

Prologue

In the folklore of all continents there is found a memory of the ancient land that sank beneath the waves and of a righteous survivor. The Babylonians called him Ziusudra or Xisuthras, son of Oliartes. The Chinese called him Yao or Fo-Hi. The Indians call him Satyavatra, the sun-born monarch. The Greeks and Egyptians called him Atlas, eldest son of Clieto and Poseidon. Others called him Prometheus, Deucalion, Heuth, Incachus, Osiris, Dagon.

Many would say that these are parallel accounts, arising from similar but not identical sources; whether those sources are ancient story telling traditions, moralistic myths or historical events. Anthropologists might call this an analogous phenomenon: many similar instances of a story genre arising from many analogous origins. Others would say that the traditions must share a common lineage: either a set of similar flood-survival events experienced around the world during a time of great global inundation, such as the drawing to a close of the last great ice age approximately 10,000 years ago, or in the extreme, a single flood survival event, experienced before the dispersion of modern humans across the globe. This is what anthropologists might call a homologous folkloric tradition: many diverse versions shaped by a single source.

Among those tending to interpret the many flood stories as homologous are traditionalists within the three great Semitic religions: in order or appearance, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Among these three faiths, scholars have long been fascinated by the idea of identifying an actual geographical location for the resting place of a wooden ship supposedly built by the man we know as Noah (the revered prophet Nooh in Islam).

Since the historical or anthropological significance of this global ancient story is also thickly overlain with religious significance, the search for the Ark has been conducted with passion, often by extremists, and ironically (since all three of these religions are supposed to be concerned with truth), with not a small degree of bias. Of course, there is bound to be disagreement when religion is involved.

It is not at all far fetched to suppose that for some at their respective extremes of various belief spectra, those disagreements may mingle with other dimensions of fanaticism to fuel extreme and hostile actions...

“There is above the country of Minyas in Armenia a great mountain called Baris, where, the story goes, many refugees found safety at the time of the flood, and one man, transported upon an ark, grounded upon the summit; and relics of the timber were for long preserved; this might well be the same man of whom Moses, the Jewish legislator, wrote.”

(Nicholas of Damascus, quoted by the Jewish historian Josephus sometime between 37 and 100 AD)

“El Judi is a mountain in the country of Masur, and extends to Jezirah Ibn ‘Omar which belongs to the territory of el-Mausil. This mountain is eight farsangs [about 32 miles] from the Tigris. The place where the ship stopped, which is on top of this mountain, is still to be seen.”

(Al-Mas’udi, Muslim historian, writing in 956 AD)

“We flew down as close as safety permitted and took several circles around it. We were surprised when we got close to it, at the immense size of the thing, for it was as long as a city block, and would compare very favorably in size to the modern battleships of today. It was grounded on the shore of the lake, with one-fourth underwater. It had been partly dismantled on one side near the front, and on the other side there was a great doorway nearly twenty feet square, but with the other door gone. This seemed quite out of proportion, as even today, ships seldom have doors even half that large...”
(Alleged quote from Lieutenant Roskovitsky of the Russian Imperial Air Force, 1916, published in the New Eden Magazine, California, 1939)

“During the month of July, 1951 a team of Russian experts, were surveying the valley of Kaat. Perhaps they were busy in finding out a new mine. They noticed a few pieces of rotten wood ...They excavated the place with deep interest...(and found) quite a good amount of wood and many other things. They also found a long rectangular wooden plate... measuring 14” by 10”... Seven experts after eight months of research came to the conclusion that this plate was of the wood used in making Nooh’s Ark and that the Prophet Nooh had put this plate on his Ark for the safety of the Ark and for receiving favour of Allah. In the centre of the plate, there is a drawing of palm shape on which some words of ancient Saamaani language are written....The plate is still preserved at the Centre of Fossils Research, Moscow, Russia.”
(From a pamphlet published in December 1961 by Hakeem Syed Mahmood Gilani, professor at Osmania University, India and allegedly reported in the London Weekly-Mirror January 1954; Bathrah Najaf: Iraq, February 1954; and other newspapers.)

In the year 2000, while some are breathing sighs of relief at the safe passing of the Millennial celebrations, a sense of disquiet is rising in the intelligence agencies of the West. It would be wrong to call it organisational panic, for the cogs of the bureaucracies turn too slowly for that. But many of the more insightful are worried – very worried. Their awareness of an emerging new security risk – it cannot not yet be called an understanding - is growing by the day. It is fed by reports of mobile phone traffic, money transfers and people movements and a new style of intelligence that they all find so difficult to evaluate – political, financial, socio-linguistic, theological and behavioural profiling of many disparate groups of extremists. The data reveal the existence of hitherto unacknowledged and unmapped networks of grass-roots fundamentalist groups with pretensions at international terrorism. That is the problem. They are organised but not organised. ‘Self-organising’, the technical experts call it. Spontaneous; bottom up; complex-adaptive behaviour. Like ants. But unlike ant colonies, not dense with activity and easily spotted, but spread widely and sparsely. Strong through diversity; resilient through decentralisation; deadly and infectious through compellingly contagious ideas. It is as though a rising sun of religious fervour has concentrated the melanin of the body-Islamic and all of a sudden a rash of malignancies has simultaneously broken out. Lying dormant for years, they have sprung to aggressive life, invisibly and spontaneously reproducing through unseen and incomprehensible connections and threatening havoc not only to their hosts, but more particularly to their enemies.

Caught unawares at the turn of the Millennium by the surprise onset of a new security landscape that some are calling ‘the new Cold War’, security agencies are slowly and reluctantly realigning their resource deployments to mine the overwhelming flood of

chaotic data; identify patterns; and develop credible analysis and counter-terrorism strategies. Rumours abound in the year 2000: one in particular – of an imminent massive and audacious hit. But it is only one amongst many and it is impossible to distinguish the components of one rumour from those of many others. This means that the intelligence response looks as fragmented as the phenomenon it is trying to track. But slowly and surely, some patterns have started to emerge. A few are old patterns that are already on file and have been taken out, dusted-off and examined afresh.

One in particular goes back a very long way...

PART I: The Preparation

Chapter 1

January 1950 South-west Turkey

The two young men stand like ancient seafarers on white steps roughly carved out of rock and leading down to an old stone quay. They are looking out to sea and scanning the narrow gulf for signs of a boat. They don't know what kind of boat. He hasn't told them that. Only the day and the place and the flag it will be flying. It has taken them the best part of a month to make their way by foot, donkey carts and for one grateful day, a motorised logger's truck, from the eastern border of Turkey to the Aegean coast. Now they are here. A fisherman they met in the town of Mugla, half a day's mule ride away and where they had spent the previous night, offered to guide them down from the mountain plateau to the ruins of the ancient harbour. *Roman*, he had confided with pride. They found it hidden amongst the pine trees to one side of a tiny fishing village that he called Akyaka – meaning *white*.

White. Pure. Most fitting.

The original port, the fisherman said, had been destroyed by an earthquake centuries ago; now the only vessels moored to the ancient granite blocks are a few old fishing boats. It looks less than a mile across the Gulf of Gokova, but distances are deceptive as dusk approaches. With the sun already sunk behind the high mountain they have just descended, the water is merging into the darkening shadows of the low-forested hills on the other side. Somewhere over there perhaps, the boat is waiting. *It will have to be bigger than these tiny craft to carry us safely to our destination.*

The taller of the two, wrapped in a roughly woven cloak against the January chill, his proud and handsome young face framed in a white head-dress made of a softer fabric, turns as he catches the distant sound of their guide's mule-cart clip-clopping back up the mountain path. He catches a breath of wind carrying the menthol scent of pine mixed with eucalyptus and laced with just a hint of mountain sage. He breathes deeply. Eyes closed, facial muscles relaxed, he nods in slow motion, as though settling some great matter.

The guide had not accepted payment. His service had been offered gladly because although his passenger is young – still in his teens – his reputation has spread far. He is a holy fighter. But not just any. He is a holy man first and a fighter second. Most unusual. Already a leader in the resistance movement some say. The guide might have guessed that the visitors to his hidden harbour are on their way to the newly occupied Palestine. Or he may have believed them to be touring his country's coastal cities preaching the young seer's strange and potent blend of devotion and militancy.

When the seer turns back towards the sea, scanning with sharp eyes of striking turquoise, the boat is there. A heavy looking wooden gulet with three sails of brown canvas has slipped silently into view – perhaps it had been moored in the next bay. Or perhaps it had been there all along, camouflaged by the shifting shadows of the light waves. It is making its way towards them. His friend sees it at the same time and they grip each other's arms in unspoken solidarity then instinctively utter quiet prayers of thanks.

Neither of them has executed a man in cold blood before.

It will be different from killing at a distance, as they both have done alongside the Palestinians. The idea of a symbolic killing is surely more acceptable than ritualistic killing. He has had a problem with that for a while. But now that he has put a line between the two ideas he has a peace about it.

In a way, all death is symbolic. Has not the one who gives breath drawn a line in the life of a man after which it will be taken away? Why could life not have gone on for a hundred and fifty years? Or more. It is a judgement. A mercy even, given men's propensity to go the way of impurity. So if it is the will of Allah to curtail the human span for his own purposes, why should he not ask one of his faithful to execute his will. *To execute*. And why should the righteous object? He knows it is wrong to doubt. It will be easy. All that Allah has ever asked him to do has been easy. There is always the strength to accompany the task. *And have we two brothers not lived since the day our mother stopped suckling us, under the daily discipline of only doing what the Holy One asks?*

They had not chosen this way. It had been chosen for them. Who knows where it will lead. For now, all they know is that they have important people to meet and a job to do. First in Palestine and then in Tehran.

For a moment, he lets his gaze dwell on the gathering darkness within the bay but finds himself disturbed by the grey opaqueness of the sea. A flicker of doubt again, quickly suppressed. He looks to the west where a few remaining gilded lines edge ribbons of sky that are still bright blue. Like the golden-blue universe hidden in the eyes of an Afghan fighter he once lifted half dead from a wadi floor. His thoughts drift to the many millions of people much farther west than where he stands, upon whom the sun is still shining from its zenith.

It will not shine on you for very much longer. When it comes, night will draw in rapidly.

With a revived sense of certainty and purposeful symbolism, he turns his back on the infidelic millions, moving a step or two so he has a clearer view eastwards, beyond the giant eucalyptus trees bordering the old harbour. The wide valley that feeds its rivers into the sea here, is flanked by mountains that are now only discernible in partial silhouette. Just below the crescented moon, one snow-capped peak has the symmetrically convex profile of a volcano, and he tries to imagine the Anatolian Peninsula being shaped and reshaped by cataclysmic events. He imagines his home several hundreds of miles beyond the horizon and he thinks of the power of Allah to create and to destroy.

At the Day of Judgement, will he willingly submit when the end comes? Will he raise his hands in welcome submission as Allah's terrible devastation comes upon him? He knows that he will. Couldn't be more certain of it as his heart wells up inside him. It is as though he is not only being asked to submit to the inevitability of Judgement Day but to share in its divine purpose. He finds himself breathing quickly, eyes moistening as his spirit is caught up in a quiet ecstasy that is now his frequent companion. As he turns to his friend he finds himself muttering his own version of Hafiz, one of his beloved Persian poems:

Why do preachers commend penitence when they seem so disinclined to repentance? Possibly they think no Judgement Day will visit them and no judge punish them for their fraudulence.

“They will be judged brother.” His friend says, touching his arm gently, understanding his mood perfectly. “They will all be judged.”

As they turn in unison towards the approaching boat he knows with utter conviction what he must do. The brothers who have tried to dissuade him from his present mission are misguided. What would they think of the bigger purpose he has just silently committed to? He has not seen it quite so clearly before. But now that he knows what he must give the rest of his life to he realises that he has known all along: even these, his brothers, belong to the fraudulent preachers. He will make his path without them. With them, but separated. Set apart. It is what ‘holy’ means.

Then as they step onto the granite quay to await a tiny rowing boat now making its way toward them, he stops, arrested by another profound and life-changing thought. Perhaps it *is* a ritual killing after all. Like the prophet Ibrahim preparing to offer up his son Ishmael. And the animal that he bled in his son’s place. Is not Eid ul-Adha a ritual killing ordained by Allah himself? Then another thought re-triggers his elation. Allah had used no human intervention at the time of Noah. Surely the great Flood was a ritual too was it not? A wiping clean and starting again? Purely divine. Awesome in its scale and majesty. He looks at the blackness of the sea again and this time feels no unease, only a sense of oneness with the Divine Judge.

Chapter 2

***Forty-four years later
April 1994
New Orleans, USA***

There are four of them seated around the oval end of a long boardroom table. At the head sits a tall and lean man with the handsome features of a high caste Indian or Central Asian nobleman and eyes of startlingly deep turquoise-green that are surveying the little group with what could be mild amusement. He has the alertness and bearing of someone not yet past the prime of life, but the sagging tanned skin at the base of his neck, visible above a collarless shirt of fine white linen, suggests he could be considerably older.

To those familiar with the Middle East, he speaks with the gently rounded soft consonants of an Iranian. The Persian linguist in the CIA's National Clandestine Service who listened in on a fragment of phone conversation a few days earlier had thought she heard hints of a highly palatalised West Iranian dialect. It could have been the Dimili dialect common in eastern Turkey, but there again there was something quite Gilaki about it - from quite a different area altogether, near the Caspian Sea. She had been puzzled, but the fragment, which had been intercepted on a Belgian network, had been so short it was not worth transcribing.

To the untrained ear, however, the Iranian's English is impeccable. To his left sits an American of similar build but younger and with much less handsome features made weaker by a large moustache and glasses too big for him. The American shifts in his chair uneasily, eyes fixed on a stapled sheaf of papers placed on the table in front of him. To the right of the Iranian sits a man and then a woman both in their early thirties. The man is wearing a tight fitting tee shirt under an expensive suit. He is thin but muscular with a shock of thick fair hair and has just spoken, using a cultured Russian accent. In one hand he holds a cigarette between his forefinger and thumb and with the other he grips his copy of the report that sits in front of each of them. His gaze follows a trail of cigarette smoke spiralling upwards toward the giant wooden fan that revolves slowly in the room's high ceiling. The woman is a less healthy specimen altogether, with a pale face pockmarked with scarring and framed by thin mouse brown hair. Her grey eyes are sunken, hardened and distanced, and they are locked on the Iranian's hands as they move in carefully controlled circles on the richly polished tabletop. At the brief introductions - hers was monosyllabic - she had spoken like an American but with the hint of a European accent. The begrudged exchanges had been at the invitation of the Iranian and now he is speaking again.

"Gentlemen." Then turning with an affected bow of the head, "And ladies. I think we all know why this meeting was necessary."

There is a pause while his hands each make a single circle in opposite directions.

"I am honoured to be your host and grateful that you have made such an effort to oblige each other. We shall not be more than half an hour at most and then, Insha'Allah, you may return to your various, ah, responsibilities."

He speaks slowly with precision and looks at each in turn. Only the Russian refuses to return eye contact.

The Iranian has made only the smallest acknowledgement of the distances they have come. He himself has travelled over the previous three days from Singapore with a flight to Paris Charles de Gaulle; train to Brussels and a short flight from Brussels to London's Stanstead Airport. From there he had taken two trains and a black cab to London Heathrow and flown to New Orleans with a connection at Chicago O'Hare. The Russian's journey has been no less circuitous, starting in Moscow and arriving in Louisiana via Madrid, Argentina and Mexico. The woman has flown in that morning from LAX - Los Angeles' International Airport - and the American with the moustache, who has had the shortest journey of them all, has driven down the day before from Chattanooga, Tennessee. It is he who has organised the venue – the clubhouse of a luxurious golfing resort at a place called English Turn, named after a decisive battle in the War of Independence. For some in the meeting, the location has ironic significance.

“We have all read our friend's report.” The Iranian gives a slight wave towards the American with oversized glasses, although he is still looking at the Russian as though willing his attention. “It is intriguing I think – I hope to everyone's approval?”

The American is the first to respond.

“May we know *anything* about the origin?” The issue has clearly been raised on some previous occasion.

The Russian carefully lowers his gaze from the ceiling to look first at the Iranian and then, with obvious contempt, at the questioner.

“The trade embargo doesn't stretch to pieces of stone. There are many corrupt officials in Saddam's cultural bureau.”

The Russian's pronunciation of 'bureau' has a touch of upper class, indicating, either a good English boarding school or mimicry of BBC radio presenters.

“An unprotected site in Southern Iraq? Do we know which?” The American with the glasses again.

The Russian only lifts an eyebrow.

“But it's been immersed in sea water for a very long time. Look at paragraph 23.” The American flips over a couple of sheets, takes off his glasses and scans the page holding it so close to his face that it looks as if he might be trying to smell the salt.

The Russian shrugs as if the matter doesn't interest him.

“But it is authenticated to your satisfaction I think?” The Iranian speaks, tilting his head slightly for the American's confirmation.

The American nods, putting his glasses back on, slamming the report onto the table and, then as if reconsidering something, shifting it 45 degrees. “All the characteristics of the earliest cuneiform script but with some unaccountable differences compared to the best known examples.”

“Dated.” The Russian is now sitting forward, apparently moving into business mode. It is a question but comes out like a threat.

“Its all here” says the American, awkwardly fumbling his way to the middle of the report and flattening the central fold to keep it open. “Three different methods giving an average of approximately...” and he looks up nervously, “6,000 years”

A silence follows in which each of the four seem to be calculating the significance of this information to their own particular interests.

“It’s impossible,” says the Russian at last. “but his results match ours. A Japanese and a Moscow lab came up with the same.”

There is another long silence and the Russian resumes his interest in the ceiling fan while the others leaf through the report.

Eventually the Iranian folds his hands in a priestly gesture and looks slowly at each of his guests as if inviting dissention. Then staring down the long table to a golfer on a green outside, golf club raised above his head, says:

“Then the deal is struck?”

Immediately he turns and looks directly at the woman.

Her lips are pursed and she is staring to one side of him where one of two immaculate American flags of heavy cloth and elaborate white rope-work regale the darkly panelled walls. The second flag is on the other side of the Iranian, giving him the appearance of some senior Washington official or perhaps a past American president in a waxwork museum.

Awkwardly, she shifts a fraction in her seat so that her back is partially turned to the Russian although she is still looking past him at the Iranian. She glances at the American opposite her for a brief moment in what could be unspoken communication and then nods to the Iranian:

“Deal” she whispers. Then coughs nervously.

Chapter 3

***Six years later.
April 2000
London, England***

The pyramidal tip of London Dockland's Canary Wharf Tower peaks through a thick blanket of toxic yellow smog. Metropolitan icons from the 1990s and 50s embracing in a prophetic photo opportunity.

Sitting transfixed by the photograph in the newspaper cutting is a woman with unusual eyes. Like many Asians, they are monolids, with the skin curving in gentle concavity from the ridge of the brows to the lashes without a fold. The lashes themselves, dark and strong, ride on a part of the eyelids completely concealed by a delicately sculptured almond-arch of a hood, its taut curvature formed by the resolution of opposing hidden forces like the geometry of a suspension bridge. But it is the way the fold of the hoods curve down towards the inner corners of the eyes that causes young girls to stare in awe and old gentlemen to find an excuse to look again. Each side of the nose, the stretched skin of the upper lid overlaps the lower lid to form two distinctive epicanthal folds: the beaks of two birds of prey, facing each other, bowing.

And behind the wonder of these protruding curtains of delicate flesh, large ebony eyes dark enough not to be able to distinguish iris from pupil. Cassy Kim has achingly beautiful eyes, which are currently registering a deep vulnerability as she stares at the old newspaper picture that she has retrieved for reasons that are still confusing to her.

It is history after all - torn from a newspaper on February 11, 1996, the day after an Irish Republican Army terrorist's bomb had torn the building's shiny glass city-suit into a million razor-sharp fragments. The journalist had cleverly captioned it '*Canary Wharf Air*'.

Next to the cutting lies another. It too, displays a photo; grainy and more faded than the first for it was taken almost half a century earlier - in another capital city, three thousand miles to the east of London. History too - even more so. But its violence is more personal and more menacing. The figures are indistinct in the half darkness but Cassy has been able to make out three of them. One is turbaned and dressed in the sort of pantaloon suit worn by peasantry from Malaysia to Morocco. The other two are wearing some kind of uniform with ridiculously large peaked hats. They are standing around something that looks as though it might be a sack of potatoes but on closer inspection is a rather more gruesome object. It could be a decapitated body if it weren't for the unnatural position of the arms and the peculiar way the top of the head seems to emerge from the neck. It had taken a long time before she had worked out what it was. The troops of the 40th Soviet Army who spearheaded the 1978 invasion of Afghanistan had nicknamed it *the Afghan-sweater* and it was one of the reasons why terrified Moscow teenagers had deserted in thousands from the front line fight against the Mujahedeen. A single cut, a ruthless tear and a man was left to suffocate under the skin of his own torso. The body is lying on a bed under a framed portrait. He had died under the watchful eye of an American President.

Cassy switches her gaze to study a set of distorted miniatures of the two newspaper cuttings, arranged like a magician's set of cards in the chrome of her brand new retro-toaster. Facsimiles are often more revealing. In the world of forensics, Cassy Kim knows that real things give you the detail but abstractions make for better reflection.

She reflects as the toaster smokes, then hits the eject and shifts position a fraction to get a sharper image of herself in the middle of the magician's cards. She moves aside an uneven thick black fringe that she wears to hide those eyes, revealing a white dressing with a line of red seeping through in a pattern that indicates it is covering a wound secured by five medical stitches. The surrounding bruise is a little less obvious than in her bathroom mirror and the image slightly more complimentary, but not much.

"Bastards" she mutters, in a soft but throaty, almost baritone voice.

The imprecation is not so much at the people responsible for the wound as at the whole set of unwelcome events that the incident represents. Scruffing the fringe back into place as if to signal an intention to withdraw from those events, and then for reassurance, running a hand up the short crop of her neck, she smiles. Her improbably mute Albanian hairdresser had surprised her with the oddly-angled cut: longer at the front than the back. 'From the rear', the Albanian's larger than life partner had told her, "the cut makes you look like an oh so handsome schoolboy!" And he had fondled her nape tellingly as he admired his partner's creation.

From the front, she notes, looking at her reflection in the toaster, she looks anything but a schoolboy. For, sitting on her own in the kitchen of her London house in the manner that is her habit, there is on her body, not a stitch of clothing.

The head wound had been sustained on the way to the lab. The car had suddenly accelerated from behind and swerved sharply left in one calculated movement.

That was over a week ago and Cassy Kim is still unnerved. It is now Sunday morning and she is comforting herself with burnt toast smothered in butter. It has to be almost black. One of her lovers, she can't recall which, had told her it was because she takes everything to extremes.

Choral singing has just given way to a radio news bulletin. The singing is more than background noise for company – she has long been addicted to pre-classical European sacred music. A daily fix seems to anchor something in her otherwise unruly soul. Now she reaches forward to turn up the volume.

"...a group calling itself the Human Extinction Front yesterday claimed responsibility for releasing a canister of oestrogen-rich chemicals into the Hamburg water supply. In a note sent to a German newspaper the HEF claims to have been experimenting with fertility-reducing compounds for the past fifteen years."

Experiments on the public. Fifteen years. Cassy turns the volume up a bit more.

"A spokesman for the Hamburg police said that a woman in her twenties, thought to be a student at a London university, had been taken into custody."

Cassy munches on a corner of carbon and ponders a world with only a handful of survivors. The idea conjures surreal images. The notion of starting again appeals. Who wouldn't want to start again? She looks across the room to the only photo she has of the disturbed teenage girl who has so dominated her life. Next to it is another

trophy to failure: Zach, the man who had been her lover then briefly her husband. In her mind, she imagines the record of her accomplishments extending, with photos of too many partners to count, filling the gap since Zach. Or filling the gap that has forever been her secret handicap. A fresh start for a tired planet? The kettle clicks itself off and a cloud of steam becomes a low mist hovering above primeval rain forests of the future - on pristine islands of a new Southern Ocean. She wonders what it would be like to step deafened over the brow of a hill, to be the first human to peer into the abyss of the mighty Victoria Falls of a new era.

Whichever way you look at it, terracide, as the eco-terrorists call it, can't justify genocide.

Chapter 4

Leytonstone, East London and Manhattan, New York April 2000

Two suited men are leaning over a very worn balustrade, one positioned on the stair above the other, looking down onto a scene that hasn't changed for 150 years. Only the dress, conversation and music has changed. The faces definitely not, and the character types they have been having a game with would have been recognisable to any social diarist, journalist or policeman in the era that the Victorian corner pub was built. It is jazz night in The Cricketers and the tiny odd-shaped lounge is full to standing room with those in the know from all walks of life, colour, creed, age and sexuality, so much so that the late comers have had to gather up the stairs that once led to the establishment's second business. You could tell by the grand open-plan oak stairway and the quality of the doors and panelling, that the five bedrooms off the small upstairs landing were made for customers, not for the pub's staff.

The rather distinguished silver haired gentleman with intelligent features standing on the higher of the stairs is named Hugo and if he had a counterpart in the equivalent scene 150 years ago, it would have been perhaps, someone high up in the Admiralty. Hugo has just rushed in by cab from a late meeting in MI6 headquarters in Central London.

Brushing away the froth on his mouth from the pint of IPA Best Bitter he has quickly downed, and picking up his wet umbrella that has been hooked on an old gas-light fitting, he takes a step down to the same level as his companion and leans into his ear against the discordant din.

“One more thing about this whole affair Nigel. You've got to make it work with her. We'll never get another chance like it. Think knighthoods on retirement. For me if not for you. Whatever's going on out there, and I'm not joking when I say it's big – big enough to change things for ever – this network's our USP. The Yanks know all there is to know and more about Bin Laden's lot – more about what he's doing over here than we bloody do. This one's going to be ours. And if we've got it right, it's a lot more dangerous. See what you can do eh?”

With this, he trots sprightly down a couple of stairs, stops, turns and steps back up to cup a hand against Nigel's ear again:

“Next time, check your sources please before calling me out of a meeting with the minister. It's not the first time you've given me an urgent call and then been stood up by one of your stooges.”

“Sorry I'm a little late Dr. Kim. What in Heaven's name did you do to your forehead?”

Cassy grimaces, instinctively touching the bruising around the scar and equally instinctively retaliating:

“You don’t look brilliant yourself”.

She did not sleep on the overnight flight from London Heathrow to New York’s Newark airport but has become unusually alert sitting waiting at the little Italian bistro tucked into a basement on East 57th Street next to the day-care centre for dogs. Nigel Buchanan, a sandy-haired Englishman, in his early forties and a public school type, gives out cards identifying him as a British Council official. He also works for MI5 - Britain’s domestic intelligence agency - and it is the second time in a month they have met in Manhattan like this. When he has settled into the privacy of the corner table that Cassy has selected, he leans forward, clasps his ginger-coloured hands together and whispers:

“We’re borrowing you for intellect – brains and attention to detail - not to get involved in the rough and tumble!”

The skin on his hands is dry and freckled – I bet he had eczema when he was a child.

“Thanks for the compliment” she sniffs “but how do you know I didn’t fall off a ladder doing DIY?”

“Because you’ve probably never hung a roll of wall-paper in your life.” Nigel retorts jovially while taking his jacket off and hanging it on the back of his seat. The dry hands are extending from double cuffs turned back and fastened with non-matching links.

He travels to the East. The Jade cufflink is from Northern Burma; the other is high-grade Korean amethyst.

It is true. His dossier is thorough.

“And because your friends say you’re out of sorts”, he adds, settling himself into the bistro chair and folding his hands neatly together again on the table. “Whatever’s bugging you, you’re not covering it up very well Dr Kim.”

“What friends?” Cassy snaps suspiciously. She can’t think of many friends at the moment who would be in a position to offer that kind of report. She thinks of the almost one-night-stand she’d had after a disastrous party last weekend and wonders if Nigel had anything to do with it.

“So what happened?” He says, softening and looking her in the eye.

She does her usual thing when someone tries this on and squints to the point of closure. A huntswoman withdrawing into a concealed place observing a dangerous quarry.

In terse, to-the-point sentences she tells him about the car. It had been stalking her for some time. Once, about a month earlier, as she had pulled out of the garage at the rear of her Victorian terraced house into the small alley, it had been there at the end of the lane. She had sworn, instinctively slammed into reverse, accelerated backwards out of the lane and sped away into the London traffic. A week later she had been driving to her university office in central London and noticed an old white Volvo in her rear-view mirror. It had stayed with her for most of the journey then disappeared.

She had thought she knew why the car was stalking her. It had to be to do with the tapes.

Just before Christmas her house had been done over with the thoroughness of a Customs and Excise rummage team. Whoever did it had let themselves in with no

sign of forced entry and left with only two ancient reel-to-reel computer tapes stored in scratched plastic covers plastered with faded sticky labels from the days before floppy and hard disk drives. They were given to her by her doctoral teacher in Cornell and contained novel research data of no great commercial value. Only they didn't only contain her teacher's research data. Hidden away amongst the old data, they also contained a very unusual and very valuable script of computer code. Why had she stored such a valuable piece of work on a computer tape stored on a bookshelf in her living room? Well she had to store the original programme and data trials somewhere. What is safer than the obvious?

When the car hit her instead of whisking her off to be interrogated, her world had plunged into confusion. She had been preparing herself for the worst, but it hadn't come.

Then there is the MI5 contract she has recently signed – technical 'experts' sign them all the time she had told herself - but there was something missing from it. A Berkeley economics professor called Williamson she had once met at a cocktail reception in LA – she can't remember his first name - had told her that all contracts are incomplete. "What counts is how you manage the resulting ambiguity", he had pronounced. She is now struggling with that - majorly.

Perhaps Her Majesty's men are softening me up. After all, although it was a deliberate hit and run, on reflection, it was a controlled bump.

She had not quite seen it like that before. She re-runs her memory of the white Volvo, reinterpreting and nods, recalling how exactly the car impacted her.

Cassy has come to New York hoping that her conversation with Nigel Buchanan might make things a little less messy. She has come to clear up the ambiguity but her thoughts make her even more confused. She senses a new reason to fear.

What do you really want from me Mr Buchanan?

She looks up at Buchanan expecting an answer. Instead, his response is to quiz her on which of her recent cases at Scotland Yard might have won her enemies.

He has seen her CV. He has interviewed her on it. He had asked why she took up the part time forensic position at Scotland Yard and he seemed to believe her. Said he was beginning to understand her. She had believed his sincerity then. Even warmed to him. And now, again, she finds him convincing. She closely observes his eyes, his minor facial muscles and his hands as he speaks. She is good at this and concludes that he is genuine on this subject at least: he knew nothing about the Volvo incident before she mentioned it.

Once she has made this conclusion she switches her thoughts to the real purpose of the meeting – a breakfast appointment the next day with a man she assumes is with the CIA.

"We're grateful of course that you're going to help us." Nigel is saying, reaching down for his briefcase and pulling out some papers.

"Here's an English version of the air accident investigator's report on the first crash. It happened almost exactly six years ago. April 1994. Take a look at the page marked with a yellow sticky."

She takes the spiral-bound document and thumbs through.

“Two members of the Russian parliament were on board.” He says casually as she reads.

Finishing the paragraph he has highlighted in pink marker, she says “A Russian plane blown out of the sky over Northern Iran?”

“By Noah’s Ark.” He says, as though it explains everything.

“The toy was stained with RDX and PTN residue,” she reads, understanding the acronyms very well.

“Chemicals left after a Semtex explosion.”

It is probably naïve male condescension but it makes her angry. Instead of lashing out as she once would have, however, she switches off inside. She learned the trick from her teenage psychiatrist and although it makes her less of a sociopath, she is fully aware that it only really shifts the alienation from one level to another.

“And the American International Airways disaster last autumn has been linked to a crackpot with a map of Mount Ararat pinned on his wall?” she continues flatly, scanning the report. “Sounds a tenuous connection to me.”

“It wasn’t just the map” Nigel counters “– his computer was full of stuff downloaded from Web sites about Noah’s Ark and *ark*-aeological controversies.”

“And I’m the closest you have to a tame Ark specialist? Who on earth dreams up these bloody assignments?” She is in a particularly disdainful mood today, which is aggravating her growing sense that it was a big mistake to sign the MI5 contract.

“You were a scientist on the Anglo-US study.”

“Five years ago and I was employed to analyse pictures from spy-satellites.”

“But you keep up with developments and you’ll have as good an idea as any of who’s out there taking it all too seriously.”

She looks at him without saying anything for a moment, *How the hell does he know I ‘keep up with developments’?*

“Why would anyone interested in that kind of thing be into terrorism?” She parries dismissively.

She is now eyeing him with undisguised suspicion, bordering on hostility and in her mind she is thinking about getting up and walking out – ending it here and now. But she knows she won’t do that. She needs answers from this man and those he represents and without him she will just have questions. Questions and a split forehead.

“We want you to look at the archaeological data used by different groups”, Nigel is saying. “Tell us how they might have gained access to them, how much money you think is going into their research; evidence of fanaticism of one kind or other - that sort of thing. We’re looking for leads, that’s all.”

He had told Cassy this using exactly the same words at their first meeting with the American they are due to meet again the following day. Nigel seems to repeat himself a lot, she has noticed. That meeting had taken place in a disused hotel restaurant on the twentieth floor of a grubby tower in uptown Manhattan. Cassy had been distracted for most of the time by a group of workmen perched perilously on the roof of the Roosevelt Island cable car. They had travelled back-and-forth, apparently doing

nothing but chatting and pouring each other coffee from flasks. Eventually they had stripped off to their boxers and changed from blue to orange overalls. It was a bizarre but entertaining ritual that had occupied most of Cassy's attention so that she could recall very little of what the man in the suit had said.

What she *had* learned was that a routine check of phone-tap archives had thrown up a surprise association. In a transcript taken from an East London apartment being watched in a people-smuggling case, there was a brief and ambiguous mention of American International Airways outbound flight AIA916 from JFK to Bombay via Munich - two weeks before it exploded meters above the Bombay runway, killing all on board. A raid on the apartment turned up nothing except for the occupant's Noah's Ark interest and someone had remembered reading the report of the earlier plane crash and drawn a connection. It was an obscure one. The Noah's Ark toy in the earlier plane wreckage could easily have just been in a suitcase close to the bomb.

"The London apartment was rented by a Russian student." Nigel Buchanan continues.

"Oh?" This is new information.

"He was under investigation for Russian Organised Crime connection – ROC in the trade.' People smuggling is only part of it. London's a busy place these days for my profession. Take a look at this."

He shoves a few sheets of fax paper across the table. Cassy recognises them as a copy of a report she has already received by post about some Iraqi visitors to London. She looks at Nigel as if reassessing him. More than once he had lost his train of thought in mid-sentence without seeming to notice. *Domestic or personality problems? Probably both.* She picks up the British Council business card he has courteously just passed to her – clearly a habit, like hanging a hat on a hook, since he had done the same at their last meeting.

The Council, she knows to be a made-over remnant of the old British Empire machinery, marketing British culture, industry and education all over the world. From its headquarters in Manchester it runs offices in most of the world's major cities and is widely regarded as a kind of cultural diplomatic service. In her imagination it is also a cover for all sorts of intelligence-gathering activities. She recalls that it has 'desks' like the intelligence agencies - the North Africa desk, the South American desk, the Central Asian desk. Nigel, she has discovered from her preparatory research, has an administrative desk somewhere on the top floor of the building that houses the part of the Council that remained in London after most staff had been relocated to England's Northern capital. From there, she imagines him managing an international network of intelligence-gatherers - British Council employees and their contacts, generating up-to-the-minute security assessments on matters of interest to MI5.

Or perhaps MI5 just rents space in the building.

"Why did you send me the report?" she asks accusingly.

"You need to know the lie of the land Cassandra my dear. Consider this a background briefing."

So he knows he sent me the report already. Repetition must be de rigueur in this business. Perhaps he monitors variations in my responses to his repetitions.

But she is saying something different to her thoughts: "The Iraqis have something to do with the two plane crashes?"

“No. It’s another case entirely. We’ve been working hard to keep Iraqi factions out of London. It might open your eyes to the way these people work – might help you spot some *patterns* on your new assignment.”

It is a joke. Although Cassy lectures and practises forensic archaeology, her specialism is the numerical analysis of digital image patterns. Or as one of her colleagues once put it, writing programs to find needles in digital haystacks. When she isn’t at the university she is in a police laboratory secreted away in the middle of one of London’s suburban forests or at the headquarters of some European police force or other. It has become routine and after a time, rather boring – Dr Kim is called in when a farmer ploughs up a pile of bones; or a grave pattern needs picking out from air photos; or an unprovenanced ancient artefact turns up on the international ancient art market. She once helped locate a mass grave in Kosovo and has analysed rather too many images of the Irish and Northern Spanish countryside for earth-forms that might give away the location of weapons dumps.

“Thousands of overseas students study in London, as you well know, Dr. Kim” Nigel is saying. “Most are *bona fide* scholars - some are not. The British government doesn’t generally concern itself with the strengths of its visitors’ scholastic aptitude or motivation - it leaves that to the universities. It does, however, take an interest in who pays for their education and what else they might be getting up to while they’re here. There’s no better way to get a certain kind of spy, agitator or terrorist into a western country for a prolonged stay. Western security agencies are aware of this and deploy their resources accordingly. We have people working in the universities monitoring undesirable networks among students, you know.”

“I didn’t realise,” She says, although she guessed this must be the case.

“Just look at the pattern in the report.”

“It’s always possible to find a pattern,” she says pedantically. “The real skill is knowing whether it’s significant or occurs by chance”.

“Quite,” he says, considering that technical detail for a second, “- but look at the chap with a Syrian passport.”

The *pattern* comprises suspicious configurations of names, acquaintances, travel histories and London and American addresses.

“He’s had two stints in France on French language courses at the same level, one in Paris one in Marseilles. Don’t all Syrians speak French anyway? He studied engineering for a year at a university in Paris and is now registered for a Masters degree in London. If he’s the person we think he is, he got a chemical engineering degree from a Baghdad university in the early eighties.”

He is artfully drawing me in. This is interesting. A mild shot of adrenaline associated with the thought warms her blood. Cassy has had suspicions about certain students but is sobered to hear it as directly as this. She lets go of some of the distance she has placed between them, cross with herself for her emotional volatility.

“And the Egyptian with an Iraqi father,” he continues, “Who does he expect to fool with this kind of background? He’s got a maths degree from Cairo, spent three years in the Egyptian army before buying himself out. Went to Florida to study artificial intelligence but according to the university had to return home for personal reasons. Then he turns up again registered for a PhD in computer security in Edinburgh and

the same thing happens. He got a six-month break in studies to sort out finances. Look...”

Nigel stabs the photocopied letter from the Scottish university with the end of a dessertspoon.

“Must think we Brits have our eyes closed. I’ll have the dates checked with immigration and the airlines. It’s no wonder we’ve got foreign operatives walking in and out of our country for work experience”.

She actually smiles at this and feels even more cross with herself. But she is liking the confidence Nigel is extending to her – and the secrecy of the whole thing.

There are three other suspects in Nigel’s report. All have proven connections with Osama Bin Laden during his early days in Saudi Arabia. Two are known to work for one of Saddam Hussein’s intelligence networks. All have taken lodgings in the inner city London neighbourhood called Leytonstone and two were in San Francisco during the same month last year. Three of them are post-graduate students.

“The girl in the Human Extinction Front’s publicity stunt was a student in London.” Cassy says abruptly, changing the subject.

“The BBC news bulletin?” Nigel looks up from the letter but continues to prod at it with the spoon. “It wasn’t a publicity stunt and the girl wasn’t from London.”

“But the Front claimed responsibility – that makes it a PR exercise.”

“That’s what the newsreader said.” Nigel says dryly, “The girl really did dump the chemicals - caught in the act by a water engineer. She pulled out a gun; but instead of firing at him, stuck it in her mouth.”

“She’s in custody?”

“No, she’s in a morgue.”

“She killed herself?” Cassy says, shocked, “Why would she do that?”

“That indeed is a mystery. No-one has a clue who she was – she wasn’t on the list of known HEF members. All we know is that she had a fake passport and a lot of money in her rucksack.”

“Well it certainly wasn’t payment for doing HEF’s dirty work. Contractors don’t turn a gun on themselves to avoid capture. How much money?”

“Quarter of a million dollars in hundred dollar bills.”

Cassy nods, as though in approval.

“Which brings me back to the Iraqis.” Nigel says. “Right now, too much money is moving around the world and landing in the hands of bad people. In the past two weeks we’ve intercepted two Pakistani secret service agents with Bin-Laden connections trying to enter the country. That’s one a week. One came in the back of a lorry on a ferry from northern Spain, posing as a Kurdish refugee. The other flew business class from Beijing via Guangzhou, Bangkok and Frankfurt and carried a Yemeni passport. His documents show him married to a Filipino nurse working in Belfast, Northern Ireland. Both had well stocked British bank accounts waiting for them.”

“Background briefing?” Cassy asks, in a tone requiring confirmation that this isn’t something she is meant to follow up.

“Unless someone discovers that the Iraqis are into Noah’s Ark too. You can keep that,” he says, nodding to the fax she already has a copy of, “and you might want to study this”. He reaches into his case again and produces a plastic folder, which he hands to her solemnly.

“It’s the passenger list of the downed AIA flight.”

His body language suggests that he has said all he wants to on the subject and it appears that the purpose of the meeting has been to introduce her to the twilight world from which her assignment has originated. She assumes she will need the insights for tomorrow’s meeting. Perhaps the purpose has also been subtler than that - she feels like an *initiate*, implicated by shared confidence into something that is less than fully legal.

“There was a matter you wanted to raise?” He adds as he picks up and opens a menu.

Cassy had phoned Nigel from Heathrow to tell him that she wanted to check something out before the meeting with the CIA man.

“I want your opinion.” Cassy says. “I had an email a few days after we were last here. Could be a hoax or a joke.” She is awkward admitting she needs his opinion. It has always been a problem for her.

In truth she thinks it might have come from his department or from the Americans, though she can’t see why they would want to give her an anonymous lead to work from.

“Saying?”

“The 120 years warning is about to be given.”

There had been a second line too but Cassy doesn’t mention it. She never puts all her cards on the table if she can help it.

He raises an eyebrow.

“Sender?”

“Untraceable”

“A name?”

“*Cleito*”

There is an unmistakable reaction - a momentary tensing of his jaw, a microscopic flicker in a facial muscle. She had been waiting for it and it came. He had been about to waive the waiter over but puts the menu back down.

“Dramatic.” He says. “Junk mail?”

“Cultish.” She replies. “But not SPAM.”

“Forget about it. Forward me a copy and I’ll see if we can trace the sender. Probably one of your students playing a prank. Any of them read Plato?”

The conversation over, he flags down the lanky Italian teenager who has been keeping a discreet distance - it seems to be that sort of restaurant – and turns his attention to ordering.

A smartly dressed young couple step into the restaurant, shaking wet umbrellas as they hand coats to another waiter. Back in England it has been a funny spring. It

started off unusually mild and everyone had hoped for a repeat of the April heat wave of the previous year. Instead, winter had returned with a vengeance. Unseasonable snow and floods dominated the news bulletins. People had died and normal life had been interrupted with predictably chaotic results.

Nigel Buchanan sits very still watching Cassy Kim's low-slung hips rock hypnotically as she makes her way to the restroom at the back of the restaurant. She has removed her winter coat to reveal a figure-hugging cashmere dress with a high neck, no sleeves and dropping elegantly in one piece and without a waistband to just above the knees. He lets his gaze shift to the pleasing curves of her bare shoulders and the two and a half wavelengths of light but firm female muscle giving shape to her arms. *So – Hugo was right about her. We're going to have to keep a much closer watch. Who the hell sent her that email?*

Cassy arrives back at her hotel on Park Avenue, tired, cold, wet - and curious. She is glad that she hadn't given Nigel the complete email message. The second line had read:

Queen Boudicca's London Camp, May 20th - 16.00 hours

The fiercely independent spirit that is a familiar friend from the past stirs within. In the stifling police culture of Scotland Yard's forensic team she rarely gets the opportunity to see a problem yield to her full creativity and certainly not to her full cunning. It has got her into trouble before, but she yields to the beckoning recklessness as to a new lover of unproven provenance.

I'll be following up Queen Boudicca on my own, thank you Mr. Nigel bloody Buchanan. So you made me like you with all the secrecy stuff. But I see through you. If it's a game, then just make sure you don't mess with my mind ok? I can do the rest, but I need to be in control of me ok? That's what I do. See through people. I'm guessing that's why you hired me.

Chapter 5

Great Mosque of Xi'an, Shaanxi Province, Central China 1959

Two Muslim clerics are seated on the second tier of the pagoda in Xi'an's Great Mosque, the oldest and most famous in China, dating as it does to the eighth-century Tang Dynasty. Only they are not, strictly speaking, Muslim clerics. Muslims yes, but clerics only for the watchful eyes of the Party faithful. And the Party faithful come in every shape and form, from the old lady seated at the entrance to her apartment block opposite the Mosque's front gate, to the junior mullah, the shop-keeper selling hot tea and the school master accompanying his children on a visit to the Mosque's gardens.

But this is not a normal period in the anything-but-normal short history of the People's Republic of China. For ten years, Mao Tse Tung's ultimate 'policed state', where everyone polices everyone else, has grown, with varying degrees of economics success. 1957 had been a good year, following eight years of economic restructuring under the Chinese Communist Party leadership and with help from the Russians. But from 1959, people have started to starve as Beijing imposes ever-more unrealistic production quotas on factories and fields across the vast country.

And so it is that a Sufi from Persia, or was it Turkey – men frequently debated his origin – has slipped across the border from Tajikistan in Central Asia into Xinjiang province on China's western-most reach and thence to Xi'an. Those who two years earlier might have stopped and questioned the lone traveller, traversing the barren Muslim periphery of the Middle Kingdom, were too busy making things or pretending to make things in order to fulfill Beijing's quotas. And if they weren't doing this, then they were busy trying to keep themselves and their families alive. Long afterwards, researchers would estimate that over 30 million people died of starvation as a result of Beijing's Second Five Year Plan for the country's controlled economy (1958-1963).

The other 'cleric' has arrived in Xi'an by quite a different route. He is a guest of Mao-Tse-Tung's government under the Sino-Soviet Friendship Treaty, which he has proudly learned to pronounce as *Zhōng-Sū Yǒuhǎo Tóngméng Hùzhù Tiáoyuè* in the Mandarin dialect. Being a high-ranking official in the Soviet Naval Research and Archive Service, he has been invited by local Communist Party Officials in the northern port city of Dalian to advise on a new archiving system for the Chinese Navy. Xi'an was both a convenient place to change planes and a good excuse to see the most famous mosque in history built without a dome or minaret. But neither of these are the real reason for his week-long diversion – one that he feels sure will get him into trouble when he returns to Moscow. The real reason for coming to Xi'an is that he has heard a rumour that one of the leaders of the Naqshbandi sect that people are starting to call the Nooh Brotherhood, is in Xi'an. He had sent a message out to try and track him down.

The two 'clerics' are sitting deep in unobserved conversation on the mosque's unusual tower. The entire building has been constructed using Chinese architecture and building materials and resembles the courtyard house of a nobleman more than a place for Islamic worship. The communist liberation has made little difference to the

place other than filling up some of its corners, outhouses and minor courtyards with communal living and eating spaces.

“You are from Moscow?” the Sufi cautiously enquires, fixing his companion with the turquoise eyes that he knows can both mesmerize and repel. He has been told that those who find themselves turning away or lowering their own eyes do so because they feel confronted by windows into another universe that is too pure or too threatening to contemplate. “A Muslim of high official rank? This is unusual in my understanding,” he probes further.

“Indeed so.” Says the Muscovite. “I am from an old Muslim family in the city. One of my ancestors was a leader of the Tartar community in the Zamoskvarechye district and built one of the city’s first formal mosques there in the 18th century - on Bolshaya Tatarskaya street, between Paveletskaya and Novokuznetskaya metro stations if you know the Zamoskvoretskaya Line.”

“I have heard of it.” He says enigmatically. “And I am honoured to make your noble acquaintance”

“And I yours. I pray that you are not offended by my request to meet like this. I do not want to dishonour my Chinese hosts but I may not have another chance to talk to the great teacher.”

“And why would that be lamentable for you my friend? There are many greater Sufis you could consult at more convenience to yourself.”

“None, however, with your interests in the Quran’s teaching about the beginning and the end.”

“Ah. You have heard of my fanciful ideas.”

“I am attracted by them. More than attracted.”

“You are a free-thinking Muslim?”

“I worship at the Central Mosque in Moscow.”

“Ah. But you are free-thinking in your own home perhaps. What is it you wish to hear from me? We may not have much time. At some stage the Party watchers on the gates will come looking for you. They did not see me enter so they will not know that you have conversed with a stranger. But they will be concerned to make sure that you have not exited by another way.”

“From you I desire nothing; you have inspired me enough already. No. It is I who bring you something in return.”

“That, indeed is a pleasant surprise, although I live simply and need very little to support my itinerant way of life.”

“Not money, my friend. Something of more profound value. I have come across something deep in a Soviet Naval vault that I think you would be very eager to see.”

After a long pause to take this in, the Sufi says:

“It must be of very great value for an official of such high rank to interrupt such an important diplomatic visit to bring it to the attention of a humble wandering mystic.”

Chapter 6

Isle of Dogs, Central London April 2000

Two days after Cassy's meeting in Manhattan, she is back in her London home, the clouds gone and a morning sun casting its light and its long shadows in equal measure - a chiaroscuro drape over a familiar view. The two newspaper cuttings are still on the breakfast table - next to a cafetiere full of stale coffee, abandoned when the taxi called for her New York flight.

She had established long ago that the Tehran photo came from an Arabic daily published in Iran in the days before the 1979 Revolution. It was a poor taste 'on the scene' picture story, common in the newspapers of developing countries. The press turns up, takes explicit pictures of blood, bodies and handcuffed villains and prints them for effect with minimal commentary, with the full story coming in the next day's edition if at all. The cutting is faded and frayed at the edges with tape holding two halves together. The date at the top of the page is just discernible as the fourth day of the Islamic year, 1375 AH: November 29th 1954 in Western time. It had mysteriously come into Cassy's possession four decades after being printed - during the second year of her abortive marriage to Zach.

With the puzzle and pain of Zach in mind Cassy makes up a fresh cafetiere, filling the kitchen with a sharp aroma. She tries to relax her jaw, realising she has been clenching it tight for days. The radio is on and the newsreader changes his tone to sound mildly upbeat. It looks like the long awaited deal to finally disarm the Irish Republican Army is about to be struck and politicians are making optimistic statements.

Fools. Reigning-in those who've tasted the elixir of anarchy is an impossible task.

The thousand kilograms of explosives that had wrecked the Dockland skyscraper in her home neighbourhood in 1996 had been detonated by a rogue IRA cell disenfranchised by the first faltering steps of the peace process. She presses the plunge-filter of the cafetiere and it jams, showering steaming coffee over the tabletop. She curses the hailstorm of coffee grouts raining down on the beleaguered Canary Wharf Tower threatening to engulf it completely. Out of the window the real thing sparkles sunlight from its long-reinstated mirror walls. The reflection of a low-flying plane from nearby London City airport briefly appears then disappears.

She gets up and retrieves a small vacuum-sealed pack from the refrigerator and a miniature clay China teapot and cups from the dresser. A fellow online tea fanatic had found the *Tie Guan Yin* plantation high in the mountains of Fujian Province, China. The buttery taste of the sample he had sent her was unbelievable and the jade colouring perfect. She had offered fifteen hundred British pounds per kilo and bought ten kilos, which she reckons will supply her until the following year's harvest with some to spare to give away.

An American professor died cruelly after attending a conference at Tehran University. Our reporter arrived minutes after the police who examined the body in a

hotel room where a member of the cleaning staff found it. The manner of death indicates this is not a robbery. The young academician was well respected in the Middle East and had been the guest of the university on previous occasions. This visit seemed destined to ill fate - he was on the BOAC flight to Tehran from Jordan last week that had to return to Amman airport after getting into technical trouble.

Having the caption translated was as far as Cassy had got; that and discovering that the newspaper had been closed down with many others after Ayatollah Khomeini's return to Tehran. The envelope containing the faded piece of Iranian newsprint had since gathered dust on top of Cassy's wardrobe.

She looks out of her window at London – like Tehran, New York and so many other capitals - complex and powerful engines keeping national and global economies going. But uncontrollable, unpredictable and vulnerable.

What kind of person becomes a terrorist? Same sort of reason why I said yes to MI5 I'm guessing.

She had been approached as she was leaving the university one afternoon by a humourless American in a perfectly cut but unimaginative light grey suit; and then a day after, by appointment in her office, by a diffident young man from MI5. The combination of his awkwardness and the noble line of his jaw had evoked a complex emotion. She had wanted to reach out and touch him – like a museum sculpture of some ancient boy hero. Maybe *he* was the reason she took the job. Cassy had made other significant commitments on lesser whims.

The real reason, she knows, is that it appealed to her need to always be moving on; her need to be fighting someone or something. For a while, her university job was an act of rebellion. She left the house each morning with a fresh wonder at the audacity of it: *Cassy Kim, a university lecturer. Member of the intelligencia. Establishment. If only they knew.* But when the job no longer satisfied her deep need to prove she was different from everyone else, she had signed up as a 'retained expert' in Scotland Yard's forensic team, ratchetting up the irony. The renewed dissonance between who she knew she was and her public role had kept her going for a few more years. But it had worn off and she had been about to give up both jobs to go travelling when MI5 came knocking. The timing had been precise.

In truth, she knew that it was neither the boy with the noble jaw nor her restless rebelliousness that made her take the assignment. She had taken it to exorcise herself from the ghost of Zach and all that he represented.

She touches her scarred forehead and winces.

Human society, like the human soul, is too bloody fragile. Cassy sighs, pressing harder to feel the pain. In one way it's come a long way since Plato's Republic. In other ways it hasn't. There's always intrigue, plotting and subversion - those within the system and those who for their own reasons want to remain on its margins.

Plato.

Nigel had asked if any of her students read Plato.

Cleito is a character in one of Plato's Dialogues. What am I meant to make of that?

Cleito was a mortal woman who at the beginning of the world lived on an island surrounded by rings of outer islands. She married the god Poseidon and fathered five sets of twin sons. The eldest became king of an idyllic island kingdom 'no smaller than Africa and Asia joined together' later destroyed and sunk beneath the waves in a mythical or pre-historic cataclysm. Plato the ancient Greek philosopher learned of the story from an even more ancient manuscript written by Solon, an Athenian lawyer in exile from Egypt and Solon had heard it from Egyptian wise men. The chain of recantation went far back into man's pre-history.

The story is familiar to Cassy from teenage days and the smell of the great hall in the private girls school comes flooding back. The eldest of *Cleito's* sons was *Atlas* and his sunken kingdom, *Atlantis*. Plato recorded his version of the story in the dialogues *Critias* and *Timaeus*, written in the third century BC but Solon had lived three hundred years before him and Plato estimated that Atlantis had sunk 9,000 years before Solon. *Far back indeed.*

Three days after returning from New York Cassy is working late in her office in central London. She prefers it in the university at night: no one else is there. An information bulletin lies on the desk in front of her – it has arrived that morning and seems to be another attempt to initiate her into Nigel's underworld. At the top of the single page in neatly formed handwriting he has written simply *Cassandra dear - for your information*. It is headed *March bulletin* and contains several short reports.

Leeds - London Daily Telegraph, 2nd February - A team of young Pakistani Muslims was yesterday asked to leave the country within three days. A Home Office spokesman said the youths, aged between seventeen and twenty-one, are suspected of being in Britain in connection with an extreme political movement rather than for legitimate religious reasons. Lawyers acting on behalf of the Leeds Mosque where the group has been based for the last month have lodged an appeal, claiming the government has produced no evidence to support the charge.

The next one has similarities.

Jerusalem - Reuters, London, 15th February - Fourteen members of a US doomsday cult were deported from Israel early yesterday after being detained by Israeli police on suspicion they were plotting violence to hasten Jesus' return, Israeli police said. "The plane took off several minutes ago, they're on their way back," a police spokeswoman said. They were being escorted to the United States by three Israeli policemen.

They're all bloody at it, Cassy mutters aloud. A third item seems to have something to do with Nigel's current Iraqi case.

New York - The Times, London, 20th February – Algerian illegal immigrant dies in New York car crash killing mother and baby.

A hand-written note adds that the Algerian's presence in New York had come to light six months earlier during the interrogation of a Yemeni being held in a Saudi prison. His identity has been linked to a Kuwaiti citizen suspected of being a double agent working for Iraq in the late eighties. He had been put under surveillance but seemed to be lying low. Apart from once driving slowly past a container port, there was nothing to indicate his reason for renting a midtown Manhattan apartment for six years. A surveillance team was following him when he apparently lost control of his car and had the head-on collision. It doesn't say what had triggered the assignment of the surveillance team.

Not far away, Westminster's Big Ben strikes twelve chimes for midnight. Cassy has just finished writing a lecture and is tired and ready to go home. Instead, she turns to her computer and following a hunch types in the words *Cleito* and *120 years*. She is startled by the phone. She doesn't get phone calls at work this time of the night - not any more. She recalls the difficult days towards the end of her 'experimental' marriage. Zach had eventually stopped checking up on her. They had agreed on marriage as a fun experiment one lazy Saturday morning in bed. It hadn't come naturally to either of them. Cassy grabs the receiver to stop the noise - and the memories.

"Yes I'm still here." She answers irritably, suppressing a yawn and combing a hand slowly through her dishevelled hair.

The security guard has seen the light in her room and worked out whose office it is to save himself the climb. Cassy walks over to the window and waves blindly towards the gate lodge far below. The building is dark apart from an office-white glow from the lodge and the reflection of her window in the wing facing her. The colleges of the University of London are housed in many buildings all over the capital. This one is an awful 1960s monument to Europe's modernism project - twelve floors of low quality glass and dull grey cladding with horribly textured concrete forming the concourse at ground level. The thought that someone once thought it a good design depresses her.

Putting the phone down she turns to the computer and hits return. Within half a second, billions of words and six continents later, a result flashes up on the screen. She smiles, hunch rewarded. It is why she is a good forensic scientist - hunches don't usually travel in straight lines. There is just one occurrence found on the entire Web.

The screen has turned deep turquoise and white, bathing the room in a phosphorescent glow. The white at the top of the screen fades into the turquoise-blue like an exotic cocktail topped with an ice cream float. On this background are several lines of writing in an elaborate gold-coloured script.

'We sent Noah a long time ago to his people, and he said, O my people! Serve God. Then We inspired him, saying: Make the ship under Our eyes and Our inspiration. Then, when Our command comes and the water gushes forth, plead not with Me on behalf of those who have done wrong. They will be drowned. So the Ark floated with them on the waves towering like mountains and Noah called out to his son, who had separated himself from the rest: "O my son! embark with us, and be not with the unbelievers!". The son replied: "I will take myself to some mountain: it will save me from the water". And Noah's son and Noah's wife were consigned to hell.'

The next bit is in a larger font and fills up the lower third of the screen.

'I will not strive with man's wickedness forever, I will give him another 120 years'

The 120 years match. Without warning, her pulse starts racing. Cursoring down reveals more in a similar vein. Another piece emblazons itself across the screen:

'Just as it happened in the days of Noah so it shall be in the days of the Son of Man. For the coming of the Son of Man will be just like the days of Noah. For in those days which were before the flood they were eating and drinking, they were marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and they did not understand until the flood came and took them all away'

And then a paragraph in the smaller script:

'In the folklore of all continents there is found a memory of the ancient land that sank beneath the waves and of the righteous survivor. The Babylonians called him Ziusudra or Xisuthras, son of Oliartes. The Chinese called him Yao or Fo-Hi. The Indians call him Satyavatra, the sun-born monarch. The Greeks and Egyptians called him Atlas, eldest son of Clieto and Poseidon. Others called him Prometheus, Deucalion, Heuth, Incachus, Osiris, Dagon. He is a portent, a sign of the second judgement. Let those who have ears to hear and wisdom to understand; let them hear and understand. Let the prophet who was dead speak life. Abide in the good teacher. Before the time of the second judgement days of great evil will come upon the world. The light of Isa and other good prophets will seem to fade and a great shadow will rise in its place. The sign of the king has been given. We await the final sign. Then the end shall come.'

There is one more paragraph, which she now is having difficulty reading, her vision blurring with rapidly swirling emotions:

'With the breaking of the Seventh Seal comes the Seventh Day. New Heaven. Eden re-created.'

Noah again, she whispers to herself slowly, trying to calm a rising panic by breathing slow and deep, hands stretched out palms down slowly patting the air.

It's bloody happening again.

She is wearing a loose-fitted black cashmere sweater that comes down just short of the top of her jeans and in a fit of determination she grabs the waist-band with both hands and wrenches it over her head, sweat beginning to trickle down the elegant spinal ravine formed by toned back-muscles. Her arm twists up behind her so that her hand can reach the scars, gently touching them, one by one. Always one by one. In the same order. And always gently.

They are the link with her past. Her known past and her unknown past. The ragged scars have long-since healed but the methodical gentle finger massage is her way of pretending that the pain lying not so very far below the reddened skin has also gone. It is a pretense, of course. The pain was the reason for signing the MI5 contract.