks of steps that stretched below. Fortunately the risers were quite shallow, and he did not have to worry too greatly about losing his balance on their account. Gorval moved steadily ahead always, seemingly quite unperturbed by the experience. They marched down and downwards, moving slowly round the great perimeter, and ever descending into the great dark. He could yet feel the strong gusts of wind blowing up from below and, as they descended, it seemed that these draughts were growing warmer. His knees felt shaky. If he had not been propelled by the power that Gorval exerted over his frame he would surely have fallen to his death. His body ached with fear and exhaustion, and his mind reeled under the waves of terror that broke over him, driving his thoughts awry. Again that strange sensation, of having experienced all of this before, assailed him. Despite the alarm occasioned by his present position he could not shake the feeling that this was somehow quite familiar. The memories of his past life grew ever more tenuous, with each pace that he took into this peculiar future. On and on they went; and time passed immeasurably. The torchlight flickered ever before him. Sometimes it was all he could do to fix his attention upon its wavering flame, but this seemed to expel some of his fears. It came as quite a shock to see the line of steps coming to an end, to terminate in a small platform just below him. Gorval had stopped, and was watching him as he climbed down the last few flights. As he drew closer he could see that there was a small doorway set into the rock. It was with considerable gratitude that he finally stepped aside, and entered its warm and embracing darkness. He spared a glance backwards to observe the stairway, as it continued downwards from the parapet, disappearing finally into the pit. The passageway they had entered was quite narrow, but sufficiently wide to be able to pass by, and with a little room to spare on either side. The ceiling was rather low and he noticed that it, together with the walls and the floor, had been sculpted to a fine finish; and more, that upon those surfaces had been carved quite extraordinarily intricate designs. There was insufficient time or light to examine those markings more carefully, but they seemed to depict a series of episodes in some unfolding story. Here and there he could see displayed the strange outlines of beasts, and interwoven amongst these the unmistakably bizarre forms of the Gaki race themselves. It was somewhat surprising - and disturbing - therefore, to observe, inscribed within one of these narrative sections, the form of a human being. Up to this point he had not seen a single individual of his race - or, indeed, image thereof - throughout his entire progress in this underground land. The only figure that graced his view otherwise was the becloaked profile of his guide, striding always before him. He had slowed slightly in an attempt to examine more closely these

stony figures. As he did so, however, Gorval had swiftly turned, and waved to him to keep up. Fortunately he had now regained full control of his faculties, and no longer had to endure the unpleasant sensation of being subject to another's will. As he recollected his recent ordeal, he felt a thrill of fear run through his body, his mind's eye running again over that desperate descent.

They had now emerged from the passageway and were entering a small, but relatively well-lit, chamber. He had noticed that the green luminescent mosses did not grow at these depths, and they were now wholly dependent on torches to illumine their path. It was by this light that he could see that they were no longer alone. Dotted around the perimeter of the small antechamber were the figures of other Gakis, all of whom seemed to serve the function of guards. They were dressed in a kind of light armour, composed of he knew not what material, though it did appear metallic. Each one also carried a short stabbing spear in one hand, and a buckler in the other. They gave no indication that they had noticed the arrival of either Gorval or himself. The former indicated to his companion to remain motionless, whilst he disappeared from the room via a small doorway, this aperture draped in some kind of heavy, shiny material. Melaskkoli glanced about him, taking full advantage of this opportunity to examine his surroundings. He made no move towards the guards, presenting as they did a rather formidable and sinister appearance. The place itself was rather nondescript, roughly oval in shape, with undressed walls, ceiling and floor. The only openings were those of the entrance, and the doorway by which Gorval had recently exited. He remained there only a short span before his guide re-entered the room, and gestured to him to follow. Gorval stood to one side as he ushered his charge into the adjoining chamber. The first thing that struck him was the precise dimension of this area. It was a perfect circle in form, and within the precise centre of the room stood a table, which mirrored perfectly that elegant geometric figure. Around the table, at intervals, were arranged chairs, and it was towards these that the visitors' attention was drawn. He counted a dozen in all, each placed equidistantly around the table, and in turn occupied by the dark figure of a Gaki. At one point on the circumference, he noted, was a small flight of steps, which led from the floor right up to the table's surface. He felt someone tap his shoulder, and it was Gorval, urging him forwards. "Issssss heeee preeeeepaarreed?" one figure demanded; Melaskkoli could not tell which. Gorval nodded. "Theennnn heeee maaaayyy taaakkkeee hisssss pllaaccee". Gorval took his arm and led him to the side of the table near the steps. Then he pushed Melaskkoli towards the small staircase. The latter was rather disinclined to follow this direction, but Gorval was very insistent. For one awful moment he thought the Gaki might again utilise his dreadful skill to force him to obey. The memory of this was sufficient for him to resolve that he would proceed according to his own will, and not that of another's. Without any further prompting he ascended the short incline, and found himself standing upon the table surface. Gorval pointed to the centre of the circle and, by this gesture, Melaskkoli understood that he was required to stand there. The room was well lit, by Gaki standards, and as he took his place he turned to face his instructor. He observed that all present sat with faces concealed, their faces shrouded in darkness. Furthermore, each Gaki wore a thick hood, which fell forward in great black folds over his or her head, this lending an even greater air of menace to the proceedings. Melaskkoli stood stock-still, observing them as they were quite evidently observing him. "So you have finally found your way back to us, young one?" a voice boomed through the room. The intonation and sibilance to which he had become accustomed was not present in this strange accent, though it lacked the timbre of

a human expression. He was quite sure that those tones could never have been uttered by one from amongst his own species. He looked about him, trying to see who it was that might be addressing him. The words seemed to have come from every direction. He scrutinised the hooded figures carefully, hoping to gain a clue as to their source. But there was only a deep silence. Nothing stirred in the depths.

The desert travellers had already covered a considerable distance in a relatively short space of time. Although they had not pressed forward quickly, they had maintained a steady pace, and the going had been easy. It was only mid-morning when Alaste called to his fellows from his position at the head of their small caravan. "Well. Good news. Fresh water today, gentleman". Celarent and his two masters scanned the land for some sign of the water hole. Celarent had been expecting to see something, albeit on a smaller scale, that resembled the generous springs of their recent dwelling place. But apart from a few straggly bushes and an aged tree, crooked and riven, and quite stripped of foliage, there was nothing to give credence to their guide's declaration. "What do you mean?" called Hesvee. He, too, was glancing this way and that, as was Ferioque. "Right there, my friends. Right before your eyes. Surely you can see. Am I the only one with good eyesight around here?" It was no good. Celarent suspected that Alaste was again indulging in one of his jokes, playing upon their ignorance of the desert. "Ah! I see you'll need some assistance. Well! Follow me", and he strode over towards that dried-up tree, which languished in solitary pathos before them. As he did so he pulled a spade from a pack carried by one of the mules, and walked briskly across the desert floor. When he reached the vicinity of that sad vegetation he raised the spade and, in a somewhat dramatic way, thrust it into the ground, and proceeded in a business-like fashion to excavate the spot. The others watched him with some surprise, and not a little amusement. Alaste continued energetically in this manner for some time before he had dug out a sizeable pit in the desert sand. The others by now had crowded around, the better to observe the mad man at his work. He had dug through the soft sand layers, and exposed a deeper stratum composed of pebbles and smaller rocks. Celarent felt something hit his cheek. He was about to call out to his industrious friend to be more careful when, on reaching up with his hand, he was surprised to discover a smear of mud upon his face. He craned forward, eager to see where it might have come from. Alaste was standing on a small mound of what appeared to be dark sand. As his spade chopped into the soil and he lifted it away, all could see a small, muddy puddle of water bubbling up from the cut. He did not cease in his endeavours, and before long the small pool had grown much larger; and it was filled to the brim with dark, brown but beautiful water. It was an unwholesome sight, but in the desert this was akin to unearthing a rich vein of gold within an exhausted mine. Alaste looked up to Celarent. "Here. Pass me a bucket". The latter went over to one of the pack mules, and returned quickly with the pail. He passed it down to Alaste who promptly dipped it in the water and, with a generous portion of mud and sand, passed it back up to the others. "Just let it settle a little, and then the mules can water first". At first the liquid appeared rather unappetising, but the pebbles and coarse sand quickly settled to the bottom of the container. In no time at all the water was potable, and the bucket was placed in front of one of the animals. Alaste called for more water carriers to be brought, and these too were quickly filled, and the water dispensed in the same manner. It seemed no matter how many times he dipped into the well it never ran dry. Soon all the animals had drunk their fill; and now it was the turn of the humans. They drank until they were bursting, so great a thirst had they grown under the ministrations of the blazing sun. Now

that their thirst was slaked they proceeded to replenish all the remaining water containers. Alaste had instructed them in the first rule of the desert. 'You can do without food; you cannot do without water'. "So my eyesight is better than yours it would seem, gentlemen?" he enquired ironically of them. "So it would seem. And fortunate for us, I think", replied Hesvee. "Yes. The desert has many hidden secrets, and her codes are known only to her children. Remain ignorant of them and these lands are an unforgiving master". The party settled down to eat a small meal; just some cheese with bread and fruit. The sun was at its height now, and the heat most fiercesome. Their guide showed them how to dig out some shallow burrows into which they could then climb. The earth would provide some shelter against the blazing sun, for there was nothing otherwise to shade them, and certainly not that impoverished tree, which cast its bare branches in futile defiance skywards. About them the desert settled into a deeper silence, as its denizens withdrew beneath the sands, protected from the furnace that burned fiercely above their heads.

Not a murmur was to be heard in the room. Melaskkoli felt his heart beating rapidly, and the blood that rushed in his ears sounded like a torrent. His mouth was dry, not merely from the arid atmosphere that suffused the room, but also from a fear, which had its icy grip about his throat. His breath felt even more laboured now than when he had been climbing down into this tomb. He stared fixedly at each of the figures that were seated near him. There was no movement, not an indication even of life. For a brief instance it passed through his mind that they were indeed all lifeless; but this ghoulish thought thankfully came and went. There would be little purpose in bringing him here for an encounter with the dead unless.... He shrugged away what that conclusion might lead him towards. "Yoooo sssaaaay heeeee iissss reeaadddy?" The voice rolled around the walls. "Yesss", replied Gorval. The fellow was standing just outside the circle, but facing towards Melaskkoli. "Very well. So you've returned to us, young one?" Melaskkoli again tried to determine the source of this enquiry. It occurred to him that an answer might help his case, and maybe even prolong his life. These creatures, though they had not acted in any kind of hostile fashion so far, might yet reverse this policy. "I'm not sure what you mean", he hesitated, "sirs?" "Your coming has been known to us for some time, Melaskkoli". He was surprised to be addressed by name. How was it possible that they should know it? "Ah!" was the best response that he could summon. "You hear my voice clearly, I trust?" Again he hesitated. "I do, though your speech doesn't sound much like that of the one who brought me here". There was a low chuckle. "Oooffff coourrrssee noooottt". He had the growing feeling that some kind of joke was being played upon him, and he felt a thrill of anger shoot through his body. "Look. I've come here. I don't know what's going on or what you want with me. I come from up above". He pointed upwards to emphasise the point. "We know quite well where you come from. We've been observing you for some time; perhaps longer than you realise. As for my speech, that is indeed different, as you have observed". There was a slight pause. "You don't hear me with your ears but with your mind. Do you understand?" He remained silent, trying to comprehend what the fellow was telling him. "With my mind, you say?" "Yes. Speech between us is usually limited to the conventional methods. But then these are not conventional circumstances". A long silence followed this statement. "So you're talking with your mind to my mind, do I understand rightly?" "That's correct, young one. I knew that you would see. And now as to why you are here. Tell me what you can recall?" It seemed that there was little point in dissimulation, and that if he was frank with these creatures they might be inclined to assist him. After a brief pause he began to give an account of his adventures so far. But his

questioner motioned with his hand, interrupting the flow of his speech. “No. I wish you to give me a full account, as far back as you can remember; even to your childhood. You understand?” Melaskkoli nodded, and retraced his steps accordingly. He spoke of his mother and father, and of their deaths, and how he had been placed under the guardianship of his uncle, and of his subsequent departure from that household. He did not speak of the strange thoughts that had passed through his mind when he had been travelling; even now they possessed a quality of impulsiveness that surpassed his comprehension. He told of his first encounter with one of their kind, and of the devastation that he had witnessed on the surface world. Then he recounted his visit to the cabin in the valley. He concluded his story with that fateful and accidental entry into this underworld. His speech was accorded complete silence, and similarly when he had finished his discourse; then that voice again arose in his mind. He wondered for a moment if the others in the room could hear it. “Very well. It’s in accord with our intentions”. There was a slight pause, as if his interlocutor was conferring with another. “Now I’ll tell you the truth of what has passed here”. Then the Gaki, without interruption, launched into a story so bizarre that Melaskkoli had the greatest difficulty in grasping its content. It was not that the narrator lacked clarity in his discourse. After all, these were directly apprehended conceptions, and so much more vivid than ordinary speech, with all its attendant semantic confusions. No. It was indeed the content. Melaskkoli had experienced many extraordinary events in the course of his brief life. For example there was that unaccountable restlessness in his moods, which he had omitted in his previous narration. But now the Gaki was communicating such an inconceivable interpretation of what had come to pass that his mind shied away, recoiling with incredulity. As the creature continued with his account Melaskkoli felt himself slumping down upon the table’s surface. It would have been quite impossible for him to have remained upright, so shocking was the news that this fellow relayed to him. The creature addressed him thus. “You’re of our race, young Gaki. You were not born to the surface dwellers, nor did you have that mother and father with them”. The seer could see that the young one was very bewildered. “I’ll proceed slowly in my account. Please be patient, and try to understand what I’m telling you. Believe me when I say - and I do speak for the Council in this - that we know that you’ll find it very hard to conceive it, but it is the truth that I tell you. I’ll retrace my steps somewhat. The history of the Gaki goes back further even than the birth of ‘your’ race, the humans. But it’s only of this cycle that I shall speak, and thereby some confusion will arise. For now let us just speak of our present history. For most of this world’s existence there was only one people that lived here. They were the surface dwellers with whom you are familiar. Their lives were hard, but they were a resourceful race, and strived always, as is the lot of all living beings. It was in their nature to prevail over other sentient forms and, in time, they were perhaps too successful. As the millennia passed they became the overlords of the surface. Their supremacy contributed to a hubris, which came to dominate their thoughts, for all were subdued before their ambition. However, what they didn’t fully comprehend was that the more they gained, the more they wanted. After a while they could no longer distinguish what was requisite to their lives, and instead were rather driven by an all-consuming greed, a craving to possess even more. This condition manifested almost as a disease amongst them, and became so prevalent that it was taken for their normal condition. And so as they consumed, so were they consumed. Their peoples spread over the face of the world; but whatever they touched was destroyed. As other creatures disappeared before this onslaught, as the abundant natural resources of this world were gradually eaten up, their happiness, which they believed was founded upon

their appetites, transformed slowly into a hunger that could never be allayed. Under their dominion the whole world was swallowed up, devoured by the beast that they had unleashed within themselves. There were few who challenged this way of life, and their voices went largely unheard, drowned out under the groaning demands and cries of more and more mouths as their race spread out over the face of this world. Finally, a few amongst their number, driven almost mad by the sickness, were forced to take refuge. The only solace they could find was beneath the earth, and it was in these dark caverns that they made their homes. But it was as they fled below that an extraordinary event came to pass. It was as if their bodies gave up a fraction of that life energy, and with this loss their forms transformed concurrently. This vital force itself sought out a new home, and deposited itself in clusters, dispersed here and there in the underworld. You encountered one of these during the course of your descent. Do you recall that cavern of gold which you passed through before you encountered our guide?" This last question prompted a nod from Melaskkoli. "You also remember, perhaps, that you grew increasingly faint at that time?" Again he nodded. "Well that is simply a consequence of you giving up a part of your life force. This realm will have become more and more familiar as you returned to it, in both body and soul, if you like. The physical transformations that we underwent, which distinguishes us so much from the humans above, represent those appetites, or rather our inability to satisfy these cravings fully. We believe that the flight of our ancestors, and all those who have since moved from the surface world to the Gaki realm, that it is a form of instinctive migration, a subconscious attempt to preserve the whole species. It was found that as more of our kind came to make the underworld our home this seemed to lessen the effects of the disease above. The surface dwellers were more easily able to control their appetites and, as a consequence, the natural resources recovered, and a new equilibrium established. That's not to say that greed was abolished, but at least it has been attenuated. However, the disease continues to manifest amongst us, and for some considerable period now it has gradually worsened. The hunger that has always been a dominant part of our lives, although manageable to some extent, shows increasing signs of getting out of hand. What you witnessed on the surface world was just one of many upsurges from the under lands. Now the Gaki, in increasing numbers, are venturing outside in order to satisfy those desires, those which can no longer be met here. There have always been some encounters between our kind and the surface dwellers, but we have managed thus far to contain any damage that might arise from these. But lately this has changed, and matters are going beyond our control entirely. The raids, that were once quite small and isolated, have become increasingly recurrent, and the numbers of those engaged larger and larger. It's just a matter of time before our existence becomes fully exposed, and then such terrible consequences will ensue". The Gaki paused in his story, allowing Melaskkoli some time to catch up. "However, there's an aspect to this which I've not yet revealed. There is, in the history of our people, and we believe also in that of the surface dwellers, a foreshadowing that such a time as this would come. For the most part we have regarded such stories much as other myths; something to amuse children, and the foolish. But it has become clearer that this particular legend too closely predicts what is indeed unfolding. The Great Hunger of the Gaki race is represented in these stories as a vast devouring monster, which will eventually consume not only the world, but also itself. If this prophecy is to be believed then Fate itself cannot be avoided. However, it is further presaged that two beings will come to us, as the saviours of the Gaki race, and that they will be human. For this to happen it was necessary that the Gaki should send an envoy to the upper realms, and that this servant

would in some way draw these two beings to the underworld. If they arrive here, and both are present simultaneously in one of the Caves of Life - that is, one of the energy depositories I have described - then the full tragedy will be averted. The Great Hunger will manifest itself, but instead of complete destruction this will lead to the final liberation of our people, and we will somehow be restored in our whole being. And now we come to you". Melaskkoli had been listening carefully to the fellow's tale, though with a considerable degree of scepticism. But he felt a shock of realisation jolt through his mind and body at the Gaki's last words. "Yes. You're that envoy. You were sent to the upper world, and within your mind was planted a set of memories that have no truth. For you to merge fully into human society it was most important that, in every respect, you resemble one of their people. In some ways that was the easier part of the task to accomplish; but your physical transformation was somewhat more problematic. Our scientists had been researching for some time the Gaki anatomy and physiology. They redoubled their efforts when it became clearer that the prophecy was something more than a fiction. It was discovered that prolonged exposure within one of the energy chambers led some Gaki to revert to a human physiology. It took a number of years, and the considerable dedication of quite a few of our foremost researchers, to ensure that this technique was refined sufficiently to allow you to pass unnoticed above. You were then placed in the care of that fellow you call your uncle, by the simple expedient of placing you at his door as an infant. We could not be sure how you would be treated; according to the histories this particular condition was not specified. As far as we could tell the Gaki envoy simply had to remain in the upper world for a significant period of time. This in itself was considered sufficient to set in motion the remainder of the prescribed events. We've no idea precisely how this is to come about, and we're not at all sure that we have achieved our objective. The only clue that we might have been successful is that the envoy would, of his own accord, return to the Gaki realm - which in fact you have". Again the seer paused in his account. Melaskkoli knew that throughout this entire interview he was being examined closely by those ranks of silent figures. His mind reeled under the facts that were being relayed to him, but mostly he rebelled against this bizarre presentation of his entire life history. Deep within, however, there was an as yet unvoiced recognition that what was being recounted was the truth. But his psyche was not ready for such an admission, and for the time being he remained utterly confused. "There's one other thing. We have spies who operate in the overworld. They have not adopted human guise and so must remain extremely covert in their behaviour. One of these has been closely following the activities of a certain scholar in one of their cities. In fact it's the largest metropolis in this region, and certainly the most proximate. He's of particular interest since his studies include those relating to the activities of the mind, and its unusual attributes. It has come to our attention, by means that we don't need to disclose, that this fellow has recently become privy to some important papers that disclose, in part, the possible existence of a certain underground location. We were not quite sure of this fact for after all these scholars are always digging up old, and usually quite nondescript, papers, but in this case, and it really is quite extraordinary, this fellow was somewhat careless, and a fragment of one of these documents made its way forth from his dwelling. Our agent was able partly to decipher its contents, and thus recognise its significance. This was sufficient in itself to alert us, that one of the overground dwellers had an inkling of our existence or, at least, of one of our cities. He brought this report, and the fragment itself, to our attention; we were able to confirm his suspicions. When we realised the implications of this we assigned further agents, to keep an eye on developments. Indeed, the document must have impressed this

fellow mightily, for our last report indicates that he has left the city with two companions, and is currently making his way in the direction of what the humans call ‘the Northern mountains’; those, in fact, that lie directly above our heads. At first we thought that this group might include the two beings that were mentioned in the prophecy. However, when we heard of the composition of the party, our spirits sank. The prediction tells that one of the two will be a male, and the other a female. Now we know that this assembly is composed solely of men. It could be, of course, that one of these will form part of the pair, and that the female will appear from another quarter. We remain hopeful that this is the case, but there’s no sign of any other travellers who might be making their way here”. He fell silent whilst Melaskkoli sought to digest all that had been imparted to him. Up to a point it made sense. But whereas the mind might accept such a diet with difficulty, the heart will not. The news that his mother, for whom he felt such love, and for his father, that both had never really existed was beyond the scope of his emotions to contain. The memories were so real. It could not be possible that everything, his history, his memories, his thoughts and feelings, they were all a great lie. His whole being rebelled against such a notion, and a great fury arose deep inside him. “How can you tell me this? How can you say such things?” He could feel the tears beginning to run down his cheek, hot and scalding to the skin. “You’re lying”. He buried his head in his hands and drew himself up into a ball upon the table, his whole body shaking with the violent emotional turmoil that exploded within his being. The Gaki remained silent; not one moved to comfort him. Yet within their hearts there fluttered the vaguest recognition of the torment to which they had exposed their fellow. But there was nothing to be done but let the storm express its own nature. They remained still for some time, listening calmly and coolly to his sobbing, and to the heartfelt calls, which railed out against the cold rock walls. Finally, the cries became more subdued, and the seer felt able to continue with his tale. “We’re sorry, young one, for your suffering. We knew that when we returned you to the human world you would regain all their passions. We’ve but one left to us – the great hunger of which I spoke. But as for anger, or lust, or any of that species, we know little. But we do know suffering, as does every creature that walks upon the earth or swims the seas or flies through the skies; for that is our universal birthright. And you have rediscovered this, both as a human as well as a Gaki. When you came back through the Cave of Life you relinquished some of that energy back into the rock. If you remain here you will gradually give back the whole of that life force; only then will you regain your true Gaki form and psyche. But that will take some time. For now you must endure the suffering that you have inherited”. Melaskkoli could hear his words, but still the import did not penetrate deeply. His whole being felt consumed in his loss, and its intensity seemed to overlay any other sensibility. The pain had subsided a little, and he was able to raise his head to look at the quiet assembly. “So what now? What happens to me? I’ve lost my family once, not even a real family. My life’s a fraud and I’ve nothing left. I’m neither Gaki nor human. Should I remain here or return to the upper world? Can’t I resume my life there? It’s not too late surely. I still have human form. Can’t you send me back?” This last was uttered with great feeling, for he had no desire to remain in this dark place the rest of his life. “You can’t go back. Even if we were willing to repeat the experiment, and return you to the upper world, we do not have time. Events are moving with great rapidity. The raids are growing more frequent with each passing day. Soon the earth dwellers will realise what is happening; and we believe that war can be the only result. And that perhaps is what the Great Hunger truly is; that we shall all be devoured in a conflict, which will finally end our race. So I’m afraid, young one, that you must remain with us. But as time proceeds you’ll become more accustomed to

our world, and to the life we live here; that is, what is left to us, of course". Melaskkoli quietly absorbed the implications of the seer's statement. His grief had diminished somewhat, or at least its more violent manifestations. Now he was left merely with an aching hollowness within his heart, that silently cried in its loneliness. He was quite alone amidst this solemn gathering.

The heat of the day had long passed, and with the cooling airs the travellers awakened. Immediately both Celarent and Alaste set about preparing the evening meal. They had brought some kindling with them, which had been packed upon the backs of two of their mules. Despite the presence of the old tree they had refrained from stripping it for wood to feed their fire. It was not simply that this would deprive future travellers of that vital landmark to the well; there was also something so poignant about life struggling to survive against such odds, just clinging to this small foothold in the desert. This was a sacred place, and not to be desecrated for such a small necessity. In a short time there was a pot of water bubbling above the newly lit flames, and to this the ingredients for the meal were being enthusiastically added. Both Hesvee and Ferioque seemed quite content to let their fellows indulge their appetite for labour. Alaste, however, had concluded that this was a state of affairs that needed to be remedied. He gave Celarent a quick glance before addressing the two venerable scholars. "Sirs. If you'd be so kind as to care for the mules? It would hardly do for us to sup when they might go hungry". He inclined his head in the direction of one of the packs that had been placed upon the ground nearby. "If you would. That's their feed". Both men seemed slightly surprised by the request, but quickly grasped its meaning, and set about their task. Alaste leaned towards Celarent. "It wouldn't do would it, my young friend, for our comrades to feel bereft of employment?" Celarent laughed quietly at the joke, and nodded his agreement. "Not at all. Not at all". The two continued with their preparations as their comrades saw to the welfare of the beasts. The water was boiling vigorously now, and to this was added dried meat, oatmeal and some root vegetables. The whole was left simmering gently whilst the two chefs retired, to seat themselves a short distance away from the fire. Although the temperatures had dropped quite quickly, nevertheless nightfall was still some way off, and the remnants of the daytime heat were quite oppressive. They were joined shortly afterwards by their two companions who had now finished their chores. "Perhaps this would be a good time to discuss the division of labour within our little company, gentlemen. I, of course, being the guide to the party, must devote the greater part of my energies to ensure that we arrive at our destination. I therefore propose that until we arrive in the environs of that area depicted by the map, I assume leadership of the party. When we get there only then would it be prudent to pass this command over to the expedition leader, Hesvee". At first the master appeared somewhat uneasy concerning the arrangement. It was not that he was confounded by any notions of who should be in charge. If anything he had a marked preference to avoid that role. It was certainly true that when it came to his profession he brooked little interference in his business or, for that matter, its conduct. Rather it had not even passed through his mind that such a deliberation would be necessary. However, he was sufficiently astute to recognise that every group needed someone to take charge, and to make those decisions that demanded especially an immediacy, which could not be supplied by prolonged discussion. But he felt that in this respect Ferioque would be the more suitable choice, for he was the cartographer of the party; and it was thus he gave voice to his conclusion. "I'm quite in accord with your proposal for my own part, my friend. But surely my colleague would be a much better candidate?" He was about to explain his

reasoning when the man himself spoke up. “Oh! There can be no question of it. Alaste is by far the better choice in navigating this desert, and getting us to our destination in the mountains. But it’s also crystal clear, indeed blindingly obvious, that you should be our leader from then on. I’ve no head or heart for the matter, and this is very much your province. So I’m afraid, whether you like it or not, you must be chief in that place”. “But in response to your view, and I quite understand your position, though I must beg to point out...”, began Hesvee. It was clear, at any rate, to Celarent, that the two were about to embark upon one of their extremely lengthy and tortuous debates on the pros and cons of the subject. But Alaste was quick to see which way the wind was blowing. “And what of you Celarent? What’s your view on this? We might as well hear everyone while we have the leisure to pursue the theme?” Both Hesvee and Ferioque were shocked into silence by Alaste’s interruption. It had not occurred to either one that Celarent might be consulted on this issue. It was not that Alaste thought the scholars boorish, or in any way ill-mannered or prejudiced. But it did occur to him that sometimes, when one was venturing into new territory, it was necessary to acquire new attitudes; and one of these certainly would be the recognition that, at least on this venture, Celarent was an equal member of the party, and should act, and be treated as such, accordingly. If the two academics were surprised, their student was even more so. “Er, er”, he began unpromisingly. “I’d be interested to hear your views, my young friend. After all, you’ve known both these gentlemen far longer than I. You would perhaps be in the best position to arbitrate on such a dispute”. Now all three were quite aghast. It would be something of an exaggeration to regard Alaste’s suggestion as almost contrary to the laws of nature, but certainly, in terms of its impact on his fellows, it approached that category. “Well, well.....”, Hesvee attempted to resume the thread of his argument. Yet again Alaste interrupted. He could barely conceal his glee, such was his enjoyment of the trend of the inquisition. “Well, my young friend. I’m sure we’d all like to hear your opinion?” There was no other choice but for Celarent to give some kind of reply, if only to protect Hesvee, and for that matter, Ferioque, from further embarrassment. “Well”, he started. “If I may be permitted, and without any intention whatsoever to cause offence?” At this point he looked worriedly in the direction of both the master and the professor. “If I might say to begin with, I believe Alaste has a good point. I concur with his view as to leading our party to the mountains but, in my opinion, and I hasten to add it is but a perspective and may easily be disregarded....” Alaste would have none of it. “Now, now, young fellow. Don’t be modest here. You’ve a right to be heard equally amongst us. Speak up!” “Er well, as I was saying. I believe that since Hesvee is, in essence, the proponent of this mission, and it was his judgement to call upon his most esteemed colleague to play a consultative role, I say that we should preserve this order, and thus the master should indeed be the expedition leader, at least from the point at which we arrive in the area delineated by the map. However, in line with the argument, and thus obviously when it comes to those matters pertaining to the interpretation of any cartographical features, then in this respect, as the party’s only cartographer, it’s clear that my learned superior’s opinion should take precedence”. The whole of this speech was uttered without the benefit of a single intake of breath, so anxious was Celarent to convey his meaning, both without interruption from a certain party, who seemed to be enjoying the discomfiture of his companions a little too much, but also to ensure that he did not lose the thread of his finely tuned, and almost legalistic proposition. There was a very long silence while those assembled imbibed his utterance. And then, “Excellent, my young friend. Absolutely first class, and so succinctly put”, opined Hesvee. “Indeed, a most propitious response”, added Ferioque. Celarent let

out a deep exhalation mindful suddenly of the fact that air needs occasionally both to be expired as well as inspired. It would seem that his tightrope performance had satisfied all, and displeased none. "Might I say something, young friend?" interjected Alaste. Celarent's heart fell. Just as he thought he had extricated himself so skilfully from the trap into which he had been so carefully placed by their guide, now the fellow was preparing to lure him into another. "Might I just say", as Alaste milked the tension, "I have to agree: a perfect solution". And so that was it. A leader had been chosen, and thenceforth the allocation of duties was not to be a committee matter, but for their head alone. The remainder of the time before the meal was passed in pleasant exchanges, with the regaling of short - and not so short - tales of times past, with perhaps a modicum of creativity appended. Darkness had fallen by the time the meal was ready to serve, and Alaste, as if in an act of contrition for his previously mischievous conduct, scooped out the contents of the pot into four bowls, and presented one to each of his companions in turn, before allotting himself his due reward. The outdoor life certainly adds a zest to the appetite, and the men wolfed down their meal with little ceremony - and even less delicacy - before retiring. It had been conceded by their leader that perhaps they might conclude their travels at this point. Both scholars were feeling the strain somewhat and they had made excellent progress so far. 'But they must be ready to be off', Alaste warned them, 'on the morn! And no time for slacking!' Suitably admonished each took his place on the ground near the fire, and abandoned themselves to a pleasing unconsciousness. Apart from the crackling of the burning wood and the occasional shuffling of their mules, nothing could be heard in the vast space all around. The sky was as clear as the brightest crystal, and across its vast darkened face the stars stretched outwards into the infinite, a silver dusting flung across the void. Celarent could hear the sounds of snoring emanating already from the direction of his comrades' prone forms. A full stomach and fresh air have a deeply somnolent effect upon the body and the mind, especially on those of a more mature development. He, the youngest of the party, and still a little disturbed by his recent elevation of rank within the group, lay quietly for a while, and contemplated the vast heavens above.

He was just about to drift off into an enveloping slumber when he thought he heard a small sound over to his left, some distance out in the surrounding darkness. At first he thought it might be one of the pack animals, kicking a stone over with its hoof. But then his eyes grew heavy again, and sleep beckoned most enticingly. A sharp crack echoed through the night; he was wide-awake in an instant. He glanced around at the other sleeping figures. There was no sign of movement apart from the steady rise and fall of the blankets, draped over the chests of their torpid forms. He looked to where the mules were stationed. They had been safely hobbled for the night. It was hardly a necessity but taken as a precaution against them taking fright, and escaping into the desert. It occurred to him that perhaps it would have been wise to set a guard. They had acted thus before; and yet Alaste had decided against such a safeguard. He assured them that these were friendly regions, and that it was rather unlikely that others would stumble upon them here, far out in the open desert. Most travellers would follow the more established routes, the very ones that this party had chosen to avoid. Celarent hesitated. Should he raise the alarm and awaken the rest of the party, or leave them be? He certainly had no desire to arouse the ire of his fellows. He had quite convinced himself now that his over vivid imagination was at play, and he resolved to ignore its overtures. Yet again he was on the point of dropping off when he felt something strike his blanket, and a low voice whispered in the darkness.

“Hsst”. It was quite unmistakable, and not to be ignored longer. “Here! Celarent!” It was some relief to know that whoever was about to assail him at least knew his name. “Come over here. I’m just a few yards away, but come quietly”. Now a sane and rational man would have alerted his fellows, and then grabbed a sturdy sword and made haste to capture - or slay - whoever it might be who had crept up on their camp in the depths of the night. But the fact that this person knew his name, and that the voice was unmistakably female, rendered him less judicious. It also seemed curiously familiar though he could not place it. He raised himself carefully until he was kneeling, and then stared in the direction from which the voice appeared to come. “I’m over here. Come quietly. Don’t wake the others”. Again it struck him, what kind of foolishness could lead a fellow to follow such advice? Whoever may have uttered it might as well have said, “Come over here so that I can kill you without witnesses”. The fact that it was a woman’s voice should not have been taken as a guarantee that he might not find a steel blade nestling up to his heart should he take up the invitation. Although he was not widely experienced in such affairs, he had heard that there were female as well as male brigands, and that it did not require a great feat of strength to plunge a blade into a body, nor that the feminine psyche necessarily excluded such an aptitude. Still, he was in different lands, and the mere unfamiliarity of his surroundings inclined him to behaviour that he would not demonstrate ordinarily. And so, wondering all the while, he found himself withal, creeping out into the desert night to encounter whatever destiny might bring his way. “Come away further”, the voice said. Now he really should pay attention to his instincts; but nevertheless he persisted in this madness. He was already some distance from the camp when he saw, just in front of him, a dark form crouched upon the ground. Whoever she might be she was completely covered by a dark robe, from head to foot. As he drew closer the figure rose, and simultaneously pulled back the hood to reveal what lay beneath. He was incredulous to observe the delicate beauty of none other than Erame, the daughter of Alaste. “What are you doing here?” he called out in surprise, his voice a little too loud for his neighbour’s liking. “Sssshh. Keep quiet. I don’t want to draw the others’ attention. Especially not my father”. In a slightly lower tone but with a faint edge hysteria behind it, he replied. “Well. What on earth are you doing here? Your father doesn’t know?” The last question, though redundant given Erame’s comment, was the most urgent from his point of view. Suddenly, he felt strangely complicit in what was obviously a deception. Erame anticipated his next outburst. “No. He doesn’t know I’m here. And I want it to stay that way for the time being”. He paused, quite uncertain how to proceed. On the one hand he was already sufficiently conversant with the guide’s temperament to know that he would be less than pleased to discover his daughter wandering about in the desert, completely alone and unescorted. He was also well enough acquainted with Alaste’s character to realise that he was a man who valued honesty, and who would have a converse contempt for anyone who sought to deceive him. But at this very moment these considerations seemed to dissolve like a mist in the presence of sunlight. Here he was, presently face-to-face with the most radiant creature that he had ever encountered, surrounded by the dark desert sands drifting away on all sides, star glittering skies overhead, and the hush of the night overlaying the whole dream-like scene. He was experiencing what can only be described as a dilemma of the head and of the heart, a relative novelty for him. “Well? You still haven’t answered my question”. She waved her hand at him, indicating that they should put some more distance between themselves and the camp; together they walked further into the desert darkness. Finally Erame judged that they were far enough away so that even Celarent’s ill-disciplined voice could not betray them. “I’m sorry to have alarmed you. It wasn’t my

intention, but I had to speak to you". "Well. I won't say that you alarmed me actually", he began. She smiled. "Of course not, but you never know what lurks in the night do you?" He coughed, to clear his suddenly tightened throat. "We should have posted a sentry. Even though your father said that it was safe, and it was unlikely that any wanderers should bump into us, you're proof that he was wrong, in that respect anyway". "Ah well", she laughed lightly. "We all make mistakes, don't we?" If she was spellbinding in the normal course of events, in this present environment she exerted an even more powerful hypnotic influence upon Celarent. He was finding it increasingly difficult to find the right words. It was as if his wits had been suspended completely, and he had been rendered an idiot. He felt he should remonstrate with her for her foolishness, for travelling alone in the desert. Yet he hardly felt in due possession of such sentiments as would become the older and wiser of the two. Moreover, she seemed quite unconcerned about her predicament, and rather more preoccupied with avoiding her father's wrath than any dangerous encounters with predators, human or otherwise, in this great wilderness. At last he managed to frame a question that did not sound completely ignorant. "Well. You still haven't answered. What on earth are you doing here? You should be at home". She looked at him with some amusement. "You think so do you, young Celarent?" Now she seemed to be mocking him, and that was almost intolerable. She hesitated but then continued, for she had observed his expression. "I really am sorry. I didn't want to draw you into this. If I'd roused any other in your party my father would know of it, and would be sure to break off the expedition to return me to safety. You're the only one I thought I could trust who would not react that way". She paused, watching him carefully, and waiting for his response. "I don't know what to do now. You can't be left here like this. Despite your father's confidence we're four men whereas you're quite alone. I must tell him of this or possibly place your life at risk; and that would be unthinkable to me". He stumbled in his words at this point, and his throat felt even tighter; it was all he could do to speak clearly. Fortunately, she did not notice his discomfiture. "I'll explain. When my father said that he was to make a trip to the Northern mountains I wanted to join the adventure. I knew for a fact that he'd never permit it. He indulges me in most matters, displaying a virtue in generosity, and a vice in discipline. But he wouldn't risk me on this occasion. As a child I would frequently travel with him on his trading missions, but then we would pass through lands that were lawful and well guarded. This, however, is a different matter. But also I felt compelled to go forth, and if you ask me the reason I could not tell you. I'm not generally inclined to disobedience. I would neither wish my father's wrath nor his sorrow, to witness such a breach of trust. So I can't claim that it's simply a matter of a wilful spirit pursuing its own pleasure. There's a significance to this mission that goes beyond my comprehension. I'm not sure that you'll sympathise with my explanation, but I do beg you to take what I've said to be true". Celarent considered her words but could not, in all honesty, claim to recognize her intentions. Nevertheless, she made her appeal in such a fashion as to render any repudiation of her request a most crass act. The genuineness of her treaty invited only an accession. "I will help you. But you must understand that I can't countenance you remaining thus in these lands. Surely you can see this". Her face showed her relief, to know that he was not about to reject her request. "Don't worry. I shan't remain unannounced much longer. Once we've arrived in the mountains it'll make little difference. It will be harder for him to turn back, and hopefully he'll be more amenable to my argument accordingly. I shall shadow your party, but remain out of sight. If you know of my presence then my safety is that much increased. During the day I must remain some way behind your caravan. But at night I shall approach your camp for greater

security; this surely must allay your fears". He looked at her somewhat doubtfully. It seemed to Celarent that there still remained a considerable degree of danger; yet her plan did offer a possible compromise. "You carry some form of blade to protect yourself?" he demanded. "Oh yes! I have – and the skill to use it", she smiled. "I assure you. When we reach the foothills I'll make my presence known. And no mention of your part in this will ever be made". He was still torn by the knowledge that he must maintain a deception that ill-fitted his character; yet Erame obviously depended on his complicity to carry out her plan. And he still had no clear insight into her motives. However, it seemed that she was not directed by selfish inclinations alone, and that some other force was in operation. He shook his head and muttered under his breath. "I'm a fool, I think. This is quite definitely not a decision based on my better judgement, but I'll go along with it. But I will say I don't like it one bit". Impulsively she stepped forward and gave him a hug, and then, hesitantly, a quick peck on the cheek. Already somewhat disarmed by his own sense of awkwardness this act rendered him into a state of even greater confusion. "Well alright. Now I shall leave you. But you must call out if there's any sign of danger". He regarded her with the most serious expression that he could conjure up, the more to emphasise his injunction. "I will, I promise. And again, thank you". For fear that she might be moved to another display, he nodded his agreement and started to turn away. He had taken only a few steps back towards the camp when he looked over his shoulder to observe her departure. There was no one to be seen; it was as if she had vanished into the sand. He continued on his way, treading on the ground lightly to avoid rousing his companions. He had nothing to fear. All three were still sleeping soundly, just as he had left them. He stretched out once more upon the sleeping blanket, and drew the thick, coarse material over his head. His mind was whirling wildly as he lay there in the darkness. A feeling of anxiety flooded his heart at the thought of the lone maiden out there in the desert night. The question came again and again; was this the right thing to do? He found no answer. Finally sleep came, and laid its consoling touch upon his body. He slept deeply, though his dreams were filled with strange and vivid images.

The seers sat in silent contemplation, and observed the young Gaki before them. His anguish was clear to all, and their helplessness equally evident to them. For the fellow, caught now between two worlds, and with an ancestry completely reversed by their companion's account, it was unsurprising that the news should not have had a devastating impact upon him. His sobs and cries had died away now, and he had fallen into a deep slumber. Wordlessly they rose to their feet, and withdrew from the chamber, leaving the speaker alone with his charge. Gorval also had departed, but only to the antechamber, there to await instructions from his superior. This latter rose from his seat and ascended to the table's surface to stand silently by the sleeping figure. He examined the boy carefully to ensure that the violent storm of emotion that had racked his body and soul had passed. After a few moments he descended from the table, and made his way out to greet Gorval. "Taakkkeee thee booyyyy toooo iDarii. Heee caann loooookk aaffteerrr hiimmm foor noow". Gorval nodded. The elder turned away from his servant, and walked towards the rock wall that lay just behind them. Without hesitation he merged his body into its solid face, and quickly disappeared from view. Gorval called out an order and two guards emerged from the darkness, to wait upon his instructions. "Taakkeee thee booy toooo thee Minniisstryy. Heeee issss iinn aaaa deeeepppp sssleeeppp. Maaakkee sssurreee heeeee dooesss nooot aawaakkeenn". The two guards left him to enter the council chamber; Gorval did not wait for them to reappear but made his own way to the

city above. He had work to do, and there was much preparation to be made; time was fast running out for the Gaki people. If the prophecy was to be fulfilled he and the council would do everything in their power to see it through to its end – or not, as the case may be. He must alert iDarii to his new duties.

Erame had returned to her small encampment. She was much relieved to discover that she did indeed have an ally in Celarent. She had not been at all sure what her reception might be. It would have been understandable if he had chosen to disclose her presence to her father. Of course, she did not realise that the fellow had fallen somewhat under her spell, for her natural modesty would have excluded that realisation on her part. But even she had had to acknowledge that her present adventure attached great risk. It was this consideration which had forced her to seek support for her decision. But her father was quite right; this region was relatively secure, and there was little real danger from vagabonds, or even wild beasts. However, life is largely a matter of the predictable failing to materialise - and its converse - and there was always the chance that she might fall foul of bad fortune. It made sense to alert one of the party of her presence (and as it turned out the most sympathetic) so that she could call for assistance should it be required. She had had but little time to prepare for this excursion. As soon as she became aware of her father's intentions she had been as excited as her mother, but in a disinterested way, as one not directly involved. However, as the hours had passed, the sentiment had grown within her heart to join the undertaking. She had tried to explain this inclination to herself, and had failed miserably, just as she been unsuccessful in demonstrating this phenomenon to Celarent. But, in truth, the impulse was quite unaccountable; and finally irresistible. She had made efficient arrangements to acquire the requisite provisions, and had departed shortly after her father and his party had left the oasis. She knew well the route they were taking. She had travelled often with him into the desert, not only to accompany him on his trading missions, but also when he pursued his love of the desert traditions; thus it was that they would return together to these wild places, and harken back to their ancestry. Both father and daughter loved the great open spaces of sand and sky, and the stark desolation that embraced this place. The cool, dry air of the wilderness seemed to act like a magnifying glass; it was as if you could look into infinity when gazing out into the boundless void. She loved her home, and the seductive beauty of the lush and verdant surroundings of the oasis. Its life-giving source was vital in every sense to their lives. But if anything, the surrounding wastes lent an emphasis to the value of their existence, measuring one world against the other. The fertility of the oasis was balanced against the barren lands that encircled it, creating a jewel in their hearts, which was of incomparable value, and never to be treated with complaisance or contempt. She had an inkling of what they sought in the Northern mountains, but this is not what impelled her on this adventure. It was more an instinct, which strived always onwards, against even her own counsel. Indeed, if she could not explain it to herself, how much the poorer in expression to another. Still, Celarent had proven himself a good friend, and she was hopeful that her plan would now succeed. She dared not contemplate what she would do if her father refused to continue with the enterprise, and instead insisted on escorting her home. In the night-time sky she could see the gleams from the flames of the camp-fire blazing upwards, and she felt calmed by that warming presence. She pulled the blankets up over her head to keep the chill air from her face and, despite her restless reflections, was soon fast asleep.

iDarii had been summoned to the Ministry. The instructions had been clear, but the reasons for his mission had not been forthcoming, or indeed its untimely announcement. He had been fast asleep when the guards arrived. His parents had been awakened by their loud and persistent knocking and, once roused, had grown more than slightly concerned to see who it was standing in their doorway. He had had little time to ready himself, and was told only that it was likely to be a long assignment. He tried to reassure both his mother and father, but the circumstances were really most unusual. Finally, he had managed to calm his mother somewhat, and his father had regained his phlegmatic demeanour, before the three - the two guards and himself - made their departure. He bid them both farewell, and assured them that he would see them again, and soon. But truth to tell, he was far from convinced by that promise himself. There had been all sorts of rumours flying round the city, even more than was usually the case. It was even being hinted that a surface dweller had been discovered, sneaking slyly through the city boundaries. This fellow had been apprehended only as he had arrived at the very centre of the metropolis; still others claimed that the fellow had been killed on sight, whilst yet more hinted that he had made good his escape, and was even now roaming free. At the same time there was still more gossip circulating concerning the events allegedly unfolding in the neighbouring caverns. So it was that these fanciful and fearful tales spread like wildfire; that they were on the brink of war. Some amongst them saw the infiltration of the human as the possible advance guard for an imminent invasion by the surface dwellers. The Ministry itself had played some part in the promulgation of a few of these confabulations; they had been regarded as a way of muddying the waters further. And, by spreading so much contradictory information, it was believed that the true state of affairs could be concealed more effectively. It mattered not greatly to iDarii. By his position within the security ministry he knew more than most of what was passing, both in the under- and over-worlds. But he was sworn to secrecy and with regard to the latest events he had no more idea than the rest of the citizenry what had occurred but recently. The three of them passed hastily through the streets. At this hour the thoroughfares were very quiet. They only encountered the occasional Gaki still abroad, perhaps returning home from a late assignment at work; or then again maybe one of those unfortunates who, gripped by that terrible restlessness which afflicted his kind, was desperately seeking to ease its influence by walking the streets, trying to rid themselves of its baleful effect. In due course they arrived at the main entrance to the Ministry. The guards left him, their duty done. He looked up at the dark entrance, and a great dread entered his heart. The hub behind him was almost entirely empty of people, apart from the occasional wanderer. Subduing his doubts he forced himself to mount the steps and enter the building, making his way briskly to Gorval's office.

There was no attendant present, which was hardly surprising given the late hour. He entered the inner office, and immediately observed his superior, seated in his customary place behind the desk. He remained silent, waiting for the latter to address him. After a short interval Gorval looked up. "Ah! iDarii. Yooouuu haaavvee maadddee gooddd tiimmeee". To be addressed in this fashion amounted almost to a pleasantry. He was quite taken aback, but chose to limit his answer to a simple reply. "Yessss sssiiirrr. Theeee sstreeeets werree indeed quiiieet". There was another silence. "Yooouuu wiilll beee taakkiinng caarree offff aaa guueessst foor aaa whiiilllee". He heard the door behind him open and then two guards entered, bearing between them the apparently unconscious body of a human - a surface dweller. iDarii almost cried out, so shocked was he to see one of that species in his own world. "Yooouuu wiilll ssttaaayy wiiitthhh theee

youunngg huummaan tiilll heee awaakeenns”. It was all iDarii could do but nod a response. Gorval instructed the guards to take their burden to the living quarters, and iDarii was to accompany them. There they were to remain on duty outside the apartments, charged with ensuring both the safety of the human, and his secure confinement from escape. Gorval signed their dismissal and they departed, bearing the slight and sleeping form between them. iDarii followed as they proceeded down the corridor in the direction of the living quarters. These were usually placed at the disposal of officers of Gorval’s rank, or other dignitaries if they were visiting the Ministry and required accommodation. Very rarely they also served as residences for the seers from nearby caverns, but only on those occasions when a convocation took place, and these had been summoned to attend. The accommodations seemed the most apt under the present circumstances, given the sensitivity of the human’s presence in the cavern, and the possible risks to security that that might provoke. In short order they arrived at the doorway to the assigned apartment, and the two guards entered, carrying their light burden easily within. iDarii followed closely upon them, reflecting upon the gravity of his task. He could not yet be sure but the human bore a striking resemblance to one that he had met only a short time ago on the surface. Melaskkoli was carried through the apartment, and into the sleeping area. The two Gaki carefully placed the human upon a pile of blankets, and promptly departed the room, leaving iDarii alone with his new responsibility. It was his first real chance to examine the young human properly. The garb was familiar although the young fellow’s face appeared more pallid than he recalled. This, of course, could be attributed to the faint torchlight that illuminated the room. Or perhaps it was the visitor’s prolonged sojourn underground that had contributed to his sallow complexion. iDarii was largely unaware of the circumstances of the boy’s arrival in his world, and therefore he was in no position to comprehend that fellow’s condition. It struck him as strange though, that this youth had not stirred once in the entire course of his transit from Gorval’s office. Whatever had affected him must have done so deeply, for he gave no signs of coming forth from his slumber. The Gaki felt that this was perhaps to his benefit. He was not at all sure how he would deal with the human if this one should protest his incarceration, no matter that the two guards remained nearby. He nevertheless bore the responsibility, and he knew that Gorval would expect nothing less than a superlative performance in the conduct of his duties. He would have much preferred to be assigned to his regular tasks, boring as these might sometimes be, rather than sustain the unpredictable nature of this particular burden. He sat down on a cushion close to where the human was laying, and waited for him to wake up. There seemed nothing else to be done for the time being.

Dark dreams played within his mind. At first all that could be seen was a blankness, encircling upon all sides. No shapes, no sounds; nothing to signify, just a curious absence. Even the watcher of this nothingness seemed to have disappeared. It was a most disturbing sensation to reflect and think, to ponder and contemplate, and yet be unable to discern who might be carrying out these actions. And then, suddenly, it was as if something had exploded in his mind. Now ‘he’ was back, and the dark emptiness had given way to a brilliant, incandescent light, so bright that he instinctively sought to raise his hands to protect his sight. But again, what a strange occurrence! Where there should have been arms and hands, and eyes to be covered, there was nothing. He could feel his mind grappling to comprehend it all. Where had his body gone? Was the light so great that it had blinded him to his own form? He tried desperately to distinguish the absent appendages. He was quite sure that he had arms, and even how they appeared to him. In

his memory he could recollect their shape and elongation, and indeed the textures and tones of the skin. But when he raised, or thought he had raised them before his eyes, there was naught but this extraordinary light. Time slipped meaninglessly by. He had no notion of how long he remained there, saturated in these vast pools of luminescence. Then - or perhaps it was his imagination - this effulgence began to dim, and he ceased in his efforts to ward off the sharp rays, which still penetrated deeply into his brain. He felt an extraordinary aching sensation in his head, painful and persistent, and a sharp throbbing that seemed to grow stronger and stronger as the light about him faded. His whole body ached as if he was being engulfed in an inexorable grip, which had squeezed him until his body was almost bereft of life, and betrayed, limp and unresisting, to these careless forces. The light had now diminished to a insipid glow. As it did so his eyelids flickered open painfully. A dread flooded through his body, that this harsh radiance might return, and cause his head to explode into a myriad of fragments. Now he could see a vague chaos, of blues and browns and blacks. And then, over to his right, something appeared, that glittered in the gloom. His vision cleared, and the colours resolved themselves into objects scattered all about him. Over to one side he could see a table pushed up against the wall. The gleam that he had observed defined itself into a flickering flame, that danced sinuously from the crown of a torch which stood nearby. He realised that he was lying upon a bundle of some kind of soft fabric heaped up on the floor. Although his head no longer quite felt like it was about to burst, it still throbbed painfully. He started to raise himself carefully, and groaned aloud as he felt the anguish run through his entire body. It was only then that he caught sight of a movement from the corner of his eye, and realised that he was not alone. He turned his head sharply, fearful of what it might be, and instantly regretted this ill-considered act. A firework display of brightly coloured sparks detonated in his mind, together with a series of sharp and powerful explosions, which he found almost deafening. "Staaaaayyy stiiiiiiiii, yoooounnggg oonnnnee", and a voice seemed to emanate from the form. A figure approached and, through the almost suffocating pain, he caught sight of one of the creatures close by. The effort had cost him too much, and he fell back again into the darkness, its welcoming anaesthesia saturating his body and mind.

It was still early morning when he awoke. He felt groggy, and it was a struggle to penetrate the fog that enfolded his thoughts. Matters could not have been made easier by the fact that 'morning', in this case, did not refer to sunrise, but rather to the commencement of his labours, for what greeted his eyes should rather have been called the later hours of the night. But night-time temperatures fall considerably below those of the day, and travelling in these cooler conditions was a far more efficient and productive experience. As he sought to marshal his energies he suddenly recalled his meeting with Erame. The memories came flooding back into his consciousness, and jolted him wide awake. He felt more than a twinge of guilt that he had fallen asleep so carelessly when a young woman was out there in the desert, a lone wanderer in this land, or so it might appear. This recollection brought him to his feet, and he turned to peer out into the surrounding wastes, striving to catch some sign of her presence. "Are you alright, my young friend?" a voice greeted him. He turned swiftly to observe Alaste regarding him with some curiosity. "Er. Er." He stammered his response. "You seemed a little bit alarmed, that's all", he observed. "No. No. I'm fine really. Just had to get up. Bit of a bad dream, that's all". "Ah yes. We all have those from time to time. Well. I've got the fire going. We've just time for a warm drink before we set off. Rouse the others, will you?" Celarent turned, his heart still beating quickly, and he stumbled towards the still sleeping forms of

Hesvee and Ferioque. He hesitated before gently shaking each in turn, rousing them from their resolute slumbers. “What, what”, started the master. But then he realised where he was and, with a groan, struggled to his feet. Ferioque followed his example shortly afterwards, complaining all the while about his aches and pains. “Definitely not as young as I used to be”, he stated somewhat redundantly. The three of them trudged over to the fire and gratefully accepted the steaming cups of tea that Alaste had prepared. They sat round the warming blaze as the cold gradually invaded their limbs and then, in turn, was repelled by the warming influences of both tea and fire. “Well, gentlemen. We shall have to be off early today, and we’ve to travel much further. And tonight we shall have to carry as much water as we can. We won’t be able to replenish our supplies until tomorrow”. The others grunted their acknowledgement. As their newly elected leader Alaste assigned to each of them their tasks. Hesvee and Alaste would be responsible for the feeding and watering of the beasts, after which they would again load them with their gear. Celarent and Hesvee were tasked to carry out the same duties, but on behalf of the humans of the party; that is to say, to collect and filter water from the well, and then fill all the containers they possessed. The four of them worked briskly, and the exercise helped restore them to wakefulness. Within a short time all these chores had been completed, and they were again ready to depart. The sunlight had not even breached the horizon yet, though there was the faintest hint of a glow from beneath its dark edge. Alaste gave instructions for the cooking fire to be extinguished. Celarent commented on this to Alaste. “Why is it necessary? I mean it’s hardly likely that anything is going to catch fire is it, in the middle of the desert after all?” Alaste looked at him sombrely, recalling that he was a novice in these matters. “Firstly, because it’s a good habit to observe. We’ll be passing through regions where there’s vegetation, and where forgetfulness in such things can lead to absolute catastrophe. The cultivation of good habits of behaviour and, of course, antecedently good habits of mind, are essential in every area of our lives, you’d agree?” Celarent nodded at the assertion although not entirely clear about its full significance. “Secondly, all things have their place and function. Once something has fulfilled its purpose should it not then proceed along whatever course is destined for it, or should it continue simply to repeat and repeat its endeavours, merely to achieve something that it has already surpassed?” Now Celarent was quite confused. He really could not see how any of this applied to the fire. Alaste continued. “Thus in this case. The fire has achieved its purpose. Wouldn’t it be wasteful, if not profane, to leave it to burn purposelessly and uselessly?” Celarent was not at all sure, but it did seem inconceivable that the fellow be suggesting a matter of so little moment should require such consideration. After all it was just a fire, a bit of dried wood and flame. What did it really matter if it was put out now, or just burned down later? He really could not see it. He decided to voice this opinion. He was most surprised to see Alaste, who was normally quite restrained and good-humoured, become quite annoyed by his observations. “Not matter! What you mean is that it doesn’t matter to you, or isn’t important to you? Is that what you think? But are you the final arbiter of what’s important or valuable? Can you be so sure of your judgement as to decide what is and what isn’t significant in this world?” He seemed to soften a little as he observed Celarent’s evident awkwardness. “Forgive me, young friend. Perhaps I make my point a little too forcefully. As is so often the case some matters aren’t clear to us until we have experienced them directly for ourselves. Just put it down to a little idiosyncrasy on my part”. Celarent smiled, relieved indeed that Alaste’s outburst had passed. “I’m sure you’re right”, he commented. “And of course I defer to your judgement on this. Maybe I need to think about what you said, eh?” Alaste nodded. And now it was time to

make their departure. It was Alaste who extinguished the fire finally. Celarent was careful to watch him as he carried out this task, trying to realise the significance of what the fellow had said. He did notice that their leader performed the duty as if it were a religious ceremony. He carefully brushed the burnt ash over the live flame and, as it was deprived of air, it gradually died away. He knelt before the fire almost as if he were praying, or engaged in an act of devotion. Celarent watched the man's face as he went about his work. Alaste seemed very calm, and completely absorbed in what he was doing. Indeed, simply watching these actions induced within Celarent a great feeling of ease within his own heart. But then he recalled that young girl, alone in the desert, and his complicity in concealing this fact from her father. The more contact he had with the fellow, the more he realised that it would be a grave mistake to underestimate him; there were depths to Alaste that he had not previously discerned. Shortly thereafter the small group resumed their trek into the featureless waste. Behind them, and some little distance away, Erame watched as they disappeared into the swirling mists that cloaked the landscape.

Celarent had kept his word. There was no sign of any attempt at pursuit, and certainly no raised voices to indicate an argument. She had watched the party keenly and, in particular, the conversation between her father and Celarent. If the latter had decided to disclose her presence she really did not know what course of action she might have taken. In the desert there is nowhere to run or hide. She would have had to face her father's ire, something she was not anxious to experience. It was not that he was a man of violent temper. But the expression on his face where she might have in anyway displeased him, that reproachful glance, it was sufficient to cause her far more pain than any physical punishment that might be administered. She waited until the travellers had completely disappeared from view before leading her own animals down to the spring. Only a short time had elapsed since her predecessors had left the waterhole, and a little sand had drifted back into the excavation. She quickly cleared this mess away before carefully filling her own water bottles, and then the buckets for the mules. She placed these before the creatures' eager mouths. As they drank their fill she drew some hay from one of the packs, and placed this also on the ground before them. She worked at a leisurely pace for she was in no hurry to catch up with her unwitting companions. She knew this land well enough to allow them some distance advantage, before she again set out herself. But it was still dark, and there was little chance of her discovery under these conditions. However, in bright daylight, and with the clear desert air free of the morning mists, it was not difficult to pick out a figure, even from some way off. She needed to remain far enough behind the advance party so that she remained beneath their line of sight. The air was quite calm and their tracks would show in the sand for sometime after their passing. She examined the fire and, with some satisfaction, noted it was completely dead; that would be her father's doing. There was no prospect of re-igniting the embers, and little enough time to eat anyway. She would have to make do with cold water for now. That was one disadvantage attached to her strategy. Fires were quite out of the question, for they would be spotted easily from far away; by daytime the smoke would expose her position; and by night, the flames. So it would have to be cold rations until they reached the mountains. Only then, she concluded, might she risk disclosing her presence to her parent. Even now she shivered at the prospect, but there was no turning back; the impulse that had driven her this far was, if anything, stronger, and really quite relentless. She could not account for its power at all. It seemed best simply to follow that instinct, and see what unfolded. She sat there quietly, and watched the mules feeding complacently. She turned from time to

time to stare outwards into the desert, looking always towards where the Northern mountains lay.

It was like struggling up from the bottom of a muddy pool, but eventually he managed to surface again into consciousness. He had a vague recollection of his previous awakening. At least this time the pounding headache seemed to have disappeared. The room was still draped in gloom, broken only by the tremulous light cast by the flickering torches. He moved more cautiously now, anxious to avoid a repetition of his previous experience. His body seemed rested now, yet there was still that sensation, that he had been exposed to some kind of brutal and traumatic event. He raised his head slowly, and examined the surrounding area. The first thing he noticed was the presence of a figure seated quite near his feet. Whoever it was must have seen his movement because it stood up, and moved close to where he still reclined. "How are you, young one?" This was strange. That odd sibilant voice had disappeared, and had been replaced by one that was almost human in timbre. He recalled his previous interview and realised that his companion was addressing him telepathically. "You're speaking to my mind?" he thought, directing his ideas as though in the direction of the Gaki. "Yes. I've been informed that you've the capacity to practise this manner of speech. We use it sparingly ourselves for it does require a considerable amount of energy and discipline. It's a talent usually employed by the higher castes in our world. For the remainder, however, conventional speech suffices. I'm quite surprised that you've this ability though clearly you haven't employed it for some time". Melaskkoli considered these comments cautiously. He decided that it was not necessary to disclose everything that had been revealed to him by Gorval. Some instinct informed him that perhaps discretion might be wiser, at least until he had had the opportunity to learn more about this strange, but oddly familiar, race. He was still very resistant to the notion that he might have descended from the same stock as these, even though it otherwise made sense. No. The best thing to do was to remain quite tight-lipped, and learn as much as he could from those who were freer with their expression. "Yes strange – I don't know. Where am I? I must have passed out?" His questions were met with silence; perhaps this other one had also decided to ration his words. "Yes. All I know is that you're to be housed here for the time being. I don't have any other instructions apart from that". There was another pause during which his companion seemed to be scrutinising him. "Forgive me. I've neglected you. Are you hungry at all? I can have some food brought to you?" But Melaskkoli did not have the least appetite. He felt rather sick, and so the thought of food did not appeal. "No. But maybe some water. My mouth feels very dry". His companion got to his feet and left the room. Shortly afterwards he returned, bearing a glass of water that he proffered to his charge. "Thank you". Melaskkoli drank the water greedily, so thirsty was he. So much so, in fact, that iDarii had to fetch another before this appetite was sated. Whilst the fellow was gone Melaskkoli was able to examine his surroundings. He had no idea how far he had been brought during the interval of his unconsciousness, or whether he had travelled higher or lower underground; certainly from the décor there was no indication of this last. The decorative element in the design seemed to be remarkably consistent, and quite unimaginative. There were no paintings or sculptures present, not even wall hangings, to vary the interior of the room. Simple bare rock, though skilfully dressed, made up the walls, floors and ceiling of his present lodgings. This theme only served to enforce the gloomy ambience that pervaded the whole area. The only effect that lent any sense of cheer was the light - albeit dispensed grudgingly – which was afforded by torches that were distributed rather infrequently around the walls,

and even upon the occasional floor stand. As iDarii returned to the room he caught sight of his guest inspecting the quarters. "Forgive me if I ask a rather obvious question, but I'd like to be sure. You're actually a surface dweller. I'm not mistaken in that, am I?" "Yes", replied Melaskkoli, "although there's some question about it". The other examined him quizzically. Melaskkoli decided that if he were to be more forthcoming himself, and dispensed with a superfluous caution, then he might elicit some useful information from his new acquaintance. It might be worth the risk. So he recounted his story in its entirety, including even the meeting with the Gaki on the surface. "I knew it!" the other burst out. Melaskkoli regarded him questioningly. "I knew it!" he repeated. "We met before. It was me you encountered on that day." "Really" observed Melaskkoli. "Well. That's some coincidence!" "I didn't recognise you at first. Well, to tell the truth, you all look much the same to us Gaki". Melaskkoli laughed. "Funnily enough, it's the same with me. Well I'm blown. Who would've thought it possible?" The two fell silent, both pondering this remarkable event. "But you didn't know that you were a Gaki then? You had no idea?" demanded the creature. "No. As I said before. Until Gorval ... it is Gorval, isn't it?" The other nodded. "Well, until he told me about how I was sent above all that time ago, I believed that I was human like everybody else. Even now it doesn't seem possible. How do I look to you?" iDarii examined him closely and observed. "Well, human, I guess!" "Your superior said that I'd eventually revert to my original form although he didn't say how it would happen, or how long it would take". "Mmmm. It must be very strange for you. And maybe a little frightening too". Melaskkoli nodded. "Do you have any idea how long I shall remain here? Or when I may leave?" "I'm afraid not. My instructions are clear only in one respect. But until I'm ordered otherwise, we must stay put". Melaskkoli thought on the other's words, and saw that there was little point in pursuing the matter further. He would just have to bide his time and be patient. In the meantime perhaps he could use this opportunity to find out something more about this world into which he had apparently been born again. "Tell me of your land then, friend? I know virtually nothing apart from what I've discerned in my travels with Gorval, and a little bit of the history of how your race came to be here". iDarii paused momentarily to consider the request. He could see no reason not to give out this information and, after all, it was quite natural to be curious about the land of your birth, especially given Melaskkoli's extraordinary circumstances. "Well then. Where shall I begin? You've seen the city cavern. The Gaki realm is divided into many such. I'm afraid I know little of the other caves, and the people who live there. We're generally a very private people, and don't take kindly to others prying into our affairs". He observed Melaskkoli's expression, and hastened to reassure him. "No. I don't mean you. Since you were brought here, and from what you've told me, you must have come originally from this particular region". He continued. "Our society is a very ancient one. We've lived below ground now from a time before any records were kept. The legends tell that we originally inhabited the surface but some great disaster sent our ancestors into the deeps. It was from that point that our forms and minds changed - from human to Gaki. But you've heard some of this already - from my chief?" Melaskkoli nodded. "Yes. Some. But I'm more curious really about you and your family. Do you have any brothers and sisters?" "I don't. There's just me, and my mother and father" replied iDarii. "But I've friends who have brothers and sisters born here, or are waiting for them to be born?" Melaskkoli looked up at the Gaki. "What do you mean? Waiting to be born?" iDarii regarded the human with some surprise before recalling that he could have no idea of what he was talking about. "I'm sorry. Of course you don't know. I'll try and explain, but you're going to find this even more difficult to grasp". He paused to rally his thoughts, and then continued. "Perhaps it

would be best if I spoke of my own family. Both my mother and father were humans, just as those you knew upon the surface. I, too, was once a human as well. But then death came, and we thought, as most people did, that it was the end of all. But it isn't. For some of us, that is for our spirits or souls, although that isn't quite the right way of looking at it at all....". He broke off. "Well, to sum up: when surface dwellers die some of them transform into Gaki and are then reborn into this world. When the first generation of Gaki came down from the over lands they established a sort of bridge, a psychic causeway if you like, between the two realms. Thus, from later generations, some of the humans who died were reborn here. Not all, by any means. We really don't know what happens to those others. But it seems that both my parents, who in the natural course of events died many years before me, were reborn here. When it came to my turn I also was born in this place. Like I say that doesn't always happen, but it did in the case of our family. So when I became conscious I discovered that I'd been born to the same two parents again. It was not like a human birth at all but more a kind of emanation from their minds, which crystallised into my present form. I was a child again, and had to learn many things anew; but I remembered them, and they remembered me. So when I said that some of my friends were awaiting their brothers and sisters, that's what I meant. Of course not all of them will be born here; but a lot will. But I never had any when I was a human, so I will have none here". iDarii again paused, allowing his companion to digest some of what he had said. "So you mean that I was once truly a human, then died, and was born here as Gaki, and then sent back again as a human? Is that what you're telling me". "Well yes. I suppose. Although the last bit obviously doesn't usually apply. I mean about being sent back as a human". Melaskkoli's mind was awlirl, and he was desperately struggling to comprehend the significance of the Gaki's tale. And then it struck him. "So that means that I have parents here as well. Is that so?" The Gaki hesitated. "I really can't say. I don't know". He saw a look of disappointment passed across the young lad's face. "I would guess it though. I mean, if they haven't suffered any kind of accident. You appear young as a human and, from what you've told me, you were sent to the surface world at an early age. So I'd guess so. But I'm not sure of that. Human time and Gaki time are not necessarily the same". Again, a look of puzzlement swept across his auditor's face. "Different times for human and Gaki?" he queried. "What I meant to say, because that came out wrong..... Well. Firstly, our scientists discovered that there is a discontinuity between the rate at which times passes here below and in the world above. There doesn't seem to be any regularity to it, or at least no one has determined an equivalence between the two respective time zones. Fortunately, it's not a great disparity usually, although there can be quite significant shifts between the two. For example, there've been occasions when I've visited the surface on one of my missions. I've then returned to discover that a greater period of time has elapsed here than up there; and vice versa. But I have to say that it is an irregular phenomenon. The research suggests that the incongruence between the two time phases may have been much more significant in the past, and that this greater asynchronicity may return in the future. Other than this I can't explain further." Melaskkoli looked quite lost now, and so iDarii decided to continue anyway. "The other factor is that the Gaki and human ageing processes are dissimilar. Again I can't be precise on this, for the reasons that I've already given; but Gaki ageing is generally much slower than human. So if you take all these uncertainties into account then it's probable, though not certain, that you do indeed have parents, or maybe one parent, here". "Only one?" asked Melaskkoli. "Well yes. It gets even more complicated. But here goes. Like I said not all humans who die come here. We really don't know where they go. But sometimes it

happens that only one parent is born here, and it is they alone who 'emanate' the child, so to speak. And then, yet again, it sometimes occurs that neither mother nor father come to our realm, but just their child or children. In these instances the child is placed with another family to be looked after; that is until they are old enough to care for themselves. So you see it can be convoluted, and I really can't put it more simply". "I think I understand", he commented slowly. "But how can I find out?" "Gorval will be able to help you in this. But I suppose he has his reasons for not mentioning it yet". Melaskkoli nodded. He would have to be patient. "So what else can you tell me about this place then? Why don't you visit the other caverns?" "Well, as I said, the Gaki tend not to intrude on others' affairs. We're quite private in many respects. But more importantly it's against the law for any to travel outside their own city without permission. I can't recall the last occasion where this has been granted. The elders of the Council, or the Seers, may sometimes visit our neighbours, but that's very rare, and only on the most weighty of matters. I really don't know much about these things other than what my superior is willing to tell me. It's really odd in some ways; I know much more about the surface world that I do even about those caverns nearby". Melaskkoli considered his next question carefully before posing it. "Well, don't you ever think about investigating these, when you're above ground, for example? Surely it's possible to gain access to the other caves when you're on the surface world?" iDarii appeared distinctly unhappy now at the former's line of questioning. "I'm not sure what you mean". He had become suddenly evasive. "Aren't you curious at all? If it was me I suppose I'd want to see how they lived". "I think they live much as we do" and the Gaki had lowered his voice. "It's a great offence to even discuss such as you suggest here. Please we shouldn't continue with this". There was a look of fear about him, and Melaskkoli realised that he had overstepped the mark. "I'm sorry. I don't really understand. But please forget that I even said what I said". "Thank you", replied his companion. "It's something that we have to be careful about. You've been above ground for some time now, and have probably forgotten most of our ways". Melaskkoli nodded, and decided to proceed onto safer ground. "And what of your parents then, and your friends? Tell me about them". At this the fellow quite perked up, and the conversation continued easily. Thus they passed the time with the Gaki giving his charge some instruction on this society, a community that would be his home, at least, for the time being.

Most of their journey passed uneventfully. The desert dunes spread about them resembled nothing so much as great frozen waves, which swept far into the grey distance. For the eagles that roamed the high sky, they and their mules were but speckles, minute dark dots, and almost invisible in this vastness. The party had covered a lot of ground this day. Already they were some distance from their last encampment, and the sun had still only climbed a short way towards the sky's summit. They travelled in silence for the most part. There was something about this land that inclined the mood towards the contemplative. It was hardly surprising therefore that Celarent's thoughts turned mainly upon his recent encounter. He could not shake his sense of unease, that he was engaged in helping to dupe Alaste, a man who had shown great friendship towards him, and had treated him with the utmost respect. Nevertheless, he had also some regard for the man's daughter, which did not necessarily centre upon her evident attractiveness, but more upon the manner in which she comported herself. It was almost palpable in its expression that this expedition was not simply an opportunity for the folly of youth to express itself, a mere wilful inclination selfishly determined for her part. There was something underlying her

actions, which went deeply into the essence of her being. He sensed this in himself, and indeed in the others of the party. It was as if there was a force compelling each of them beyond their own wills, a power in operation that could not so easily be delineated, yet remained undeniably effective for all that. He reconciled himself to his own duplicity by recalling her assurance that the masquerade need not be continued beyond their arrival at the Northern mountains. It was in this direction that his gaze mostly strayed, for day-by-day they grew closer. Already their massive peaks stretched like vast battlements linking distant horizon to distant horizon. They were still too far away for any individual features to be clearly distinguished, although he would have sworn that he could see already the snows crowning their upper heights. Ahead of him the rest of the party steadily trudged across the sands. Alaste was in the lead whilst the two scholars walked a few paces behind him, each one leading a small file of mules. He brought up the rear, and it was from this position that he was able to observe, at leisure, his comrades. He was struck again by the incongruities of their fellowship. Alaste was well suited to this profession it was clear. But himself, and the other two? Surely not? It was a strange world, and the longer he endured, the more unpredictable it became. If someone has suggested to him, but a few days before, that he would be where he was today, he would have laughed in their face; that is if it were possible for him to be so ill-mannered. But here he was, and here they were, and there could be no question of retiring from the journey now; pride itself would place that beyond reach.

The sun rose higher and higher. Finally, the heat had grown quite unupportable, and so they halted their day's journey. Here was the deep desert, with not even the shelter of a withered tree. They dug themselves into the sand, and raised a small covering overhead, to ward off those burning rays, which flooded so brutally down upon them. In these high temperatures there was really little else to do but to take refuge in sleep, and thus wait out the inferno. The pack animals were well acclimatised to these regions but even they lay prostrate upon the ground, their ears twitching from time to time, as they too succumbed to this elemental burden. The heat saturated the ground, and the land fell silent under its weight.

Erame had also acknowledged that the heat was impressing an exorbitant demand upon her physical frame. She had resorted to the same methods as her nearby, but invisible companions, to insulate herself from the intense radiation that flailed the land. After she had watered the small group of mules she took cover in a shallow trench, dug out from the loose greyish sand. She swallowed some generous draughts of tepid water, and settled down to rest from her efforts. The heat was so intense that it was difficult to sleep. But finally she slipped into that dream world, which hides so patiently beneath the surface of consciousness; banished were the sands, and the vast expanses of the desert lands; dismissed also was that unforgiving sun, which held this region under its tyrannical sway. Now she found herself walking along an avenue that stretched arrow straight into the distance. Upon either side of the path swayed tall and elegant trees of an unfamiliar species. They bore leaves which resembled fine needles, and of a deeper green hue than she had ever beheld. A soft and fragrant breeze drifted across her face, and the delicate boughs, which stretched out across the path in front of her, swayed backwards and forwards, as if beckoning an invitation. The sky itself was quite extraordinary. Rather than blue it was a pale green, its soft tones broken only by vast clouds of brilliant red, which danced languidly across its visage. This rich tone reminded her of blood, and she

shivered slightly as this image surfaced in her mind. She seemed to be dressed in the most diaphanous of gowns, of a material that swept around her body like a soft and caressing mist. Her feet were bare, and the ground felt like a thick carpet beneath her tread. The grass was of a pale bluish hue, and covered in pools of small, brightly shining blossoms, which sparkled like snow, bewitched under a full moon light. There was nothing to be heard but the soft whispering of the leaves, and the occasional ragged creaking of tree limbs, as they shifted to and fro. There seemed to be no destination in her mind, and she continued to stroll along the avenue, carefree as the wind that murmured about her. Time had no meaning here, and it could have been for an instant - or an eternity - that she had resided in this eccentric landscape. Far away and directly ahead she caught a glimpse of a vagueness, which gradually defined itself more precisely as she approached. The mote finally resolved itself into a human figure, one advancing with some speed towards her. Now her heart was tremulous, as if some unknown threat presented itself here. But there was nothing to observe about this form that suggested it might be inimical. Despite this caution she did not falter in her pace, and quickly the two of them were facing each other. Whoever it was had the appearance of a young man. He was dressed in a long white cloak that fastened at the neck, the cloth flowing to the ground like a torrent of water about him. For some unaccountable reason there were only two features that seemed to enforce themselves indelibly upon her recollection of that meeting. The first was the colour of his hair. Never had she seen such brilliant gold tones so richly displayed, not even by the metal itself. It flowed about his head, and then upon his shoulders, almost liquid in its form and texture, and resembling a kind of mantle that luxuriantly graced his upper body. The second feature was his eyes. It was not so much their colour or clarity, though these were both striking; they shone blue-grey like the light reflected from a burnished shield. More, it was rather the intensity of their expressiveness. The strength held within them was unmistakable, and their steadiness unwavering. Absorbed as she was in these particular qualities, they were as nothing compared to the extraordinary sense of age, which was conveyed somehow in that glance. The body and face spoke of youth; but the eyes betrayed an ancient wisdom quite overwhelming to behold. She did not turn away though the impulse to do so was almost irresistible; that stare compelled her attention despite its dreadful intensity. Finally, the world around her appeared to fade away. The avenue of trees, the ground beneath her feet, even that bizarre sky, drifted and coalesced, until nothing was left but those two bright orbs looking deep into her soul. And then these too dissolved, into an intense brightness, and....

.... she awoke. In her restless sleep she had pushed aside the covering that had been raised over the trench, and her face was now exposed to the still blazing sun. She touched her fingers against the skin, and could feel the heat glowing angrily there. She realised that she must have burnt somewhat. She settled back into the shallow depression in the sand and began to contemplate the dream that still echoed in her mind, its features still bright and distinct in her recollection. She had had many dreams in the past, and a few that had recurred. But they were no more than the phantasmagoria of the human mind at play. This, however, was of quite a different order. Firstly, its lineaments had been most distinguishable. The colours, and so forth, they may well have been the results of a healthy imagination, a juxtaposition of unusual elements randomly aligned, and a kind of curious experiment, which the mind likes to conduct spontaneously. But more significant yet was the presence of the stranger, and what had passed between them in that thoughtful exchange, as they had gazed into each other's eyes. More had been

communicated in that moment, she believed, than all the words she had spoken in her life; an intimacy never experienced before with anyone, not her parents, nor even a lover, had occurred in that instant. And the stranger had seemed no stranger at all. His features she did not recall; they were not important. But those eyes, and that soul, these now resounded within her spirit.

Time passed on, and the sun gradually sank back towards the edge of the world, its heat abating reluctantly. She slipped back into sleep, but there was no recurrence of the dream. It was nearly dark when she again awoke and, pulling aside the sheltering canvas, she got to her feet. The desert was quiet, glowing serenely under the great moon that shone brightly in the southern quarter. The whole landscape was bathed in a cool milky glow, such a contrast to the harsh light displayed by her predecessor, the sun, in those interminable daylight hours. She looked away, to observe the files of foot and hoof prints left in the sand by her father and his companions and their mules. They had been easily tracked during the day. After all there was no reason to obscure them, for why should these travellers exercise caution? Only Celarent knew that they were not alone in their safari. She turned to the preparation of her evening meal. She was far enough behind them now that she could see no trace of a camp-fire against the evening sky. She thought that she might risk a fire herself but concluded that it would be unwise. It would seem folly, and just for the sake of a hot meal, to jeopardise her plans, and attract the undue and unwelcome attention of her parent. Reluctantly she withdrew some dried meat from one of the packs, and chewed upon the leathery viands, screwing up her face at the salty flavour that permeated the tough, sinewy flesh. Despite the invasive savour it was an excellent source of nutrition, and would remain edible for some time; and, moreover, it was very light to carry. She took some long sips from the water bottle, for her body was heavily dehydrated by the sun's depredations; these at least served to ameliorate the strong and bitter taste of the provender. Once she had concluded her own repast she attended to the beasts, putting hay down before each of them, and filling a bucket with warm water, which she placed before the beasts in turn. As the animals ate and drank, in their characteristically languid fashion, she contemplated the landscape about her. In its own way it possessed a sort of magical ambience, its softened black and white tones melting into each other under the mollifying influence of the moonlight, which flowed lambently upon the whole scene. In this respect it held a great contrast to what she had witnessed in her dream. The colours displayed in that odd region had possessed a resonance most abrasive. Again, the scene, although apparently naturalistic in its own terms, had been imbued with a kind of speciousness, a misrepresentation of true nature. It was not a matter of form, nor even the unnatural colouration, but rather the mode in which these were combined. But then, confusingly, the same could not be said of that meeting with the stranger; that episode in itself would have made anything set beside it appear vacuous and meaningless, indeed truly lacking in any real substance. Unlike most imaginings these details seemed to impress themselves upon her consciousness with a greater rather than lesser impact now, even with this passage of time. She could not shake the intuition that a message lay submerged within the reverie, one which presaged a future that she could not ignore; or maybe a past she should not dismiss. The present returned, and she recalled her predicament; it was time to break off from these reflections. She set to with a will, folding the tent covering efficiently, and quickly packing everything back upon the mules. Soon she was ready to depart once more on her journey. She was fairly certain she had allowed enough time to elapse for her father and his friends to be well on their way by now.

She was not overly concerned that she might catch up with them, but carelessness was something easily avoided, and such an upset now would be quite unforgivable. She roped the beasts together in a file and, taking the halter of the lead animal, she marched out into the night.

A gathering had been summoned, but this was like no other. The seers of the Inner Council had concluded that events had taken such a turn that extraordinary action must be taken. The council elders from the other caverns had been called so that they might decide what should be done. The word had been spread by the usual esoteric means, and already a majority had accepted the invitation. Deep below the earth, and deeper still beneath their home cavern, the elders were to meet in a specially constructed chamber. So large were the numbers due to attend that the usual meeting places could not be employed. Without break, a host of stonemasons had strenuously applied themselves and their craft to the task, and had already succeeded in extending an existing chamber to a size that would meet the council's requirements. In a short time it was ready and, as the council members arrived, the assembly chamber quickly filled. In some cases there were Gaki seers present who had not met for whole generations, and this further emphasised the gravitas of the occasion. A count was called, and it was evident that all those who were able to attend were present. There were, however, some notable exceptions, and some commentaries were occasioned with regard to these absences. All were conversant with the subject matter of their debate, but equally they were aware that not all Gaki were in accord. Some regarded the raids, and their increasing frequency upon the upper world, as mere unfortunate instances, and passing phenomena that would shortly resolve themselves. Others, however, representing the more warlike faction, suggested these forays presented an opportunity for the Gaki race to wrest back what was theirs and, according to their viewpoint, reclaim the surface world as their own, subjugating in the process the present populations of humans who unlawfully remained there. But the present company was composed mostly of wiser counsels, of those who had a firmer grasp of the realities of their present condition, and a recognition that a naïve and crude response could only be grotesque in its effects, especially given their current position. By definition all those who were present in the Council were seers, and therefore of the higher caste. On this account the entire discussion was conducted purely in mind-to-mind form, since this was the natural discourse within their community. The actual structure of their debates cannot be represented here, for it resembles in no way what might take place between humans. The exchange between the seer and the human/Gaki Melaskkoli was an exception, for that seer had trained in this human mode of dialogue. In a similar manner, communication within the lower castes took place either using physical language, or in a form of mind-speak, which was used predominantly by members of the higher administrative castes. However, between the Gaki seers a private telepathic language existed, of which only the content may be approximately rendered at this time. The council were acquainted mainly with the nature of the problem insofar as it referred to their own localities. But up until this moment few among them had realised to what endemic proportions the crisis had inflated. After only a few reports had been recounted it rapidly became obvious to all that this was not a matter that could be dismissed lightly; nor could it be viewed as a pretext to be exploited in order to gain a tactical advantage in any putative struggle with the humans. Interestingly, though the scope of the problem had been more clearly defined, this precision was equalled only by an absence of any discernible strategy to deal with the question. Most of the debate essentially centred around the question of

“What can be done?” to which no obvious answer presented itself. The arguments raged to and fro, but without any conclusion. Finally, it was the seer that had interviewed Melaskkoli who advanced his solution for the convocation’s consideration. All present had been briefed on Melaskkoli’s mission, but only a minority knew of the most recent developments. The seer informed them that not one, but two, separate parties of humans had been detected making their way across the desert towards what the surface dwellers called the Northern mountains. These peaks themselves were actually the uppermost elevations of the roof that presently arched above the massive city, which lay directly above their heads now. The constitution of that first party had already been well broadcast amongst the Gaki community of elders; but few knew of the second. When it was announced that this latter group comprised but a single human female, gasps of surprise echoed around the council chamber. For those who were well acquainted with the myths of redemption, this presence seemed to confirm the possible truth of the ancient predictions. The seer concluded that, in his opinion, this female must represent a component of a pairing - the other, of course, being a male - who would, in some as yet undefined way, prove to be the salvation of both their worlds. He asserted, further, that it must be assumed that the second part of this soteriological equation would be supplied by one of the human males in the other group. The seer concluded that since they had not been able to arrive at any plan of action themselves, and that it seemed that the predicted elements of the prophecy were present, this might suggest a way out for all of them; indeed, the only course of action in fact left - was inaction. On hearing this some of the younger seers reacted angrily, for they saw such a response as entirely fatalistic and passive, and quite insufficient to this evidently deadly state of affairs. But their outbursts were rather symptoms of frustration than a passionately held conviction. Fortunately, in this council, wiser and cooler heads prevailed, and the gathering concluded that the better way to proceed was to return to their respective regions, and try to maintain public order. Loss of life would indeed be tragic but there was nothing to suggest that this must be an inevitable consequence of the unfolding drama. Other than this it would be assumed for now that destiny followed an implicit design, within which the forces of destruction had some role to play. Thus all would have to place their faith in this eternal verity, and await the outcome. With that the assembled seers paused to share silently their vow, before returning by hidden paths to their own caverns. As the chamber emptied the seer summoned Gorval to his side. The latter was instructed to make his way to the human/Gaki Melaskkoli and explain, according to his capacity, what was taking place. “Should I tell him all that you have conveyed to me, sir?” The seer paused briefly before responding. “It would seem only fair. In truth I don’t know myself what awaits our young friend. His part seems to have been played out. All that remains is this confluence between the human female and male who are presently travelling towards our city; if indeed these are the ones to whom the prophecy alludes. There can be little enough harm, for he won’t be allowed to come into contact with the general population, and certainly not in his present condition; and even then only if the legends have been fulfilled. Yes. I see no reason why not. And if he has any further questions I leave it to your discretion to respond. After all, he’s given up much for our people. A gesture of gratitude wouldn’t be misplaced, I think”. “Very well, sir”. Gorval departed, leaving the seer alone with his thoughts. He made his way back to the upper levels, and thence through the city streets to the Ministry, finally coming to the section that contained the accommodations. He paused at the door, observing the two guards still on duty there. As he approached they noted his arrival, and moved to obstruct the way. Then one of them recognised the

senior administrator, and signalled to his companion to let him pass. Without any further delay Gorval entered the apartments, and came upon both iDarii and the newcomer apparently deep in conversation. As soon as Gorval appeared iDarii leapt to his feet, and awaited obediently his orders. For his part Melaskkoli remained where he was, seated on the floor, but regarding Gorval warily. It was then, as the latter passed close by one of the torches, that the light was sufficient to illuminate his features. "Youuu maaayyy beee goonnnnee", Gorval addressed the Gaki. Without hesitation iDarii left the room, not even pausing to bid farewell. The administrator turned to examine Melaskkoli. "And you, my young friend. How are you faring? You've been treated well, I trust?" Melaskkoli nodded, and started to get to his feet. "There's no need. You should rest. The journey, and all the other matters with which you've had to contend, these must have weakened you seriously. Stay and rest. I have some news to bring you from the council". Melaskkoli resumed his position whilst the other rehearsed the latest developments, or those, at least, that seemed to have the most bearing on his own concerns. He had already amassed quite a lot of information on current circumstances from his conversations with the seer, and also those with iDarii and Gorval. However, he could not pretend to understand their full import any more than did Gorval himself, or even the seers. Predictions and prophecies seemed to meld strangely within the evolving physiology of the Gaki race. Although much of what was occurring seemed to bear all the hallmarks of a great catastrophe in the making, this was simultaneously combined, or so it appeared, with omens of a more fortuitous nature. But whatever the outcome, great events indeed were coming to pass, and of such a magnitude and complexity that none could honestly venture an accurate assessment of the final production. If this were a world of darkness it would seem that its people were descending into even greater unilluminated depths.

Time passed in the desert measurelessly. Celarent felt as if he had already spent a lifetime in this land. His eyes had grown accustomed to the stark light that flooded down upon every corner of this ill-tempered region. Their company had fallen into an easy routine, which varied little day-by-day, or even night-by-night. Sometimes they would find themselves resting in the vicinity of a small underground spring. These were not so difficult to locate, so it might seem to the novice, as had already been demonstrated by their adept guide. Wayfarers had been voyaging by these desert paths for generations. To the neophyte's eye this land appeared featureless and seamless, and one part much like another. But to the seasoned explorer, and certainly to one well versed in this terrain, there was a multitude of clues by which to navigate. The position and declination of the sun in the sky - an observation modified by the passage of the seasons - would give a moderately accurate indication of where the navigator might plot his passage in this sea of sand. The bright, clear night sky displayed yet another chart, one written precisely across their dark heavens, and which proved to be a surprisingly accurate guide. The water holes themselves were generally accompanied by at least some sparse vegetation, be it only a few blades of desert grass breaking through the sun-baked ground, for, against the remorselessly uniform texture of the surface, these would show up quite distinctly, even at some distance, and most adventitiously, to the seasoned eye. So although initially rendered quite dumbfounded by Alaste's sure-footed leadership, which at times appeared to border on the miraculous, his skill in forging his way through this unremarkable void had already been penetrated by Celarent and the others who, having gained some insight into his methods, saw his apparently inspired powers recede in due proportion to their expanding knowledge. However, none were so arrogant to believe that they could have

performed equally, and all would readily acknowledge that, but for his abilities in desert craft, they would never have made any significant ingress into this locale, let alone have determined an egress.

And so day passed into night, and night into day. With each sunrise Celarent would look up at the great mountains ahead, and with each day it appeared they were not one step closer to their destination. Distances in this place were quite misleading. Moreover, there was no way of estimating the size of those great vaults of rock, which piled upwards, deep into the heavens. He commented on this to Alaste who assured him that he was not mistaken. The desert air was so dry and clear that it acted like an enlarging glass. Distant objects that would otherwise appear vague and indistinct would, in this atmosphere, stand out as clear and as sharp as if they were at arms length. And the mountain range was indeed enormous. Although it seemed that those peaks were already towering directly above their heads, nevertheless there was still some way to travel before they would reach even the foothills. Under the ruthless glare of the sun their skins had become darker and tougher; and as each day passed the superfluous fat and flaccid muscle, the inheritances of a relatively sedentary life, were falling away. No longer did the three scholars appear so exceptional to this place. Instead, each was taking on the aspect of an adventurer, one born to wild and rugged climes. Even Ferioque, he of slight build and stooping aspect, had acquired a musculature that would have been the envy of a much younger man. Hesvee, by contrast, a fellow somewhat prone to moderate corpulence, had rid himself of this superabundance, and had acquired the demeanour and profile of more warrior-like proportions. Celarent, despite being the youngest of the party, had at first suffered greatly from the rigours of the march, but was now adjusting fully to this new life. Instead, there was a spring to his step, even at the very conclusion of a long day's march. Sleep and energy and appetite, all had thrived under this new regime. Alaste, however, resembled himself as much now as at the outset of the mission, aught that the smile was broader, and the laughter came more easily to his lips. He was truly of desert stock; this was his land, and his home, and where his heart would always lie. For the most part they travelled in silence, the better to conserve energy, but also because this atmosphere predisposed to mute reflection. Celarent was quite naturally preoccupied with their hidden companion. He had seen no further sign of her since that last meeting. At the day's end, and in the darkness of the night, he would stare along the line of tracks that they had left in the sand behind them. He hoped Erame was still keeping pace with their advance. It was at these times that he would wonder if she might have come to any harm. Indeed, it was all he could do to summon up sufficient self-restraint, and prevent himself from rushing headlong back along that route, the better to reassure himself of her security. However, he was mindful of his promise, and recalled that she seemed a woman, most competent and capable, and well equipped to take good care of herself in these parts; perhaps better even than he. Nevertheless, the thought was there, always in the back, if not the forefront, of his mind. It nagged away at him like an itch that would not be relieved.

Hesvee was a happy man, or so he discovered. Under his naturally cautious nature, with a marked tendency towards perfection and introspection, he had always erred on the side of avoiding unnecessary risk. It was the case certainly, given his general temperament, that he would never have considered seriously his present endeavour. A man of letters, and never happier than when delving into a dusty archive - the more arcane the better - he had followed these sober guides unswervingly. He regarded adventuring as at best, the

activity of the foolhardy, and at worst, signifying a grave want in intelligence, and exemplary of a considerable degree of foolishness. And yet, demonstrably, he was greatly contented with his current condition. It had never occurred to him that such contact with the elemental in nature should provoke within him a similar, if not mirrored, response from his own psyche. He was a fellow much accustomed to concentrate upon the minutiae and detail of a question. He would most willingly wrestle with such matters for greatly prolonged periods, sometimes for days on end. Then, hopefully, an insight might fall like a blessing from heaven, and open his eyes to that obscure truth, which he had sought so eagerly to penetrate. But now he had discovered that such veracities might also reveal themselves within the grander lineaments of this vast world. Whilst lying upon the ground and looking out into the depths of space, or during the passing of the day atop a sand dune - the heights of which permitted a broad vantage point whence might be pondered the comparable dimensions, and qualities of another, more earthly void - he found that these greater perspectives acted as a filter, dredging through the obscuring layers of clutter with which the mind so easily encumbered itself, only to reveal a clarity beneath that opened up his deeper psyche to a more deeply incisive examination. Many a time as he strode across the sand, the heat beating down upon his head and back, and his body aching from the exertion, his mind would leap like a fiery dart, to burn away the deadwood, exposing his true nature buried far beneath. Sometimes he would feel almost compelled to shout with sheer exultation at these remarkable discoveries, and he was even tempted to impart them directly to his fellows. And yet he knew, in his soul, that these visions were beyond the clumsy scope of speech, and that a sally towards this end would be purposeless; and this realisation had been the occasion of some sadness in his heart. But he had discovered that the truths upon which he meditated were of a reality, and one which was discernible eventually by all men; but only in their due time. Thus the journey across the desert, for Hesvee, was equally a journey within, for that old scholar. His body might be growing aged, moment by moment, but his mind was eternal.

Ferioque was also, in his own unique way, realising the fruits of this enterprise. He was an observant man and never more at ease than when he could scrutinise his fellows, but only surreptitiously, by preference. He thought homewards to his family, for he loved and missed them dearly. From the rigours of the journey he had suffered much. As a younger man, and even before taking up his profession, he had travelled widely, and enjoyed thoroughly his intercourse with fellows of different lands and races. His curiosity had quite naturally led him to his present position as chief cartographer. When he had married, and had begotten children, he had been obliged to discontinue many of his youthful interests and, as this abridgement progressed, he had modified the objects of his enthusiasm accordingly. His studies of ancient cartography had allowed him imaginatively to travel, not only to distant lands, but also to distant times. By means of the designs exhibited in the ancient archives, and their attached commentaries, he had made the acquaintance of men, and races, long dead. In some instances so detailed were the accompanying notes that he felt as if he had grown to know some of these men most intimately, perhaps better even than his own family and friends. His imagination supplied those parts of the accounts that were sparse, and he had, in his own way, led an adventuresome life, albeit confined within the narrow corridors and storage rooms of the university library and archives. To be once again crossing unknown lands in search of a great secret was akin to returning home for the professor. Ferioque was more extroverted in his apprehension of life. He was a warm-hearted man who greatly enjoyed the company of his fellows, and welcomed any

opportunity to engage in conversation with a new acquaintance, and this despite his near incarceration in those labyrinthine cellars, which housed his stock-in-trade. He found the expansiveness of the desert almost overwhelmingly invigorating, and was rather grateful for the experience of once more travelling in the company of his fellows. He valued especially those evenings when they would sit by the fire, and talk of matters close to their hearts, or even just the idle chatter of men. He supposed that it was this kinship that he had missed for so long, and which even a family cannot supply. This was his journey through this desert.

Alaste, indeed, was in his element. No sooner had he embarked upon this journey than he asked himself why he had left it so long overdue. His people came from these parts, and the sands were a part of his blood. He loved the life of a wanderer and had been able, to an extent, to indulge this aspect of his temperament within his business activities. It was true that the greater part of his travels had been to the prosperous and necessarily more heavily populated regions – or civilisation, as some might say; but the wilderness had its own appeal, and there were riches to be found here as well. He had had a few doubts before their departure, wondering if he had made a prudent choice in volunteering to be their guide on this venture. A more unlikely and unsuitable group, he had thought, could surely not be found. But as time had passed these misgivings faded, and he found himself to be in the company of true explorers, unprepossessing or not, as they might have, at first, appeared. He had noted the manner in which each one had adapted in response to their circumstances, and how, apart from a few hiccups at the commencement of their travels, they had behaved quite admirably since. It was evident in the way in which each conducted himself that the desert had proved to be a great teacher. His hope was that by the time they reached the foothills ahead they would have cohered into a clan, and one which would be able to deal with any adversity that must surely await them there. The Northern mountains were notorious for their lawless peoples, and only the foolhardy, or the brave, would venture into their deep passes. Still, as he scrutinised these fellows, and as each day passed, his confidence grew, and with it the certainty that they possessed the fortitude and capacity sufficient to surmount any difficulty that might present itself. He had taken a particular interest in the youngest, Celarent. He had noted that though the fellow was clearly intelligent and not without spirit, nevertheless, the many years dedicated to his studies had detracted somewhat from his natural resources, leaving a vigour depleted but not totally extinguished. Apart from the necessity of ensuring that Celarent's status within the expedition was properly acknowledged, he was keen to ensure that that spirit was fully revitalised. He had also been somewhat amused to witness the fellow's evident interest in his daughter. He was neither a jealous man nor a possessive father. He rather saw this curiosity as the entirely proper response of a young man faced with the attractions of a vivacious and graceful woman. Alaste took great pride in the virtues of both his wife and daughter though he had to admit he erred somewhat in favour of his daughter on occasion. As his thoughts dwelt on his only child he wondered to himself how she might be faring. This would be her first time travelling alone, and in the desert as well. It was a cause of great merriment to him that youth thought itself more capable in mendacity than age; it should be evident surely that age had all the advantage. The capacity to lie or deceive requires a sharp wit, intelligence, and above all, experience. How frequently does one observe a young child seeking to deceive its parents, and how impoverished the attempt! Their innocence, though disarming, is no ally to intrigue. And so it was that when he had announced to both his wife and daughter his intention to depart upon this project,

he had observed the immediate spark ignite within his daughter's eyes, a reaction which betrayed an interest which superseded that of mere spectator. From that moment onwards he knew that she would seek to attach herself to the group in some way or another. He had mentioned this fact to his beloved wife who had drawn the same conclusion as he. He knew, moreover, that she would not approach him directly, anticipating his reply to be contrary to her wishes. Therefore, she was left with but two alternatives; to sweep from her mind that ambition or, by the practice of some artifice, ensure her participation. He had not known the precise form of her ruse, and had awaited its maturation with some anticipation. His suspicions had been confirmed from that point where he had observed Celarent departing furtively the encampment. His absence had been longer than would have been warranted by a call of nature. Thus he was left with the possibility that his withdrawal had been at the behest of his daughter; or perhaps Celarent had succumbed to an overwhelming desire for a lone stroll in the moonlight. Alaste had drawn his conclusion.

The Northern mountains were massed along that border of the desert like a great army, poised ready to throw itself against the enemy. Ancient were those huge walls, their jutting peaks breaking forth from vast, granite bases; savage, jagged, fanged protrusions that hacked into the skies, to puncture the enormous cumulus clouds, which clung over their summits, sending down huge torrents of rain onto the foothills below. A man standing upon one of these heights might look out across the grey desert sands below, and sweep those wastes with his gaze, searching for some lost creature in that great emptiness. He might keep his watch there, day upon day, week on week, and even longer, and in vain achieve his purpose. But men do pursue such hopeless goals, and, from time to time, the gods will favour such a one, and reward him for that seemingly futile endeavour; perhaps on a day as this – or not.

It was his custom to wander the hills in pursuit of game, of small deer, and even straying wild cats, which ventured onto the lower slopes of the Northern mountains. Occasionally he would break from his hunt, and look upwards towards those fearful grey peaks that stretched high into the skies. Within him would grow the longing to reach into their very heart, and flee the bonds of earth, ascending every upwards into those suspended heights, and soar there limitlessly, like an eagle. His spirits grew heavy for his life seemed a masquerade, tied as it was to this heavy and blatant earth. The mountains seemed to mock him with their ponderous weight. Yet they rose so effortlessly, when he, frail creature that he was, could barely climb beyond the snows, where his breath grew heavy, his vision clouded. Then he would retreat in confusion to the foothills, his breathing eased, and his balance of thought restored; truly the gods guarded their realm jealously; none but the favoured could ever hope to venture further. Despite these numerous failures he had never abandoned the hope that one day he might reach his goal, and discover there in that snowy realm, what he, in his soul, sought. If any had asked him to describe the object of this venture he would have found it quite impossible. And yet he was convinced that if he could but reach those peaks he would find that which was absent from his heart. He could feel the void within him even now. There it was, a dull ache, which erupted into a longing so great that tears would burst forth, and what had been the merest twinge would grow to a emptying pain that enveloped and penetrated his entire body. Finally, he would let his hopes falter, and thus reconcile to his lot; but always the struggle would continue afresh. There seemed little that he could do to release himself from this bondage and gain his

freedom, there to enter either fully into life, or into darkest death; but this was a bright day, and he was light of heart. He had been engaged in the pursuit of a black antelope, a species quite commonly discovered upon the lower slopes. They were agile creatures, equally well adapted to fleeing the predators of the lowlands, or negotiating the steeper slopes of the mountainside. He had pursued this particular beast for two days and two nights now, following relentlessly its spoor until, at last, he caught sight of the beast. It was a mature male, some fourteen hands in height. Its horns were well developed, with at least two curves in their length. One of these spikes, however, had a broken tip, indicating at least one combat with another of its kind. The creature's coat was a deep black, and displayed the silken lustre of a beast in its prime. It was well aware of its pursuer but its mature years had deceived it into the folly that it could outwit this poor two-legged beast. And so the game was played; the animal would allow its admirer to move in closer only to leap lightly out of range, nimbly skipping up the higher slopes, there to taunt its shadow from safety. But the hunter knew his craft, and he was plentifully endowed with patience. Sooner or later all creatures, notably those prone to an overweening pride in their own abilities, make an error; and this beast would be no exception. The contest continued, with the beast always just one step outside the grasp of its pursuer. It was late on the third day that the long awaited fault finally materialised. Both predator and prey had descended the slopes until they were at the lower edge of the foothills. The numerous streams that emerged from the peaks above flowed down the mountainside here, to form a confluence, whose waters flowed more gently upon these shallower slopes. It might have been that this lone creature was missing the company of its fellows; and maybe it had tired a little of the sport. For whatever reason, it had made its way from the precipitous heights above, and was now trotting nimbly along a narrow path that led into the side of the small watercourse. Along the track there was a scattering of boulders that had broken free from the higher cliffs. These fragments had bounded down the hillside, finally coming to rest near the trail. The antelope had grown careless and heedless, and perchance a little contemptuous, of the poor little two-leg that had followed it so fruitlessly. But now the hunter had greatly decreased the distance between them, and was poised behind one of the boulders, closely observing the beast. It had reached the water hole and raised its head to sniff the air, catching neither sight nor scent of its fellows, nor of the man. The pursuer was downwind of the beast, and quite invisible to his prey. He observed the antelope as it approached the water. It paused briefly, to look from side to side, before lowering its head to the cool frothing flow where it languorously commenced to scoop up the water with its long coiling tongue. The man moved carefully and quietly, anxious not to disturb the loose stones that littered this whole side of the mountain. The man advanced, slowly and slower, moving from boulder to boulder, as he closed in upon the animal. Now he was within range. He had already unslung his bow, and had strung it, ready for use. His eye never wavered, not for a moment, from the creature, as he drew a long, wooden shaft from its sheath, and slid the notch over the sinewy string. He raised the bow fluidly, his eye fixed on the beast, levelling the arrowhead just above its right shoulder blade. There was a light breeze blowing from his right, and he adjusted the sight accordingly. He braced himself against his back foot, the bow bending into a great arc, his body quite motionless. His breathing was steady, his arm flexed ready, and the arrowhead drawn back almost to the wood of the bow. The animal raised its head, and the man's breath ceased. His whole being was centred on the target; and his body was the bow. An instant passed and the cord whispered past the man's cheek, the arrow flying upon its course. The deer fell to the ground, already dead, struck clean and true. The hunter leapt into the

air, with the joy of the kill filling every part of his being. He ran joyously down the slope, covering the remaining distance between himself and the deer in a matter of moments. He slowed as he approached the beast, eyeing it carefully; more than one man had been killed by a thrust from those deadly horns, and that following upon the mistaken belief that their prey had been despatched. But the creature was lifeless. There was not a movement to show life's breath. It was indeed a magnificent beast, and a worthy opponent in the chase. His first thought was to withdraw the arrow, and that he did very gingerly, not wishing to break the head off. He wiped clear the blood upon the grass nearby, and dipped the shaft into the stream to rinse away the remainder. He returned the arrow to its sheath, and set about his work. His first task was to cut the horns from the body. It was a great shame that one tine was broken; but still they were a fine trophy. He felt a twinge of shame as he removed this elegant work of nature from the beast, much like a thief stealing a rare treasure, or even worse, committing an act of sacrilege. He brushed aside the notion and returned to his labours. After he had removed the horns he attended to his hunger. During his pursuit he had had neither time nor opportunity to break his fast, stopping only briefly to sup from his water flask. As he saw the blood oozing from the wound he drew his short bladed dagger from its sheath and, pulling a small wooden cup from his sack, he poised the vessel beneath the creature's throat, and drew the blade swiftly across the artery. Immediately, a generous flow issued from the incision, most of which trickled into the cup. The bright, red, foaming fluid quickly filled it to the brim. He raised the vessel to his lips, and drank deeply of the liquor; it was still warm, and the taste was rich. He could already feel the life energy flowing into his body and, with this addition, his almost spent energies restored. Much blood had spilt upon the ground, and the body was quickly drained of the residue. Working quickly and efficiently he skinned and eviscerated the beast. Piece by piece he jointed the animal's frame, though from its innards he kept only those organs that would be of some use; the gut he cast aside. But there were other creatures waiting, readily and most eager, to take their share of the kill; there would be nothing wasted on this day. Above he could already see the flights of carrion birds gathering overhead, hungrily awaiting their turn at the dining table. Each morsel he washed in the stream to clean away the blood; these he then carefully wrapped, binding the flesh within the broad leaves which he carried in his bag.. It had been discovered long ago that this foliage contained within its fibres a property that maintained the freshness of meat. The action of this preservative allowed hunters to travel great distances but still bear home their kill yet fresh. The remainder would be hung or smoked, to be consumed at a later date. Fortunately, though he had been engaged in the chase for some two days, he had not wandered far from where his people lived. His clan had made their base deep in one of the mountain passes; it would only be a short time, even before darkness fell, before he could return there. He concluded his butcher's trade, and stowed the meat away neatly in his sack. He had unstrung the bow again, and placed it upon his back. He looked down upon the remnants of the beast, and at the grass upon which they lay, the ground stained a darkening red with its life's blood, and silently offered a prayer to the gods, that they might look with kindness upon their recently deceased kin and, even more generously, upon the agent of its demise. To support this supplication he buried one of the small packets of meat nearby, as an offering to the local deities. It was only after this obeisance that he made his way back along the mountainside, and homewards.

The light had begun to fail. The clouds had drawn down upon the high peaks, and the first wisps of mist were even now drifting over the lower slopes. He was not greatly worried that

a fog should beset him. At this time in the season these would not linger long, for they would easily be displaced by the warm airs that rose from the desert. But the atmosphere grew cold, and a grey light fell over the whole area. He felt a shiver run through his frame as the temperatures rapidly dropped. He picked up his pace, both to warm his body and to hasten his return. He had been absent from home for considerably longer than usual, and he was keen to see his family again. He thought fondly of them now, and of the warm comforts of his hut, set high up on the side of a deep valley. He dearly loved to roam these slopes at his leisure, but there was always that anticipation, to return home once more to the warm hearth of his brethren. In truth he could not be sure whether it was the freedom of the hills that he enjoyed most, or that sweetened return to the bosom of his family, for the one experience seemed to enhance the other. But for now he longed for a warm fire, hot food, and the comfort of a bed, within which he would bury himself beneath thick fur coverings, there to sleep soundly through the night. So preoccupied was he with his reveries that he hardly noticed the cloud as it lifted around him. It was only when the sun broke through, and pierced the thinning murk, that he could again survey his environs. He had made his way some considerable distance up the mountainside, and was able to survey the desert now, its dry plains rolling away far beneath. It might have been a mere impulse, for he was not particularly fatigued, but he decided to rest briefly before continuing on his journey. He sat down and, leaning back on his elbows, cast his gaze over the landscape. There was nothing of great significance to remark upon. Deserts, by their very nature, are of a rather repetitive character, and their particular prospect is hardly likely to excite an enlivened interest. No. it was more the breadth and expansiveness of that spreading vista, which inspired his appreciation. Range upon range of low sloping dunes, sweeping away across the scene, to disappear, finally, into a greyish distance. At its very margin the crystal clear blue skies raised themselves like a curtain from that misty boundary, to soar into the infinite spaces above. That enormous sense of emptiness, precious to him beyond all earthly riches, gave his soul the scope that it craved, a boundless and limitless compass, to explore, and to be truly free. It was such a contrast to the narrow mountain defiles in which his people lived. Oftentimes it felt as if he could hardly breathe, surrounded by those enormous falls of rock, the sky barely visible between those ponderous granite towers. Scarcely would he return home before that impulse would again drive him, to wander the mountains, his heart longing for release. But today he felt a heaviness grow upon him. Even the great plains exhibited before him did not occasion that sense of awe, which he customarily derived from their generosity of dimension. Now there was just this grey desert, stretching onwards and outwards; and it felt like a burden, a barrier and prison from which he could make no evasion. Weighed down by this vague oppression, he was about to resume his journey when he caught a glimpse of something far away on the plain beneath. This might seem quite extraordinary to people endowed with ordinary vision, but his people were blessed with an acuity of that sense that might seem almost superhuman to others. He narrowed his eyes, the better to determine whether his mind had not played a trick upon his sight. He stared intently towards that distant mark until he was quite sure that he had made no mistake. He could distinctly pick out a dark speck, but he was unable to distinguish more than that. He continued to examine the feature, striving to identify its nature. But even with his extraordinary faculty it was quite impossible to discern any more specifics. What could be quite certain, however, was that it was no animal. The only creatures that populated the desert here would be the eagles, and they held their watch only in the skies. Sand cats would occasionally venture into the deep desert, but only if food was very scarce; and

certainly not in this season. The only other beast that would have the gall to venture so far into this wasteland would be of the human species. But if there was a man down there, or men - for he could not tell if the speck represented an individual or a group - then what on earth were they be doing there? A single individual would have to be extremely foolish to make such a journey. He was so intent upon his surveillance that he almost failed to notice the arrival of yet more dark minutiae upon the plain. Whatever they were they must have just breasted the crest of a large sand dune, for he was quite sure that they had not been there a few instants earlier. They were quite some distance ahead of the first speck. Surely this was a mystery! Or bigger mystery! Why on earth would there be two groups wandering the desert? Perhaps the solitary figure had become separated from the main company, and was attempting to return to his comrades. He reflected on this briefly before concluding that such speculation could bring him no answers. More to the point, what should he do now? His people and those of the lowlands had little to do with each other. There existed an unspoken - and unwritten - rule that each should keep to their own domain. It had been many generations ago that the upland folk had made their homes in these mountains ranges. Their forebears had been outcasts, driven away by the bedouin of the desert plains. Criminals or the dispossessed, who faced either death or mutilation should they remain in the lowlands, they had instead taken refuge in the mountains. It was there they gathered in small communities until, finally, they had made this wild realm their home. As their numbers had grown the lowlanders feared this burgeoning power, and numerous expeditions had been mounted to destroy the threat. But the mountain folk had become too potent, and they knew these heights better than the intruders. They had avoided any direct confrontation with the armies despatched to subdue them. Instead, they had engaged in a guerilla campaign, taking full advantage of their superior knowledge of the terrain. As the enemy ranks had infiltrated the passes they were greeted with torrents of rocks, tossed upon their heads from the rocky ledges above. Smaller units of soldiers, which had been tempted into pursuing a retreating enemy, these were diverted into canyons from which there was no escape. Here the trap was sprung, and the highlanders would fall upon their foes, destroying them to a man. Three major expeditions were made in all, so determined were the plains folk to destroy their neighbours; all failed miserably. Instead, the survivors fled the mountains, bringing with them tales of great savagery and barbarism, of inhuman cruelties inflicted upon them by the beasts that infested those parts. From that time onwards no further attempts had been made to extirpate this nuisance, and for their part the dwellers of the heights were content to remain within their own boundaries. Some among their number farmed the lower slopes of the mountains, or herded their cattle wherever they might forage in the warmer months. The rest, such as he, Garuda, were hunters and warriors, though all amongst them might be called to arms should the occasion arise.. There were now only sporadic encounters between the two neighbours, and an uneasy peace, if it can be called that, existed between the two sides. However, this truce was sustained only upon the clear understanding that there should no intrusion by either side into the other's territory. It was this last condition that had occasioned Garuda's surprise when he observed the presence of the interlopers below. It was quite unheard of for any to attempt to approach this territory nowadays. No watch was kept, and it had been pure chance that he should be in a position to observe them from his present vantage. This part of the range was rarely visited and, apart from game, it had little agricultural value, adjacent as it was to the desert borders. He debated within himself as to the best course of action. He could return to the settlement and raise the alarm. But nightfall was rapidly approaching, and even if he

returned with reinforcements they would be unable to launch a search. Darkness would obscure any clues as to the visitors' whereabouts, and they might make their escape under its cover. No. It would be better to track these fools on his own account. They were yet in the desert, and had not entered his people's lands. They might even veer off their present course, and take a route along the base of the range towards one of the settlements that lay to the east. He decided to maintain a watch upon them and then, if they should be arrogant enough to continue on their present track, he would at least know by what route they were to proceed. If this indeed was their intention, he could return with his allies, and the lowlanders would be treated to another salutary lesson in minding their own business. By his reckoning those below were perhaps another day's march from the foothills. There remained a few hours of light and, if the mists did not return, he would remain where he was, and keep a sharp eye upon them. If they were indeed determined upon this folly he would have plenty of time on the morn to descend the slopes, there to better observe their numbers and composition. Furnished with such information he would muster a sufficient force, and repel whatever attack they might be mounting.

To Celarent's eye there could be no further doubt that they were within striking distance of the mountains. It was only now that he could gain a full appreciation of their magnitude; they were truly awful to behold. For days and nights, in their voyage across the desert, those snow swept peaks had dominated the landscape. It seemed, however, that no matter how much they strived and toiled, those stupendous grey buttresses remained always out of reach. But here they were, and suddenly those enormous bulwarks reared up before them, reaching upwards into the sky to such dizzying heights, and so precipitous, that it seemed that they might tumble downwards upon his head. Alaste had assured them that it would be only one more night and one more day, and they would be amongst the foothills. Celarent was much relieved to hear this, as were both Hesvee and Celarent. Accustomed as they had become to the unremitting heat that blasted them during the day, it was rather the unrelieved monotony of the desert sands which was beginning to drain him. Striking though the colours were, with freezing golden-silver dawns, or the deep reds and purples of the glowing sunsets, their rich hues fading slowly into a deep black firmament, yet the daytime hours were filled with a burning light, which oppressed the eyes, and drove the surrendered gaze to the ground, then finally, to a sea of fine grains that mocked the imagination with their uniformity. But now the world seemed to erupt once more into life, and the horizon was transformed again, into a mass of grey and black battlements, with snowy white wreaths garlanding their summits. The skyline jostled in amongst the great parapets, and white clouds skimmed the tops of the mountains, while a sharp blue sky lay as a resplendent canvas upon which all was defined with sharpest clarity. It was on the last night before they would reach the mountains that the small party gathered around their camp-fire. All were excited - and a little apprehensive too - for they were on the very threshold of the next stage of their adventure. Their customary supper, of meat and oatmeal, was already bubbling away in the pot, and the conversation had turned towards the morrow. "So you think we'll be in the foothills presently, sir?" asked Hesvee, of Alaste. "No doubt. No doubt. In fact if you care to observe, we're already on the margin of the desert. Didn't you mark the colour of the sands hereabouts?" The other looked at him blankly. "No, perhaps not", continued their guide. "Observe tomorrow, when the sun's up. The ground's already of a darker complexion. You note those great mountains that lie ahead of us. To the eye they seem as behemoths; indestructible and unchangeable. Yet over the passing of many

generations the winds and rain, the snows and icy rivers, all have made their mark upon those grey indomitable faces. Yea. Even these must bow before time". Alaste's suddenly poetical turn of phrase had come as something of a surprise to the party; all were rather more accustomed to his more prosaic style. To hear him speak thus was both unexpected, and a little alarming. But his mood seemed sombre and restrained. "Yes. All must turn to dust. And that's what you'll see in the sand about you on the morrow. Those great granite faces have shed their tears into the ground, and blackened the sands with their sorrow". Celarent stared at the man. "Of course", commented Ferioque. "But I'm surprised that the dust should've carried this far from the range. Surely it'd be too heavy to be carried by the winds. And I see no evidence of ancient riverbeds in this area". "True enough, friend, true enough. Normally the winds that blow by this way are of no great force. But sometimes the storms that drive through the mountains are so ferocious that they rip the rock with their fury, and can carry their prey even thus far onto the plains". "Well, I for one wouldn't wish to witness that, to be sure", Hesvee observed. "Worry not, sirs. If we did then none would return to tell the tale". Alaste laughed at his own grim humour. He did seem to be held in the grip of a strange mood this evening. It was on the tip of Celarent's tongue to enquire as to his well-being, but discretion enforced the rule that forbade such familiarity. He was not a man much practised in such disclosure and had, no doubt, good reason for this melancholic disposition. Instead, he returned to the topic that was undoubtedly on everyone's mind. "You believe that we're in the right position to enter the mountains, Alaste?" "I think so", replied their guide. "I'm not accustomed to entering the range from this quarter. But I've still got my bearings. I marked one of the peaks today, the fellow that lies directly ahead of our course. If I'm not mistaken - and I think that I'm not - this will point to the right side of the base of the triangle upon the three mountains. At the moment it's a simple enough matter to keep on target, here in the desert. But when we enter the mountains, then will my skills be greatly tested. But I'm confident. Worry not, friends. Worry not". The companions fell silent momentarily, listening to the sounds of the fire crackling, and the gentle muttering of the bubbling stew. In the cooling night, and after the ardour of the day, it was easy to work up a good appetite; Celarent was ravenous. He contented himself for now by gnawing upon a piece of stale bread, the last of their reserves. They had planned prudently, and their provisions would see them to their destination. Alaste had assured them that it would be a simple matter to restock their supplies with the plentiful wild game inhabiting these parts. On their return journey they would go by way of one of the nearby villages, and obtain the rest of their needs accordingly. There would be less need for concealment then, for they would have discovered the truth - or not - of their mission. If the map led to nowhere, and to nothing, no harm suffered; maybe just the loss of a little time - time perhaps, which could have been more profitably employed. But it would be true to say that even if such a contingency arose there would not have been one among them who would have regretted setting out on this venture. For the other part - that is, if the reports should prove true and the chart indeed led them to long lost cities, and perhaps even great treasure - then they could return once again; but on this occasion with a full-scale expedition.

The night had descended into a hush. The only sounds that could be heard were the scuffling and low chirpings of the night creatures as they hunted for their own suppers in the deep burrows of the sands. The travellers had fallen silent, each reflecting soberly upon his future. Suddenly there was a loud crack, and each head jerked around as if snapped by a string. Alaste looked up from where he was seated near the pot. He had

been stirring its contents steadily, and debating whether to serve it now, or leave it be a while longer. Now he sat there motionless, ladle in hand, staring in the direction from which the sound had come. It had not yet occurred to Celarent that this interruption might signify Erame. But then he recalled what she had said, that she intended to announce her presence to the group shortly before they entered the foothills. He did not know why but he had assumed that she would choose the morning, or even sometime during the following day, to reveal her position. He noticed that Alaste had glanced across at him and, he could swear that he saw a smile on the other's face. "Come forward and show yourself", the fellow announced loudly. The four of them remained utterly still, each straining to pierce the silence of the night. "Come on, Erame. I know you're out there. Come forward or test my patience". Alaste was looking at him directly, and he was grateful for the poor light shed by the fire, for it concealed the expression on his face. A low shuffling noise could be heard in the darkness, and from out of the shadows emerged a figure, carrying in one hand a bridle, which in turn was attached to the harness of a mule. Following upon this beast was the rest of his herd, which trudged resignedly into the circle of flickering light. All four had got to their feet, but only two remained utterly baffled by the interruption. The fellow had said, 'Erame', thought Hesvee. But what on earth would she be doing here? And Ferioque's speculation was proceeding in a similar direction. The new arrival had now come to a halt and was standing motionless near the fire. With one hand it raised the hood from its face and, with this gentle gesture, the delicate features of their guide's daughter were revealed. Alaste presented a stern expression to the world, and was regarding his daughter with as much disapproval as he could summon; but maintaining this facade was too great a strain upon his temperament, and he was quite unable to contain himself any further, and burst out laughing. The rest of the party, including the errant daughter, stood by, unsure as to how to respond to this fellow's strange merriment. Celarent did commence to feel the slightest stirrings of relief though these were still tinged with apprehension. Perhaps the fellow had lost his mind, and this peculiar behaviour simply signified the final departure of his sanity? If he should learn of his - that is Celarent's - complicity in this subterfuge, then surely his humour would depart as rapidly as it had arrived, only to be replaced with a wrath vented, and quite rightly, in his direction. Hesvee and Ferioque stood open-mouthed, now looking at Erame as if to ensure that they were not mistaken, and then at Alaste, trying earnestly to fathom the source of his jollity. Finally, of the whole party, Erame seemed the most discomfited. She had prepared herself to meet her father's ire, disapproval, annoyance, or whatever might come, but nothing had quite prepared her for this reaction. She stood there, staring somewhat irately at her father, whilst casting the occasional glance towards Celarent as if to implore an explanation. However, the latter, still not assured of the trend that things might take, did his best (and without wishing to appear rude) to avoid her silent bidding, and to await patiently whatever was to come. But Alaste seemed to have exhausted his capacity and, observant of his daughter's troubled expression, bade her come closer. "Now daughter. Why so surprised? Are you not pleased to see your father"? She remained tight-lipped, taken aback by his peculiar demeanour. "Surely you've not travelled all this way just to ignore this poor fellow?" he asked mockingly. She found her words. "You knew. You knew". "Knew what, my pretty one? Enlighten me a little on the matter?" "You knew", she repeated, almost accusingly. "Knew all along?" "Again I beg you, have some fond regard for your old father. What is this knowledge of which you hold me accused? Have pity on me". He assumed a hangdog expression, but a smile twitched at the corner of his mouth. "You knew I was following you. But how?" "Ah! A mystery,

indeed, is it not, my beloved daughter? That a father should know his daughter. What a strange occurrence. Have you never had occasion to hear my dear wife remark, 'You're just like your father you are'. Have you heard these words uttered by your mother? Tell me?" Erame was growing redder and redder, and Celarent did not think it was the heat from the fire that was affecting her otherwise pure complexion. "You're mocking me father. I warn you". She seemed to have recovered some of her poise. "Warn me, daughter! Warn me of what? That your mother is right, and that the poor, old fool has a poor, young fool for a daughter. Oh! It's too late for that now surely". He was watching her face, and had seen embarrassment and surprise turn to annoyance. "Come daughter. Put up the bridle and give your father, the old fool that he is, an embrace". She glanced up at him, and then suddenly burst into laughter, mixed perhaps with a few tears. She crossed the intervening ground, and threw herself into the welcoming arms of her parent. "There, there, pretty one. You're home again", he muttered in her ear. He patted her head affectionately as she drew back. "You did know then?" "Yes, my dear. And so did your mother, of course. I assume that you left a note behind, announcing your plans?" "Of course I did. I'm not that careless, father". "Well I'm glad to hear it. A least in one thing you're a dutiful daughter. I fear for the rest", he smiled. "Come. Warm yourself by the fire, and tell us all of your adventures in the desert". Alaste glanced across at Celarent and indicated that he should attend to the mules. When he returned from this duty he found Erame seated by the fire, hungrily eating from a bowl of stew. The others were similarly engaged. Alaste passed him his allotment, and he took his place by the fireside. "So now we're all here, daughter. Your adventures? You obviously passed safely through this place, and here you are. Might I be so bold as to enquire of you your intentions?" Erame gave him a look as only a daughter can a father. "Stop playing games, father. Yes. I know you well enough for that". "Games – me?" The latter responded, with mock surprise. "Yes. You know very well". Alaste paused before resuming his light interrogation. "Well! Did you meet anyone of great interest in your travels, my dear? The desert is so large, and it can be such a lonely place". Alaste slyly observed Celarent from the corner of his eye. Erame noticed this, and realised that the time for dissembling had come to an end. "Very well. Yes father, I did - and you know that I did". A hint of exasperation lingered in her voice. "I do? Really. Please enlighten us". He was smiling broadly now, those gleaming white teeth flashing in the flame light. Erame glanced quickly at Celarent before continuing. "Well, I'll tell you what you already know if it amuses you, father. But he's not to blame, and you won't hold him to be so. It's only fair". "Fair? Fair! Hmmm. Let me see. Have you ever known me to be an unreasonable arbiter, dearest one?" "No, father", she responded a little wearily. "Then I see no reason to conduct myself in any other fashion now". Alaste knew that the jest had grown well worn, and relieved his daughter of her burden. "Yes. I did know of your intention. And yes, I did observe your little rendezvous with our friend Celarent". He looked across at the young fellow who was displaying every sign of his disquiet. "Now, sir. Don't fret. I've known little Erame some years more than you so I know where to apportion the responsibility for this little deception; and it'll not be on your head, sir. Be at peace". Up until that point Celarent had not realised that he had been holding his breath in anticipation of some kind of violent outburst on the part of the aggrieved father. But now he let the exhalation flow, and with some relief. Erame saw his expression. "See here, father. Your humour has vexed our friend". "My humour! My humour! You say. So now it's my fault?" "No. No. But not everyone's accustomed to your jesting, father. At least I've the advantage there". "True enough daughter. True enough. Well, I'll let you both off for now". He paused but his face grew serious. "You wish to come

with us into the mountains, Erame?” The question was put thus, but was intoned as a statement. “Yes. I do. Please don’t ask me why precisely. It’s an adventure, but I do feel impelled to make this journey. I wouldn’t easily thwart your wishes, father”. She fell silent, perhaps shocked by her own audacity. “I know, daughter. I know. It’s the same with me, and perhaps with all of us”. He looked around the group but both Hesvee and Ferioque remained silent. “And you’re here, and we must decide, I suppose. Or rather I - is it not so, daughter?” She looked across at her father’s face. She was shocked to see how tired he had suddenly appeared. Her heart ached for she did love him dearly, and never wished to be the cause of any hurt. “We must go on. And anyway, you’re old enough to make your own decisions. But you’ll know of the dangers. The Northern mountains are beyond the civilised world. Or at least they are now. You understand?” She nodded. “I knew before I set out but for not a moment did it give me hesitation”. She went on. “I’ve a feeling about this. I can’t and won’t try to explain it. But deep down within my heart I feel that this is something that I have to do. And that the result, whatever it might be, is a matter of necessity or fate, or design, or whatever you might wish to call it. But I’m as ready for the risk as any among you”. Her father stared at her fixedly as she spoke. Then he lowered his head, and his voice came quietly, in the very softest of tones “Very well, daughter. We’ll proceed together. And we shall see what we shall see”. The night drew its mantle about that little beacon of light. In the vast emptiness around, nothing stirred; but time measured its inexorable beat, drawing them closer, moment by moment, to their fated ends – or beginnings.

In caverns vast and deep, extending far below the surface of this world, in cities and over seas, the Gaki went about their business. This restless people, daily and by greater degree grew more agitated, and their rulers, the councils of Elders and of the seers, became increasingly fearful for the welfare of their populations. Further raids had been reported from caverns all across the underground realm, and there was news that a number of surface dwellers had, by ill chance, encountered these sorties, and had suffered consequent casualties. It would only be a matter of time before the authorities of the over world would gain credible evidence of what was occurring beneath their feet, and within their own lands; and then they might come below, and seek the cause. But everything that could be done was ventured, in an attempt to contain the spread of this restiveness. But within the underground cities the populace, even those who had not gone forth to the surface to sate the Great Hunger, were becoming more and more distressed. The hubs, that formed the central part of most Gaki cities, were daily filling with great crowds. The citizenry, acting it seemed almost on an instinctual level, hastened to these axes, to circle them endlessly, in a desperate bid to alleviate their distress, their strange keening howls filling the air, and echoing across the rooftops. All of this was unknown to Melaskkoli as he ate and slept and carried on the regular daily routines of what had become his life. If it had not been for iDarii, his constant companion, his life would have been insupportable. They spent many hours in conversation while the former recounted stories from Gaki history, and together they explored all the wonderful intricacies of that strange society. In many respects the Gaki and the surface dwellers differed little in their preoccupations. Apart from the obvious physical and material differences between their two peoples it seemed that the forces that drove the Gaki were virtually identical to those that impelled Melaskkoli’s erstwhile companions. The expected transformation from human back to Gaki had not yet begun, and there had been some discussion between Gorval and his superiors on the tardiness of this phenomenon. On his side Melaskkoli was little

concerned, and perhaps slightly relieved at this omission. After all, his human form - the one to which he was most accustomed - whereas he was not as shocked or repelled to such a great degree as he had been by the grotesque appearance of his hosts, yet his frame of reference, his sense of normality, still owed much to this, and to his life in the upper lands. iDarii, however, he found to be a kindred spirit. As their conversations proceeded, and as the former became more inclined towards personal revelation, their physical differences receded to a point where they no longer struck him so forcefully. The only occasions where they again rose to prominence was during meal times which, to be frank, Melaskkoli would rather not have attended. The sight of his friend (for he came to regard him as such) ingesting his fare through that minute mouth, he still found quite repulsive. However, his outlook was such that he was not disposed to display those inward sentiments, for quite clearly his friend was a fellow of fine sensibility, and would be deeply hurt if he should so carelessly express his disgust at that gustatory display. Occasionally, Gorval would join them in their dialogues and though he was not a talkative fellow, and showed little in the way of emotion, nevertheless he remained the only other person with whom he might hold discourse. As he became more attuned to the Gaki temperament he was with greater facility able to read the moods of his two colleagues. Although the Gaki appeared at first sight a rather humourless race, he detected, certainly, though somewhat infrequently, that noble characteristic in iDarii, the hallmark of a truly civilised being. His wit, though notably of a grim slant, was quite unmistakable, and appealed more to his Gaki than human side. One consequence of his increasing fluency in their manners was to permit him to read more insightfully between the lines in their communications. iDarii would leave him at regular intervals, presumably to report to his superiors. He would generally return in a fairly sombre mood, and Melaskkoli could not always be sure that this was not simply a reflection of his normal frame of mind, or that he might not have been the recipient of some particularly doleful information. He hesitated to probe the fellow on the matter. However, on one occasion, the Gaki had returned to the apartments in an evidently depressed state; there really was no mistaking it. Their conversation had been somewhat halting, even desultory, and it had been mainly incumbent upon Melaskkoli to keep the flow going. It was then that he decided to risk querying the fellow. Maybe it was the case that his friend was homesick, and merely tiring of his duties here? They usually conversed mind-to-mind for he had grown more adept in that mode of communication. He had discovered some time ago that the fatigue and headaches, which he had experienced on his first interview with the seer, had in part been due to a lack of exercise in this particular faculty; that is, as well as his debilitating experiences whilst journeying down to the Gaki world "Please forgive me, friend. And I apologise for my intrusion; but I feel compelled to mention it. Does something ail you at all?" iDarii seemed a little surprised, if not disconcerted, by the question. "I'm sorry. What did you say?" He pretended a deafness, not at all convincingly, given the previous evidence of the acuity of this sense. "You seem troubled. I was just enquiring as to the cause". The Gaki hesitated, and it was obvious that he was debating which way to go. "Well I'm a bit tired, it's true". He left it there. However, Melaskkoli was not convinced by the reply. "Well, I thought perhaps you were becoming a little bored here. I'm sure you'd rather be spending time with your parents and family". In the same fashion that the human had grown more skilful in reading the temper of the Gaki, so too had the latter grown in empathy for the surface dweller. The expression on the other's face clearly demonstrated a genuine concern for his well-being, and to repel his enquiry so facilely could only be construed as lacking in even the most elementary courtesy. Although it had been agreed

that there was little point in withholding information from the young human/Gaki, it had been agreed, or rather the seers had decided, that he need not be burdened with the entire weight of the current crisis within the underground world. It was not so much a fear that he might escape to the upper world and alert the authorities that informed their ruling. After all, he was but a child so far as the surface dwellers were concerned. Why should they pay heed to any warning that he might convey when they so blithely ignored reports concerning the Gaki raids from full-grown males. No. It was rather a question of pride. Although Melaskkoli had been born a Gaki, nevertheless he retained his human form. His interlocutors could not dislodge that slight sense of shame, and admit the full extent of their current condition to a 'human'. Indeed, it was trying enough to acknowledge the gravity of their situation to one another, let alone to a human, different as he might be from the general run of his kind. Yes. A pride in their own condition, or rather a growing sense of humiliation with their deteriorating circumstances, and the rapid dissolution of their society, these were the factors that inhibited a full disclosure. It was as if by denying the truth to this young fellow they might continue to conceal it from themselves. But now Melaskkoli had asked his question, and iDarii believed that he, at least, had earned an honest reply. Briefly, he summarised for Melaskkoli the latest news. The latter could not pretend to understand the full import of what the Gaki was trying to communicate, but he did glean something of the seriousness of the situation. It was more in the halting and awkward manner in which iDarii expressed himself that conveyed the gravity of events, rather than the content of his analysis. He did not grasp fully the notion of the Great Hunger though, of course, he was well acquainted with its distant relation in his own appetites. But the depth and anguish that were its consequences were quite beyond his immediate comprehension. In disclosing this massive disruption in their society, iDarii suddenly realised what an enormous strain he had been under, in attempting to keep the full truth not only from their guest, but also from himself. He was relieved to observe Melaskkoli did not seem greatly disturbed at his account although he knew that the latter could not possibly comprehend all the implications. But he was even more reassured to measure his own reactions to the story; the unravelling of those hidden fears did not destroy him as he had secretly believed. Instead he experienced a peculiar sense of relief, that at last all was fully displayed, with nothing left to conceal. Even in the accounting he could feel his spirits rise, and the vigour return to his frame. It had been true, of course, that he was very physically fatigued. The burden of his secrets had sapped his strength, and brought even his modest humour to a very low ebb. And thus he concluded his history. At times during the narration Melaskkoli had interrupted him, requesting clarification on some point, or on an obscure reference. Now that it was finished he awaited the response. "Thank you for telling me all of this. That must have been hard. I had an idea of course, from what you and Gorval have already spoken of. But no notion at all, of how serious things had got. It would seem that perhaps my mission has failed?" "Oh. I don't think you can say that. Please don't take what I've said to indicate any fault in you. No. Not at all. If anything we should be grateful to you. You've given up much for your people. I feel that it's us rather, that should apologise to you. It doesn't seem right that you should be confined. After all, you've been away from your people for so long, and you should be reconciled with them. It's only....". He paused, struggling for the right words. "It's not a matter of trust. Well, in a sense it is...". Again he hesitated, clearly at pains to advance his argument with accuracy. "Since you're used to being a human it was felt that there had to be a period of transition before you returned to Gaki society. As you will appreciate some of my people find your appearance disturbing, as I'm sure you do ours". Melaskkoli

nodded; in this world he was, indeed, the freak. "So a period of time was to elapse before you could be reunited with those from your past; that in itself would be a shock enough for you for we weren't at all sure how you might react. Part of the reason for our conversations was to acclimatise you as far as possible, and familiarise you with our way of life before you're set adrift again, you might say". Melaskkoli nodded. Everything that the fellow had said made sense, and there was little point in protesting against an argument based on such sound judgement. "I understand. I really do. I have to say that there's much within me that resists the notion of being returned to my people, as you call them. In my mind, and for that matter, in my heart, I still feel quite differently from them. I don't know how I'd handle that at all. I did resent being locked away here. But I must assure you that you've done much to make my imprisonment", and he laughed at this point, "more bearable. Your people have shown great wisdom and compassion, I think". "I'm pleased to hear you speak so, my friend, for I have come to regard you as such. And there's much occurring in our world that's most unpleasant. It did seem a troubling prospect to return you to our society when it's in such a state of ferment. No one knows for sure what will happen next. Catastrophe, or a return to order? It's anyone's guess! I, for one, am not prepared to wager on the question. Thank you for listening to me as well. You were quite right. I had a lot on my mind, and you've helped me greatly. Thank you". Melaskkoli was quite touched, to hear the effusive thanks of his companion. "Not at all. Not at all" he replied shyly.

There was a low mist on the ground, which softened the harsh landscape, and rendered the whole terrain dream-like in its aspect. Garuda awoke to find this chilling shroud lying about his body, drifting and flowing around him, caressing with its careless touch. He got briskly to his feet, stamping them on the hard ground, eagerly shrugging of its numbing grasp, and then, to feel once more the life return to his stiffened limbs. He could sense the blood flowing through his veins, pumping the warmth from his heart to his extremities. The sun had already pierced the gloom, and soon the fog would be gone. He had slept upon the hillside that night. There was little to fear from wild animals in these parts, and even less from strangers. He knelt on the damp ground to pull up the covering, and shook the gleaming dew from its hardened folds. A short distance down the slope there grew a small clump of brushwood, and towards this he made his way, his gait awkward, his limbs still feeling unsteady from the night's cold. He broke off some of the branches and dead wood, and then collected up these fragments in his arms. He returned to his former position, and reached into one of the bundles that he carried in his knapsack. From this he withdrew a small handful of dry kindling together with a small stone, which he kept there as well. He placed the fibrous matter on the ground and, grasping his knife, he struck the metal haft against the fire-stone. A few sparks flew off immediately, but failed to catch. He struck the knife upon the stone again, and then once more. Suddenly a fleck of fire was captured within the fibres, and this began to glow a dull red. He bent forward, shielding the clump within his hands, and blew gently upon the nascent ember. A few gentle puffs and a delicate white flame erupted from the pile. The dry cords caught rapidly, and soon the whole bundle was blazing vigorously. Quickly he added wood and brush to the small pile, anxious not to extinguish it, feeding the flames until they burned fiercer still. He went back down the slope but this time returned with an even larger break of wood, and added some of this to the blaze. In short order the flames had died down, but the heat from the glowing heart of the fire was growing steady and strong. Using a hardwood pole, already blackened deeply from previous employment, he suspended a pot, full of water, above the

flames. As soon as its contents had begun to simmer he took another bundle from his wallet, and extracted some dried meat shavings, and added these to the brew. It was not long before the water again came to the boil, and to this he added some herbs for flavour. Soon he was able to remove the pot from the fire, and let it cool a little, before supping on the brew. There really is nothing more reviving in the morning than a succulent mug of meat tea. He could feel its vivifying warmth penetrating his bones, and his spirits rising correspondingly. To add further to his sense of beneficence the sun was cutting through the haze, and the mist retreated wistfully before its attack. The hillside had taken on its former appearance, and Garuda was once again able to gaze down upon the desert plain, his vision quite unobstructed. At first he could see nothing of the intruders, and feared that overnight they might have given him the slip. He cast his eyes backwards and forwards, desperately searching for the point at which he had first discovered them. But there was nothing there but the grey emptiness of the sand to greet his frantic researches. He sipped upon the tea, savouring its aromatic flavour, but not for a instant withdrawing his attention from the land beneath. Finally, he caught sight of something black against the otherwise monotone background. Yes. There it was. He was quite sure now. And then another, and another. They must have been hidden behind the cover of a dune, and were just now making their way down the opposite slope. He narrowed his gaze, keen to see if that lone fellow still followed upon his predecessors' course; but there was nothing. By his calculation, and if they continued on their present heading, then they should be amongst the foothills well before nightfall. He continued to sup upon his drink, relishing its full, rich taste. Soon enough he had finished his breakfast, and it was time to decide upon the next course of action. It was vital that he maintain his watch, and not lose sight of them. Although the party was small he could not be sure that they were not the advance guard of a larger expedition, perhaps still some distance away over the horizon. He would have to move closer, and assess their intentions as best he could. They still lay far to his right, and it would do no harm to move further along the mountainside until he occupied a position nearer to where they might enter the range. He would remain at the same height throughout his traverse so that he would not lose sight of his quarry. Now that his mind was set upon its tack all that remained was to break camp. The fire he carefully, though regretfully, extinguished. The sun was well above the hillside but there were stiff breezes blowing, and these sent a shiver through his body. It had occurred to him that his fire might give away his position to those below; but the ground was uneven here, and the flame itself was unlikely to have been observed. The branches that he had used were mostly dry, and free of any leaves; little - if any - smoke had been produced. He ground the remaining embers under his feet, careful to make sure that there was no possibility that they might re-ignite. As a final precaution he kicked some damp earth over the grey ashes, to leave nothing to chance. He bundled up all his possessions once again, and slung the sack over his shoulder. Similarly, his bow he hung about his neck, and the sheath of arrows from his waist. He cast a last look out over the desert, to mark the position of the wayfarers, and then set off along the slope, aiming roughly in the direction of their heading. The sky was clear, and the air bright and fresh. His body felt light, and his limbs full of energy, and quite free now of that early morning sluggishness. He moved at a steady pace, though not hastily, for the slope was gentle but it would not do to suffer an injury this far from home. The space opened up about him, with the peaks of the mountains flying skywards to his right, and the vast expanse of the desert disappearing into its own enormity to his left. He kept his gaze steadily fixed before him but would periodically halt in his advance to scan the desolate tracts below for signs of the travellers.

On each occasion he was not disappointed, for it seemed that they were making no attempt at concealment. Perhaps they had not even considered the possibility that they might be detected. As they drew closer to the desert margins their destination became obvious to Garuda. Ahead of them there lay a deep ravine, which toiled its convoluted way through those vertical cliffs, and into the heart of the Northern mountains. The route they had chosen was hazardous. There were softer ways by which one might enter the range, and certainly less perilous. If any should be trapped within the canyon they would be an easy target for any hostiles. It seemed that whoever was in charge of this little party might have made the same calculation. If it was a deliberate act on their part, in proceeding in this fashion, then that would suggest that at least one of their number might be familiar with the territory. It was unlikely that any among his people would act as a guide; an act of treachery such as this would lead to a swift and bloody retribution. On the other hand it could be purely accidental that this was their choice. In the latter case then these unfortunates were in for a very rough ride, and in every sense of that expression. Garuda concluded that he would have to climb some way further down the mountainside if he was to get a closer look at these daring fools. It might mean that he would lose sight of them briefly; but then was there another choice? He altered his course so that he was now moving in a diagonal, both along the hillside but also whilst losing height. He had to be even more cautious in keeping his footing here, and this slowed his pace considerably. But the sun was not even at its zenith, and the day was clear, so he was still making good time. After he had been travelling for some little while he could feel the strain building in his calf muscles, as his legs fought against the gradient. He had to exercise even greater care now. Should he slip and hurt himself, even a small fracture could prove to be fatal. From time to time he lost sight of his prey momentarily, hidden behind the vagaries of the mountain sides. Fortunately these intervals were brief, and he was easily able to locate them anew. As he moved from the heights towards the plain below the air grew noticeably warmer. Finally, between his own exertions and the milder climate, he was obliged to remove his jacket, for he was perspiring profusely. The sun rose, and as it did so the reflected heat from the desert shimmered up from the hot surface, its warm breezes brushing over him.

Now he had arrived at a plateau, the edge of which obscured his view of the lands below, and he made haste to cross this. When he finally came to the scarp face, which descended from the opposite border, he was surprised to discover how rapidly he had approached the party of wanderers. Although still some distance away he was now clearly able to distinguish them. There appeared to be five persons - with about three times that number of pack animals. There was no sign of any others in the vicinity, and he was quite at a loss to account for the disappearance of that second group. The strangers were still quite some way from the mouth of the ravine but he guessed that unless they had made a sharp detour, that this would remain their objective. He was left again with a choice to make. The only means by which to track them, once they were within the confines of that precipitously guarded defile, were to follow them directly, or to attempt to monitor their progress from the heights above. The latter course was extremely dangerous, and there would inevitably be obstructions, which would oblige him to divert from his march. But then again, he could descend to the level of the plain and follow at a short distance behind the intruders, always contriving to remain out of their sight. His original plan had been to return to his fellows, and to warn them of the incursion; but this was rendered unnecessary by their present itinerary. If they followed the ravine to its only exit they would then be but

a short march away from one of the mountain settlements. It would be simple enough to raise the alarm; then his people would fall upon the interlopers, and conclude their business quickly and efficiently. The answer seemed obvious. He would descend to the plain below and work his way around until he was at their rear. When he arrived at the canyon this would provide more than ample cover, and it would be a simple matter to pursue them closely, and still remain undiscovered. He directed his course accordingly, and set his face towards the desert.

As usual the party rose early, albeit this time its numbers increased by one. Erame was the first to waken, and she set to to revive the fire and prepare breakfast. She had broken with tradition somewhat and prepared a thick gruel, a fairly tasteless concoction but one that she rendered palatable with the addition of some honey to the mess. As the men wolfed down the food, stopping only briefly to drink from their mugs of hot steaming tea, she observed with some satisfaction this noisy, but honest, testimony to her efforts. Despite her father's assurances she was aware that her presence would place an additional burden upon his shoulders. There was little that she could do to alleviate this but at least she could ensure that she took her place within the expedition, and discharged her portion of the duties. Hesvee had already seen to the mules, and Ferioque was busying himself attending to the fire. Alaste had left the small encampment, and disappeared over a small rise. It was the etiquette within the party not to enquire upon another's absence in these circumstances, for a call of nature was a matter not to be intruded upon in either sense. Although Alaste had indeed left the company for precisely this purpose, he wished also to investigate a matter that had come to his attention from the previous day. As they had been crossing the plain, and making very good time, drawing ever closer to the foothills before them, his eyes had been drawn to the foreground. Even at some distance out from the canyon mouth, its dark maw could be seen clearly, outlined against the gently rising slopes on either side. He had deliberately chosen this entry point, for only the foolhardy would cross the mountains by this way. But he knew that the inhabitants of these parts were a cautious people, and it would not be entirely unthinkable that they might place a guard, even here. He had thought that he might catch sight of any fires that such sentries would have lit, to warm themselves through the long hours of the night. It could be of no concern to these if the flames alerted others to their presence, and perhaps might even serve as a deterrent to any who would be foolish enough to set foot in their land. The darkness was thick black, and not one glimmer of light could he see in the gloom. A little reassured by this discovery he made his way back to the camp. As he did so he reflected on Erame's arrival. Although he had been well prepared, and despite the fact that he could easily have forestalled her plan, yet here she was, and the proximity of the dangers they faced seemed even more persuasive now. For the first time since their departure from the oasis he considered the possibility that they might actually suffer casualties. For the most part he had scarcely given the fact of his own mortality much contemplation. To be sure he had been in some troublesome places, and had met men along the way who had borne him great ill will. But he had come through these ordeals with little fear in his heart - or not so much that it would incapacitate him. For only a fool abstains from fear, and this is a gift from the gods; to endow men lacking even in wit with some means of saving life and limb. And so for his own preservation he gave no more than due account. But for the lives of those dear to him, this had never been a question subject to much debate. But now she was here, and just before them lay the great mountains, and with them the adventures and dangers that were their progeny. He drew closer to the

camp, and observed that the others had almost concluded their preparations. They worked well together, and he was pleased to see that they had progressed so greatly, and in such a brief time. Even Celarent had gained a deal in confidence, and was clearly more than slightly buoyed up by Erame's arrival. His estimation of that fellow had not been diminished at all by this recent turn of events. Indeed, the fact that he had remained true to his word impressed him favourably, and reinforced his view that here was a young man of good character. As to the fellow's prospects of a future liaison with his daughter – well! – that was another matter, and truly in the hands of those playful deities who enjoy such sport with men's fortune. The fire was doused, and the packs replaced upon the backs of the mules. The sun was far below the horizon when the small party set out again upon their journey, with Alaste and his daughter in the lead, followed by Hesvee and Ferioque, and with Celarent bringing up the rear guard.

The group had been under way for some time before Ferioque observed to his fellow, "Well, my friend. The mountains grow desperately close". Hesvee grunted quietly. "Mm. Yes indeed". "But Alaste seems to know the way. He pointed out the ravine to me yesterday, before we stopped for our midday rest". "Yes. He mentioned it to me. He said there were a few risks attached to choosing that route, but they're overruled by the advantages. Anyway, he assured me that this way would lead us quickly to our destination – the three mountains. Though to be honest I can't pick out one from the other. They all seem much the same to me – Very high!" he laughed. They continued a few more paces in silence. "The fellow's a strange one, isn't he?" queried Ferioque. "What do you mean?" "Well – a man who's difficult to figure in some ways. I don't mean he's dishonest. But a simple merchant; he doesn't seem the type at all. And his daughter as well. She's very much a bud from the same tree. I was thinking about her comment, about her not being clear quite why she's here, or at least not able to explain it. I'm not quite sure but the question has occurred to me more than once on this trip, and most assuredly I tell you". Hesvee examined his friend carefully before replying. "I think I know what you mean. Yes. Undoubtedly there's a depth to the fellow that isn't easily plumbed. And Erame's of the same breed. For myself I can't say truly the reasons why I decided to pursue this venture either. There are the evident ones, of course, for our journey that is. The discovery of the map, and the possibilities it opens up for research are quite enormous. I find it difficult to conceive not following the matter to its full conclusion. But as you say, it seems to me that there's something underlying my actions, and I can't determine its root. I can honestly say that I have never, and I mean NEVER, acted with such impulse before in my life. You know me Ferioque?" The latter nodded. Hesvee continued. "I'm a careful man. Meticulous to a fault, and not given to whims or fancies. And yet this adventure stirs my blood in a way that has never happened before. It was almost like a calling forth of something within me, something that has lain long dormant. But if you were to ask me to identify it's nature I couldn't; there are no words to give expression to it". "Now that you speak thus, my friend, I have to grant myself in accord with your pronouncement. There I was, happy in the bosom of my family, my work proceeding most fortunately, and me enjoying the best of my life, and then – Boom! I, like you, put up little or no resistance to embarking on this escapade, not a second thought even. Certainly to a properly planned expedition I would have given the matter detailed consideration, and perhaps then rejected it as foolish, and despite its potential rewards. And yet here I am, on the very brink of risking my life, and for what? A few pieces of old parchment and a myth? Hmm. This is not me, or not the me that I recognise, to be sure – to be very sure". He chuckled a little, as

if in commiseration with his own foolhardiness. “Mm. Something to ponder?” observed Hesvee. “Maybe we will find our answer somewhere up there?” and he pointed ahead, into the rising shadows of the mountains, darkly shadowing their path. “Maybe, friend. Maybe”, echoed Ferioque.

Garuda had reached the plain. He had made good time, and had rarely lost sight of the desert travellers during his rapid descent. Now that he had reached the desert he found that the rise of one of the foothills lay between him and them. This served his purpose well, for otherwise his presence would easily have been detected on this featureless and gently undulating land. It was now beyond any doubt that they were headed into the ravine. It simply remained for him to close in behind them, and follow the tracks that they left clearly indented upon the sand. Once the strangers had entered the defile there was plentiful cover, and he would be able to further close the interval. The heat was greatly oppressive, and he was ill used to such high temperatures. He had already doffed his jerkin, and now discarded the overshirt which he had been wearing. The leather trousers, which had served him so well on the mountain heights, proved to be a most unsuitable garment in these climes. He reconciled himself to this temporary discomfort by recalling that shortly he would again be up amongst those peaks, and once more in the cool embrace of that temperate, if not chilly, climate. As the sweat poured down his back he took frequent swigs from his canteen, grimacing slightly as the tepid flow of water trickled down his throat. The sun was high overhead, and the noonday heat was rising rapidly with it. With any luck his prey would have entered the valley, and he should be able to follow them into its welcoming shadows, and that long before the sun had reached its full fury in the heavens. He made his way around the lower slopes of the hill, all the while keeping a watchful eye lest he come upon the advance party unawares; but there was nothing to indicate a single human being in this whole land. The only signs of life he could discern were a few birds flying far away in the desert, whose gliding wings described great sweeping arcs in the sky, as they swept blithely over the lands below. Finally, he crested the brow of the rise and there, before him, the mouth of the pass presented itself to his view. There was no one in the vicinity. They must have already entered by this way. Eager to avoid the worst of the heat he hurried down the hill until he was standing upon the very lintel of the rift. It cut directly into the hillside as if the rock had been sliced savagely asunder with a gigantic axe. The place was enveloped in deep shadow. His eyes were still dazzled by the bright sunlight, and he found it difficult to penetrate the obscurity that dwelt in that gaping hole. He eyed the valley entrance warily, striving to distinguish any movement within the shade; but there was nothing. He continued his advance, moving to one side, and using the line of the rising rock wall to hide his presence. He expected at any moment to be discovered, convinced that they would have prepared some kind of trap for a careless pursuer; but nothing - not a movement nor a sound. Emboldened by their heedlessness he pressed ahead, ready to close with the enemy, and discover their full intent. Now the high walls on either side of his path were blocking the sun, and the dark, cool shadows blessed his baking skin. So sharp was the contrast between the burning heat of the open desert and the cool shade of this place that he shivered momentarily, and felt the goose bumps rising upon his flesh. He paused briefly to allow his sight to recover its precision, now that it was relieved of that unrelenting glare to which he had become so accustomed. It was not sight but sound that acted as his guide in this place. In the deathly hush, and with the walls of the ravine acting to focus any reverberations, he could distinctly hear noises originating somewhere up ahead. It was difficult to determine how far away

they might be, but here was evidence that he was on the right track. The way was littered with boulders and smaller stones, which had split away from the mountainous walls that towered above, and he had to pay careful heed again to his passage along the path. He moved silently, not wishing to alert those ahead of his presence as they had so incautiously - and helpfully - advised him of theirs. The gloom seemed lighter now, and with ears pricked, he hurried forward in eager pursuit. The sounds seemed to grow louder. Encouraged by this he pushed forward, and with such enthusiasm that he almost failed to notice his error. The valley had narrowed considerably and the way was extremely tortuous, turning this way and that, with massive rock walls rising upon either side, seemingly to bar his advance. It was then that the noises coming from deeper in the valley disappeared. For a moment he believed that he might have lost his quarry, and increased his pace to close the intervening distance. He was almost running now, a dangerous folly with all those stones littering the ground, each one ready to betray his presence with their clatter. Ahead of him another rock projection cut across the path and, as he turned the corner, his foot turned upon a loose rock, and he fell heavily to the ground. As he tumbled he reflexively raised his hands, and so, fortuitously, managed to land safely - and quietly - face down upon the unyielding surface. As he lay there, panting heavily with the shock, he could hear voices now, quite distinctly, and it seemed that he was almost directly upon them. He raised his head carefully and saw, not more than a few score paces away, the small group of travellers with their mules. He froze, convinced that no one but a completely deaf and blind person could have failed to detect his presence. However, the noise of their voices, and the echo of the beasts' hooves upon the hard rocky ground, and both magnified by the surrounding rock, masked any disturbance that might have been detected originating from him. He remained there, lying pressed close against the hard earth, his stare fixed upon the receding backs of his prey; gradually they disappeared from sight, plodding into the dimness of the valley deeps. When he was quite sure that he could not be spotted, he lifted himself carefully from his prone position, and began to brush the dirt and dust from his clothes. Under his breath he cursed himself for his impetuosity. One more step, one more mistake like that, and he would surely be discovered. From his brief sighting they did not seem to represent an important threat; nevertheless, they were five to his one. With an ear acutely cocked he resumed his march, but this time moderating his pace somewhat. He realised now that the numerous twists and turns of the gorge had had the effect of intermittently blocking the passage of sound down its length. He needed but maintain a steady, even leisurely pace, and he could be sure that he would not lose them. Only when they stopped to set up camp would he be able to draw closer, and discover more concerning these fellows, and their intentions.

Gorval sat quietly in the comforting gloom of his office. He had recently emerged from a meeting with his superior, one of the elders. There had been some consultation on the unfolding crisis that was so rapidly deepening its grip upon the Gaki world. Equally worrying were the reports from the Gaki scouts that an increasing number of the surface dwellers were coming into contact with the raiding parties. It had now reached a point that news of these attacks was finally filtering through to the cities and their populations. Even the authorities - at best, a hide bound bureaucracy - could no longer afford to ignore the growing flood of stories coming in from the outlying districts. Despite the ancient feuds between the city and country dwellers it was no longer possible for the former to shrug these accounts off as mere yarns, spread abroad by a superstitious rural population. Their scouts had witnessed, on at least two occasions, military units being despatched to the

affected areas, to gain further intelligence on these extraordinary raids. The situation was growing worse by the day, and although the priority still lay with maintaining some degree of civil order within the Gaki cities, nevertheless these problems could only be compounded if the surface dwellers decided to challenge one of the raiding parties, or even worse, to pursue it underground. The old wars might once again erupt, and the slaughter begin afresh. But unfortunately there seemed to be no immediate solution to the problem. There was no way of restraining the outbreaks now, for the numbers involved were growing on each occasion. Any access between the Gaki cities was extremely limited but, contrariwise, the opportunities to reach the surface were numerous. Whatever the vagrant Gakis were seeking it did not lie underground, whether they be driven by the Great Hunger, or by an even darker unconscious motive. The councils of elders, who dealt rather with the civilian administration, were limited to predominantly anodyne exclamations; calls for order and calm, and such like. The councils of seers were equally impotent though their responsibilities lay in a different, but allied sphere. They were not unconcerned with the sufferings of their people, but viewed matters from a wider, or perhaps it should be said, deeper perspective. The unfurling course of events, and the fulfilment of the prophecy, this is what they monitored most intently, for in these lay the future not only of the Gaki race, but also of the humans above. According to the myths there lay within these precipitate and dreadful events a purpose even greater and more universal than widely recognised. Its precise form was unknown, even to the most skilful in their art; and its direction and purpose yet more obscure. Some among their number had acquired an intuition into these happenings but it was beyond the powers of all to transmit its full significance. 'Wait and see' were the watchwords of the day, unsatisfactory as these might be. Gorval pondered the latest reports. He drew some consolation from the fact that the young Melaskkoli seemed to be in good spirits and health. Whatever came to pass he would be sure to commend his subordinate for carrying out his duties so faithfully, and taking such good care of their guest. iDarii had provided him with regular reports on the fellow's condition, and everything pointed towards him making a full recovery from his traumatic experiences, and the even more devastating revelations about his true nature. Gorval - not a fellow given to idle speculation - could not help but imagine what it must feel like to have your entire history overthrown, and to discover that not only were you not the person that you believed yourself to be, but indeed, to never have been such a one in the first place. It would be akin to dying, and being born again; but to commence as if from nothing and yet be fully aware, moment-by-moment, of the actual parturition... this was too much.

He had not departed the Ministry for some time now, not since his expedition to retrieve Melaskkoli from the higher levels of the Gaki world. He did not care at all to venture into the city streets. But he was aware of the vast crowds that now circled outside, their numbers growing day by day. The whole hub was a mass of closely packed bodies now, barely able to move, and pressing up against each other as they shuffled in a mindless circle around the central axis. Their condition was alleviated only by that peculiar fact of Gaki physiology; their strange ability to merge partly with other solid substances. It was this, and this alone, that accounted for the fact that not one individual had yet been crushed to death in the melee. For those who remained free of this strange compulsion, the sight itself was horrific to witness, and he fell undoubtedly into that class of people who felt such an abhorrence. Anyway, there was nothing that he could do to help, or to alleviate their circumstance. Time would provide its own solution; patience and fortitude

were the only resources that they could call upon now; and perhaps hope - but always hope.

The cool airs of the valley were an enormous relief to all as they entered its dark confines. Even so, Celarent felt some regret as its walls embraced them, locking them in upon every side. He had grown accustomed to the expansiveness of land and sky and, despite his growing ennui with these, he found his new home to be less to his liking. To be sure, the lower light levels were much less wearisome to the eyes, and the air so much tenderer upon the skin; nevertheless, there was much of the prison about this place. He did not believe that he had ever suffered from that illness, which magnifies a sense of incarceration into a form of panic. But he could not deny the sheer scale and weight of those rocky battlements, which soared so far above them, the sky a mere thin blue slit in their roof, that these caused within him the sensation of being entombed, buried alive in an airless sarcophagus. He stroked his throat, as if to relieve the gripping choking that seemed to bind itself there, and rebuked himself soundlessly for this irrational inclination. The others seemed quite unaffected. Erame seemed quite unconcerned at their new predicament. He reminded himself sternly that it would never do to display such foolish weakness, and resolved to pull himself together, to put aside such corrupting notions. It had taken a little time for his eyes adjust to the subdued lighting but he could now see some way ahead. The canyon had narrowed quite quickly, and the path was falling deeper into the ground, which partly accounted for how quickly the heights seemed to rise above them. It was as if the very earth was eager to bury itself, and them, deep within the bowels of the mountain. Again he felt that odd sense of constriction about his neck, but repeatedly he firmly rebuffed the conceit. The path they followed was greatly convoluted, twisting this way and that, as it corkscrewed into the mountainside; on either hand the buttresses of grey granite soared into the heights above. The party now advanced in a single file, so narrow had the way become. There were numerous obstacles along the track, mostly boulders and rocks that had broken away from the peaks above and tumbled down, to rest finally in this dark pit. Otherwise, the ground was quite smooth, and he could hear the hooves of the mules ringing loudly and clearly down the whole length of the cut. The others had been engaged in some kind of conversation, but they had fallen silent now. There was something quite dreadful about this place, something that inspired a chill within the heart, but which also quietened the chatter of both the mind and the mouth.

The narrow aperture of the sky, now only just visible above their heads, had darkened quite imperceptibly, for but little light managed to penetrate to these depths; then even that small illumination gave way to night. It was at this point that Alaste decided it was too dangerous to proceed further. It was quite perilous in these unfavourable conditions to navigate a way across the boulders and rocks, which were strewn so profusely over the valley floor. Already, and on more than one occasion, at least one amongst them had slipped and fallen, prey to the treacherous ground. So it was that they set up camp for the night, and the mules were efficiently unburdened of their loads. There was no lack of water in this place for numerous small falls flowed down from the heights above, punctuating the silence with a soft hissing noise. Curiously, not one of these flows continued their course along the canyon floor, but quickly disappeared underground, losing themselves amongst the debris of fallen stones that covered the whole area of the ravine bottom. Their food supplies were more than adequate, and Alaste assured them that they would have quite enough to see them through to their destination. When they again

emerged from this chasm they would be in the lowlands of the mountains, and there would be abundant pasturage for the beasts; but for the time being these would have to make do with the grain and hay, which they had transported upon their backs. The party set to their regular duties, and a fire was quickly lit and the meal prepared. The sight of the flickering flames was a warm pleasure to behold in this dark place. Celarent was weary of the gloom, and the cheery flames fanned away this sombre mood. It was not cold here, for they were still at a low altitude. Indeed, it seemed rather that they had burrowed into the ground than risen above it. But the valley air was damp, and its clammy vapours clung to the skin. Soon all were seated about the fire, hungrily scrutinising the pot as its contents simmered over the flames, their bellies already tight with anticipation. This day had been particularly tiring. It may have been the swift transition from the blazing heat of the desert to the relative coolness of this place, or perhaps the gruelling nature of the rough ground over which they had had to travel, but either way, all were happy to be at the end of their day's labours, and looking forward to a hot meal, and a good night's sleep. As they waited for their meal Alaste reassured them - for he had observed the disconsolate expressions on the faces of some of his comrades - that they would be through the pass soon, and nearing their next goal before midday on the morrow. They had already penetrated some way into the Northern ranges, and it was here that the next stage of their journey would begin. He reckoned thereafter that it would be but a short stroll - as he put it - to where the three mountains lay. Then it would be down to the skill and experience of their cartographer - Ferioque - to conduct them to their journey's end. The meal was ready, and Hesvee filled the bowls eagerly proffered by his comrades. They settled down to the serious business of eating, the sounds of chewing and chomping only occasionally interrupted by an exchanged word. As the extremity of their hunger was eroded there came time, at last, for a little chatter; but all were weary, and eager to get to sleep. Alaste might have chosen a better moment, given their fatigued condition, but necessity takes precedence over convenience, and he dictated that they would have to assign guards, to maintain a watch during the night hours. "Don't worry. There's no immediate risk, I assure you. I don't think our passage has been observed thus far. And there are none to witness our fire, not at these depths anyway. But from now on we can't afford to take foolish risks. A watch must be kept. If we take it in turns during the night, each can get all the sleep he needs, and ensure that no one is on duty for so long that their attention will wander. I'll take the first watch, then Ferioque, Hesvee, Erame, and then you Celarent. All are agreeable?" This last was phrased as an invitation to acquiesce, but conveyed with a commanding tone; this was not a subject for disputation. All nodded their assent, albeit reluctantly, recognising the value of their leader's judgement. Their supply of brushwood had been sadly depleted, but there was still sufficient to keep the fire burning well into the night. Alaste emphasised the importance of it being well maintained for it would certainly serve to keep any wild animals at bay, and warn off any of the mountain folk who might have strayed this far. While the rest took to their sleeping bundles Alaste piled more wood upon the flames, sending them leaping higher, crackling and snapping, casting a cascade of shadows upon the rocky walls, a dancing crowd of grotesque silhouettes that wildly circled the camp fire. Finally the flames gradually settled back down into the heart of the fire, and its warm glow spread around them, comforting and lulling them into its welcoming clasp. Celarent's eyes were heavy, and soon he slipped away from this world, and into another realm.

He was back in the darkness, but this was of a different cast. All around him stretched a

forest of ancient trees, their great gnarled trunks and leafy boughs merging seamlessly into the gloom. Their wood was torn and split, with swollen twists and coils threading the bark, their misshapen forms mocking the eye with horror. Their girth was massive, and it would have taken many men, linked arm in arm, to encompass fully the circumference of some of the more venerable growths. He was quite alone, and found himself walking down a long alleyway lined with these bizarre figures, the sky overhead obscured by a canopy of drooping and tentacled branches. Finally, and after some considerable time, he espied what appeared to be another human form, which stood motionless at the end of this natural colonnade. He was in two minds whether to continue, for he had no idea as to which this might be; friend or foe. Yet his steps carried him forward, and he disregarded the debate within his own mind. Soon he was close enough to discern that it was, indeed, a man, and one that seemed quite unarmed. And further, the fellow was not only bereft of weapons but also clothing, for the figure appeared entirely naked except for a wildly flowing mane of hair, which fell down over his shoulders, and thence onto his chest. The man stood at such an angle that he was not yet able to distinguish the fellow's features. He remained quite still, and seemed completely unaware of Celarent's advance. As the latter continued his approach he was perplexed to observe that the light seemed to be increasing in intensity. He was completely at a loss to explain this phenomenon. As he looked above he could see no break or aperture in the forest canopy that could explain this event, for the branches and leaves above presented as an opaque a layer as ever. And yet there could be no question that the illumination was growing steadily and rapidly. It is strange to say but it was only when he was within a few paces of this strange creature that he realised whence the light emanated, for it streamed in powerful waves from those furious fires which burned upon the man's crown; indeed, it was evident that that great golden mane of hair itself was essentially composed of this fiery substance. The flames blazed upwards, high into the air, gold and red and white, and with an awful ferocity, or so it seemed. Moreover, what he had taken to be hairs covering the fellow's body were fashioned also from this element. He was appalled to observe the man's skin glistening with an incandescent energy. Yet he could feel no heat from this conflagration, nor that the man's manner gave any hint of distress, and this despite the fact that his skin should have been flayed away in an instant by such a fiery assault. Celarent halted a few paces away from this human pyre. Still the man did not acknowledge his presence, and the two remained thus for awhile, the man staring to one side whilst Celarent was transfixed to the spot. An eternity might have passed when suddenly the figure began to turn slowly towards him. Again he was almost overwhelmed by a panic, which seized control of every part of his being, and urged him to flee this place immediately. Still his legs paid no heed to this command, and he remained immobile, awaiting whatever fate might befall him. The head had swivelled around, and he was being observed directly; and now he could view its face clearly. If the fellow's pelt appeared shocking, his eyes were even more so. There were no pupils, not even whites. They were the eyes of a statue, but one composed of gold and not flesh. The sightless orbs gazed at him, a pure metallic stare, reflecting neither life nor intelligence, but only the sparks of fire that crowned his head. And then Celarent's nerve broke, and he turned and fled back down the avenue of trees, his heart beating furiously, his mind quite crazed by this awful apparition. He ran and ran until, thankfully, the darkness drew him back into its obscuring folds. Exhausted and all but drained of any vigour he stopped, his whole chest convulsing massively, his lungs desperately dragging the meagre air into his shaking body. He looked behind him half expecting the figure to be in eager pursuit; but there was nothing. Not a sign. No flames.

No light. Just the darkness of the great forest. Then he felt an absence rise up within him, and a great sickness filled his body. He fell to the earth in a swoon; this time the dark was complete.

He awoke to the sound of a soft voice murmuring in his ear. For a moment he was quite disoriented. It was still dark and the dream was yet resonating through his mind; part of him remained behind in that fearsome forest. But his thoughts gradually cleared, and he realised that it was Erame, summoning him to take his turn at watch. "It's been quiet. Not a sound or a sight. A little boring really", she smiled. The fire had died down, and cast its wayward light but dimly now. He got to his feet as she moved away. He had wanted to take the opportunity to talk to her but it was difficult to find the words; another time would have to suffice. He poured some water from a canteen into his cupped hand and brushed the cold liquid over his face, hoping to wash away the remaining cobwebs that lingered in his brain. He moved over towards the fire and knelt down, rubbing his hands together to bring some warmth to the fingers. There was still a small pile of wood set to one side and he carefully added some twigs to the dying embers, to reinvigorate the flames. He crouched down on his haunches, his face to the gentle heat, allowing it to soak through his body. As he rested there the dream began to resurface within his mind, and he reflected upon what it might signify. It was certain, he thought, that the man with the burning hair bore no resemblance whatsoever to anyone he had ever met in his life. He was acquainted with the many myths of his people, and yet he could relate none of these to his somnolent vision. After a while he gave up this internal enquiry, and set to his watch. He looked out beyond the perimeter of light, and into the darkness that encircled the camp. He found it quite impossible to penetrate beyond this dark barrier, and decided that it would serve a better purpose if he moved some small distance away; the glare from the flames would be much reduced, and he would better be able to see into the shadows. Regretfully he walked slowly away from the consoling warmth. At last he stood close to the very edge of the firelight, and again gazed out into the dark, and into the invisible valley. Apart from the low crackling of the burning kindling, and an occasional snort erupting from one of the sleepers, the place was deadly quiet. There was not even the hint of the night creatures, which usually scurried about in the gloom, busying themselves upon their deadly trade. He looked up towards the distant sky, a narrow bluish-black slit far above, and speckled plentifully with the glittering of faraway stars. But an instinct told him that he presented too easy a target, outlined as he was against the glow behind. He lowered himself to the ground, crouched closely to the earth, and resumed his watch into the dark night.

Garuda had followed his course through the valley without further mishap. The sounds had died away ahead but he could still hear the noise of the mules' hooves as they rang upon the stony ground. He looked upwards and could see the light already beginning to fail. It would not be long now before they would make camp. He slowed his pace and proceeded with greater caution, keen to ensure that he should not come upon them unawares. But the travellers continued upon their way much longer than he had expected, and night had already fallen before they finally halted their march. He had approached the corner of yet another buttress, which had piled itself against the side of the ravine. With great care he peered round its edge, and caught sight of the group of travellers, no more than a few score paces away now. They were already engaged in unloading the mules. He settled down behind a boulder and studied them as they went about their business. He was

surprised to discover that one of their number was a woman, or rather a girl, for he could hear her voice ring out from time to time, and her laughter was quite unmistakeable. The remainder were men, mostly of mature years, with the exception of one who, though not a youth, carried fewer grey hairs. He recognised not one of them; but then why should he? His people and the plains dwellers never mixed, for not even trade was carried on between them, so mutual was their hostility. He did, however, recognise their tongue. Both peoples had not been separated for so long as to evolve completely different languages, although their accents and intonations varied considerably. But, nevertheless, he was surprised how easily he could understand the occasional words and phrases, those anyway that carried this far down the valley. He was still some distance away, and the amplifying effects of the ravine walls served also to distort their speech. If he wanted to discover more he would have to get even closer. However, he determined that it would be better to remain here until they had finished their chores, and had settled down for the night. They were still too active for his liking, and there was every possibility that one might break away from the group, and move in his direction. For the time being he would stay put, and learn as much as he was able from his present vantage. He, indeed, debated briefly whether it might not be better to withdraw some distance for fear that he could too easily be discovered. But he concluded that so long as he had them always in view he would be more than adequately warned of any approach, and thus have ample time to make good his retreat. He cautiously lowered his sack and bow to the ground, carefully unbuckled the sheath about his waist, and quietly placed this next to the other items. Without breaking from his observation for a moment, he reached into the bundle and withdrew some dried meat, a morsel of which he chewed upon eagerly, for hunger had crept upon him unbidden. He had unslung his water container, and took some generous sips from this, thereby offsetting the somewhat salty taste of the cured meat. He had taken up a position beside a boulder, and it was against this that he leant, as he kept his own watch that night. They seemed to be a convivial gang, and went about their duties with a quiet but cheerful energy. Occasionally, a fragment of conversation would find its way to his ears, but nothing from which he could decipher their intent in these dangerous ranges. He looked on, and somewhat enviously, as they settled down about their fire, to enjoy a good, hot meal. He had already replaced his clothing, which he had cast off during his brief sojourn in the desert. But this place was dank, and the sodden cloth felt cold upon his skin; a meal of hard, dry meat was but a poor substitute for a warm pot of broth. Still - as long as he knew of them, and they not of him, he was content enough. He figured that within a day they would be out of the valley, and he would be able to alert his people, and bring them down in force upon this hapless band of fools; there would be time enough for celebration then. The night deepened, and the darkness grew. He watched as, one by one, they took to their bivouacs. He saw that there had been little conversation after their meal but that one of their number was now standing guard near the perimeter of the fire. Happily, the fellow had taken up a position on the opposite side to where he now sat. Though they were foolhardy it did not seem that they were entirely lacking in sense. He would bide his time, and wait his chance.

The night passed peacefully enough though the valley was cold. The wayfarers awoke to find a thick dew covering their blankets. Since it was Celarent who took the last watch it was he who roused the others. He had built the fire up with the last of the wood, and it was blazing away merrily now, greeting them as they rose from their slumbers. A pot of gruel had been set over the flames, and a warm meal was ready to further invigorate them.

This dark valley burdened their spirits heavily and all were anxious to remove themselves from this region as soon as possible. It was sure that they would be at greater risk upon the open slopes, but this seemed a fair exchange for the sight of wide, blue skies again. There was little conversation as they finished their breakfast, sufficient only to impart instructions, and make ready to leave. This they did with even more alacrity than usual, and then they were on their way once more. The ground was still heavily littered with debris, but they had become well accustomed to this, and made good progress. Alaste again assured them that they would soon reach the end of the ravine, and begin their ascent from this forbidding hole. Indeed, it was mid morning when the ground once again began to slope upwards before them, and they were climbing towards the bright daylight at last. The valley widened at this point, and the gradient had become so steep that they had to wind their way upwards, their path zigzagging towards the heights. As the rock walls fell away on either side the sky opened up above them, and the warmth of the sun again fell upon their grateful faces. All were gladdened that they had not had to spend more than one night in that gloomy place, and they were eager to feel again that welcoming radiance upon them. As the heat returned to their bodies so did it to their tongues, and their hearts lifted accordingly. So rapid had been their progress that it was well before noon when they reached the upper part of the valley. The stone walls and harsh rocky ground gave way to meadowland. It was as if they had been transported into another world, with grey rock replaced by lush pasture, and this speckled with wild, brightly hued maiden flowers, and occasional flourishes of small copses of trees, which dotted the whole landscape. As they emerged from the valley Alaste indicated to his companions to halt whilst he scouted ahead. As he stepped out onto the plateau he carefully examined the whole scene, seeking out any sign of habitation; but there was nothing, not even the smoke from a cooking fire. It was a virgin land there, which lay displayed before his eyes; nothing but the tall grasses swaying gently under the breeze, their ripples playing across the fields like waves on a lake. He surveyed the plateau from edge to edge, and then onwards up the lower slopes of the mountainside before returning to his friends. "Well. It looks clear to me. There's no sign of anyone living in these parts. I didn't think there would be but it's a while since I've been here. That mountain ahead of us, if I'm right, should be one of those indicated on the map. The other two lie beyond it, but we won't be able to see them yet. If we pass by we should come to the land that falls between it and its fellows, and I believe that's the area that's shown by the chart. After that, sirrah, I'm afraid it's upon your shoulders", and with this he smiled at Ferioque. The latter did not appear unduly worried. "Good. Good. Well we're almost there then. The hard part's over". "Well, not quite", Alaste added. "Certainly in terms of physical hazards we've come through quite unscathed. But now our greatest peril lies with the inhabitants hereabouts. There's no sign of anyone at the moment but who's to say what lies in the ranges ahead? We've got two choices, and neither one's appealing. If we keep to the lower slopes then the way is easy, but we're more likely to run into the locals. If we go for the high ground and try to cross by that way", and here he pointed to the col, which sat between two of the lower peaks, "then we should avoid any contact with them; but the weather is likely to be a harsh, and very, very cold". Alaste paused as he watched their faces. "Are you sure we can cross by that way? What about the snows?" asked Hesvee. "Well it's not so much the snows but rather if a storm blows up while we're making the crossing", responded Alaste. "I'd rather take the risk of that though, than run into any indigenes", commented Ferioque. "What do you think, father?" Erame asked. "You know this area better than us". "For my choice I'd go by way of the mountain. It'll take us no longer, and we can make the crossing quickly

enough. There's no easy way to predict a storm coming. We could start off in bright sunlight and within minutes a gale might blow up; so I don't want you to underestimate the risks. But even if that's the case there's a good chance that we could survive it if we found shelter. But then again if we run into any of the locals ...” and he left the rest unsaid. Celarent had remained silent during the discussion but now he found his voice. “I think we should take the mountain way. You've got us this far without mishap”. The others nodded in agreement. “Very well. Let's make haste. We've plenty of daylight yet. And the sky is clear. We'll be off now, and as long as we're on the other side of the shoulder before nightfall we'll be alright”. Without further ado they gathered up the reins of their mules, and set off again across the plateau, heading for the base of the mountain.

No great distance behind them lay their pursuer, concealed within the shadows of the rift wall. He had seen Alaste make his sortie onto the plain, and then rejoin the main party. He could hear nothing directly but there was clearly some kind of discussion taking place. Then the party set off again, but instead of taking the route round the lower slopes of the mountain, they were directing their path to its very base. At first he was confused as to their intent. Where on earth were they going? He looked up towards the mountain peak. He had some knowledge of this district but not with the same degree of intimacy as his home ground. He scanned the heights until he came across the same shoulder that Alaste had noted. ‘That's it’, he realised. Indeed, whoever was leading this party must have some close acquaintanceship with this area, and perhaps also of the people who lived in these valleys. They were taking the high pass to avoid any contact with the inhabitants. He recalled then that there was a small settlement just on the other side of the plateau, a hamlet located in a shallow valley near its margin. If he could alert the villagers they would be able to help him capture these intruders. The question was whether he would have enough time to put his plan into effect before they got away. It was either that, or follow them immediately, though he was somewhat outnumbered; but really there was no choice. He would have to take a direct route across the small plain, which meant that he ran every risk of being discovered. His only hope would be that their attention was wholly placed upon the heights before them rather than on the plain behind. They were already well advanced, and had drawn out a good lead; he could delay no longer. Keeping as low to the ground as possible, and with his eyes constantly directed upon the backs of the retreating party, he ran quickly over the plain, taking advantage of every bit of cover. Fortunately, the grasses grew tall and thick across the ground - well above a grown man's height - and these, together with the many dips and rises in the terrain, obscured most of his progress. He used the many copses of trees to evade casual observation, sprinting between them, and stopping only to rest under the cover of their densely packed trunks and branches. In this fashion he rapidly covered nearly three quarters of the distance to the other side of the tableland. His heart was pounding heavily with his exertions, and he had to halt to catch his breath, the perspiration streaming down his face from the effort. He looked up towards the mountain, and could see the strangers, already mere dots against the hillside, steadily ascending its lower slopes. He took some consolation from the knowledge that their pace would be greatly reduced now, and if he could just keep going he would get to the village soon enough to raise the alarm. He could rest no longer. Moving out from under the thicket of trees, and throwing caution to the wind, he sprinted across the remaining gap towards another clump, which lay a few hundred paces away. He knew that though the travellers were some distance away, that it would still be possible to pick out a moving object even from that far. They might not be able to see him distinctly,

but enough to tell that he was a man. He reached the cover, and paused to see if he had been discovered. As far as he could tell they were still pursuing their original course, and gave no sign that he had been observed. There were only a few hundred more paces to go before he reached the other side of the plateau; after this he would have passed beyond its edge, and out of their line of sight. Rallying his energy he once more broke into the open, and ran at full tilt until he came finally to the far boundary of the plain, where he flung himself forward, and over the brow of the low rise, which bounded that whole area. Now, just in front of him, he could see the small vale in which should lie the encampment. He knelt upon the ground until he felt sufficiently rested, and then, with a deep sigh, he dragged himself to his feet, to resume his march down the slope. Now that he was able to walk fully erect he did not tire so easily, and was soon entering the mouth of the shallow depression. It was then he heard a voice that rang out through the air. "Halt". He stopped immediately. From a low dip in the ground to his right emerged a man. "Stay where you are", repeated the fellow, as he advanced hesitantly towards Garuda. In his right hand the ruffian was balancing a throwing spear, and his countenance gave every indication that he was prepared to use it. "Hail", replied Garuda. "Hail" he repeated, throwing up his arms to show that he carried no weapons. The man came closer, but watching Garuda like a hawk. He had no fear upon his face but his every sinew was bent to its fullest tension, readied for any sign of betrayal. "I'm Garuda", he announced. The man was close enough now to see his attire. "I, too, am of the mountains. I bring no evil to your hearth". The spear was still held at the ready, but the man nodded. "And you wander in our lands? For what reason?" He waved his arm, indicating the mountain that rose behind them. "I seek your assistance, brother. There are plains folk who've come into the mountains, and I've tracked them thus far". The man was standing close by now, and had lowered his spear slightly, as he listened attentively to Garuda's tale. Finally, he seemed satisfied. "Stay here. Don't move. We'll see if you're telling the truth. And you're being watched". At this point the fellow raised his hand, and silently half a dozen of his fellows rose from their hiding places, seemingly from the earth itself, and gathered about their leader. There was a brief conference before the fellow turned to him once more. "Very well. You'll lead us until we can see these savages for ourselves. Then we'll decide from there". He came up to Garuda. He was of a short but sturdy build, which seemed to be the general type amongst his people. His face, and those of his band, bore the markings of their clan. He regarded Garuda with suspicion, but displayed in his smile the sure knowledge that the latter was within his power. "How many are there?" he demanded. "Five all told. Four men and a woman", Garuda replied. "A woman?" commented the man. "Foolish to come here anyway; but to bring a woman. This is strange indeed. Are they warriors then?" he continued. Garuda considered the question. Up until now he had considered them merely as enemies, despite their disposition. But from the little he had seen of them they hardly carried themselves with martial bearing. And they were far too low in numbers to comprise an expeditionary force; then again they were too numerous to be viewed as a scouting party. In these regions it was better either to travel in large numbers, or with as few as possible. "I don't think so. They don't bear the aspect of soldiers, and the presence of a woman would suggest not. Now you come to mention it, I can't think what purpose they might have here. But I suspect one of their number, at least, knows something of these parts". "A highlander acting as guide among their number!" growled their chief. "No. No. I don't think so. Or if he was, then he's been many years away from our people. Maybe he's travelled this land before. I can't say for sure but they do seem to have some destination in mind. I can't believe that they're lost, and certainly no one would be mad

enough to wander into the mountains. Better to die in the desert than at the hands of our people". The last comment was received with loud guffaws by the others. "True enough. Perhaps they're madmen – and a mad woman – poor fools! It would almost incline one to pity". If anything this remark was greeted with even more raucous merriment. "Well! No point in wondering. Let's go and find out for ourselves, shall we?" he smiled grimly. "I'm sure we can get all the answers we need. I am Rogas, by the way. I lead the clan. You're in luck". Garuda had to ask the question even though he thought that he might well regret the answer. "Why so, Rogas?" "Well, if one of these had come upon you, his orders were to kill, mountain dweller or not. You're indeed a fortunate one". Garuda swallowed quietly. It would not do to show fear here. "I am indeed, most noble Rogas". The leader regarded him silently, and for just long enough for the tension to build. Then he smiled toothily. "It's not often that I'm addressed in that fashion. But your humour amuses me. Now we must off. Lead the way, sir. But don't forget, noble or not, if you play us ill then I may yet forget my high birth, and have your throat carved from ear to ear". Garuda managed to force a smile and then turned and started back up the slope towards the plateau. He paused to look behind him as his new comrades followed him up the incline with Rogas at their head.

The air was growing chill, and the winds rising rapidly, as they made their way up the slope. At first it had seemed easy going as they had started across the plain. The ground was covered with thick grasses, and it was soft underfoot. But the foliage covered a multitude of small burrows, and Celarent, at least, was constantly catching his foot in these, and then stumbling, sometimes heavily. As the incline steepened so their footing became even more precarious, and it was not long before their progress had been reduced to a crawl. So hazardous had the way become that their full attention was reserved for the ground beneath their feet, sparing only an occasional glance for those peaks, which now rose so precipitously before them. A shiver went right through his body at the prospect of even having to pass by that way. Celarent did not have such a great head for heights, and he felt sick to his stomach at the mere contemplation of that trial. He consoled himself with the thought that the col appeared a much less intimidating route though it was still some considerable distance above them. He was panting heavily now, as were the others. Even the mules - that most resilient and dogged of brutes - were sorely afflicted by their exertions, and their dark eyes held a most pained expression, as if they were suffered some great importunate affront to their dignity. He had just taken another pace forward, and it was then that he again caught his foot in a hole, but this time completely lost his balance. He fell forward heavily, putting his hand up instinctively to soften the impact. His body had twisted slightly as he slipped, and his arm did not fully cushion the blow. He hit the ground with his chest, and the impact pushed all the air from his lungs. He lay there winded for a few moments before he managed to raise his head, and look upwards along the slope. His companions had remained quite impervious to his accident, and were continuing their arduous way up the steep incline. He carefully examined his limbs to ascertain whether he had broken a bone in the fall. He had felt no pain as he tumbled, nor heard the sound of any fracture. It was with considerable relief that he realised that he had escaped a more serious mishap. He rolled over upon his back, the better to ease his breathing. As he did so he glanced downwards towards the plain. They were already some height above the plateau but he was sure he seen a sudden movement near its margin. This errant motion had been near a clump of trees, which grew over towards the edge of the flattened ground. He shook his head to clear his

vision, thinking that he might still be groggy from the fall, or that his sight might have become in some way impaired. He looked again at the spot, but there was nothing; it could have been a bird or a small animal for all he knew, or even his imagination. There was nothing to be done anyway. There was certainly no purpose to be served in going back down the hill to investigate. The prospect of having to climb back up again was more than enough to deter him from that line of thought. He checked his body for breaks and scrapes once more, before bracing himself to get up. With nothing more than a dent to his dignity, and perhaps a few bruises, he had remained relatively unscathed. Groaning with the effort, he set himself once more to the slope, and applied his efforts accordingly. The ground rose and rose higher above them, and the incline grew steeper and steeper with every step they advanced. It certainly was not precipitous here, but for Celarent it was quite a sufficient challenge to encounter; he was entirely unaccustomed to this degree of exercise. Although he was a fitter man by far than when he had left home, he was, nevertheless, feeling his years here; he could only imagine how Hesvee and Ferioque were faring. He paused briefly to observe his companions. Both Alaste and Erame seemed to be keeping up a good pace, but he could see that the other two were struggling as was he. However, it would never do to fall back now, and again his pride spurred him on.

It was a shortly afterwards that he was grateful to observe Alaste had called a halt, to let the stragglers catch up. It was not long before he too joined the small group, as they huddled together on the declivity. He was much relieved to observe that he was not the only one who seemed to be short of breath, for all were panting heavily. It crossed his mind to mention the incident he had just witnessed, but again there seemed to be little point, and so he remained silent. "Well, sirs. And how do you fare?" Both Hesvee and Ferioque were gasping in great lungfuls of air, and were quite unable to reply "Don't distress yourselves, sirs. The air's a little thinner, even at this altitude. So unless you're one of the mountain folk, and accustomed to this atmosphere, you'd be out of breath for sure - even a younger man". He looked across at Celarent, who was just about holding his own. As if reading their thoughts, Alaste continued, "We can start cutting across now towards the pass. We've only a bit more height to gain, and we'll be there soon enough". He looked up at the skies as he spoke. The others followed his gaze. Over the desert, already some distance behind them, the airs were clear and blue. It was difficult to believe that the temperatures there would be so oppressive that they would barely be able to move. And yet here they were, and the chill was already reaching into their bones though they had been resting for only a few moments. The peaks ahead were enshrouded in thick white clouds, and overhead more of these vast white columns were advancing to join their fellows on the higher slopes. The pass itself was still clear, but the ground about bore a thick white mantle, for at these altitudes the snow abided all year round. Each of the party was wearing sturdy boots and it was Alaste's suggestion that they now don thick fur stockings before they continued on their way. "Don't want to get frostbite, sirs. Lose a toe like that". He walked over to one of the mules and pulled out some packages, which he passed around. "Here. It's warm enough now, but it's best to be prepared. If the clouds come down the temperatures can drop in an instant. It may be a bit hot for a while but the discomfort will be worth it, believe me". Alaste pulled out a bundle of socks from one of the packs, and then some jackets and fur-lined trousers from the rest. It was really rather awkward to put the cumbersome clothing on over their leather jerkins and thick canvas trousers, but, he explained, it was the layers of air between the clothes that would keep

them warm, rather than the material itself. Each one struggled to wedge him- or herself, into their new outfits, but with some considerably energetic assistance from their comrades. Soon they all stood there like so many round furry balls, their arms and legs protruding from each bundled mass. Finally they were set, and taking up the reins again, they headed out across the slope, moving always upwards, but at a much slower pace. The grasses and mosses, which had covered the ground up until now, gave way to bare rock. Small patches of snow appeared, mostly piled up in heaps against the shady sides of the large boulders and outcrops, which were dispersed over the entire slope. The peril of the burrows had gone, only to be replaced by these treacherous patches of slippery ice-covered granite. Fortunately, their boots had thick soles, and a rough tread, and these kept them from sliding about too much. All, however, were keenly aware that they could not afford an accident, especially at this stage in their journey. Undoubtedly it was the most dangerous part of their endeavours, and if they could only get through this safely then the rest would all be downhill, if it might be described thus.. The bare rock had now disappeared completely below a thick layer of hard snow, and, as it deepened, so their march became that much more debilitating. It was no longer sufficient merely to put one foot in front of the other, but instead they were obliged to lift the whole leg upwards, clearing completely the impression left in the packed snow, before replacing it anew in the next ; this was most debilitating. It would be accurate to say that he, Celarent, was rediscovering muscles that he had long since forgotten, even as a youngster. They were obliged to stop frequently for it was vital that they remained together. The air was yet clear, but if a mist were to descend, and one or more of the party lost sight of the others, then it could spell death for them. All looked eagerly ahead, gauging how much closer they were to the gap in the ridge, which marked their way over this massive barrier. Despite their strenuous efforts they seemed to be proceeding at a desperately slow pace, for the pass appeared no closer. Celarent noticed that the light seemed to be failing, and he looked up at the sky. It was far too early for the onset of night but he was alarmed to see the clouds, which had lain so far overhead, seemingly dropping precipitately from the sky. It was on their next halt that Alaste confirmed his observation. "The cloud cover's falling. It shouldn't be a problem so long as it holds off long enough for us to get to the pass. Once we're there we can't lose our way. My only fear would be if the mist comes down before then and we miss the entrance. We must redouble our efforts. It's not too far". His words had the desired effect, and they set off with considerable enthusiasm, and a little fear as well. Pace by pace they advanced, their entire concentration now devoted to the climb. There was nothing to do but to reach that objective, and then all would be well; or at least that was what Alaste had said, and that should be the end of the matter. On and on they pounded through the snow. The mule tracks helped somewhat for their hooves flattened the deep snow; but then someone had to lead the beasts, and this was a most onerous duty. All took turns to draw the mule train forwards, while the others followed as best they could. And always above lingered the clouds, mysteriously contemplating their fate.

Rogas and his men had moved swiftly up behind Garuda. There was no need for concealment now. Even if the party on the heights above should detect them, it was of no consequence. Sooner or later they would meet, and the mountain men were confident that, in their realm, these intruders would not escape. Garuda had been worried that he might not be able to point out this quarry to his new allies. He had no doubt whatsoever that if he failed in this task there would be little or no debate on his fate. This people were

an insular race, and much given to warring amongst themselves. However, nothing bound them together more than an alliance against the plains folk. It was this appeal to a common enemy that had inspired Garuda's confidence in gaining their support. He was much relieved, therefore, when he caught sight of the file of small dots outlined clearly against the green lower slopes. He was surprised though to see that they had made significant progress, and stood already at some height above the plain. He had stopped to examine the terrain ahead when Rogas and his brethren caught up with him. "Well, fellow. You've sighted our prey?" "Indeed I have", replied Garuda, pointing upwards towards the distant specks. Rogas followed the line of his finger until he too saw them. "Mmm. The clouds may come down soon. See how dark they grow. They are heavy with moisture. If they should discharge their burden upon the mountains then the gods will do the job for us. No one can survive there, not even us. But for now we'll follow until we can be sure. Come. Onwards". Now Rogas took the lead, and Garuda diplomatically gave way to his command. The pack set off again, running steadily across the plain, the ground already starting to rise beneath their fleet pace.

It was easy to lose all sense of time in this place. Melaskkoli had little idea of the passing of the days and nights - if they could be called such - in this strange place. He had much recovered his energy now, and was starting to grow restive in his moods. iDarii observed the change in his young friend, and made his report to Gorval accordingly. "Has the young fellow begun the change yet? It is somewhat overdue", enquired the latter. "Not that I've observed, sir". "Nothing? His Gaki form should at least be reasserting itself by now. What about his frame of mind? Can you tell me about that?" "Well that was what I was going to say, sir. He is growing restless. But I can't be sure if that's the hunger growing within him, or the mere fact of his incarceration. We've kept him withdrawn from all contact with the outside world for some time now, sir. I'd not be surprised if he's not simply bored. And who could blame him? I try to entertain as best I can, but I think he grows weary of the same four walls". Gorval considered his servant's response. "You're probably right. But even if we were to consider letting him go forth from his present quarters he certainly cannot appear thus in our city. There'd probably be a riot, and we already have more than enough to contend with". They both fell silent, each studying the problem from his own perspective. After some time iDarii spoke again. "May I suggest something, sir?" "Go on", replied Gorval. "Well, if he's permitted to leave the apartments he would have to be accompanied. We already have two guards assigned to this duty, which is more than sufficient. Indeed, I don't think he contemplates any kind of escape. He becomes more reconciled daily to the facts as we've presented them to him. But if we were to cloak him, and thus hide his face and form, I don't believe that there's any risk whatsoever of him revealing, of his own accord, his identity, or indeed nature. In this fashion we might go anywhere in the city without arousing great interest or attention". Gorval looked at his subordinate, and then downwards towards the ground. "You're sure of this? It's only now that the rumours of a human living amongst us have died down. The populace have much to distract them anyway. But if he should be seen I don't like to think what might happen". Gorval seemed to be leaning towards dismissing his lieutenant's suggestion. iDarii did have some sympathy with his senior's point of view, but equally felt that it was quite unfair, and indeed unnecessary, to keep the young fellow imprisoned further. "I'm merely suggest an outing, sir. We don't need to venture into any of the heavily populated parts of the city. I've in mind a place that I go to on the outskirts, near where I live. It really is quite deserted, and at least it'll give him some change of view. The guards will at all times

accompany us. I assure you, sir, that at the first hint our plan is compromised we shall return immediately to the apartments, and that'll be the end of the matter". Gorval appeared to consider this proposal. After some time he nodded. "Very well. I'll take the final responsibility, of course, but you'd better make sure that nothing does go awry. Am I clear?" "Of course sir. Absolutely". iDarii was quite delighted. He was sure that Melaskkoli would be equally - if not more - pleased to discover that his confinement was not to be quite as absolute as it had been so far. "I'll inform him immediately. And, of course, explain why it's imperative that he remain undiscovered". "You may go now. If he wishes you may make your expedition whenever you please. But report to me immediately upon your return. I'll review any further expeditions on this basis. You may go". iDarii bowed, and without further utterance, left the office, and returned to their apartments. As he entered the room his friend looked up and smiled. "Ah! Darii. You're well I trust". "Excellent. And all the better for the tidings I bring you". He told Melaskkoli of Gorval's decision. Naturally the latter was delighted to hear that, finally, he might see more of the Gaki city than his present accommodations. iDarii explained the several caveats attached to this little jaunt, impressing upon his friend that on no account should he reveal his face at any time to anyone during their jaunt. It was obvious that Melaskkoli grasped the significance of what his friend proposed, and grasped fully the import of these precautions. "Well? When can we go? I've got to tell you that if I stay cooped up here for much longer I'm going to go crazy. Well - crazier really". iDarii was pleased to see his friend's spirits had already been restored somewhat by the news. Melaskkoli was not generally prone to self-pity but he had been growing noticeably more morose as the length of his detention had extended. "We can go immediately if you wish. I have Gorval's permission. We'll be accompanied by the guards, of course, who by now will have been given their orders". As if on cue one of them entered the chamber, bearing in his arms a large bundle of clothing. "These have been delivered, sir. We await your orders", he announced as he handed the clothing to iDarii. "Thank you. You can wait outside. We'll be leaving in a few minutes". The guard departed silently. "Here. Put these on, and make sure that every part of you is covered, the face most especially". As Melaskkoli dressed, iDarii left the room to instruct the guards, both on their destination, and the contingencies that they should adopt in the unlikely event of some upset. By the time he returned he saw that Melaskkoli was now completely hidden, from head to toe, in an all enveloping cloak, with the hood thrown forward over his face, leaving only a small gap for his eyes. This form of attire, though a little extensive by Gaki standards, would not draw a great deal of attention and, so long as they kept their distance from the other Gaki, things should go smoothly. "Good", observed the Gaki. "But how is it in there?" he laughed. "A little warm perhaps, but I can see well enough". "That's fine. And once we're outside in the cavern the temperature will be cooler, and you'll feel more comfortable. Are you ready?" The shrouded figure nodded. "Ah yes. I should say that when we're outside, or at least until we get to our destination, and certainly if there are others about, you must remain completely silent. Only in an emergency should you consult with me, and then only out of earshot of the others. It's certainly as important to obscure your voice as it is your form". The other nodded, putting into practice his directions. "Well. No need to wait any more. We shall go". He turned, and Melaskkoli followed him out of the room, and then into the corridor beyond. He noted that the two guards had fallen into step behind them. It felt quite odd to be outside the room, so long had he been confined within its four walls. Now the four of them strode off along the dark corridor, and onwards to the Gaki city, and whatever else awaited them beyond the thick walls of the Ministry.

The light was fading rapidly, and the cause all too evident. Flocks of thick, dark clouds could be seen flooding across the skies, and the first swirls of mist were gathering upon the slopes ahead. Without a word from Alaste they redoubled their efforts, and hastened forwards. The mules too seemed to sense the growing urgency of their condition, and struggled heavily in the snow as they gave vent to their distress and vexation in the usual fashion, their braying cries of protest echoing through the valley, the noise grating upon Alaste's ears. He was more worried than he cared to admit to his companions. If they could not make the pass before the mists thickened they would be unlikely to survive. Not only would the way be completely obscured, but also the chilling vapours would quickly saturate their clothes, and here, on this exposed mountain side, the heat would be drawn from their bodies most rapidly; they would almost certainly die of exposure. However, he was quite sure that once they reached the comparative security of the col they could shelter there until the worst of the weather had passed. He recognised that his friends had some notion of this, for all were making the utmost effort to mount the slope. Fortunately the depth of snow had diminished slightly, and they were able to cross the ground more rapidly as a consequence. He was pushing himself to the limit now, his breathing heavy and laboured, his heart pounding in his chest. The climb had been exhausting, and had tested each of them to the limit. But he had underestimated the courage of the older fellows, Hesvee and Ferioque; scholars they might be but their spirit was impressive, and neither had uttered a single protest despite the strain that was clearly imprinted in their faces. Erame, and Celarent too, were faring better, which is only to be expected from those of tenderer years. His daughter, though of slight figure, possessed considerable resources of energy, and he worried little about her ability to cope with this present ordeal. They walked in a half-light now, the mist deepening to a fog, and the hillside just barely visible around them. It could only be a couple of hundred more paces to their target, but these would be the most difficult of all. He pushed on knowing that if he should falter the pace of the whole party might slacken. He could hear the mules still protesting most noisily, but he spared them not, lashing them on mercilessly. Man or beast, their lives depended on finishing this climb without hindrance. Finally, the ground began to level beneath him and, shocked, he found himself already at the top of the ascent. Yes! He had made it. He turned to observe his fellows, calling out to them as best he could, labouring as he was to recover his own breath. "Quickly. Quickly. We're there", and he encouraged them to make one last push. One by one they struggled through the last section of their journey, until all were gathered safely at the entrance to the pass. The mountainside was now completely laden in a thick, impenetrable vapour, and visibility was reduced to no more than a few paces. The way ahead was equally murky, but at least their direction was assured. The pass was extremely narrow here, and even in this thick miasma the grey walls of the mountains were just visible upon either side. He managed to regain his breath sufficiently to speak again. "We made it. Well done.". None of the others had yet sufficiently recovered to reply. "All we have to do now is to find shelter. I'd hoped that we might be able to finish the crossing today, but in these conditions I think it would be too perilous. We'll advance as far as we can but only with extreme caution. Fortunately the winds have held back. At least we don't have to deal with a storm. Keep an eye out for any breaks in the rock wall - a small cave will do. That'll give us shelter, and we can huddle together for warmth until the skies have cleared. The mists shouldn't last for too long". There was no reply from the two older men. They had clearly reached the limits of endurance. Although Alaste had not voiced all his fears he was determined that they find

cover soon, and get out of this mist; that, at the very least, was imperative. A little food and a short rest, and their spirits should be greatly revived, he thought. Erame simply nodded, as did Celarent. Although they were in a better condition than the others, it was by not so much. Alaste waved them forward, and the party set off again. The air was bitterly cold, and all had raised their hoods to protect their faces from its harsh caress. As they trudged through the snow Alaste kept a keen eye out, anxiously seeking for some kind of fracture in the rock walls, which might afford them shelter from the freezing wetness that now invaded to their clothing. As he dragged his feet over the ground he noticed that it had begun to snow. At first it was just a few solitary flakes that floated downwards, but then these were followed by more, and then more still. Soon a thick curtain of down-like swirls was adding to the murk that surrounded them. It was getting harder and harder to see, and he kept his gaze directed towards the ground, only occasionally looking up to peer through the swirling melee that danced about them. From time to time he would stop and study the granite walls nearby, but still there was no sign of a hole that might serve their purpose. They marched on wearily, their breath steaming from their open mouths, a mockery of the freezing air that forced its way into their lungs. Suddenly Ferioque fell to the ground, and as he called out Celarent quickly came to his side. Alaste, too, on hearing the man's exclamation, turned back from the head of the party to assist. Ferioque's face was blue-white, a pallor that spelt trouble. "Are you alright, sir?" he asked. Ferioque seemed to have some trouble answering. His eyes were slightly unfocussed, and it was evident that he was in considerable distress. "Don't worry. We shall find shelter soon, and be out of this blasted mist and snow. Just keep moving". He nodded at Celarent. The party moved onwards but with Celarent at Ferioque's elbow, helping the older man forward. Both Hesvee and Erame were able to continue under their own steam, their shoulders hunched forwards in a futile attempt to protect themselves from both the chilling cold, which was burrowing its way into their bones, and the deepening swirls of snow now sweeping furiously through the narrow defile. There was not much time left before the cold would do its work and drain them of the last remnants of the life force that sustained them. He had to find shelter, and he had to find it soon.

Rogas led his men up the slopes in hungry pursuit of their quarry. Garuda followed at the rear of the group, aware that these fellows knew the terrain much better than he. He had been rather disconcerted by his reception. Although he was of the same race as these, they appeared to him to be of a feral nature. They reminded him rather of wild beasts than men. His own people were of a sturdy disposition, it was true, and it ill befell anyone who should make the error of presuming upon their hospitality. Only the most hardy could survive in these parts, for there was little time or effort to be expended on the social niceties. The mountain dwellers considered the plains folk to have grown soft and lax, even degenerate. They led lives of indolence, and were ill-equipped to deal with the rigours of life in its raw state. Even so his kind were not animals, and it was this quality that he had observed in these fellows. They had the appearance of men and, indeed, the speech of his kind fell from their lips. But now, as he watched them hurtling forward over the landscape, he could not repel the impression that they hunted much like a pack of wolves rather than a hunting party of men. From their mouths would issue small yelps as they encouraged each other in their pursuit, these barks much akin to the howls of a wolf as it closes in upon its victim. He grew uneasy as they climbed the mountain, and unconsciously he had fallen back slightly, as if wishing to sever his link with the party. Unfortunately Rogas had noticed this recalcitrance, and called his men to a halt from their

headlong pursuit. “Ho! Sirrah. Come, laggard. Are you not eager to be in at the kill?” The fellow laughed uproariously, chorused in like fashion by his gang. Garuda heard the guffaws, but felt the man’s eyes questioningly upon him, and attended the threat that lay therein. To what “kill” might the fellow be referring, as his thoughts dwelt upon the ambiguity of the question? Not his, if he had anything to do with it. He raised his pace, and rejoined the main party. For the time being it seemed well advised not to voice any doubt, and to play the part, if not with conviction, at least convincingly. “Oh! Not at all Rogas. More than happy. But see you the mist that falls upon the peaks? Will it not hinder us?” Rogas observed him with an appraising expression. “Well? the cold airs will greet us, but then so will they are prey. And cold air killed not one of my people. But cold feet! Now that’s another story. Many a man has died of cold feet in these parts”. The rest of his crew seemed somewhat puzzled by this allusion, but to Garuda the warning was clear. ‘Keep up or else’. “You’re right, of course. Let us be off”. And to show his enthusiasm he leapt up the slope ahead of the rest. Behind him he could hear Rogas and his fellows take up the chase. But now his thoughts were preoccupied with how he might extricate himself from the company of these savages. They were not men but beasts, and he might suffer more harm from these than the strangers ahead. He decided that, at the first opportunity, he and they would part company. And it might be that that chance might present itself somewhere up in the mists ahead.

They passed down long, gloomy corridors, and through large, darkened halls, onwards through the twists and turns of that vast complex, which was home to Gorval and iDarii, and to the thousands of other Gakis who worked within this enormous edifice.. Some knew only of the superficial purposes of the department whereas others, like Gorval, and now iDarii, were privy to its more esoteric functions. But it was a carefree party that emerged finally from this warren of buildings, which constituted this part of the state bureaucracy; and then outwards, into the Gaki cavern. There were but few entrances and exits to the building, and for the most obvious reason; it should itself be secure from unwanted intruders. However, the main entrance had been ruled out as a means of egress. The crowds that gathered within the hub had grown so numerous it was now almost impossible to reach the wider city by this route. Instead, iDarii had chosen one of the lesser-known ways, one usually employed by the scouts when they went on missions to the upper world. The party, at last, came to a doorway, which led out into the city streets. iDarii left first, instructing the guards to remain behind with his charge. He surveyed the street in both directions, and was relieved to find it quite empty. He quickly re-entered the building, and curtly reminded both guards of their instructions. When he was satisfied that they fully understood their duty, he again opened the door, and the small party issued forth. iDarii took the lead, and they began to make their way down the quiet avenue towards the periphery of the city. Although Melaskkoli had not seen any Gaki he could hear the sounds of their cries, soulfully drifting over the rooftops. Since there were none nearby, other than those in their party, and ever mindful of his instructions, he caught up with his companion. “Those cries. What do they betoken?” “Ah yes”, replied the Gaki. You probably have no recollection of that. Those sounds signify the Great Hunger. All of us experience this grossly magnified appetite occasionally. But as I’ve told you the Hunger seems to be spreading across the populace, and many more among us display the symptoms daily. Never before have so many Gaki, and at one time, been subject to its influence. It’s like a plague sweeping our world, and the means to alleviate its baleful results no longer seem effective. There’s nothing to be done that has not already been

essayed". At this he fell silent, whilst Melaskkoli considered his words. "Nothing, you say. And this has all been foretold?" "No, or at least, not in detail. We really are quite ignorant of the precise unfolding of these matters. We've knowledge only of its general outline, but I'm afraid that we're as ignorant as you are when it comes to how this will all end". He paused and shrugged his shoulders. "There's nothing to be done. Sometimes that's a difficult thing to be grasped. To be helpless and quite unable to act, and yet wait patiently nonetheless. That's truly all we can do for now. Wait and see. But we don't have to be patient mournfully, do we?" "No I guess not", replied Melaskkoli. "So where are you taking me then?" "Oh, a place I go to when I want a bit of peace and quiet", he laughed. "And I think we could certainly do with some of that, with all this racket going on". His attempt at humour was brave, but with those shuddering cries floating through the air the joke fell macabre from his lips.

They continued along the thoroughfare until they came to a junction. There were a few individuals strolling nearby, none of who seemed to be suffering from this strange affliction. Melaskkoli, for one, was not eager to witness this malady, for its mere sound was quite enough to deter him from an encounter, and he was as keen as his companion to move away from this quarter of the city. The two of them walked quickly through the streets and alleyways, the guards bringing up the rearguard. He observed the citizenry going about their business, and all appearing quite indifferent to the tumult. He was still unused to this newly discovered ability, to be able to discern the forms of the other Gaki about him. On his only previous venture into the streets of the metropolis, when he had been escorted hither by Gorval, these fellows had remained entirely opaque to him; but now he had no difficulty, whatsoever, in distinguishing them. However, it was not quite 'seeing' in the way to which he was accustomed, not in that sensual mode employed by human beings. This was not 'sight' for the eyes any more than their mind-to-mind communication was 'sound' for the ears. It was assuredly quite confusing as he tried to explain this 'human' sensation to his friend. "I understand in part", commented the latter. "It's difficult to explain a sense impression in those terms usually reserved for quite another. I mean how on earth could one possibly describe 'colour' to one who has never possessed sight, or 'sound' to one who has never heard? It's true that our race can be 'visible' at certain times - and in certain places - and in a fashion that humans might use that term; and then again they can be 'visible' but only in a way that a Gaki could comprehend that condition; to a human being the Gaki would not be visible at all. But what I can say is that your Gaki nature must be reasserting itself, or at least its inward manifestations. Perhaps the transformation proceeds from within to without, and your physical form will conform to the Gaki model at a latter stage of the process. I consider this to be most propitious". Melaskkoli, however, did not find the prospect of reverting to his Gaki origins particularly inviting. He still possessed an essential prejudice against that Gaki template, and an equal but opposite preference for his more familiar human aspect. But he thought it impolite to make such an observation, for he truly did not wish to upset his companion. It occurred to him that iDarii's preceding advice - on the matter of dealing with the inevitable with patience, and a recognition that what cannot be avoided should rather be received with some equanimity - sound and well conceived. If he was to return to full Gakihood, as it were, then so be it. He was sure that he would adapt, and there might be worse things than to be a member of this race, troubled as it presently was.

They had been walking for some time now and were already a good distance from the

centre. But there was still some way to go before they would arrive at the fringes of the town. The buildings were less grand here, for this area served as a dormitory, housing the vast numbers of workers who were needed to maintain this enormous conurbation. The streets were generally quiet in this part of town but to iDarii, who was familiar with the district, it was unusually deserted. There was an ominous calm about the place, which concealed within it a menace undefined, and all the more threatening for that. The guards seemed unaffected by the atmosphere and iDarii struggled to discount the feeling as a bad case of nerves, or a mild case of agoraphobia perchance. It would not do to communicate his discomfort to his charge, and he made no mention of the sentiment. Anyway, it served their purpose well; the fewer people around, the less chance of their discovery. They continued, the buildings becoming progressively more humble, until finally the last of these edifices fell away behind. They had now crossed beyond the city limits and were out in the open countryside, or what passed for this in the Gaki world. The light had fallen to more subdued levels in these outlying areas. For here the people were poorer, and could not afford so easily the oil that fuelled the multitudes of torches, those which were scattered throughout the city. But now that they were beyond the city boundary even this illumination diminished, and the cheery red glow of the city lights was replaced by the cold luminescence of the mosses, patches of which spread widely across the landscape. The terrain was smooth and unremarkable, and the few hills were of modest altitude. iDarii had grown increasingly excited during the course of their trip. Now that they were drawing away from the city Melaskkoli could sense the relief within his guide, to be finally divorced from the prying eyes of its citizenry. In the near foreground he could just discern a dark sinuous curve, which snaked its way over the landscape. He could not quite make out what it was at this distance, but as they drew closer he could hear the sound of running water. At last they came to its edge, and he could see the river, deepest black in this light, but with small ripples and swirls beading its surface, a pattern that reflected faintly the light yet reaching them from the nearby municipality. iDarii signed that they should sit here for a while and rest. The guards moved away some distance but remained alert. "Here we are. This is one of my more favoured spots. I love to sit by the river and just rest my thoughts for a while". Melaskkoli made no response, fascinated by the prospect of those pitch-dark waters running sleekly by, murmured gently to themselves. "It's not much like the rivers of my world," he commented. And then as an afterthought he asked. "Are there any fish in its waters, Darii?" "Of course. But I'm not one for fishing myself. Can't stand the things to be honest. No. It's just so restful here, staring at the water. Not to think sometimes, is such bliss". He laughed at his own words, and Melaskkoli could see the Gaki appeared to be the most at ease, certainly since he had met him. It was evident by the change in the fellow's manner that he had been under a considerable strain, and that the outing might have been just as much for his benefit as for his charge's. "Yes. I know. I used to sit by a river near my home. Well, what I thought was my home anyway. All sorts of strange of things would come into my head". "Really", asked iDarii. "What for example?" Melaskkoli hesitated. He was still unused to having an audience, let alone a sympathetic one. "Well. Just wondering about everything really. My mind would just go off on its own. 'Daydreaming' my uncle would call it. But I did wonder about it sometimes. Where did all those thoughts come from? Sometimes it even seemed that they might not come from me, they were so odd. Maybe it was to do with my being sent up to the surface. Was that were these ideas came from?" iDarii was silent, contemplating his companion's musing. "I don't think so", he commented finally. "Well I don't know to be truthful. But I'm like that as well. Sure, I think about my family, and work, and what's going on in my life; but I do

find it goes off on odd tangents. I guess everyone's like that. But then we don't talk about the way we think, but rather what we think about. But what I like about this place is that everything seems to slow down. I don't notice it until I come here, how much I seem to be rushing all the time. Even when I'm sitting down, and not doing anything in particular, my mind does seem to be in such a hurry. I've no idea where it thinks it's going. But it's a relief to hear you say that, Melaskkoli. I often wondered if I was a little crazy. But now I know I'm not alone". They both laughed at this. One of the guards looked round, but then returned to his own contemplations. The Gaki and the human sat there on the riverbank, watching the waters flow by, dark and always mysterious.

The weather was worsening steadily in the pass. The snowfall showed no signs of abating and, if anything, was growing thicker and denser. To make matters worse the breeze had picked up, and whether it was growing stronger of its own accord, or merely that the winds were being funnelled by the rocky walls on either side, it had the effect of blowing the flakes directly into their faces. Ferioque was bearing up, but only just, and they urgently needed to find shelter. Alaste cast his eyes about him, desperately seeking some haven; even a rock overhang would have been a blessing, anything to avert the growing storm that pressed upon them. He stumbled on through the white flood, almost swimming now against the blustering winds, which seemed so intent upon blocking their progress. His eyes were narrowed to slits, the icy blasts forcing tears to trickle forth, for them only to freeze almost instantly upon his cheek. At that instant he thought that he caught a glimpse of something to his right. He shuffled over in that direction unsure whether what he had spied was just a rock spur jutting from the wall, or an hallucination, a product of his failing vision and exhaustion. But no! There, just before him, he could see a dark shadow, which loomed out of the snowstorm. He staggered on a few paces more, and then slipped, and fell down a steep incline that ended at the rock face. Reaching out with both his hands he stumbled forward only to find himself suddenly separated from the gale, which had been beating so viciously upon his face. He bent forward to better protect his head, and entered a small cave. Already the sounds of the storm were retreating behind him, to be replaced with the relative tranquillity of this haven. A quick survey showed that the space might be sufficient for all, and he hastily retraced his steps. It was quite possible that the others might have failed to notice his absence, and would continue to wander in the storm. He was just about to emerge once more from the shelter when a figure brushed roughly past him, followed by another. and then another. It seemed that Hesvee had seen his detour from their path, and had led the rest of the party after him, mules and all. Soon the whole group were safely ensconced inside this rocky excavation, and were busily brushing the snow from their shoulders. Very little could be seen in this light. The small amount of illumination that managed to make its way through the cave entrance barely sufficed. Alaste felt around him with his hands until he had located one of the mules. He searched through the bundles that were loaded upon its back, hoping that he might find one that contained their oil lamps. He was unlucky at his first trial, and proceeded onto the next beast; this time he was more fortunate. He pulled the bundle from the strap that secured it, and knelt down upon the floor, busily unravelling the hide with his frozen hands. A low voice came out of the darkness. It was Hesvee. "What are you doing?" He sounded hoarse, his throat chilled by the air, and he was coughing heavily, his lungs clearing themselves of the icy miasma that still lingered within them. "Just a while. If I can get the lamp lit perhaps we can see where we are". Reaching beneath the thick leather he pulled out a flint, a small knife, and a twist of tinder to hold the flame. He struck repeatedly upon

the hard stone, and a few sparks arched off into the darkness. His hands were cold and they felt clumsy and awkward as he grasped the wooden haft. Finally, a spark caught upon the tinder, and, by blowing gently upon this, a small flame licked up out of the kindling. He applied this urgently to the lantern wick until that too had caught. Carefully he enclosed this newborn light behind the glass shield that surrounded the lamp, and held it thus aloft. The steady flame, magnified by the reflecting surface within the container, threw out a weak but constant light upon their surroundings. About him, Alaste could now see the pale faces of his companions, their eyes squinting at him in this impoverished light. The cave ceiling was low but its dimensions were larger than he had at first surmised. Alaste could see the low opening through which they had made their way within. The entrance lay at a slant to the face of the rock wall outside. They could have quite easily walked on by, and remained completely oblivious to its existence. However it also meant that, with the prevailing direction of the winds, these were completely blocked by the overhang, and the air inside seemed almost miraculously calm in contrast to the gales that blew without. But they could all quite clearly hear the howling of the storm, as it buffeted the mountain outside. He inclined the light towards the deeper interior of their shelter and saw that, although it narrowed somewhat, the cavity seemed to extend some way further back into the rock. "We are fortunate, I think", he observed solemnly. Then Alaste saw that Ferioque must be at the end of his tether, for the poor fellow had slumped heavily to the ground. Celarent knelt beside him. "He's alright. He's just tired - and not the only one. Couldn't have gone on much longer in that", and he nodded in the direction of the mouth of the cave. "We'll be alright here, I think", Alaste commented. "At least for the time being". "We're out of firewood though", observed Hesvee. He looked at Erame and Alaste. The former nodded. "Yes. We burnt it all at our last camp". This seemed an age past to Celarent. "We have shelter. That's the main thing. It's still cold here but perhaps if we retreat further into the cave it might be a little warmer. This place seems to go back quite a way. Stay here while I have a scout around. I'll see what's there". Alaste left them, and holding the lamp before him, he moved towards the back of the hole. He was now able to see that the roof lowered somewhat; but there was still no sign of a dead end. He pursued his investigation as the fissure continued onwards into the darkness. Satisfied that there was no immediate sign of danger from this quarter he returned to the party. "Well. We can go some way further in. And I can't see any wildlife there". "Wildlife?" asked Ferioque, his energies restored sufficiently to find his voice. "A jest. I don't think that anything would live here. It's too high in the mountains anyway. Nothing up here but snow and rock". "And us", added Celarent, a little unnecessarily. "Yes. And us", echoed their guide. They moved into the cave, Alaste taking the lead whilst he shone his light upon their path; Celarent followed at the hind part of the column, driving the mule train forwards. It might have been his imagination but the air did seem a mite warmer as they burrowed inwards; and as for wildlife - they would have to take their chances, for they could not survive outside. Erame had extracted some of their remaining supply of dried meat from a pack, and proceeded to distribute these morsels to each in turn. They munched quietly upon their rations, resting now from their efforts, and sitting in a circle about the glowing lamplight, their only source of warmth and consolation in this freezing dungeon; outside the winds howled furiously.

The hunters kept up a relentless pace, closing all the while on the figures ahead as they approached the snow line. Garuda had been careful not to repeat his mistake, and ensured that he remained inconspicuous by his pre-eminent position in the pack. Always

he allowed Rogas the lead, but he kept his position just behind the man; he could not afford to arouse the fellow's suspicion, nor draw attention to his growing reluctance to participate further in this manhunt. The more he examined his fellows, the more he distinguished their feral nature. The clouds ahead were lowering upon the slopes, and their quarry was already partly hidden by these mists; but the pursuers showed no signs of slackening their efforts. It seemed that nothing could stop them from tracking down their foe, and wreaking upon them some dread harm; not even the elements. Driven as they were by their blood lust, they seemed fuelled by an inhuman energy, which impelled them ever forwards. Increasingly Garuda was finding it more and more difficult to maintain this pace. It was only the realisation that if he faltered he might well replace the intruders as a target for their savagery that sustained him. No – not a sign of frailty, or he would be done for. Fortunately, the slope had become so steep that it was impossible even for these to continue at full speed, and finally Rogas called a halt. The men, or whatever they were, stood panting heavily in a circle, like so many dogs upon the heels of their master. Their eyes were bloodshot, and this did nothing to dispel their semblance to beasts of the field. “Well, my friend. How like you the chase so far?” There was nothing of friendliness in the voice, nor in the demeanour of their leader. Garuda was quite sure now that, whether they caught up with the men upon the mountain or not, something would be sacrificed to their appetites before the day was out. “Well enough. Well enough, Rogas”. He fought furiously to keep his voice even, though he was struggling to draw air into his lungs. “Good. I’m pleased to hear it. What say you, sir? Shall we come upon them before the storm falls - or not?” This was not a question that could invite another answer. Garuda knew well that his opinion mattered naught in this present company; the man was playing a game, and testing him to see how he would perform. “Ah! I know not these mountains as well as you, good Rogas. But the storm does seem to be approaching fast”. “Mmm”, replied their leader. “But we shall have them nevertheless, shan’t we, my boys? This was greeted with roars of approval. Garuda thought that they must be quite insane, to even consider continuing under these conditions. How could they hope to follow them in such a storm? They would all surely die. He had to get away from these, and soon. But how? Seemingly, and as if to banish all further thoughts upon a retreat, Rogas rallied them with a cry, and rushed onwards up the mountainside, his fellows pressing close behind. Garuda, too, rallied what little reserves of energy he still possessed, and energetically but unenthusiastically, followed in their wake.

Melaskkoli awoke from his sleep with a start. The soothing effects of the silently flowing river had lulled him into this slumber. He looked about him and observed that all his companions, guards as well, were similarly unoccupied. In a flash it crossed his mind to leave them, and set off on his own across the plain. But he realised then that he had no idea how he might escape from this fathomless subterranean world. He had no recollection, at all, of the way back, nor even of where he had entered the city cavern with Gorval. Any further contemplation in this direction was rendered purposeless for it was then that iDarii stirred, and opened his eyes. “Goodness. I must have been tired”. He looked about him and observed their escort, quite oblivious to the world. Abruptly he realised how remiss they had been in their duties, and he leapt to his feet, calling out angrily. At the sound of his upraised voice the two fellows awakened, both leaping promptly to their feet. They looked rather sheepish as iDarii harangued them. At the conclusion of his tirade he returned to where Melaskkoli was seated, and resumed his place. “My apologies. Those fools”. He glared angrily in the direction of the hapless duo.

“Oh, when we get back they’re going to be dealt with.” “Please, friend. Don’t be angry. Everyone’s tired at the moment”, pleaded Melaskkoli, seeking to soften his friend’s mood. “No. No”, iDarii held up his hands. “Don’t make excuses for them. Lazy ne’er-do-wells. They’re entrusted with our security and what do they do at the first opportunity but...”. His voice tailed off. “What am I saying? I’m responsible, and just as much at fault as they. More so, in fact. I really do know better”. When Melaskkoli saw the look of deep remorse on his friend’s face he knew that he must speak up. “Look. We came to no harm. And no one need know. I won’t say anything. And I think you can be pretty sure that they won’t”, he indicated the two guards, now nervously standing some paces away, both looking this way and that, as if seeking some avenue of escape. “But I was charged with your care and I’ve let you down”, protested iDarii. “No matter”, insisted Melaskkoli. He was about to continue when he heard, sounding behind them from the direction of the city, a low rumbling noise. At first he thought it to be thunder until it occurred to him that such a thing would be impossible this far underground. The guards, too, had noticed the clamour, and all turned towards what appeared to be its source. At first nothing could be seen. The silhouettes of the buildings appeared unchanged, their dark outlines clearly visible against the red glow of torchlight burning from within the city walls. The low rumbling continued for some time. Suddenly there was a blast; an explosion of sound. Still there was nothing to be seen on the skyline, and the group continued to search for the cause of this unusual phenomenon. Then a flash of light suddenly shot up into the heights of the cavern and, as their eyes followed its course, for the first time Melaskkoli caught a glimpse of the ceiling of this vast underground structure. Indeed, the rock wall was so far away that very little detail could be distinguished. But he was quite sure that if clouds had existed in this land then those heights could easily have accommodated them within their scope. But for now their attention was drawn back again to the metropolis. The light, which emanated from behind the city boundaries, seemed to have risen sharply in intensity. There was another flash, and a boom sounded shortly afterwards, as it floated across the range towards them. Now flames could be seen, licking above an area of the city far away to the left. “There. A fire”, called Melaskkoli, as he pointed towards the conflagration. “Yes. I see”, replied the Gaki. “I suppose it can’t be that uncommon here what will all the torches and cooking fires?” iDarii hesitated before replying. “Yes. We do have them. But because of the risk there are strict rules about their care. But the explosion!” His face betrayed his disquiet. “Should we get back? Can we help?” demanded Melaskkoli anxiously. His companion seemed quite preoccupied, and the guards, for their part, were equally absorbed in the display. Then a loud report echoed across the cavern, and yet another fire could be observed, this one burning much closer to the centre. “What’s this? There can’t be so many fires breaking out so closely together, surely?” Slowly the Gaki replied. “I’m not sure. But for now we should remain here and watch. It does seem an unlikely event though”. Then, as if recalling his friend’s earlier question, “No. We have fire watchers who’ll take charge of this. It’s best left to them”. He fell silent again, his eyes wide, and staring with a kind of horror at the growing pyres of destruction that floated over the city streets.

The hunters had reached the snow line; now they plunged into the storm. The snows were falling heavily but their senses were more finely attuned to these surroundings than their predecessors and, without hesitation, they dove into its white depths. With sharp eyes they picked out the faint tracks of the pursued, and they eagerly coursed along the spoor, the hunger for the kill filling every belly. Regardless of the fixedness of his purpose Garuda knew that Rogas’ gaze was upon him constantly. His only hope lay in slipping away under

the cover of the snowstorm, and retracing his steps back down the mountainside; but this prospect was fading rapidly the further they advanced into the hills. The ground had levelled off and, despite the snowfall, he was just able to distinguish the features of the mountain pass ahead. The tracks were quickly disappearing under the blizzard but in this constricted space there was only one way that their quarry might have gone. The pack advanced more cautiously now. They knew that their prey could not be far ahead, and would only be making slow progress in these conditions; at any moment they might fall upon them, and it would not do to be taken by surprise; they were bold creatures, but not foolish. The cunning of their kind preceded their zest for the chase, and no one was prepared to risk life or limb unnecessarily, not at least in exchange for a foolhardy act. Now all traces had been obliterated by the snow, and nothing remained but to navigate the pass until they could fall upon their victims. The party had drawn together now, and Garuda overheard briefly a muttered exchange between two of the huntsmen. "Ohhhh, my poor belly's empty" lamented one fellow. "Leave off your whining. It'll be full soon enough", replied the other. Then the latter nudged his friend, pointing out Garuda nearby. They fell silent and moved away; but their words echoed in Garuda's ears; he did not like the sound of this at all, and hoped that he had misinterpreted what they had said. Yet their appearance and manner betokened otherwise. He would not be at all surprised, albeit horrified, at their dietary habits. If he had not already been completely convinced of the necessity for making a swift departure from his present company, then these words sealed his determination, to seize the first opening that presented itself. But Rogas was watching him, as no doubt were the rest of his gang. Doubtless they would assume that if he did make a break for it, it would be back down the mountainside. Rogas himself remained in the lead, but the others were following closely upon his footsteps. There was little chance that he might make good his getaway by that direction. But they would not dream that he would pursue his freedom through the pass ahead. The weather was quite appalling, and even these hardened trekkers could not survive here for much longer. They would be counting upon the weakened state of their victims for a quick kill. He felt some pity for the latter, but this was no time to indulge such sensitivities. His own life was at risk, and he was quite sure now that his demise would quickly follow their despatch. He was still at a loss to explain the savage nature of these fellows; they were really quite unlike any of his people. Then he recalled that he had never actually entered the village itself, which lay some distance below on the valley floor, yet he had assumed that these men hailed from that encampment; but then not one had claimed it as his home. It had been strange also that he had seen no sign of smoke from the camp fires there. What might have come to pass for his fellows? He shuddered to think that his kin might have met some dreadful end at the hands of these beasts.

They continued their advance into the pass, seeking constantly the least sign of the intruders. Garuda glanced around, to mark where the others stood, and then towards Rogas at their head. He cast all doubt to one side, and he called out. "Ho! I think I see them". Rogas turned, and took a few paces towards him. "Where ... where do you see them?" His eyes were wide with a kind of animal rage, and his lips curled in an eager and ferocious snarl. "There", and Garuda pointed downwards into the valley. "They must have lain in the snow as we passed by". The explanation sounded feeble, but he had to account somehow for their evasion. Cunning as these fellows were the vision of the kill now filled their minds, and displaced all remaining caution. A deep hunger drove them, and a murderous frenzy filled their being. Rogas, confident that his captive would make no

attempt to escape into the pass, joined his fellows, and peered into the snow flurries in the direction that Garuda had indicated. Some of them had even started retracing their steps, the smell of blood seemingly cloying in their nostrils. "I can see nothing", said Rogas, with some exasperation. Before the fellow could turn to face him again, Garuda dealt him a mighty blow upon his back, and sent him sprawling into the snow. It was now or never. With a bound Garuda turned back up the pass, and sprinted into the gale, the snow clouds quickly closing about his disappearing form. Behind him he could faintly hear the screams of rage issuing from Rogas' mouth as he bellowed furiously at his comrades. "Find him. Kill him now", he roared. Energy that he did not know he possessed flew into his limbs, and spurred his desperate flight. Even the cold and the storm were forgotten now, as he fled down the narrow gorge. It may be that all that lay ahead of him was a cold and miserable death, but better that than the one he would surely suffer at the hands of his pursuers.

Inside the cave Alaste and his fellows were snuggled together, hungrily sharing the warmth of each others' bodies to stay alive. Although it had seemed warmer when they had entered this hole in the earth, yet the air here was still well below freezing. They had placed the mules all about them, hoping to draw at least a little warmth from these sturdy creatures. The lamp they had set in their midst, its poor light - and even poorer heat - making but a small contribution towards the alleviation of their condition. Fortunately, Ferioque had regained some of his strength, and the colour had returned somewhat to his otherwise pale features. The cold, dry meat had helped revitalise them as well, though it was a feeble substitute for a hot meal. Although they had escaped from the immediate violence of the storm and its deadly consequences, their hopes now lay with it abating rapidly. They had sufficient rations for now, and of water there was plenty; but the capacity of these plains dwellers to live long at the higher altitudes was limited, most especially in these dreadful freezing conditions. If the storm were to stop, or merely lessen in its fury, they might yet continue along the mountain path, and then descend easily upon the other side, there to enjoy the relative safety and warmer climes of the adjoining valley. Alaste sat in the dark, holding his daughter tightly in his arms. He had not voiced his thoughts, but inwardly he condemned himself for his foolishness. How could he have permitted himself the notion that she would be safe here? He might easily have forbidden her to follow her inclinations. But for him she would now be safely at home, with her mother and her people, enjoying that delightful haven of beauty within the desert. Instead here she was, freezing in the mountains, with only fools such as he for company. He chided himself, too, for his part in encouraging this dangerous expedition. It was true that these were grown men, and well able to make up their own minds; but they had elected him as their guide, and he had as good as led them to their death. They might be blamed for their ignorance but he, surely, only for his stupidity; and which was worse? Well! He had declared himself on this. He was not a man given to prayer for the gods of old, it seemed, had long departed. But at that moment he swore upon his own poor life - with a longevity that might soon be in dispute - an oath to the gods - indeed any gods - that should they see both his daughter and his charges safely from this place, that they might burden him with any fee or obligation that they would choose, including his own life as forfeit. His vow was heartfelt, if tinged with a large margin of incertitude. But despite this he gained a sense of relief from his burden of guilt. If he could make recompense he would, and without stinting the charge.

The winds howled about the mouth of the cave. Such was their violence that an occasional gust would penetrate even as far as their little grotto, sending a chill across their faces, and a shiver through their bodies. Despite the testimony of his hearing, and prompted by a sense of unease, Alaste got to his feet, and crossed to the cave entrance. As he rose Hesvee looked at him questioningly. "Just going to check outside. Who knows? Maybe it's better than it sounds". Hesvee nodded, and buried his head in his arms, trying hopelessly to keep warm. Alaste knew before he had even reached the entrance that it was pointless. Indeed, it seemed that conditions had deteriorated still further. The storm was gusting violently, sending great walls of snow fleeing before its advance. It was virtually impossible to see any distance in this tempest, not even as far as the opposite wall of the defile, so thick were the snow flurries. He was about to retreat into the relative warmth and shelter of the cave when he saw a dark bulk emerge from the shadows of the gale, and stagger drunkenly towards him. At first he thought it might be some poor, wild creature, cast adrift in this fury. But as the figure drew nearer his apprehensions rose. Could it be a man, a mountain dweller? He drew back, instinctively reaching for the knife in his belt. Unfortunately the weapon was buried beneath layers of clothing and furs, and he was unable to reach the blade quickly. He stumbled backwards into the darkness, still desperately fumbling for the haft. The figure lurched forward again. Perhaps it had caught sight of him as he struggled to retrieve the knife? In the blackness he tripped and fell backwards, tumbling heavily upon the floor. To his horror he saw an indistinct form loom up above him, outlined against the greyish light that penetrated through the cave entrance, and then felt a thump as whoever - or whatever - it was, fell upon his body. As it did so it let forth a yelp, and kicked out against him wildly. Alaste scabbled backwards, his feet lashing the rock frantically as he clawed his way into the darkness, all the while calling out loudly to his friends. He could hear footsteps coming in his direction and felt, rather than saw, a rush of figures fall upon the newcomer. Emboldened, he too got to his feet, and added his weight to the melee. Fists and elbows were flying everywhere, but soon the intruder was subdued. From the depths of the cave a light appeared, and Erame came into view, bearing a lamp above her head. Both Hesvee and Celarent had taken a hold of the stranger's arms whilst Alaste and Ferioque stood close by, ready to resume their grip should the fellow offer any further resistance. Strangely, the latter had not uttered a sound, apart from that solitary scream when the two had first collided. Erame held the light close to the creature's face, and all were relieved to see a human physiognomy displayed, though one with a cut and bleeding lip. Alaste had recovered his wits enough to address the man. "What are you doing here?" The fellow looked at his questioner, and then at the others who stood nearby. "Perhaps I could ask you the same question?" He paused. "Look. You might consider me an enemy, and you might be right. And then again I might be your friend. Right now there are a band of....", at which point he hesitated. "I would have said 'men' out there, but maybe not". He paused again. "They're hunting me and they're hunting you. We don't have much time. You have to defend yourselves. They'll find this place soon enough, and they'll be bent upon taking your lives. You have weapons?" Alaste looked doubtfully at the fellow. "Yes we do. But why should we believe this story?" "It doesn't matter whether you believe me or not. You'll find out soon enough. And you've a woman here with you. Believe me when I say that they'll spare no one. No one!" he emphasised. Alaste looked around at the group of anxious faces staring at him, their features laid gaunt by the flickering lamplight. "Look. You're trapped here. They'll find the cave entrance. There's no point in venturing by that way". He shook his head, indicating the outside, for his hands were still gripped tightly by his captors. "You might be

able to hold them off here for a bit – but not long”. Again, Alaste considered the man quietly. Finally he spoke. “The cave goes back some way. Perhaps there’s an alternative. Will they follow us further in? I’ve heard the mountain folk fear these places. They’re your people are they not? Speak up”. “Yes. It’s unlikely that they’ll follow. But I’m not sure that they’re of my race. They’re quite savage”. Alaste uttered a grim laugh. “Savage, you say? And you’re not?” “Believe what you will. But I, for one, want to hang on to my life a little longer. I care not if you wish to throw yours away; and that of the woman”. Again he looked across at Erame. “But then maybe the plains dwellers don’t value their lives as highly as do my folk?” And outside still the winds howled miserably, the snow piling ever thicker upon the ground. In the deepening murk the pack approached quietly, nostrils testing the air. Man flesh and plenty of it – and so near.

The explosions and blasts echoed across the plain. The small group watched the burgeoning inferno, mesmerised by the growing horror. The fires had spread, and with these the strange wailing noises had grown too, now flowing from every quarter of the city. It was an unnerving racket. Melaskkoli could see the fear on the faces of the guards, and of his companion iDarii. It would seem that even if an escape route were to present itself, by which they might flee this nightmare, none would have taken it, so transfixed were they by this dreadful spectacle. The smoke from the multiplying fires rose high into the cavern roof, and the thick, black fumes had already partly obscured the more distant suburbs of the town. So engrossed were all by these catastrophic events that no one noticed a pair of figures rapidly approaching, as they emerged from the wavering shadows, which writhed beneath the city walls. As they drew into sight the two guards instinctively reached for their weapons, unsheathing their swords, and holding them at the ready. The two creatures came closer. It was evident from their gait that they were both Gaki; as to why Melaskkoli might have thought otherwise is unclear. Perhaps the shock and surprise that he had undergone of late had inclined him to a more dread anticipation of the unknown. But that peculiar drifting, walking motion demonstrated, at least, their Gaki antecedents. Finally, the pair stood, or rather floated, gently, before the small gathering. It was not until one of the new arrivals spoke that Melaskkoli recognised it was Gorval. “Good. We’ve found you. There’s no time to waste on unnecessary explanation. I and the seer”, he nodded in the direction of his companion, “managed to escape the mob. Civil order has completely broken down. It’s as we feared. The Hunger is in control now. We must leave the cavern. And perhaps flee the Gaki world altogether. You’re both unharmed?” This question was addressed to himself and iDarii. The latter nodded. “Yes. We saw the explosions and wondered what had happened. Where shall we go?” It was at this point that the seer spoke up. “We must go to our refuge. The Cave of Light. We shall wait there”. iDarii looked at Gorval, as if seeking confirmation. “Yes. We should be safe there for a while. No one can say how this will proceed. It may be that the rioting will come to an end, though I don’t think so”. This last utterance was delivered in an undertone, as if the Gaki did not hold out much hope for that possibility. Gorval and the seer set off again across the plain, with iDarii and Melaskkoli following behind, whilst the guards formed the rearguard. To their left they were easily able to hear the tumult arising from the dying city. The whole horizon seemed to be framed in fire, with a thick black smoke that rose from every point, to coalesce with the darkness that shrouded the cavern heights. The wailing noises, which wafted across the landscape, were now punctuated by cries and screams, as the desperate citizens fell upon each other in a frenzy of destruction, engendered by both madness and panic. As those dreadful calls came within the hearing of the small

group they quickened their pace, eager to leave this terror behind.

At first their course took them on a parallel line to the city walls. All kept their eyes focussed upon those ramparts, watchful for any signs of a threat that might come at them from that angle. But apart from the occasional explosion, which sent a jarring shock across the intervening space, they were able to proceed unhindered. Indeed, it seemed that they might make good their escape, and without any further interruption at all. They had now drawn clear of the metropolis' environs, and were advancing steadily towards the margin of the plain, approaching what appeared to be a solid wall of rock, which formed the boundary of that section of the cavern. Melaskkoli could see no means of escape by this route, and assumed that they would turn either to the right or the left, and thus make their exit at some point distant. It was then some instinct obliged him to look back towards the stricken city. Despite the considerable distance that now lay between them and it, he saw what appeared to be a mist, which blew across the plain towards them from that bearing. At first he guessed that it must be some kind of eddy from the winds that were now forcefully gusting over the land, driven by the enormous fires, which were burning quite out of control within the city walls. However, as he examined the phenomenon more closely, he realised that it was not a cloud of smoke at all, but rather a massive horde of the inhabitants fleeing the disaster. So dense was the press of the multitude that some were being driven upwards above the heads of their fellows, there to tumble and fall, carried along as if on the crest of a great flood, their terrified screams and cries reverberating above the heads of the mob. Gorval and the seer had halted now, and all were watching the onrushing torrent of Gaki. Even from their present position it was evident that anyone caught in the path of this monster would be crushed. "Quickly. We must reach the wall before they arrive", Gorval called out. With no further ado they resumed their previous course, though at a much accelerated pace. As they crossed the intervening distance between them and the rock wall, Melaskkoli could still see no way out. They were almost on top of it now, and it was only when they were within a few paces of its apparently impenetrable surface that he saw a small aperture, which lay some small distance above the ground. He turned to look behind him, and was shocked to see how close the mob had drawn; the whole landscape was concealed beneath the fleeing forms of the population. From horizon to horizon the throng extended, streaming across the plain in blind terror, driven onwards by an unknown and hideous fear, which embedded itself within each frozen heart. "Quickly. Climb. There are foot and handholds for those who know. Follow me, and place your hands accordingly". The seer was the first to make the ascent, quickly followed by Melaskkoli, then Gorval, iDarii, and lastly the guards. The flood was almost upon them now. Their cries and screams could be heard with a dreadful clarity. The ground shook beneath them, as did the rock wall itself; indeed the whole earth quivered beneath that mass of pounding feet. Melaskkoli scabbled up the wall, carefully observing where the seer placed his feet before mimicking precisely his actions. He was vaguely aware of the others beneath him, fearful of what might become of them, and of him, should he lose his grip and fall. The seer had suddenly disappeared from sight. In an instant a hand reached down and pulled him to the safety, and he fell forward into a narrow corridor. He just had time to see both Gorval and iDarii also surface, to be followed, he observed gratefully, by both the guards, who rapidly joined them within the relative security of their new redoubt. Then there was a massive shock, as if the cliff had been bludgeoned with some great hammer. At first he thought that it might be an underground quake. But then he realised that the rabble had arrived at the rock wall, and had crashed bodily

against it. He did not dare to return to the entrance, fearful to witness what was passing below; the blood-chilling screams that reached his ears were testimony enough. The crush of the throng was so great that the life was literally being squeezed from the bodies of those who were pressed up against the rock face. Outlined against the opening he could see both Gorval and the seer looking down at their fellows. They did not linger long, and not a word was spoken of what they had witnessed. Shortly thereafter the seer again took the lead, and they turned their backs upon this terrible calamity, the wails and vexatious groans of those poor unfortunates still ringing in their ears.

Rogas and his men were momentarily confused by the unexpected direction of their erstwhile ally's flight. On his side Rogas had always distrusted the fellow, if only because he sensed that this one placed little confidence in him, and in his confederates. It was fortunate that they had intercepted him before he reached the village. It had long been deserted, but there was enough evidence there to point in the direction of him and his men – and pretty damning at that; it really would not do for awkward questions to be asked. He and his fellows were outcasts; criminals and vagrants. They had been turned away from the society of their fellows, considered unfit to mix even with the mountain folk. They had lived in the true wilds for many a year now, and, from time to time, it seemed only fair and just, to return, and repay their debt in blood - the villagers' blood. They had been hunting the region for some time now, unopposed by the remaining locals all of whom were too fearful to challenge their dominion. It had been a matter of pure chance, that they had been where they were at the time that the lone stranger had arrived. And it had indeed been the truth that Rogas had told to Garuda. His fellows would have most certainly fallen upon him without question, and then killed him out of hand. But the fellow was no fool, and had now slipped their grasp. But how could the fool believe that he might remain alive? This was a mystery to Rogas, for none could survive the mountain storms. They would search awhile but if they could find no trace, then no matter, they would have their kill anyway. All that would be required would be to return when the storm had passed; then they could search the bodies out. The flesh would be well preserved, and they could feast to their stomachs' content. He could not remember when the pack had first turned to man flesh to supplement their diet. His only regret was that the hunt would be cut short, for the aroma of newly hunted meat was unsurpassed. He rallied his men again, and they set off down into the pass, their lean bodies leaning against the thrusts of the wind, their eyes blanked by the driving snow. In this cold it would be more difficult to hunt down a prey, for the freezing temperatures would dull the sharpest sense of smell to naught.

Alaste thought on the stranger's words. He could see no advantage to the fellow should he be lying. It had been his plan to wait out the storm, whereupon they would return to their course through the pass. If the fellow were deceitful they might come back up to the surface anyway, there to continue with their journey. And, if there were truly someone pursuing them, they could not survive for long in the open under these storms, and must withdraw eventually. Nevertheless, he could not shake the feeling that his judgement was in some way deficient. The fact remained he was primarily responsible for their present quandary, and was not prompted to make things worse. He decided to take a look outside, and see if he could spot these alleged pursuers. "Wait here and hold him", he instructed the others. The man was about to protest, but then realised that this was quite fruitless. It was strange, he thought, that the very people he had been tracking might be the only means by which he might now survive. How the fates twist and turn, dictating

destiny by their whim! Alaste felt the freezing gusts of air gnaw upon his face as he came towards the mouth of the cave. He crouched against the rock wall near the entrance, partly from caution, but also because of the overwhelming power of the gales, which were now sweeping over the ground. The snow was driven horizontally by the harsh gusts, and tears were running down his cheeks as he squinted against their brutal buffets. He could see nothing, just a whiteness that blanketed the whole scene. He remained briefly where he was, the bitter air urging him with each moment to withdraw into the cold sanctuary behind. He was just about to turn and re-enter the cavern, there to remonstrate with this malicious fellow, when a sudden movement caught his eye. He returned to his previous position and knelt in the cold wet snow, the hard unyielding rock scraping his knees. Yes. There it was again. A dark shadow moved across the ground just before him, a body convulsed against the storming winds; there could be no doubt. So the fellow had not been lying after all! He did not need to ascertain the intentions of the intruder; he was dressed as a hunter, and they could be his only prey. Carefully, and moving very slowly, he gradually sank back into the darkness, his eyes fixed unwaveringly upon the huntsman. Finally and painfully, he had withdrawn fully, and made haste to rejoin the company within the cave. "He's telling the truth. There is someone out there. We don't take any chances. Give me the lamp, Erame. I'll lead. Bring the mules, but for the sake of the gods don't make any noise. The storm will probably cover any sounds that we might make, but let's not make a present of our lives to these fellows". He took the lamp from his daughter and started off into the darkness, with Erame following immediately behind, drawing the mule train. The others followed upon her, with both Hesvee and Celarent keeping a good hold on their prisoner, and then Ferioque bringing up the rump. There was no sign of their visitor yet, and it took but a few turns of the passageway before all the blasts and revels of the storm outside had disappeared completely, to be replaced by the tomb-like silence of the mountain interior. The corridor in which they now found themselves was quite narrow, but sufficient to accommodate the whole of the party, if only in a single file. The path declined gently and, as they passed deeper into the mountain, the air grew steadily more temperate. In this respect, it occurred to Alaste, perhaps the intervention of the stranger had been a blessing of some kind. Still! Who knows what lay ahead, and what perils awaited them in the depths of the earth!

Above them, in the gathering snowstorm, neither Rogas nor his men had been able to find the absconder, or anyone else for that matter. The storm was gathering strength steadily and, despite their disappointment, there really was no choice but to find cover here, or give up their search and retreat into the valley below. Reluctantly they turned their backs to the gales, and began to retrace their steps homeward. As he marched down the slope Rogas again consoled himself with the thought that they would return in a few hours, and he would have the pleasure himself of retrieving their frozen bodies from the icy drifts.

They had been travelling for some time now. The gradient had been shallow, and the way unobstructed. At Alaste's suggestion they had stopped for a short while so that more lamps might be unpacked, the better to light their way. They also used this break to bind the stranger's hands, thus relieving Hesvee and Celarent of the chore of safeguarding their charge. But Garuda had no intention of trying to escape, for in one direction lay the mountain beasts, and ahead, the darkness of the underworld. His people had always feared these regions, and only the brave - or very foolhardy - would venture into these places. If he had to be in this predicament at least there would be safety in numbers, he

reflected. But he understood their caution, and knew that he would behave no differently if he were in their shoes. The best policy for now would be to demonstrate he represented no threat, and that, in the end, he might be trusted. Surprisingly, it was the woman who addressed him first. "How are you called, sir?" she demanded. He looked at her somewhat askance. With his people the women were not so bold in their speech, though they were regarded as formidable fighters on the battlefield, and the equal of any man in that respect. "Garuda", he replied. "Very well. I'm Erame. That over there is my father, Alaste", and she pointed in his direction. He could now see the family resemblance clearly, even in this poor light. Alaste noticed that his daughter was in conversation with the stranger, and waved her away, as he himself approached. She looked at him, hesitating for a moment, before complying with his direction. Perhaps it would not do to show dissent in front of one who might exploit it, she thought. She had learned much, both from her father and from his trading practices; in any negotiation let only the principals speak, the rest to remain silent. "So, sir. Garuda is your name. First, I will thank you for your warning, though I've no illusion that it served your interest before ours". Garuda smiled at Alaste's forthright expression. "You're quite right, of course". "I've a few questions for you, sir; but they'll have to wait awhile. Are you familiar with this region at all?" Garuda paused, weighing up the advantages, and disadvantages, of his possible responses. If he replied 'no', then they might regard his continued presence to be an unnecessary encumbrance, and dispose of him accordingly. On the other hand, this fellow displayed a preference for straight-talking, and this might be the better way to advance his prospects; that and the fact that they did not look like brigands or cut-throats. "No I'm not. I saw it only as a retreat. I've no idea where this path proceeds, or what might lie at the end of it. My people don't frequent these ways. There are stories of what lies underground, and none are happy, shall we say". "Good. In that case we shall just have to find out for ourselves. We'll speak again later. In the meantime you shall remain bound, that is until we've determined what to do with you". Garuda merely nodded, concluding that, at least, he was not to be disposed of forthwith. His hands had been firmly tied, and a rope further served as a leash by which he was attached to Celarent, for the latter had been assigned the duty of his keeper. After a short break the party again set off, with Alaste at their head, his lamp held before him; thus the companions proceeded deeper into the mountain.

Briefly we might imagine that some casual observer could survey the events unfolding on this innocuous planet, seeing them in their bare entirety. For the participants themselves, quite naturally, it is the trend of their own lives which preoccupies their individual attention most directly. In the hearts and minds of those varied creatures, which populate these lands, they are proportionately happy or sad, scared or at peace, angry or calm, each according to their predisposition and circumstances. Our lofty and detached witness might also have caught a glimpse of those poor creatures, as they burrowed through the earth, pursuing who knows what vague notions might drive their bodies ever forward; but in this great nexus of things they counted for little. However, even for one so removed from the mundane - or even banal - anxieties of these solitary fellows, they could not fail to be moved by that tumultuous schism, which befell the inhabitants of the under lands. The surface dwellers carried on with their affairs, going to and fro about their own petty interests, whilst beneath their feet, in a myriad caverns and caves hidden deep within the earth, a whole race of creatures had erupted into a boiling mass of terror and despair. Countless Gaki now threw themselves to their deaths, hurling their broken bodies into the great pits dispersed about their realm, and in a thousand cities and towns across the

deeps, their fellows' cries and screams echoed so loudly that it seemed that these might reach to the very skies above. In those vast caves these pathetic creatures ran hither and thither, high and low, only to retreat again to the depths, seeking some refuge from a fear, a terror, which compressed their hearts and souls; a futile endeavour indeed, for no such sanctuary existed. Far beneath even these cities there arose yet another race of Gaki, yet unknown to their brethren. They hurled forth, as if from the simmering mouth of a long forgotten and slumbering volcano, from beneath their cousins' feet, their terrifying aspect bringing fear even to those their kin, and binding their dreadful weight to the horror, which was detonating across all the Gaki realms. Vast mobs flooded the heights and depths of their world, its long and winding stony corridors filled with the despairing crowds, madly seeking to escape the nightmare that had lain long quiescent within their hearts. But now the darkness within had risen, to join the great darkness without, and the Great Hunger was released; it could not be contained further. The Gaki hordes surged about the great holes buried within the breasts of the earth, like a boiling torrent seeking some release from the growing pressures of an awful cauldron. The writhing torment, which had once been so proud race, now spun and swirled in gathering chaos, waiting to burst upon the lands above. Even upon the surface there was some premonition, of a dread desolation to be visited upon them. All across the face of the world there rose within the hearts of the surface dwellers a growing discord. It was not so powerful that more than a few might make mention of it; just a feeling of disquiet, a general malaise, but easily dismissed for all that. But hidden darkly within their essence, of both men and women, young and old, a slow and dark dread was unfolding, breaking out from that seed, which had lain so long dormant within their souls. The very air itself carried within its heated coils a burgeoning and dark presentiment, of some unvoiced disaster set to fall upon the human race. And yet within this drama of anguish and dismay, still this bystander might have turned their attention again to those two insignificant bands, which even now hastened through the dark ways of the earth, unknowingly racing to an encounter that had been predestined, even before this planet had been born. No lesser one than this might pause, before turning his lordly brow upon some other spectacle, for it is in the actions of the small and insignificant that lie the future of worlds; it is the ordinary and mundane, which create the futures of men and Gaki alike – and perhaps even the gods.

The seer maintained a fast pace as he drifted along the track towards their destination, anxious that there should be no unnecessary delay or interruption to their arrival. Melaskkoli found himself walking alongside iDarii, and this seemed an opportune moment to ask the fellow what the seer had meant when he had referred to the Cave of Light. "Am I right in thinking that that's the same place where I first encountered Gorval?" "Yes. But it's not the only such in our world. They are spread out across the caverns, but ours is one of the most ancient, or so it's said. It's a holy place, and none would dare desecrate it. Only the seers are allowed to enter them. But I think that things have changed now". iDarii fell silent. The Gaki did not seem inclined to continue the conversation. Just ahead he noted that Gorval marched alone. He increased his pace, and caught up with the fellow. As he drew alongside the Gaki turned to greet him. "How are you, my young friend?" "Well enough, I suppose. But I was wondering why we might be going to the Cave. iDarii has told me something of it - that we shall be safe there. But is this whole reason for our going there?" Gorval studied the young human carefully. "You're observant indeed". And then he continued. "The Hunger has gone beyond all control. You've seen for yourself the consequences. There is no longer what might be called a Gaki society. Our people have

simply disintegrated into something resembling a mindless creature, as it might called; they are quite crazed with fear, and driven into such disorder under the sickening influence of this dark disease. The Council of Seers had met to debate what must be done, and as a result one of their number was sent to find me, and conduct us to the Cave. I'm not going to pretend that I know what's precisely to occur, but that it has something to do with the prophecy. It would seem that that small party of humans, you remember them?" Melaskkoli nodded, although they had quite slipped his mind, especially with all that was occurring within the caverns. "Well, they've been forced beneath the surface. Our scouts report that the humans came into contact with a renegade band of mountain folk, and now take refuge in the under lands. If they continue by their present course it will bring them to the very cave by which you arrived in our realm. The chances of that occurring are quite infinitesimal, for the ways into the surface world are multitudinous. That they should choose, nay be obliged, to come by this route, heralds a conformity to some kind of will, which operates quite beyond our comprehension. Within this party is the woman who was spoken of in the ancient words; all that we may do is to try and intercept them. Perhaps they hold, wittingly or no, a solution to our predicament. If nothing comes of this assignation, then all will be lost. So far the troubles have not truly seeped out in the world above. But if this should occur then the last war fought between Gaki and men will appear a trivial matter, that is besides what might happen now. Many died then, but those numbers will be far exceeded in any imminent conflict. That's all I know". Melaskkoli listened most attentively to the Gaki's pronouncements. He continued walking alongside the fellow, but absorbed deeply in his own thoughts. He could not see how any act would avert this mounting tragedy. What could a few surface dwellers - and some Gaki - do in the face of the tragedy that threatened to submerge them beneath its momentum? "Do we have far to travel?" he asked Gorval "No. It's not a great distance, not by this road at least. We shall arrive there well before the humans. The question's more whether they'll find us. The ways through the mountain are many, and there are turnings that they might take which will lead them away from us. But the seer seems confident, at least, that they'll come to us. I don't know myself though". Gorval shook his head sorrowfully. Indeed, his expression suggested that this last hope was laid upon a flimsy foundation. There arose then, in Melaskkoli, a desire to pursue his enquiry with the seer himself. Surely this one must be able to throw a greater light upon these issues. Gorval caught a glimpse of this impulse in the youngster's expression, and warned him. "I know that there's much that you wish to ask, and I hope that you'll accept my poor answers. Please believe me when I tell you that it's best not to address your questions to my master. If he does possess the information that you seek he'll be unlikely to impart it to you. There are some things left better unsaid - and some things left better unknown. You must rest contented for the time being. This may sound strange from one of my race, but a surfeit of knowledge might sit ill in your belly". Melaskkoli nodded. "I can't say that I understand, but I would not dream of breaking faith with you. And thank you for what you've told me". Gorval indicated that he should rejoin his friend. Melaskkoli fell back a few paces, and matched steps again with iDarii. "Well?" his friend asked. "More questions than answers I'm afraid", he laughed. "This is the way of life, isn't it" agreed the Gaki. The company continued on its tortuous way up through the roots of the mountain, its encounter with the future of both races drawing closer with each step.

In the farms and homesteads of the upper world the pace of life seemed to continue on its unvaried path. Men and women, and children too, went about their customary affairs. On

one part of this world it was night, and all were abed, disporting within their dream lives, with bodies resting from their daily labours. Within the hearts and minds of these the drama of that ephemeral world unravelled within their psyches, and strange tales and portents floated upwards from the depths of their being. Visions from other worlds, and the stirrings of what lay deep beneath, danced, and paraded grotesquely their forms in that somnolent half-light. On the other half of the planet day thrust its eager form upon the attention of their fellows, announcing itself in a fanfare of brilliant colours, which blazed fiercely across the horizons; or perhaps its display more mutely protested beneath heavy rains, which fell across the face of the skies, to flow finally upon the earth. Man and beast, in all their varied forms, moved carelessly upon the skin of this world, with only the deepest stirrings of their consciousness betraying the anguish that swept the depths beneath them. Within the cities it was the same. Although those who lived here did not experience the tides and flows of life so forcefully, yet they were of the same stock and, even within the limits of their dulled sensibilities there dawned the realisation, that all things were upon the cusp of change. Here, a man would address his wife most abruptly, with a temper even unsuited to his nature. There, a child rebuked would withdraw from her mother, eyes wide with shock and hurt, smarting under the severity of the chastisement. Then, a dog barking loudly, replete with the pleasure of living, would receive a brutal blow upon its back, and would cower quivering to the earth, fearful at such treatment from an otherwise gentle master. Slowly, rising like a dark tide from beneath the even surface of the sea, the monsters that inhabited those realms drew closer to the surface, their gaping maws filled with sharp and unforgiving fangs, eager to seize upon their prey, and draw them into the darkest deeps, their fins breaking the surface with the touch of the merest feather, giving few clues to the threat that lay suspended. And so the world waited, its breath anxiously and unknowingly held, whilst the storms broke within the under land. They were poised upon the edge, the very brink of the most profound abyss; and with sightless eyes, about to step into the void.

They had descended some great distance before Alaste decided to call a halt to their advance. There had been no sign of any pursuit, and it seemed unlikely that their pursuers might follow them to this place; that is, if the stranger were to be believed. So far his information had proved reliable, and he had behaved most docilely throughout their encounter. This, far from reassuring Alaste on his conduct, had precisely the reverse effect, for the fellow's whole demeanour portrayed a man ill at ease with a subordinate's role. Indeed, he gave every sign of one more inclined to give orders than receive. If he had not been restrained, and securely, he might yet prove to be an adversary they could ill afford. But he had shown not the slightest inclination to regain his freedom; and this Alaste had to question. They had arrived in a small cave, and there was just enough space for all to sit and rest. As a precaution Alaste had assigned Celarent to stand guard over their guest, despite the fellow's apparently compliant stance. It might be that Alaste wanted to signal to the newcomer that they were not to be taken lightly, or careless. Ferioque and Erame attended to the mules whilst the remainder seated themselves upon the floor. This seemed to Alaste to be an opportune moment to question the fellow further. He had observed his daughter had shown an undue, and even unseemly, interest in the mountain dweller, and he, it would appear, in turn, in her. He was eager to ensure that a burgeoning friendship be discouraged now, and the fellow subjected to a thorough scrutiny to determine his precursors. He made his way over to where the savage was seated, and was quickly joined by both Hesvee and Ferioque, who also appeared keen to interrogate

the fellow. For his part Garuda observed the approach of his captors with some trepidation, and readied himself for the inquisition. He sat somewhat awkwardly upon the floor, his hands still bound behind his back, and with Celarent's leash still wrapped about his arm. Alaste noticed the man's discomfort. "I don't suppose there might be any chance that my hands could be untied?" he asked. "You're quite right. For the time being there's no chance. Or at least not until you've answered a few of our questions", replied Alaste. Garuda nodded. "Very well. Ask away, sirs". Alaste looked at his companions before proceeding. "Well, firstly, I should thank you again for your warning. My last comment upon the matter might have been construed as somewhat ungracious". Garuda again nodded, but smiled at his interrogator's aside. "Well. You were quite right. It did serve my interests as well as yours. Perhaps there are other ways in which our aims might coincide". "Perhaps", observed Alaste. "But first you mentioned that you might be our friend, and then again maybe not. What precisely did you mean by that?" Garuda paused. From his more extensive observations of Alaste he had not had cause to revise his original opinion; directness seemed to be the most profitable route to take. "Well. In that case I should say that – yes - I was tracking you. In fact, long before you came into the mountains. I saw you as your party approached from the desert. Or rather two parties, though I lost sight of the second". The three listeners exchanged glances at this, but there seemed to be little purpose in explaining Erame's presence; at least, not yet. "And for what purpose did you track, or hunt us?" Alaste corrected himself. Garuda noticed the amendment but made no comment. "You are plains dwellers and I'm of the mountains. I would've thought that sufficient explanation", was his brisk response. "Mm. Very well then. You tracked us, but what of these others? How did they fit into this plan?" Again, it seemed to be best to frank with this fellow. And so Garuda embarked upon the tale of his encounter with the renegades, and his subsequent parting. Alaste, Ferioque and Hesvee listened with rising interest to his account. It had never occurred to them that there might be something like a moral law operating for a denizen of this region. The very speech of the fellow betrayed a level of civilisation that they had not anticipated. Garuda sensed their surprise, and took some pleasure in disassembling some of their expectations, or at least those associated with his people's mode of living. Whilst the conversation proceeded Erame sat down to one side, to listen attentively, but remaining quiet herself. Her father had directed her to repack the mules, mostly in an attempt to distract her from a further encounter. But she had seen through his ploy easily, and had merely adopted the raiment of attending to her chores. Garuda looked up as she drew near, and Alaste caught the gesture. He glanced at his daughter, a frown upon his face. She blithely ignored both his expression and the hint. Alaste sighed to himself, wondering where he had gained such a wilful woman as his own progeny. "So. These wild men... you think that they'll have gone by now?" "I can't see how they could possibly survive upon the mountainside. I imagine they believe us dead, and hope to return on the morn to recover their trophies". "Very well. And what are your intentions towards us, fellow, now that your allies have fled?" "Be assured that they're no allies of mine", rejoined Garuda, with a hint of annoyance betrayed in his voice. "Fellows of mine they are not, nor shall ever such be". "Gently, gently. I'm merely trying to determine whether you remain a threat or no, that's all", replied Alaste soothingly. The fellow seemed somewhat mollified, but slightly affronted, at the suggested association between himself and the savages. "I wish merely to return to my home. But I'm curious as to why such as you are wandering these mountains. You're not warriors. What business could you possibly have here? And to bring a woman as well. This seems to me foolhardy in the extreme". Alaste could hardly disagree with the man's assessment

of their present condition. There was something about him, too, that prompted the belief that his word might be trusted. He could have betrayed them to the savages; but then again they had mostly to rely upon his avowal as to their intent. However, Alaste had seen for himself the creature near the cave entrance, and its behaviour had signified a sinister purpose, he believed. Finally, to keep him thus snared would be a burden upon them all. It would be difficult to both guard him, and pursue their own ends here. "Shall we say for, the time being, that we're explorers, and we've come to these mountains in pursuit of that knowledge". "Well, I hope that whatever you seek is of great value. It must be so if you are willing to take such risks with your lives". "We believe so, but for now we've to consider you. We can release you now, but only upon your word that you'll not try to do us harm. We're more than you, and though we may not be warriors, nevertheless our strength is sufficient". They awaited Garuda's response. The man glanced at Erame as if seeking a clue where he might stand in her estimation. It was an unconscious movement, and he himself would have been unable to explain why he looked towards her now. Undoubtedly she was an attractive woman, but that was not the only reason for his interest. There was a fascination there, which enthralled him, and yet he could not account for this allure; something in the lineaments of her face betokened a memory of the past, an ancient past perhaps. He knew beyond doubt that he had never met her before this day, for it was quite impossible that their paths would have crossed. But there was something familiar about her, a warm presence, one to which he easily responded. There was no reason for these to trust him, or he them; but whatever else came to be, he sensed a bond, a connection that went back before recollection itself. Alaste again saw the glance, and regarded his daughter reprovingly. She, however, was quite oblivious to her father's admonition. Despite her natural modesty she was unable to disguise her own unaccountable fascination with this fellow. Indeed, if she could have but known what was passing through this fellow's mind she would have been greatly surprised, for precisely that recognition that he experienced was similarly occurring within her. Alaste looked around at Hesvee and Ferioque before returning to Garuda. "Well, how say you, sir? Have we your word on this?" Her look had sealed his decision. "I give you my word, sir. I'll not seek to cause you or any of your party harm; indeed, I'll bend my efforts towards the safety of all whilst I remain in your company. I swear it so". Again Alaste surveyed his friends. They nodded their accord, as did Celarent, who had drawn closer during the discussion. He, too, had seen those surreptitious glances exchanged between this fellow and Erame. He felt a stab of annoyance within his chest, but he was forced to acknowledge it would be most impractical to continue as they were. He loosened his hold upon the leash, and swiftly cut the bonds that secured the man's wrists. Garuda brought these before him, and rubbed the flesh vigorously, to both restore the circulation, and ease the chaffing, which the rope had seared upon his skin. "Well", said Hesvee. "Now that we've concluded this business we must decide upon our next course. Do we go forward, or do we return upon our path, back out into the open?" The party fell silent, pondering the question. Hesvee continued. "We can go onwards by way of the pass. Although those fellows may have retreated from the storm by now, nevertheless it would be quite impossible to venture there until it has abated. We could bide our time here awhile, and then seek our way forward in the snows. But at least it's warm hereabouts". Ferioque nodded vigorously at this point, for he had no desire to return to that freezing world outside; his recollections of that experience were all too recent. "Or we could press ahead here. After all, we would have to go underground at some point anyway. That was our intent". Hesvee's last observation was greeted with a sharp look from Alaste; but it was

too late. "So what you seek lies beneath, sirs?" enquired their guest. There seemed to be little point in further dissimulation. "Yes. The object of our survey does involve some exploration in these parts. But we'd planned to advance somewhat further overground before we delved beneath the earth". "I see. Well, to be frank, whereas above ground I might have been of some use to you, here I'm quite ignorant of this terrain. But the storms will eventually subside, and then you can return to your previous course". It was at this juncture that Erame, even to her surprise, broke in upon the discussion. "I think we should continue into the mountain". Her voice and manner betrayed an eagerness, which was difficult to ignore. "Please Erame....". Her father began to speak, his face displaying a growing impatience. "No father! Hear me. I know what I'm talking about". She paused, and her voice fell low. "I mean.... what I mean to say is that Hesvee's right. And if we remain underground at least we won't fall foul of those brutes. And this fellow has said that certainly none among his people will venture here. Surely we can navigate our way here. The path back still remains, and if we make sure to mark our passage from this point forwards then we can find our way to the outside if need be. I say that we go at least a little further". It was then that Celarent spoke up. "Surely we have already agreed that once it came to our adventures underground it was Ferioque who was to be our leader. Should not his views be considered?" Celarent was delighted to see the warm look of approval that he received from Erame. He had to concede that he was more than slightly motivated by his desire to attract her benign regard ; and his strategy seemed to have worked. All eyes turned now upon the professor. He appeared somewhat ill-at-ease to be the subject of so much attention, and, moreover, disinclined to have the responsibility laid upon his own rather sore back. "It's true that we would have had to make the descent at some stage. I've been observing our route, and most especially the construction of this particular corridor". "Construction, you say?" queried the master. "Yes indeed. I believe it to be man-made, or should I say, fabricated by someone. Certainly the fissure existed before, but it's my belief that nature's provision has been elaborated by man's artifice. The floor certainly seems to have been carved to a greater regularity; or perhaps its smoothness may be attributed to the frequency of use by others before ourselves. To be concise, this is no accident of geology but a path made by creatures such as ourselves, and leading to some specific destination. I believe that we can follow it wherever it might lead. And it cannot be accidental that it exists here. After all, we're not such a great distance from our objective, although, and if I'm correct, what we seek must be of considerable dimension". His words were guarded for he had guessed from Alaste's comment - and dark look - that he was still reluctant that the stranger know any more than was absolutely necessary. However, this stratagem could not hold much longer, especially if they did locate what they were seeking; then it would be quite impossible to conceal the matter. "Well. This is something that concerns us all. The decision must be made in accord, for none has the right to enforce his will upon the others. But once the die is cast, then we must follow it through to its conclusion. Are we agreed upon this?" Alaste looked at each of his comrades in turn as they nodded their assent. And then his glance fell upon the stranger. "And you, sir? It's fair that you should take your liberty as you wish. You may leave or stay". Garuda's face remained impassive as he spoke. "As I said, I'll remain in your company", but now he avoided looking in Erame's direction. He was well aware that her father was no fool, and he had no intention of drawing further attention to his interest in her. "Good. It's decided then. We shall proceed. Who shall be responsible for marking our way?" "I'll do that", replied Ferioque. "I'll simply mark the wall at intervals, wherever our course should divert from the main passageway. I shall cut three strikes

thus". As he said this he lifted his blade, and carved three diagonal scores into the rocky surface. Under the lamplight they showed quite clearly, their regular formation contrasting cleanly with the natural breaks and narrow cracks that covered the pitted surface. "We've rested enough. I think we should still mount a guard. I know that you've told us otherwise but I wish to take no further chances". Alaste nodded at Celarent, and the duty fell to him. The party arose as one, and without further delay, resumed their march along the passageway.

In another part of the underworld, and at no great distance from this small group of humans, the few refugees from the Gaki kingdom, led by the seer, were rapidly approaching their goal. They had climbed steadily upwards, rising through layer after layer of quite extraordinary rock formations, the like of which certainly Melaskkoli had never before witnessed. The grey granite, now sparkling with quartz encrustations, had given way to an stunning rainbow of colours. Never had a human eye encountered such sights as these; minerals of such rarity and beauty that Melaskkoli would frequently pause, entirely hypnotised by the ravishing beauty of this subterranean vision. The path they followed would intermittently emerge from its narrow confines, and open up into broader grottoes, which more resembled a fantasy of the most fevered imagination than the harsh aspect exhibited generally in this region. From the ceilings and floors respectively, would spring spires, either rising elegantly towards the roof, or falling perilously, like giant spears hurled earthwards. Even more remarkable were the vast trceries of rock, which were composed almost entirely of glittering jewels, that flowed over every surface like a tapestry woven into the living stone. Melaskkoli had quizzed iDarii, and was incredulous to discover that nothing of this was the craft of Gaki artisans. He had observed that his friend still seemed somewhat subdued, and pressed the fellow as to what might be troubling him. The Gaki hesitated before replying. "I never had time to talk to my parents". With a shock Melaskkoli realised that his companion was fearful for his family. "I'm sorry. Gorval hasn't mentioned anything?" he asked. His friend shook his head. "I can only hope that they got out of the city. But you saw that mob. They were good parents to me, in this life, and the one before". There was nothing that he could do but remain silent as the Gaki tried to compose himself. These people were not given to strong emotion, unless the hunger was about them, of course. But, nevertheless, it was obvious the depth to which his companion felt his loss. "We don't know for sure. We don't, do we?" That was all he could say, and to speak further, he was quite sure, would only make matters worse. And then he reflected briefly on his own loss. Since he had never met his kin, or at least had no recollection of them, he was partly grateful for this fact. He resumed his examination of the awe-inspiring sights that surrounded him, but his enthusiasm for these was now tempered by the reality of his friend's grief.

It was but a short time later, and they had just passed out of sight of these extraordinary structures, when the seer came to a halt, and motioned to Gorval to join him. The rest remained where they stood as the two leaders moved out of the sight along the tunnel. Neither the guards nor iDarii nor he felt disposed to conversation, and it was fortunate that the two elders returned quite promptly. Gorval drew near. "It is well. We've reached the chamber. It's quite deserted so we shall be safe, at least for now. Come! We must enter it. The guards will remain here to keep a look out. You and iDarii must join us". Both followed him along the path towards the seer. As they approached the latter, he turned, and drifted forwards again. As they traversed the last section of the passageway

Melaskkoli again found himself in that golden chamber. It seemed a lifetime ago that he had last been here, when he had first encountered Gorval. The cave seemed smaller now, but its golden glow was still as intense as he recalled. He looked away from the blinding glare, shielding his eyes against its ferocity. The four of them entered the cave but were forced to turn their backs to its brilliance. Melaskkoli could not forbear from asking Gorval what might occur next. "All we can do now, young one, is wait. Patience as always. As for what will come, I cannot say". He fell silent, contemplating and admiring the fellow's equanimity. It was a rare Gaki, or man, for that matter, who could, with such evenness, face the unknown. It was easy enough to display courage when one knew one's enemy. But when the unknown advances, with blade concealed, then indeed were such inner resources tested to their limit. As he entered the cavern he had been concerned to discover if he would be subject to that attack of faintness, which he had first experienced on his last visit here; but there was no sign of that frailty. Instead, however, he did notice a rising sense of restlessness, which firstly pervaded his body, but then was rapidly reflected in his mind. It felt like a kind of panic, which flooded through his body to grow and grow, until it required the greatest application of will-power to suppress its effects. Every impulse within him, every nerve and muscle, ached with its onslaught, and it was all that he could do not to run headlong from the cavern, in a desperate attempt to escape this distress. His mind whirled chaotically, thoughts flashing through his consciousness, in a wild whirligig of impressions. This mental confusion did nothing to reassure him, and merely added to the growing strife, which enfolded and penetrated every part of his body and soul. So great had it become that he felt quite unable to speak, for otherwise he would surely have sought some assistance from his companions. He managed to turn his head to observe them, but they seemed quite oblivious to his condition. Perhaps this was the change that they had been talking about? Was it like this to be a Gaki? Surely such an existence could only be insupportable? They could not sustain this degree of suffering for long? He had sometimes felt that life as a surface dweller could be harsh and onerous. But no human being could endure such as this without losing his mind completely. The panic and discord rose and rose, and body and mind were racked with anguish, and paralysed with fear. Behind them the cave radiated out its golden splendour relentlessly, and the world turned endlessly upon itself.

Throughout the Gaki realm the cities were burning. The caverns were aglare with the infernos, which blazed beneath their distant heights. All around could be heard the crackle of the flames, and the tumultuous crashing of burning buildings as they disintegrated into the ground, their frames corrupted by the intense heat. Smoke filled the air, and cast its choking grasp everywhere. Most of their populations had fled the environs though many had been crushed in the stampede; the streets were filled with their bleeding bodies. Across the surrounding plains the remainder gathered, corralled within by the impervious granite walls. Some were so maddened by terror that they met their end there, driven against the unyielding barriers of the rock by the crowds that pressed behind, their cries and wails ringing out into every corner of this underground world. Many, guided by their few surviving leaders, had entered the corridors that led upwards, and these long files of terrified creatures shuffled towards the surface world, and to whatever horror that might await them there. Many feared for their lives indeed, for they were quite sure that once they encountered the surface dwellers there would be a wholesale slaughter, and they would meet their death in this awful fashion. It seemed an impossible choice, and yet it is in the nature of all living beings to cling desperately to that most precious possession,

even to the very end, and regardless of the price to be paid. Life is valued beyond estimation, even when its fabric is riven with fear and despair. And so the Gaki race fled their world, and into a future that few believed they could survive. Degree by degree the caverns emptied; the subterranean plains lay empty now except for the piles of bodies upon all sides; the sky was reddened with flame, and the air thick with acrid smoke.

They plunged onwards into the depths of the earth. This place played upon the nerves, thought Celarent. Though he took some courage from the presence of his companions, and from the warm yellow light that seeped from the lamps - this repelling the dread darkness that lay upon every side - nevertheless, he could not prevent these thoughts from burdening his mind, buried as the company was, far away from the open skies above. Never mind that the freezing winds still scalded the upper lands; there was something quite dreadful about giving up one's life in such a place as this. And this world played its malevolent tricks upon the senses, for he was quite certain that he could hear the faintest echoes of shrieks and screams coming from far beneath his feet. But their course was set, and he had no other choice than to follow its path. He had again been assigned the rear-guard duty, and this too added to his sense of isolation. He would look behind him, into the darkness that followed in their footsteps, and his imagination would conjure up all manner of demons hidden beneath its cover. He was relieved that Erame could not read his mind. He was quite sure that she would be unimpressed at his lack of courage. The air grew steadily warmer as they continued downwards. He even believed that he could detect the faintest odours of burning in the air, but dismissed these as yet more evidence of his bloated imaginings. He, for one, would certainly be glad when they arrived at the end of their journey, and could then once again make their way back up to the surface. Although they had been but a brief time beneath these mountains, it was quite long enough for his liking.

As they proceeded still deeper there appeared some changes in the rock strata. The walls glistened now under the lamplight, and their rays were captured in the facets of the multitudinous tiny crystals, which studded those surfaces. Despite the warming air it seemed that the corridor walls were composed entirely of ice, so extensive were these formations. At least there was no sign of any pursuers, and from this Celarent took some heart. On either hand there would appear occasionally the dark mouths of passageways, their mysterious jaws quite uninviting to the travellers. Their present route was clearly a main artery and Ferioque, therefore, had decided to follow this conduit to wherever it might lead. It was impossible to keep track of time under these conditions, and it was only Celarent's belly, which could lend any clue as to its passing. The air was dry here, and he had frequent recourse to his water bottle, moistening his lips sufficiently to hold that appetite at bay. They had seen no sign of underground rivers or streams so far and, though they were still well provisioned in other respects, it seemed prudent to conserve this resource at least. Then, suddenly, a piercing scream penetrated the earth, and with such an unearthly tone that the entire party halted as one. "You hear that", called out Hesvee. "Yes", replied Alaste, much to Celarent's relief, for he was starting to doubt his own senses. "I've heard such for some time, though not as loudly or clearly, but couldn't be sure if it was not a trick my mind was playing upon me". "No", called out Erame. "I, too, have heard these noises. What could they be?" "Well, whatever it is, it doesn't sound particularly encouraging", observed Ferioque, with some understatement. The stranger was silent, but his face betrayed fear. Momentarily, the whole party remained motionless

in the tunnel. And then it was that Celarent spoke. "I can't be sure from which direction these yells are coming. Sometimes it seems from below, but they could be echoes from anywhere". Then Garuda chimed in. "In that case we might as well press on". There was an inevitability about his pronouncement - and a logic to his argument - that overcame whatever fears and doubts held them back. Better perhaps to see, and overcome, the source of these strange calls, rather than remain in ignorance; or at least this is how Celarent persuaded himself. And so they advanced, though at a slower pace, ready for whatever might present itself. But as they proceeded the tumult about them grew steadily in volume, issuing from every quarters.

They continued in this manner for some time, their ears and hearts continuously assailed by whatever dreadful events were betokened by these soulful laments. Then, breaking through the darkness ahead, a low glimmer of light could just be discerned. Encouraged by the prospect of being released from the gloom which surrounded them, they hastened forward. The low glimmer became a steady glow, which in turn was transformed into a bright golden radiance as they neared its origin. As they drew closer, caution beckoned upon their judgement, and they slowed almost to a halt, carefully scrutinising the area for some clue as to its cause. The full power of this luminescence was not evident until they turned the last corner, and were presented with the root of this effulgence. All had to avert their eyes before the radiance which assaulted them so cruelly. So powerful was it that it seemed to beat upon their bodies, almost forcing them to their knees. The mules protested their pain and fear, braying loudly, and pulling upon their traces, bucking and jumping to either side, in a fruitless attempt to escape this dreadful luminosity. Hurriedly, Erame grabbed the reins of the lead animals, and led them back into the relative darkness behind. But the rest of the party remained where they crouched, desperately trying to distinguish any features of the phenomenon, concealed as it was behind this unforgiving glow. As his eyes adjusted to the glare, Alaste was at last able to make out some of these details. It really was quite extraordinary. He was presented with the prospect of a gigantic maze, carved out of the stone within the cave. Even more astonishingly, the walls of this enormous labyrinth appeared to be composed of gold, or at least of some mineral that greatly resembled it. Yet he had never seen this precious metal glow with such an intensity as it did here. The lustre was of a quality that betrayed an altogether different origin. He screwed up his eyes, desperately seeking to penetrate with his sight into the more distant quarters of the cave and, for a moment, he could have sworn he saw something move, but at the very limit of his scrutiny. But the strain was finally too much, and he was forced to turn his gaze away. The others had gathered at his side, and were attempting equally to penetrate the savage glare with their suffering eyes. But finally, they too were overwhelmed by its power, and were forced to withdraw back into the corridor. "Well. This must be it", commented Celarent. He looked at Erame as he spoke. She seemed to have been successful in quietening the animals, laying some feed upon the floor to distract the poor creatures. The food had served as some diversion, yet their skins still jumped and twitched, betraying the terror still coursing through their bodies. Satisfied that they were sufficiently calmed, she rejoined her friends. "So the land of gold, it would seem?" asked Alaste, addressing his question to either, or both, of the two scholars. "Well...", began Hesvee hesitantly. "Golden certainly. But gold? I've never seen it in that form". He looked at his colleague. Ferioque had reached into the wallet he always carried about his neck, and extracted his copy of the map. He was now examining the symbols upon the yellowing paper employing the residual light, which still issued from the cave.

“There’s no way of telling if this in fact is the place to which the map refers. I was counting on navigating from the original position, and then that would have confirmed our route. But since we’ve arrived from a completely different angle, I can’t be sure. However, it would surely be coincidental to encounter something like this, and for there to be no connection whatsoever to the other indications on this parchment. Anyway, whatever it is, gold or not, we have to investigate. Perhaps we can find out more from a closer examination”. “But how can we do that? The light’s far too bright. We must damage our eyes if we expose our sight for too long”, asked Celarent. “One thing I noticed, though as you say it’s difficult to see clearly, is that the passageways that run through the whole maze, these are considerably darker. If we can enter the structure we might be able to withstand the glare from there”. The others considered his words. “But there’s nowhere to tether the mules. We’ll have to leave someone behind to keep guard on them. Or better still - two people. We don’t know what the source of that noise is, either”, observed Alaste. “I’ll stay behind”, volunteered Erame. “But I want my turn to look as well”, she joked. “Very well. And Celarent, you can stay with her while the rest of us examine the cavern. Don’t worry. We’ll all get a chance to have a good look round, never fear”. Under normal circumstances Celarent might have felt aggrieved at this assignment, but in this case he was more than happy. Both he and Erame retreated up the corridor whilst the others returned to the cave. As they did so Alaste addressed Garuda. “As I said, sir. You’re not obliged to risk yourself upon, what is after all, our adventure”. “No. Not at all, sir. I’m more than happy to join you. I am just as curious as you to investigate this phenomenon. Lead on”. So they four of them re-entered the cavern, to face again the glare of the golden maze.

Melaskkoli lay outstretched upon the ground, his body and mind tormented by the intense craving and fear, which permeated his being. He was quite motionless, a stillness that betrayed nothing of the violence that flooded his body. Gorval, the seer, and iDarii, were similarly resting upon the cave floor, but their forms betrayed nothing of their inner state. Melaskkoli felt that his mind must be close to breaking point. The agony had continued for an eternity, and there surely must be an end to it soon. The light washed over his form, but he was totally unaware of this, so absorbed was he in his own suffering. Occasionally he thought he could hear screaming and shouting, which seemed to float up from the rock beneath; but it might even be that these same tortured screams escaped from his own lips, so confused was his state of mind. In the midst of this agony he felt a touch upon his shoulder. He could barely move his head to one side, but when he finally did he saw Gorval’s eyes staring into his own. “You’re in pain, little one?” asked the Gaki. He blinked, the only response of which he was now capable. “Come. It’s time now. We must cross into the maze”. He felt, rather than saw, their hands reach down towards him, to lift him bodily upwards. Both iDarii and Gorval had placed their arms beneath his armpits, and were supporting him as they half carried, half dragged, his almost senseless body down the shallow slope that led into the pool of light, a whirlpool of staggering incandescence, which flooded the cavern floor. The maze seemed to have completely dissolved into this brilliant fluid. As he was lowered into it it seemed that he felt some easing of the pain, which had possessed him so brutally. As his distress receded so he became aware of his surroundings. The seer was still at their head, leading them deeper into the complex of corridors and runways that constituted this golden lattice. Melaskkoli had recovered sufficiently to carry some of his own weight, though his friends still mostly supported him. As they entered the first corridor the blinding light diminished somewhat in intensity, and the glare became almost bearable. He felt his toes scraping along the ground, and he

struggled to regain his poise, feeling ashamed to have betrayed such weakness. “No, young friend. Struggle not”, iDarii reassured him. Wearing by his fumbling efforts he abandoned these attempts, and gratefully rested in their supporting grasp, now letting himself be carried forward. The seer seemed to know his way well and, without hesitation, plotted their course through the bewildering windings of the warren, drifting ever deeper into its grasp, and heading inexorably towards their destination, wherever that might be.

Upon the other side of the cavern, indeed almost directly opposite to where the Gakis were presently positioned, the small group of humans, too, made their slow, and more uncertain, progress into the maze. Now that they were ensconced firmly within its depths the light had lessened somewhat, and it was just about possible to observe their surroundings, and without the protection of a shading hand. The glare was still quite intense, but not of such a degree that they could not proceed. Ferioque, still at the forefront, carefully examined the walls of the maze, searching always for any sign that might assist them. From this perspective the surfaces of the rock seemed very similar, in most respects, to those of the passageways by which they had descended into this cave; that is, of course, apart from this extraordinary luminescence. They were only a little way advanced within the warren when they heard a shout behind them. All abruptly turned, unsure as to who their pursuer might be, only to see both Erame and Celarent running towards them, the girl in the lead. “What are you doing here, daughter?” asked Alaste, with some heat in his voice. “And you, sir?” as Celarent caught up to stand beside her. They were both panting heavily. “I have to be here, father”, was her reply. “You’re both supposed to be looking after the mules”. “The mules are fine, truthfully, father. They’ve got feed, and they’re not going anywhere. But I must be here”. “MUST! You say. MUST! Indeed daughter! “And MUST I repeat my orders”, he asked, in a scolding tone. It was then he turned his wrath upon Celarent. “And MUST you be here, sir, as well, may I ask?” Celarent was torn between remaining silent, and admitting his guilt, or seeking to defend himself, but at Erame’s cost. “I thought it better to safeguard her rather than the mules, sir”. This was an unassailable argument, which served merely to infuriate her father further. He regarded his recalcitrant offspring with some exasperation before concluding that this was hardly the time or place for debate. “So be it”, he concluded. But Alaste’s expression indicated that the matter was far from over. But there was a curious expression in Erame’s eyes that he had never seen before, and her manner was certainly uncharacteristic. This did not refer to her disobedience for though she was a wilful girl she possessed a keen intelligence, and with a sense of responsibility that more than compensated for youthful exuberance. It was quite unlike her to behave in this fashion; that is, in the ordinary course of events. But then nothing about their present circumstances was ordinary, or mundane. He turned to address Ferioque, who had been waiting patiently nearby. However, Erame wordlessly brushed past both her father and Ferioque, and took the lead, with Garuda following closely, almost upon her heels. They had disappeared quite from view before Alaste and the others had recovered their wits sufficiently, from the impact of this presumptuous act, and began to hasten after the pair. When they caught up again with the recalcitrants they could be seen advancing confidently, as if they knew this place intimately. There was not a sign of hesitation, nor deliberation; it was as if they were both following a hidden path, one which only they could see. Indeed, so brisk a pace did they maintain that the others had difficulty drawing near. In this manner they advanced into the depths of this melange of rock, looking neither to the right nor the left, set straight upon their course, like an arrow to its target. Momentarily, the small party lost sight of their leaders, and all rushed forward

before these could completely vanish from sight. It was with some shock they rounded a corner, and found themselves apparently at the centre of this puzzle. A small, open space appeared before them, and both Erame and Garuda had come to a halt at its centre, awaiting their arrival. "Here father. We're here". She was looking smilingly at Garuda as she spoke. There was a meaning and a depth to her words, which suggested more than that simple statement ostensibly conveyed. Garuda, too, seemed unnaturally calm, as if he was standing within his own home. His face showed no sign of fear now, nor even disquiet, and this despite the bizarre surroundings, which now embraced them. "Yes", he replied. "We're here". "And we must wait", she added quietly. Her tone was low but firm. "Wait for what, my dear?" he enquired. "Just wait, father. Just wait". Alaste looked towards his companions, seeking some guidance from them; but all were as perplexed as he at this strange turn of events. For the time being there seemed to be nothing else for it but to abide by her wishes; besides, now would be a good opportunity to rest. This place was strangely draining upon their energies, and all felt disproportionately tired despite the modest amount of effort they had expended in navigating this maze. While both Erame and Garuda remained standing, the rest settled themselves upon the ground. This was hardly the most comfortable of situations, but at least the light seemed not so oppressive from this particular aspect. But always those invisible calls and cries echoed about them. Yet it really is quite extraordinary how the human psyche can adapt so quickly, and to even the most jarring of experiences. Although those dreadful shrieks still sent shivers of fear into the hearts of those crouching in the maze, nevertheless, the immediate, the almost paralysing horror, which they had felt on first encountering these awful calls, had now diminished considerably. It was not that these could easily be dismissed but, in this strange place, they might be considered to fall within the province of ordinariness.

Time had passed by in its measureless mode when Alaste observed his daughter had grown quite animated. She was standing close to Garuda, their bodies almost touching. Over to one side of this central area there was what appeared to be the continuation of the path, the sole means by which they might leave the maze. Both his daughter's and the stranger's attention now seemed to be directed there. Alaste could not hear anything himself, but something had certainly attracted their attention. Both were poised, as it were, upon their toes, their bodies as if straining at some invisible leash, and eager for the off. Some instinct brought him likewise to his feet and, as he rose, he signed to the others in the party to do similarly. Whatever it was that might be about to transpire, it would be better greeted with readiness than inattention. He was barely upright himself before he was startled to see a dark figure enter their small enclave. Alaste was not able to distinguish the features of the fellow, for the man - if it was, in fact, such a one - was covered from head to foot in a dark cloak, the hood of which completely obscured his face. And then two others appeared, who were similarly attired, and quickly followed in his footsteps. However what had seized his interest the more, was the sight of a youth who they were bearing between them. His face was clearly visible, pale and drawn, and he seemed to be in a great deal of pain. This second small group was followed, in turn, by two other individuals, both of whom bore a long sword apiece, which they brandished menacingly in outstretched arms. At the sight of these Alaste and the others took a step backwards, fearing what these attackers might be bent upon. Only Erame and Garuda stood their ground, their faces betraying no sign of alarm. It was difficult to tell who might be the more fearful. None of the cloaked figures presented any clue as to their feelings on meeting this small party of humans. However, their leader, on witnessing the humans'

reaction, quickly turned towards the two attendant warriors, and ordered them to lower their weapons. This they did, though with a deal of hesitancy and reluctance. The two fellows who had been bearing their young human charge placed him gently upon the floor. Much to Alaste's consternation, Erame, quite unbidden, drew near to the youngster, and knelt by his side. No one from either party made any attempt to obstruct her. She examined the youngster intently before turning towards Garuda. "He's in great pain. It must be close now". Garuda nodded, but remained wordless. Alaste had recovered sufficiently from his surprise to approach his daughter, all the while eyeing their recent visitors. "Tell me, daughter. What's happening here?" She looked at him, but momentarily it was as if she did not see him at all. "I'm not sure father. I can't say. There's some kind of link between him and us. I mean myself and Garuda. Some meaning to our meeting here in this place. It is holy to these people, but how I know..." and at this she shrugged, unable to explain further. The screaming and crying seemed to be growing louder and nearer. Hesvee, Ferioque and Celarent were gathered together, in a tight cluster, just behind him. On the other side of this small ring stood the huddle of darkly draped strangers, with the young lad lying before them upon the ground. Almost directly between these two groups stood Alaste and Garuda.

A timeless moment passed. It might have been his imagination but it seemed to Alaste that the radiance, which glittered all about them, was increasing yet again in strength. As it grew brighter and brighter, and all the more painful, he was again forced to raise his hands to his eyes, to shield them from the glare. And as the radiant intensity increased, so, it seemed, did the groans and howling heighten in their volume, as if synchronised to that measure. These exclamations now seemingly emanated from the very body of the earth itself. It was then, as if the agony could not increase further, that something rose from beneath their feet. It had the semblance of a mist, and yet here and there, thought Alaste, he could distinguish individual forms, strange figures and outlines, swirling around within this miasmatic vortex. The fog rose higher and higher, as it rushed about the small band of creatures huddled within the bosom of the Cave of Light. Celarent, Hesvee and Ferioque remained frozen in silence, struck dumb by the scenes which they were witnessing. The vapour itself seemed to be the source from which these cries emitted. Alaste saw occasionally a strange form appear, as the mist coalesced briefly into a figure, before it was again absorbed back into the greyish black fog. Startling images disported themselves before his eyes, with gossamer pale bodies and great distended bellies, and grotesquely elongated limbs which flailed about them in the murk. Here and there a bizarre countenance would emerge from the nightmare, with great dark staring eyes which seemed to draw him helplessly into their glowing depths. He drew back in horror, but there was nowhere to take refuge. They were surrounded upon all sides by this swelling tide. As it rose above their heads Alaste noticed, for the first time, a strange transformation in both his daughter and Garuda. The golden light, which had infused the cave, seemed now to have imparted itself to their bodies; firstly to their faces and limbs, and then about the residue of their forms. Their clothes, as well, had taken on a patina of that same tone, and with every moment this lustre grew in strength. So bright was the light that he found it almost impossible to descry his beloved daughter's face. Garuda, too, had undergone the same changes. He tried to go to his daughter's aid, fearful for her well-being, but he was rooted to the spot, by a force of unknown provenance, preventing even this slight movement. The mist had risen now to the heights of the cave. It had also taken on some of the characteristics of its surroundings, and its tones had transformed from their previous

sombre colours to a growing golden bloom. As the first vapours touched upon the roof of the cavern it seemed that the rock itself had become translucent, merging imperceptibly into the lifting fogs below. Soon this golden opacity grew brighter and lighter, and it was almost as if the vast granite mountaintop itself was dissolving into a radiant energy. The vapours rose upwards and upwards until Alaste thought he could see the open skies above their heads. As the great rock strata disappeared into the light, and the skies opened up above them, this seemed to send the vapour into an intense excitation. A great volume of this haze flooded into the Cave, and absorbed the light which dwelt there, before exhaling its body into the space above. Now it was like a whirlwind, drawing higher and higher into the upper atmosphere, sucking up the entire Gaki race – for that was what these ghostly forms were - into a vast, twisting column, which ascended to the edges of space itself. Both Erame and Garuda had now disappeared into a mass of golden flames, their bodies seemingly burning furiously within this inferno. Alaste could not be sure but he believed he caught sight, amongst the raging fires, of a pair of great golden wings sprouting, as it were, from each of their backs, thus transforming them into creatures of the air. Distantly he heard a voice calling to him through the maelstrom. “From beneath to above, father. From beneath to above. Fare ye well”. As these words echoed in his ears he could see their two forms lifting gently from the ground, to float within the glowing storm, and then rising higher still to follow the course of the whirlwind, as it bore the Gaki into the heavens. He looked downwards towards his own body to see its dissolution, his form and outline breaking down, and gradually merging with the vapours that surrounded him. The same phenomena were occurring with his comrades, and with the strangers nearby. They, too, were disappearing, even as he watched. Their clear outlines were transmuting into a vague and shimmering boundary, which faded and fused with the mist that saturated their forms. There was no pain, and no fear within his heart; just a powerful sense of liberation, and a jolt of freedom, which surged through his breast, and filled his mind with a calm he had not experienced in many a year. His whole being was filled with a sense of lightness, which seemed even to communicate itself to his physical mass. He could feel himself beginning to rise effortlessly into the air, floating higher and higher, to breach the now diaphanous mountain peak, until he flew far above the land. In every direction he could see the territory of the surface dwellers as it extended to the far and faint horizons. There, upon one side, the Northern mountains marched across the landscape, their snowy peaks and razor back ridges crouched over the desert plains, which faded away into the southern lands. As his body melted so did his thoughts; finally, Alaste too, had vanished from this world, and both humans and Gaki now merged into those great columns of light, which climbed into the heavens, and then higher still, into the far beyond. Across the lands and beyond the seas the surface people watched in terrified fascination, as these great towers rose from beneath the earth. Across every continent, and from the oceans themselves they thrust forth, while the land beneath reflected their bright aura. Men and women and children, even animals, huddled together for comfort, horrified by what these sights might portend. For one long day and one long night the columns floated above the land, bearing their mysterious message to the stars, and even to the final void.

Now the Cave of Light had returned to darkness. The walls and ceilings, the twists and turns of the labyrinth, all rested in a numbed sombreness. Far beneath, the cities of the Gaki too, lay in gloom, with only the softened red embers of the dying fires left to illuminate the scene. Not a soul remained here, not in the caverns or caves, nor the rocky

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underground paths; nothing of this once great people. The towers of light gradually dimmed beneath the cooling sun, and vanished from the skies, and the people returned to the ordinary round of their lives. But the stories of those times were passed down through the millennia, generation by generation, of those dreadful days, and of the terrible sights that had been witnessed.

The gods had spoken, and made known their presence.....