

os

BILLY TAYLOR

SYMPATHY
FOR THE
DEVILS

A book by James F. Whitehead.

Copyright © James F. Whitehead 2023.

The moral right of the author has been asserted.

All rights reserved.

www.jliat.com

To Lesley,
and the “real” Billy Taylor which the character here is nothing like.



Introduction: Curriculum Vitae of sorts.

I met Billy Taylor again in my local pub, The Ancient Mariner, in Woodbridge, Suffolk. A small town on the Deben estuary, opposite to Sutton Hoo, an ancient Saxon burial ground. The estuary is popular for sailing, rowing, bird watching and simply walking. I was drinking by myself when someone came over and called my name, smiling, it was he. I must admit I hadn't recognised him, but he soon reminded me of our first meeting.

We sat and talked, I asked if he was local like myself, though only very recently. 'No,' he said, 'here for the birds.' and 'Staying where?' I asked, he pointed to the ceiling. His life it seems had been radically changed since our first meeting, to that of an interest in comparative religion, and by accident I had been part responsible for this. So, we met again the following night, his last on this holiday, and at my prompting he outlined just one incident from what it seems was far more than just an interest. But first I should give you some background.

Billy was born in the 1950s in Yardley, Birmingham. His parents were working class, his first home a council house of his grandparents, with a neat front garden, and a back garden where his father grew vegetables. When Billy was young his father worked at Austin Rover, a large car factory in South Birmingham. His father, as was Billy, by all accounts were keen fishermen, of freshwater course fish. Billy, like his father was also a keen cricket player. After living with his grandfather and grandmother Billy's family moved into "Overspill" housing in Lichfield, like so many other families in the housing shortage of post-war Birmingham. His father then changed his job to work in Tamworth for Reliant, a much smaller firm making cars.

Billy was not seen to be particularly bright and not destined for a good education, sufficient to maybe work as his father did. No surprise that he failed his 11 plus, and so did not receive a “good” education but went to a secondary modern school where expectations were low. Here he was average but managed to avoid the bullying from other boys and from the crueller teachers. Nothing was expected of these boys, and the teachers resented having to work with what was termed “factory fodder”. He was fairly good at sport, but nothing much else. On leaving school with no qualifications other than a leaving certificate, he seems to have joined the Army as soon as he was able. His career in the Army was short, though he did well in training and had some tours abroad. Malta was something he mentioned. On leaving the Army he joined the police in Birmingham, what is now the West Midlands Force. Here he did well, promotion to sergeant, then to the C.I.D. and plain clothes detective work. He played cricket for The City Police, then for The West Midlands Police when The City merged to form the new authority. He played well, which helped his rise through the ranks, he did so well he married a girl from Solihull, ‘Married posh.’ as his colleagues would say. Promotion meant passing tests and exams, which, it seems, he got the hang of with some help. Maybe this prompted a move which significantly changed his life, and one on a trivial level that led to our first meeting.

He decided or was advised, to get a degree with the Open University. For those who don’t know, this involves taking various “units” and studying at home. Back in the beginning of the University, lectures were delivered on cassette tapes and T.V. programmes shown very early in the mornings or late at night. This, with the units on various topics, had printed material and supporting texts. A naïve government minister’s gaff, it was not just “watching television”.

Students would submit assignments, TMAs (Tutor marked assignments) and there was an end exam for each unit, these building up to a total of points for the Degree. Units ranged from the Sciences and Mathematics, through to the Humanities and the Arts. Billy initially taking Sociology and Psychology units. Most units had a summer school, one week in the summer hosted at universities outside of the term times of the full-time students. Like Billy I failed my 11 plus, but due to a wonderful teacher, Mr Barlow, I took an art exam and avoided the horrors of a secondary modern school by going to Moseley Road School of Art. But this is not my story, but I took a unit from the O.U. in philosophy, and another in comparative religion. I decided to build the units for a second degree, but for this I would need to pass one of the O.U.'s foundation courses. Obviously, I chose the Arts foundation, this included an introduction to all the Arts, Literature, Music and the Humanities. And here on the summer school, held at The University of York is where I first met Billy.

The students on these courses back then were varied. As is the case often small groups were given tasks and reported back to the tutors. So, I found myself in a group with Billy, who introduced himself as a “civil servant”! Others included a guy who was a caretaker, whose daughter was off to university on a full-time course, and he wanted to keep up with her! A guy from Liverpool who owned a small firm making duvets, and an ex-student who had dropped out and was now unemployed. Seminars started at 9.00 AM and continued with breaks to 9.00 PM when our brains could take no more input. Our group stuck together, we would walk the mile off campus to the village pub and soothe the grey cells with Yorkshire bitter. It must have been there I suppose Billy filled in some of the details of his “civil service”, that he was in the police, though he gave no rank. He enjoyed the literature and history, but not the art, or philosophy sessions.

One chose which evening seminars to attend, from 7.00 PM to 9.00 PM. On one evening there was a seminar from a visiting professor, Ninian Smart, from the University of Lancaster where he more or less founded the study of comparative religion, those of the Abrahamic traditions, but also others, Sikhism, Buddhism, Hinduism, those of Japan and China, the lesser-known religions of Polynesia and Africa, and even ancient religions. I was interested, Billy was not, though nothing else on offer that evening was of interest to him, so he joined me. Ninian Smart was a spectacular lecturer, and in the two hours outlined his ideas regarding the “Dimensions of religion”. I’m detailing this because Billy was spellbound, to the life changing extent I found out years later at our meeting in the Ancient Mariner. His choice of joining me in that lecture, though I knew not, had radically changed his life. Within the space of a couple of years he had quit the force, got divorced, and entered full time education at Lancaster. He took a Masters in comparative religion, and then began his doctorate, which he quit to do “field work” for his professor, Ninian Smart!

And so, on the evening he outlined this story that follows. It is an approximate sketch that I made from that night and other conversations, so not precise, I’m not sure of the ranks of the police officers he mentions, or their names, I think they are accurate, as is his story. But I have had to put flesh on the bones of these incidents, and I apologise in advance as I’m no novelist, and I’ve been told about my grammar, the deadly comma and apostrophe. But I think the story needs telling, so forgive me please.

Chapter 1: Arrival.

It was a hot and a bright summers day, the first day of July, not good weather for a funeral, though that would be tomorrow. Which accounted for why Billy was driving a nine-year-old Ford Fiesta and was not on the train from Milton Keynes to Birmingham. For funerals involved travel from the crematorium to the “reception”, or whatever it was called, afterwards, hence using this, his anonymous car. He liked anonymity, which is why originally, he liked Milton Keynes. Now he held no strong opinions about Milton Keynes, Ford Fiestas, or funerals. Not, that is, these kinds of bland and empty affairs.

Birmingham City centre appeared through the heat haze as the car descended the hill at Corely, the city was only just recognizable. The M6 motorway spread ahead, but apart from two large distant buildings, one the Post Office Tower, now an obsolete tall concrete stalk no longer for microwave transmissions, he recognized from this distance nothing of the city of his birth, once which he liked, then disliked and then after many years of not re-visiting, it became another anonymity.

The M6 as it descends from Corley, where the last, or first, service area is located, depending on one’s viewpoint or direction. Here is a trap, a puzzle which costs many motorists both time and money. Money, because with a mistake one is on the M6 toll road. Time because getting lost is easy. The M6 branches not only to the toll, but the M42, south to the M40, to Oxford and London, and north to where it ends near the village of Appleby Magna. Not its intended destination but maybe for saving money it becomes the A42 which goes to Ashby-de-la-Zouch and on to a set of junctions in which it

disappears, though via the M1 lies Nottingham, maybe its original intended destination. There is also a spur to the A446 west for Solihull and east for Coleshill and Lichfield. Somewhere eventually is the M6 to the North, the M5 to the southwest and the A38(M) to the city centre, Billy's target. The first set of these junctions are condensed into 2 miles, the black tyre marks across the carriageways, sometimes 4 or 5 lanes wide, showing the traces of the less successful navigators. If the motorist avoids all this, a quest worthy of Greek myth, any optimism is ill placed. Ahead lies Birmingham and the Gravelly Hill Interchange, or Spaghetti Junction as everyone knows it to be called.

The M6 road here is elevated, it is alleged, it was built by the lowest tender, a house building company with no experience of building motorways. In passing there are numerous myths about this part of the motorway, some macabre involving bodies being moved from Witton Cemetery to make way for the motorway. This suspended part is on concrete pillars with each section between, having a joint with the next, and so at each of the sections there is a joint or more "technically" a gap. These gaps are permanent and create in a car a loud bump every second or so, where the joints fail to meet and over tens of years of remedial repair work still do not meet. Well, thought Billy, smiling to himself, it keeps the lorry drivers awake, and perhaps the only other good thing is you can get from the centre of Birmingham into the Warwickshire countryside in under 20 minutes.

Star City, a vast entertainment centre appeared, and near by the gasometers of Aston, a landmark stretching back decades, though no longer the gas works and coke works of Aston, or the Ansells Brewery, or even the HP sauce factory or original A.T.V. television studios. Aston, still known for its football team, The Villa, and for the origin of one Ozzy Osbourne. Technically though he is not a Brummie

as he was born in Marston Green Maternity Hospital near to Coleshill, a few hundred yards from the city boundary, so born in the county of Warwickshire, more a Warwickshire Shit House, than a Brumigum Bad Boy.

The comedian Ken Dodd called Spaghetti junction “the eighth wonder of the world”, because ‘You get on and wonder how to get off’. The slip road for the city centre seems at first to be taking its time or non-existent, then suddenly one is prompted by a sign announcing the end of the hard shoulder for vehicle recovery and then that this is now the exit slip road, not only for the city centre, A38(M) but also for the A38 north, that is for locals, Sutton Coldfield, Lichfield and Staffordshire. Billy took the exit, keeping left and then onto the Aston Expressway, AKA A38(M).

Beneath and above the coils of the suspended flyovers writhed and looped, and beneath all of this was the old Birmingham and Fazeley canal. The cliché of the city having more miles of canal than Venice maybe true, but over a larger and far less romantic landscape. In fact, the area beneath the junction was at best sinister, but today it could be described as positively “evil”. And Billy did get a sense of this “change”, *the image of a young girl’s severed head*. Normally, if “normal” should be allowed, the area underneath the interchange was a wasteland of drug users, alcoholics, and the less fussy prostitutes of both sexes. Massive walls of Graffiti shapes and colour, “Tags”. Also, of all things, the artwork of local students, a large pink elephant on a raft floating in the canal, and the “professional” work of Artist Bill Drummond, a co-founder of the late-1980s pop group, the KLF and its 1990s media-manipulating successor, the K Foundation, with which he famously burnt £1 million in 1994. His works painted over the other graffiti and anonymous explicitly pornographic texts, whose “poetry” at times matches that

of William S. Burroughs' *The Naked Lunch*. Drummond's work consists here in large texts painted in black and white over the colourful Tags, such as "GIVE NEW ROSE A REST", "LET YOUR LONE RANGER RIDE" and "BEST BEFORE DEATH". But the change now was a deserted wasteland, no tramps, artists, students or otherwise, cordoned off by police tape and a couple of PCs on the tow path, more on service roads sitting in marked cars. A SOC, Scene of Crime, now deserted by its SOCOs, Scene Of Crime Officers. *One of the most serious the force had to deal with in decades.*

Descending from Spaghetti down the Aston Expressway – A38(M), the driver is still faced with much tribulation; first, the 7 lanes with no central reservation to allow for the "ingenious tidal flow" of the morning and evening commuters, or to terrify the new visitor. Then the succession of exits, directions, visitor information, flyovers, tunnels, islands, lane changes, requiring response times of a military pilot.

Though as Billy had driven through these so many times, so not for him, but the city's road system is wiser than even the experienced local driver or SAT Nav. To "level down" the driver experience to that of the stranger and newly qualified, the city constantly mutated its one-way systems, sometimes reversing them, or would close them, safer but still a nuisance. It would even remove whole roads overnight. Part of this began with the Inner Ring Road of the 1960s urban planners, subsequently called "The concrete collar" and its function it seemed was to keep people out of the city centre. When it was eventually part removed the centre received an economic upturn. Though not all of the collar was removed, due to cost, such that driving down Smallbrook Queensway the road became, with a late final warning, a road for buses and taxis only. The driver has no recourse but to continue and receive days later in the post a

summons for £60.00 and two accompanying photographs of their car travelling through the prescribed section, a keepsake of one's visit.

The Inner Ring Road was part of an informal competition in the county of West Midlands, between the two cities, Coventry, and Birmingham, held in the 1960s, with lesser towns joining in. Coventry won, its ring road being the tightest and having the greatest number of interchanges. Scoring extra for managing to isolate its main railway station outside the ring, but not the Cathedral.

Wolverhampton did likewise, as well as isolating the railway station, Polytechnic, now University, and Wolverhampton Wanderer's, The Wolves, football stadium. Robert Plant's team. Apart from canals and once real metalwork, the West Midlands was the origin of the "metal" (heavy) rock genre.

Nuneaton's "Roanne Ringway" achieving the isolation of its station, parish church, its municipal park, gardens, and aviary. Birmingham could only isolate Moor Street Station, not its Cathedral or its main New Street Station. It cunningly closed and demolished its other main railway station, Snow Hill, as it was unnecessary. It was replaced by a concrete car park, then it was reopened as an underground concrete railway station some few years later as it was necessary.

So, Billy negotiated the opening gambits, the flyover, rapid lane changes, a long tunnel and anticipated the sharp final lane change. This was Paradise Circus, an inner central ring road from which he could drive to the Hyatt hotel. But he couldn't, it was no longer in use, and its use which was his plan, came as no surprise, or that Broad Street, a main artery road and entertainment area was also closed, under some kind of construction. It was taken as an ex-

sportsman being given LBW in a Sunday cricket game at pub opening time, unfair but obvious. This meant he had to go back half a mile and try again. This he did, passing the Mailbox, an upmarket shopping mall, a Harvey Nick's, hotel, BBC studios, posh cinema and apartments which had once been the Royal Mail sorting office, all of which had been constructed without Billy's knowledge or permission. And so, he drove past what he knew was an NCP car park on the site of the rail goods depot of the Midland Railway, now a monstrous apartment block, Centenary Plaza. A "Plaza" in Birmingham? Just in time he turned right up Bridge Street to the Hyatt. He chose the Hyatt as the other new hotels he knew not where, and the Grand had closed years ago, and despite the cost, or that Tony Blair and Bill Clinton were once guests he thought it reliable, and mistakenly, easy to find.

At the hotel entrance he was directed back two hundred yards to the hotel's underground car park. He parked his Fiesta, collected his bags and walked back to the hotel's doorman, who opened the door, and to reception. How was he to know there was a shuttle bus?

The Hyatt Birmingham is a huge glass brick, off Broad Street, the street now closed to traffic whilst the tramlines are being laid. 'Trams in Birmingham!' thought Billy, and he thought of his father, who spoke to him from his grave in Yardley cemetery, 'We had trams, lots, the council tore up the tracks after the war, and bugger me now they are putting them back!' The one side of his room was just glass, and from it he saw the convention centre, he recognized, which has a walkway link to the Hyatt, good security for Blair and Clinton to be able to walk from their hotel to the convention centre for, was it, a G8? And lots of overtime back then. The New Rep, (Repertory Theatre) – yes, but then the rest, a new Library, and this the new, new library, and the old new library an upturned ziggurat, gone, like

much else of Birmingham's city centre. Snow Hill station, Birmingham's St. Pancras, long gone, the new Bull ring shopping centre, gone for a new new Bull Ring. Now called "Bull Ring" and not "The Bull Ring". He thought, the bits the Luftwaffe missed, quite a lot, of the older Birmingham, the 60s planners had demolished, thus the "new", and then in the 90s on to the present, the demolition of the new for the "new new". With the trams back!

Chapter 2: Funeral.

It was another hot day with blue skies. Billy Taylor uncomfortable in a suit. He preferred a good linen jacket in hot weather, but never sandals, always brogues. The suit was a good one, good enough for respect, a dark charcoal Jaeger, that he probably would never wear again and a new, and uncomfortable, pair of black lace-ups.

The funeral, a cremation, was not at Yardley but at Solihull, Robin Hood Cemetery, a strange name for a cemetery he thought, with the drinks and food afterwards at the Robin Hood golf club's, clubhouse. It was his wife's funeral. Divorced now how long? Many years and distances, she remained in the house they had in Solihull. And not a friendly divorce, if such things exist. Billy's fault, 'My fault!' he thought, I changed. She remained unmarried, and then got cancer.

A service with taped music from the 60s, Mo town, popular in Birmingham then because it was a Mo town. Another claim, Longbridge was once the largest car plant in Europe? The car industry being a source of Birmingham's and Coventry's post war boom, and its subsequent closures, government dispersals and collapse. Epitomised by Coventry's Specials, "This town is coming like a ghost town." in 1981, and not a suitable song for a cremation, though one felt it might be, at least by Billy, and many of the other mourners he suspected. And not just from a materialistic feeling, but the sham of a cremation's attempt at a significant rite of passage, which seemed more something uncomfortable to be got done, than a significant event, a rite of passage as Billy would now call it.

The service was conducted by an unenthusiastic priest, maybe his third or fourth of the day, with more to come, though not as busy as

in winter. A small congregation of friends, and a few relatives who Billy vaguely recognised. His wife's younger sister who had let him know about the funeral and on seeing him gave a little polite smile. He sat at the back of the crematorium's chapel, half wishing he had not come, just sending some flowers, but as often the request was "No flowers." and a donation to Cancer Research. And anyway, he had a little "thing" to do. The priest gave a sketch of his wife's life, without the divorce, mentioned friends and rounded it with a brief soft touch of Christian hope of a resurrection. A hymn might have been sung. And so, the curtain was drawn to sombre taped music, and the small congregation filed out, placing donations in a basket at the door, into the warm, and inappropriate perhaps, sunshine. People not talking much, wandered to their cars, to drive to, what was it called, not a reception? Billy did likewise. He first however found a rear door to the crematorium, and passed a small envelope to an operative, written on it "To be placed on the coffin please." and his ex-wife's name. It contained a small piece of snakeskin. This was the reason for Billy being present. A departing gift for the right of passage of his ex-wife. For respect he went to the "reception", and had some feelings of long ago, he drank mineral water, he still never touched alcohol when driving, it was fatal for a career in the police to be caught, at least by another division! And there was the finger food, and instant indigestion.

Chapter 3: It Begins.

‘One more night, no two? in the Hyatt then home.’ he thought. For another more tragic, more macabre death there would be no funeral for many, many weeks. For the lines crossed are often significant, and certainly Billy no longer thought them just coincidental. One such was the lines of sigils, spaghetti like, marked on a pillar underneath Spaghetti junction five days ago, which remained even as Billy drove above the sight, as yet undetected from the other graffiti or street art, long after the head had been found.

Two days ago, two art students were checking out the site for a possible work, and photographing Drummond’s work with old 35mm cameras, black and white wet photography was the “new” answer to digital, and old Olympus OM1s the thing. Ali, one of the two students, it was safer to explore these wastelands even in daylight in pairs, saw it first, who thought it was a balloon floating on the canal. Then pushing first, then hooking with a piece of old metal, curiosity, no it was not a balloon but a black bin bag heavy with something other than just water which poured from it as she dropped it on the tow path. Bruno, the other student, looked cautious, but Ali was slowly making a tear in the bag, which first revealed hair, and then before this could be accounted for, an eye, an open eye. Bruno literally just fell over, Ali amazed herself, though in deep trauma now took out her smartphone, and tapped 911, at which point all she could say was, ‘a head, a head, in the canal, Spaghetti...’ Ali now sitting blank unable to move or focus, Bruno sitting next to her. The immediate reaction and sight now registering in her higher cortex, releasing far too many thoughts and images the brain simply went catatonic and shut down, like a frozen computer. Bruno sat beside her, he was not looking, crying, of all things crying because he could

not think of what to do, he also had a feeling that if asked to, he probably couldn't stand. The patrol PC saw the couple, he and his partner approaching with caution. This place even in daylight was not safe. Above on the service road was their patrol car with its flashing blue light, though in the sunlight barely visible. They had their lines ready, a 'Now what's all this then...' kind of thing. It had been a good morning shift, no problems, and hot, sunny, a good start, coffee, and a bacon bun each, which was from a van in Digbeth near the police station. Maybe not healthy but, and so they were both relaxed, sleeves rolled up smiling, as they dropped down to where the two students were sitting, though as yet they didn't know they were art students or any detail other than a report of something suspicious underneath the M6 A38(M) Interchange, as the dispatcher called Spaghetti junction. And first seeing two figures, teenagers or in their 20s, sitting three yards from maybe a black football in a bin bag. Then as they approached the obvious stress of the situation, the now traumatised students, so they focused on the bag. The woman PC bent down, looked but did nothing more, looked at the bag, the hair, the open eye, her colleague asking,

'Is it real?' to which came, 'I think so, call it in'.

It was real. The head of a young girl, who was identified initially as possibly from East Africa by the skin colour and fine cheek bones. As the events unfolded though not an illegal immigrant, someone's first thought, but the loved daughter of a couple who were second and third generation residents. The mother's family originally from India, she third generation, her husband second generation from the Yemen. A head of a young girl and no body.

Chapter 4: Sightseeing.

After his evening meal at the Hyatt, Billy decided to go for a walk.

Birmingham began its rise to prominence with the industrial revolution, from which it ceased being a fairly insignificant village and became at times more affluent, more civilized than even London, Bristol or Manchester, though no doubt their inhabitants might beg to differ. The cliches are numerous, ‘more miles of canal than Venice’, ‘a city of a thousand trades’, the Lunar Society, home to free thinkers and science. Less well known were the Golden Boys, so called because of their gold statues, Boulton, Watt and Murdoch, pioneers of invention and the manufacture of steam engines, the first gas lit factory in the world in Soho – Birmingham, where Boulton had a private zoo. Even less well known is William Jennens, the richest commoner in England who on his death in 1798, his estate was valued at well over £1,000,000. Because of an unsigned will, his death had lawyers fighting for over a hundred years, which became the source of Charles Dickens’ “Bleak House”. Now only a road name remains. The canals however did remain, disused, lined with derelict factories, full of rubbish and no doubt dead cats, dogs, and other fauna of the city. The canals not filled in by the good fathers of Birmingham because they were good soakaways for rainwater from the streets. But now they had become one of the features of the city centre. They had fish in them, geese, and ducks as well as narrow boat excursions and even a floating restaurant. Smart new apartment blocks had been built alongside these canals, with cafes and bars. So, Billy walked onto the canal tow path round the back of Symphony Hall, across the footbridge past the Malt House pub, where inside is a picture of Bill Clinton enjoying a pint. Billy walked past the massive Indoor Arena, over another bridge past Sea Life, in

which sharks swam, he walked past the burger restaurants and bars, canal side, and the bridge into the rear of the Mailbox.

He found a chair outside the Mailbox, beneath the BBC studios. Placing his light blue Orvis linen jacket on the back of the chair, he was wearing an open neck check shirt, and light grey chinos, with his normal brown brogues, which he always wore when possible, and a Cannes linen flat cap from Lock and Co. It was hot so he rolled up his sleeves and gave the waiter his order for a large glass of a good red wine. He was looking at the Cube, a strange multi-purpose building of shops, hotel, offices, and apartments, 25 stories high with a central void, fretwork front, and topped with a Marco Pierre White restaurant, when ‘SLAP’, on his back.

‘Well, you old bugger... what are you doing here?’ Billy looked into the face of what was once his sergeant, now certainly promoted. Ray Wood, not Roy! Ray pulled up and sat on a chair grinning. He was wearing the standard DI suit and tie, though loosened in this heat, and Ray-Bans, and still had his neat moustache. He always wore Ray-Bans even as a sergeant. He looked Billy up and down, Ray was now pointing,

‘Oh! And to cap it all, Barmy Billy now drinks wine, not Ansell’s Mild, or was it Bonkers Billy?’

Rather than grimace, the slap was not that hard, no wine was spilt, and it brought back some good memories of a simpler life. As if mind reading Ray continued,

‘Christ you take me back, life was simpler back then, good versus bad and no one had “rights” So, what happened in America? And the cult stuff?’ he continued.

‘It was Africa, and indigenous religions.’ Billy replied. ‘And you knew that,’ he continued. ‘Though I’ve studied some of those, after we lost touch.’

‘Lost touch! More like you left the force and buggered off on some quest like that Indiana Jones’.

Billy remembered his sergeant, six and a half feet of muscle, like Billy he had a stint in the forces, but unlike Billy he was in the Royal Marines. Back then a very useful sergeant. And a way with words, even his deliberate misunderstandings, and so Billy smiled.

‘What’s that?’ Ray continued, now pointing to a mark on Billy’s inner wrist,

‘Oh, a tattoo.’ he replied.

‘Looks like some odd knot to me, anyway, tell me about yourself, and why the hell you are here?’

‘Funeral of my ex-wife.’ replied Billy.

‘Oh sorry,’ Ray replied, ‘but hey let’s meet up anyhow, tomorrow late afternoon, a big meeting at Lloyd House in the Morning, about that missing girl.’

‘What girl? anyway I’m off home tomorrow after lunch, so sorry can’t make it.’

Billy said, but actually he had one more night, he booked this as he thought he might check out his old hometown, but was now having

second thoughts, too many memories, and an evening with Ray would not help. He was toying with the idea of leaving now, but it was his second or third glass of wine, maybe leave tomorrow and miss the last night?

Chapter 5: The Head.

Tuesday morning, Ray (now a DI, Detective Inspector) entered the Division HQ of The West Midlands Police in Snow Hill, Lloyd House, he got the lift to conference room B and entered. It was nearly full, DS's, DI's and DCIs! and some foot soldiers in uniform. He even spotted some from traffic. The door opened and in walked The Chief Constable with Detective Chief Superintendent DCS Anne Jones. The top top brass. All went quiet, and The Chief and Jones sat down facing the police audience.

The Chief began, 'You all know something of this, but we have kept things from the press and as many as we can, and would still like to stay that way maybe for a day or two, so initially while engaged in forensics we kept the facts very limited, but now we need human resources, that is what you are here for, DCS Jones will now give you more details, she will be in overall charge, but I will personally be monitoring progress, this is of such import, I can add, not just to the West Midlands Police, we are being monitored by Whitehall.'

There was some murmuring at this.

The Chief continued,

'Now I'm handing over to Detective Chief Superintendent Anne Jones.'

Anne Jones began,

'The absolute priority is obviously a quick result, but added to that, and one of keeping as many facts close, for not only standard police

reasons but the nature of the crime. We are calling it operation Aston.’

DCS Jones continued, explaining the name was as neutral as possible, she said that the missing girl, of which they all knew, was no longer missing. This the police audience did not think good news, no one there was that stupid. If not missing, and nor reunited with her parents, then something had been found, and it was not the living girl. Try as you might not think this, but everyone knew what was coming next was not good, none knew how bad, or could imagine. There was gossip around Lloyd House, it all failed to be near the truth. A body found, paedophilia, nasty, nasty stuff no one liked.

Then the pictures displayed of the scene, underneath the junction. DCS Jones went on,

‘The two art students from Margaret Street (The School of Art) found what they first thought was a balloon three days ago underneath Spaghetti Junction, (she didn’t bother with the correct terminology) in fact I can now confirm that it was the head of the missing girl, Eve Sharif.’

She paused, there was a stir, but nothing more.

‘The students are still in shock,’ she continued, ‘we have them in Priory Road. (A private hospital) The Art school has been informed and their parents, the students being over 18 they had to give permission, and they did, though only after difficulty due to their still being traumatised. Ali’s parents are local, Bruno’s are in Portugal where he is from, we are keeping them informed. The School of Art in Margaret Street also know they are sick, but we gave no details, just that they are witnesses to a crime which has led them to needing

treatment. The psychologists think the trauma might be long lasting if not permanent. We want to keep things tight. The situation has links with community issues as well as religious and, (her voice hesitated) occult practices.'

There was another stir in the audience.

'The victim, Eve Sharif is the 10-year-old daughter of Mr Mahjoub Sharif and The Reverend Rebecca Sharif, his wife, she being an ordained priest in the Church of England with a parish in Solihull. They are currently in a hotel with councillors due to the shock, obviously as of yet we have not been able to have detailed interviews, we are awaiting the OK from our psychologist team and the counsellor from the diocese. Cause of death is not known or can any sign of sexual activity be established for obvious reasons, there are no signs of her being drugged.'

The room now was silent.

'Your job, to put it very bluntly is to find the body, but, and this is a big but, without anyone finding out the full details. For the time being it will still be a missing child case. We have the Home Office on full alert and on our backs, there is some political concern regarding nationality, religion and maybe links to extreme cults. They are sending a senior exec to join the investigating team. This team initially will be myself overviewing, and DCI Sally Arscott running the day to day with, for the present, two DIs. The team which I will chair meetings with regularly, will be the Home Office exec, a senior criminal psychologist, three community advisors, and a specialist from The University of Birmingham in religious cults, as well as our detectives. When we have more evidence, which we hope will be soon, and are able to interview the people concerned we will bring in

more West Midlands senior detectives, whatever we think is needed. We are also working with press liaison people. There will be leaks, but hear this, if you are caught, your time in the police will be over, the story to the press is still a missing girl.'

There was a slight stir.

'Now I'm afraid some of you, if not all will find these next images disturbing. They did me.' The Chief nodded and frowned in agreement. 'That said you need to be aware of certain things which might help the search, so I'm afraid you need to see these very disturbing images. I can add, if anyone has problems after seeing these please we have a confidential phone helpline and trained counsellors to help in complete confidence, no one else will know if you do not wish, and nothing on your record. One last thing, if anyone has issues and in light of this, they are free to leave now, and they will be assigned other duties, again with no come back.'

The room remained fairly quiet. A bit of shuffling, looking around, but no one left the room.

'Good.' said DCS Jones.

The first image was that of the head of the young girl, dark skin, and jet-black long hair. Eyes still open, but the whites beginning to yellow.

There was a hushed gasp from some, others shook their heads. Some patted others on their shoulders who were more visibly shaken, not at all regulation. Many had seen terrible things, from brutal attacks, shocking car accidents, but there was something in the image, of what was once a beautiful young girl which was deeply

disturbing. Maybe that the look, as if not dead but something other? This was a ridiculous thought, that something was more to this particular crime. Even the hard-nosed veteran no nonsense coppers sensed it, the word was “evil”. Real evil.

Slowly the room grew still and quiet again, but now a cold stillness despite being early July and a fine day. A silence which seemed to carry all kinds of emotions, none good, despair, a void, nothingness, incomprehension.

DCS Jones continued, after a good three minutes.

‘I’m sorry but one last image you need to see, the sign might be important, this.’

A picture of the girl’s head from the back appeared, the hair raised to reveal in a pale colour, an image drawn on her neck by a marker of some kind, an image in either white or silver of what looked like a coil of rope?

At which point Ray said, and said loud enough for all to hear,

‘FUCKING CHRIST!’

Both of the senior officers looked and frowned but DCS Anne Jones said quickly, ‘Wood, my office after.’

She completed her talk, outlining the plans to try to uncover something of who was responsible, and what, why, but not when, that the medics were fairly certain on the time of death, 24 hours before being first identified in the postmortem. Jones stressed that firstly it was still a “Missing person.” but this would soon have to be

made public. There was the tone of real frustration of absolutely no progress having been made so far.

The meeting broke up, and Ray moved towards the two senior officers at the front of the room, the senior detective, DCS Jones and The Chief. DCS Jones was about to repeat her demand to see Ray immediately in her office and began to try to say this as firmly as she could, but before she could, Ray began.

He stammered, very unusual for him, 'Sorry about that Ma'am, but you see I've just seen that mark thing on the kid's neck, I saw a tattoo of it yesterday!'

The two senior officers looked even more surprised now than from his outburst.

'Where?' the DCS said, 'Where?' and said this again. 'Well,' replied Ray, 'it was a tattoo'. At this The Chief spoke to Anne, to the effect of being kept informed, and DCS Jones ordered Ray to follow her to her office.

Detective Chief Inspector Sally Arscott was already waiting in the office, she had been at the meeting and went straight there afterwards to discuss progress, or lack of, she thought. She knew Ray and was expecting some kind of reprimand after the outburst, but no, Anne said 'Sit,' then added a 'please.' She then sat behind her desk, looked up at Ray and waited.

Ray explained that the strange shape, seems the term is 'sigil', was on the wrist of an ex-officer, Billy Taylor who he had bumped into the previous day. And that it wasn't "similar" it was that particular image, the same!

‘Not for a minute involved, he was down for his ex-wife’s funeral, he’s into all this cult stuff, he’s some academic.’ Ray said.

DCS Jones arrived at West Midlands after Billy had left, but knew of him, a good run of the mill officer who seemingly and suddenly left to go to travel for some strange reason, to do with languages? So, Ray put her right, ‘No Ma’am, as I said, he got into religions, not into being religious, but to study them, all kinds, all over, Siberia, America, Eskimo stuff and Africa.’

‘Well, he could be a suspect, or of some possible help given his background, and given that, and his being ex force, I think we,’ she looked at Ray and Sally, ‘should pay him a visit right now.’

Both Ray and Sally were surprised, a DCS involved in questioning?

So DCS Jones, DCI Arscott and Ray, once Ray had remembered that Billy was at the Hyatt, immediately took the lift down to the underground car park. Even more of a shock, Jones walked to her car, opened the driver’s door and sat in, she was literally ‘in the driving seat’.

She drove – she had a black Range Rover – and had the blue lights flashing but no siren. They parked at the front of the Hyatt, and before the doorman could speak, Anne Jones produced a warrant card, announced who and what she was, and walked past the speechless doorman, Sally and Ray following.

Chapter 6: The sigil.

The three police officers entered the hotel and asked the receptionist for Mr Taylor's room number and could he give them a phone to contact him, and somewhere in the lobby for a quiet talk, nothing wrong at all. Ray took the phone, Billy recognised the voice, and was told that he and senior detectives, DCS Jones, DCI Arcscott were in the lobby and had a very urgent and important need to talk with him. He wouldn't or couldn't say more, other than it was a serious police matter. Billy would have joined them anyway, but the tone in Ray's voice was very unusual, quiet, almost timid. And a DCI and a DCS, he thought thinking back to his days in the force, but maybe things had changed? Billy arrived in the lobby after only a couple of minutes, and the officers gestured to follow into a corner around a coffee table. They sat,

'Ray seems to think you have an unusual tattoo on your wrist which seems to have some relation to a serious crime we are investigating.' Jones said.

Billy looked surprised, so Jones added, 'You may have heard of a missing girl?'

Billy said he had not, and why the tattoo? They asked very politely if he might come down to Snow Hill with them as they had some questions, and he might be of very much needed help. Anne was keeping her options open, and of course he would do as she asked. And so, the four drove back to Snow Hill, Billy's old HQ. Very much smarter than in his day, a lift to the top floor and then into DCS Jones' office. They sat round a coffee table, not each side of the desk.

‘Firstly,’ Jones began, ‘Could I see the tattoo?’

Billy rolled up his sleeve and showed his tattoo, a remarkable match.

Jones now had dropped several ranks, it seemed to be that she was conducting a DCI interview, albeit informally in her office.

‘Could you say where were you around Friday the 29th of June?’

‘Siberia.’ came the reply, to the detectives, trying to look nonplussed, except Ray of course, and without prompts, Billy Taylor produced from his pocket his passport, opened it, flipped past the pages of visa stamps to the last showing the dates, arrived back in the UK on June 30th, arrived in The Russian Federation on Tuesday the 11th.

‘I came back early as I got the message of my ex-wife’s death and wanted to attend the funeral on the 2nd of July. After that I met Ray by accident.’ he said.

‘Watertight!’ thought Ray, and maybe the others, but Jones said, ‘Fine, we will of course check, but fine, could we ask you not to leave the hotel until the morning when we can check out your details.’

‘No problem.’ was the reply.

‘Ray,’ Anne said, ‘please can you drive Mr Taylor, back to his hotel.’ Ray drove his old boss and friend back to the Hyatt hotel in silence,

Billy saying, ‘I understand the silence, Ray.’

They parted with false smiles.

The next morning Ray phoned Billy in his hotel room, asking if he wouldn't mind coming to Lloyd House and talking again with DCS Anne Jones. He sounded sheepish for Ray, so more in the spirit of helping an old friend he agreed. Ray collected Billy in a black unmarked police Ford Mondeo, retraced the previous route into the underground car park at Lloyd House. Again, a lift to the top floor and then as before into DCS Jones' office. Again, they sat round a coffee table, only the three, DCS Anne Jones, DCI Sally Arscott and Billy, Anne Jones had said 'Thank you.' and with only an expression and a look, Ray knew he was not wanted. He left.

DCS Anne Jones was very apologetic about having to check, but Billy replied he understood after all he had experience of police practice. Anne Jones was again apologetic, far too much for a DCS Billy thought. And eventually she said,

'But now could I ask your help in this matter from a different perspective, from your knowledge?'

Billy Taylor looked blank, but nodded,

'This is all at the moment very limited to this authority, you understand.'

Billy nodded again.

So, Jones ran over the story to date, in some detail, then asked, 'Now could I show you some pictures, again in confidence?'

Another nod.

‘Some of these are very disturbing.’ she added.

And so, Jones showed Taylor pictures of the crime scene, and the girls head, including the image on her neck.

‘And this looks maybe like some kind of black magic mark?’ Jones said.

Billy immediately replied,

‘It’s not a sigil used in black magic in the accepted sense, but a snake.’ as he spoke, he rolled up a sleeve showing the design. ‘It’s an African puff adder, actually, Ateyath to be precise, a totem animal of a sect of the Dinka who are animists. Dinka is a traditional religion of the people of South Sudan.’

No one else said anything for at least a whole minute, each of the two detectives confounded in different ways. Whereas Jones’ thoughts were very much more private and complex, Sally had one single word, ‘Yes!’ Something real to go on, before either could speak, Billy continued,

‘You maybe need some help in this, especially as where the head was found.’ puzzlement on the other faces, ‘Gravelly Hill Interchange, or Spaghetti Junction you see it looks like spaghetti, or’ a pause, ‘a snake’s coils.’ After another long pause, the senior detective, in slow and precise tones said ‘So this was some cult murder by a sect, of these Dinka? Is it?’

‘Oh no,’ replied Billy, ‘they would not use such an image, and they are not a sect but part of a coherent religion with a Creator god, Nhialic and a pantheon, even some evil spirits similar to other religions, even

ideas of a “fall” as found in the OT.’

The two senior detectives were now enthralled. Sally was quicker to become a police detective,

‘So, where and why did you get the tattoo?’ she asked.

‘I got the tattoo of Ateyath when I was initiated in Africa.’ was the reply.

There was a very long silence.

Chapter 7: Back in the Saddle.

Anne walked to her phone picked it up and asked someone to send Ray Wood to her office immediately, he came immediately.

‘Please Mr Taylor, would you mind if Ray took you for a coffee while we check some things, say 20 minutes, it would be most appreciated in the circumstances.’ ‘Fine.’ came the reply, and Ray and Billy left the DCS’ office.

Ray took Billy to a Coffee Lounge that was once a canteen and got two coffees. They sat in silence. It was only 10 minutes before Sally Arcscott arrived at their table. ‘No rush,’ she said, ‘but could I have a word, Doctor Taylor, we are having a meeting in an hour with some advisors, would you mind attending, we would be very grateful, very, given your background and experience.’

‘Fine.’ said Billy. ‘Not a problem, though not a doctor, just a mister, but please call me Billy.’

‘Ray, get Billy some ID, and we will be in room 407, fourth floor at 12. Mr Taylor, sorry, Billy, you might like to stroll around the new Snow Hill, its maybe changed since your last visit, and thanks again.’ Sally said with a slight smile.

She left, Ray raised his eyebrows and grinned, and said, ‘Well from possible suspect to expert! They moved quick, and Siberia what’s that about?’

‘If you want to know, 100 dead horses, and Oroch, Altai, and Nganasan healing séances, now I’d like a walk.’ Billy replied.

Billy Taylor rose and left the coffee lounge, through security doors to the reception area and out of Lloyd House, leaving Ray with the ‘why did I ask?’ expression, he too got up and went to sort out Billy’s ID.

He took a 15-minute stroll around the new Snow Hill of towering office blocks in the bright July sunlight, then he walked back to the entrance of Lloyd House. He passed through security eventually when he found his lanyard and ID Pass to where Ray was waiting and had obviously been asked to bring Billy to room 407. They entered a medium sized room with a large LCD TV screen, a semi-circle of 6 chairs in front of desks, which each had notepads, pens, bottled water and a glass. To the right 4 more chairs with arms, and at the back of the room a row of 6 chairs, without arms. There was a white board, to the left of the screen a technical guy, or should that be girl, or young woman tech PC, sitting at the edge with a computer which controlled the LCD TV screen.

On entering the room Sally welcomed Billy back and asked him to sit on one of the front chairs, at the extreme right. To his left was a man in his 40s, 2 other men, obviously DIs thought Billy, an empty chair, probably Sally’s he thought, and yet another empty chair. At the back of the room sat three others, two men and a woman, who were what? and Ray joined them. The door opened and four more people entered, two were obvious but surprising, Chief Constable White of The West Midland Police, Anne Jones Detective Chief Superintendent and two others, one obviously a cleric. They sat in the chairs with arms. The door opened again and a middle-aged woman walked in, she was carrying an old leather brief case, had short dark brown hair, and was wearing a neat tweed suit, obviously an old school academic. She sat in the last chair in the semi-circle.

Sally Arscott now stood centre and began to speak.

‘Introductions, I am Detective Chief Inspector, Sally Arscott, on my left Chief Constable White, Detective Chief Superintendent Anne Jones, The Right reverend Poole, Anglican advisor, and Community Liaison Officer Dr Milkha Singh, The reverend Poole and Dr Singh are helpers and advisors, Chief Constable White and DCS Anne Jones are observing.’ She used her hand to indicate.

She now pointed to the semi-circle saying, ‘We have to my left, Professor Catherine Mulberry, holding a chair in comparative religion at the University of Birmingham,’ skipping the empty chair, her chair, ‘DI Ron Smith, DI Benjamin Washington, and Dr Andrew McNeil Criminal Psychologist. This is the initial investigation team and has been so from Saturday, and finally Mr Billy Taylor who is sitting in for this meeting as he has some significant information. At the back we have Detective sergeants Kate Moore, Mohammed Asiff and Rashad Mahmood, who are also on the investigating team, and DI Ray Wood, who is not part of the team.’

Her voice trailed away at this ‘not part,’ she continued, ‘This is our third meeting and although no progress was made since our last, we now have some new information. This is regarding the mark or sigil on Eve Sharif’s neck. Mr Taylor please.’

Billy stood up and recounted what he had earlier said, though not showing his tattoo, rather he drew on a whiteboard a reasonable sketch, as well as the words Ateмыш and Dinka. There was an impressed silence, especially from the police contingent, who were the majority.

Dr McNeil was the first to speak, ‘So the crime scene, or at least

where the head was found has some symbolic reason.'

'Yes, so it would seem,' Billy replied. And added, 'has the graffiti at the scene on the walls been examined in detail?'

The detectives looked at each other,

'Well yes of course,' DCI Sally Arscott began to speak, 'and we were not aware of this Dinka connection,' she was looking at Professor Catherine Mulberry, but before she could continue, Catherine Mulberry began to speak in a very angry voice,

'Can I ask what Mr Taylor's background is, academically for a start, to arrive at such a ridiculous conclusion?'

Others looked suitably embarrassed, she continued calmer,

'I've been asked to be seconded to this team on the basis of my knowledge and have put important work on hold.'

'I'm sorry if this has upset any apple carts.' Billy said.

'Apple carts!' was the professor's response,

'What qualification backs this nonsense up?'

'I don't think this is the time or place, I've studied comparative religion at Lancaster, took an MA, and began my doctorate but...'
Billy started to reply.

The exchange continued with the embarrassment of the onlookers increasing. Both Jones and Arscott thinking they might have made a

terrible mistake, actually who was this, Taylor?

‘Began your doctorate.... but!’ responded Mulberry.

‘Yes but,’ said Billy, ‘but I broke off to do some field work for my supervisor, who kept me busy, so I never got around to completion, both he and I thought my field work more important. So here I’ve presented my thoughts from my actual experiences.’

And Billy rose as if to leave, but before he did Mulberry rejoined,

‘What kind of supervisor, who! would suggest such a thing?’

The question was obviously rhetorical and meant to show the Professor’s poor opinion of such practice, but she should have spotted the clue in ‘Lancaster’.

As Billy approached the door, and in a cool calm voice he replied, ‘Who, the who was my supervisor, Professor Ninian Smart, that was the who.’, which was an equivalent to a bomb going off.

Billy was gone. The professor looked like she had just been given a high voltage shock which paralysed her, the other academics, and the cleric showed signs of recognition, if not awe in the reverend’s case, even The Chief had it seems known of the significance. Those that didn’t, the detectives, soon as they could, searched reference material online. As Ray would say later, ‘Ninian Smart was not a big cheese in this comparative religion stuff, he bloody invented it! No wonder the prof was gob smacked!’

What followed was a maelstrom in the middle of a very serious investigation. There were conversations and meetings too many to

mention. Amazingly it was The Chief Constable who sorted this out in the end, which impressed Ray, The Chief actually earned the money for once. The 'gong', a knighthood, all West Midlands Chiefs get one, and White would be the first not to if this investigation failed, the first exception. The Chief and all around knew this.

The problem revolved around attempting to get Billy Taylor involved, but not upsetting the professor. The politics was deep, conversations between The Chief Constable and the Dean of the University. The problem for The Chief Constable was one of not upsetting a qualified expert, but failing to use what could be an invaluable resource, and the question of why they did not do so with such a case as this. The danger of the question 'why was such expertise ignored? had to be solved', at the same time as keeping 'a distinguished academic on board'. The latter was solved by pressure from the University, a hint at funding for a planned ethnographic trip to the Amazon and the kudos from working with someone who had worked with Ninian Smart. The aberration of the dispute with Mr Taylor due to the stress that Professor Catherine Mulberry was recently under. So, by Wednesday afternoon that half of the problem was settled.

The next step was risky, but The Chief could see no viable alternative. Ray picked up Billy from the Hyatt and drove him to Lloyd House. Billy was not upset, nothing much did this, his status with regards to his fellows was not of much interest, actually it was none. So, what was his motivation for accepting being driven to Lloyd House for a meeting with The Chief Constable of the West Midlands Police? Curiosity. The setup was the Headteachers study. Outside Ray waited. Inside The Chief Constable introduced Billy to Rebecca Sharif the mother of the dead girl. The conversation was along the lines of, 'This is Billy Taylor, we think he can help.' and 10 minutes later a

woman PC came to escort and drive Rebecca Sharif back to the hotel where she and her husband were staying. After another 15 minutes The Chief's secretary spoke to Ray.

'DI Wood, could you join Mr Taylor and The Chief Constable please.'

The result was Billy had agreed to help, seeing the distress of Rebecca Sharif, yes, he was a softy, but also curious to the point of danger. The terms were simple, seconded to the force, he wouldn't take pay, just expenses. His room in the Hyatt, travel, and food. He had asked for a DI to work with as he might need a warrant card, it could be a DS, but no, and not just any DI, not any, Ray of course. How, and why so willingly did The Chief Constable agree to these terms was from the conversation with Billy after the Reverend Sharif had left.

Back in the lift Ray could not shut up,

'Back in the saddle, and me a DI as a bag man for a nutty professor, sorry not a professor, still you a bag man for Ninian Smart, we have an ops room, 408, bigger than 407. Can you be there at nine, keep your id to get in, all receipts to me. And now how about a pint in the Wellington around eight?'

'OK,' Billy replied, 'I'll find it, and I'm only doing this to get you promoted to DCI.' Billy smiling.

'So, what if we don't catch this bastard, how long a secondment?' asked Ray.

'26 days.' replied Billy.

‘That’s kind of definite?’ said Ray.

‘Yes, it is.’ said Billy.

‘How do you know?’

‘I’ve been told who, and where to find the physical evidence, that will take 17 days, and 9 to put things right, which gives a 9 and 8, which looks good.’ Billy replied.

‘I’m not asking.’ said Ray, ‘eight o’clock, The Wellington, Bennetts Hill off Colmore Row.’

Chapter 8: Food and Drink.

Though his room in the Hyatt was like a fishbowl, only rectangular, Billy liked it, better than other accommodation he had been in, like some Russian hotels last week, and the food was very good. Tonight, he thought, looking at the menu, potato and yeast tartlet wild mushroom, truffle, alliums, followed by Wiltshire lamb, braised belly, seaweed and to finish raspberry soufflé, cardamom, shiso, rose.

He ate early at seven, so took a circular walk to Bennetts Hill, stopping to sit where he could, lost in thoughts, or dreams. From the Hyatt he walked the 50 yards down Bridge Street to the canal. Joining the tow path opposite Gas Street Basin where moored narrow boats lay, some permanent house boats, others the hire boats which took people on a tour down the Worcester canal for a few miles and then back. At night these also served meals, and at weekends could be hired for private parties. It was a beautiful warm July evening; he crossed the bridge by the ICC and then turned right and walked towards Newhall Street where he could walk up the hill to The Wellington. A new pub for him, and one he found very interesting, it did not serve food, but you could bring your own, it had no music, but real ale, the bar had a screen showing 14 different choices, 14! And even though it was in the city centre it had an old resident cat, who acted as a part time doorman, checking out the clientele.

Billy chose a Black Country Ales 'Fireside', a deep brown malty bitter. Scanned the scene, a faux Victorian décor with old black and white framed photographs of the Birmingham of his childhood, then he spotted Ray, he had company, Ron Smith, and Benjamin Washington, both DIs. Ron was a Londoner, Ben a local, originally from

Handsworth, his parents arriving from the Caribbean in the 1950s, he now lived in Coleshill with his wife, a science teacher, and two children. Ron was more anonymous, he lived in an apartment, not a flat, somewhere in the city centre, a walk to work. It was Ray's idea of team building, not that it was Billy's or did he like teams. They didn't talk about the case for obvious reasons, a snippet overheard and the proverbial would hit the fan. The subject of travel, fairly innocuous arose, or so it seemed. Ron began,

'Billy, I hear you've just got back from Russia?'

'Yes.' he replied.

'Moscow or St. Petersburg?' Ron asked.

'No, Siberia.' he replied.

'Siberia what was that about?' Ron asked.

'100 dead horses, and Oroch, Altai, and Nganasan healing séances.'

Ray gave the answer, he had always had an excellent memory, if nothing else he often thought to himself. Well and drafts and cards.

Ron tried again,

'Has anyone else been to The States, I've been to Florida and Vegas, and you Billy?'

'Alaska.', was the reply.

'Why Alaska?' Ron asked.

‘To visit the Iñupiat.’

‘Who?’

‘The Iñupiat who live in the Northwest Arctic Borough.’

‘Oh?’ uttered Ron.

Ray was smiling, as was Ben. Ron tried again,

‘What about Australia,’ asked Ron, ‘never been myself but I’d really like to maybe settle there if that’s still possible, have you ever visited?’

‘Err yes.’ said Billy.

‘Where, Sydney, Melbourne?’ said Ron.

‘No, Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara.’

Silence, then not being able to hold it in, laughs from Ray and Ben.

Ron had one more try, ‘Anywhere normal like in Europe?’

‘Languedoc southern France.’ replied Billy.

‘Why?’ asked Ron.

‘There are still secret Albigensian gnostics, I’m relating this to the Bogomils, and the Byzantine Empire, through the Paulician movement.’

Billy smiled, then all four laughed, tried sport, then hobbies, finally beer, which meant another round and a subject they could actually understand what Billy was saying, basically he liked “real beer”, otherwise he drank red wine.

Chapter 9: The smell of death.

Thursday morning Sally gave a brief meeting and outlined the duties for each in the team, CCTV was limited, but needed checking, some door to door around the scene would keep a DI and the DSs active, though in truth hopeless and pointless. The forensics was also poor, apart from time of death, and now after careful samples, no traces of foreign DNA or anything else. Sally then turned towards where Ron Smith was at his desk,

‘We have a chance to visit some of the regulars, rough sleepers, normally found under the junction tonight with a city worker for the homeless and a couple who work for a charity. Ron and DS Moore be here at 10 PM, then you can meet with these, you can take the day off till then, expect to be out till early morning.’ she said.

Then DCS Anne Jones walked in, nodded at Sally and handed her a sheet of paper as she stood up, she began, ‘Right, the parents and the two art students should be OK for interviews next Monday, we will do this in their hotel, the students want us to use Margaret Street, The School of Art, familiar ground, and the Vice Dean has set this up, so action at last, here are times places and teams.’

People who were at their desks staring blankly at computer screens, some still showing the West Midland Police logo, slowly began to work, some getting up and leaving to follow up the tasks. Billy who had been standing by a window gazing over the city landscape, at the tower cranes and new building, in the distance the blur of Barr Beacon, and what after that, this thought entered his mind, what is it after that, Staffordshire, a strange county he thought, not the gentle South Midlands, but a kind of promise of a more harsh landscape,

more cruel? Not cruel, remote, he remembered his childhood, and the great Cathedral, that was it.

He snapped out of his thoughts, he had to, and walked over to Sally,

‘I’ve got to go to the scene.’ he said.

‘Why, we have photographs – hundreds!’ she replied.

‘I’ve got to go myself, for detail, fine detail.’ he hesitated, ‘For feelings, smells, the unseen.’

‘OK, OK, nothing else is happening,’ Sally said, ‘Ray take Billy to sniff out the scene.’

Both rose, left the room, and took the lift in silence to the car park, took one of the force’s unmarked cars, a bland Ford Mondeo, and within minutes were on the A38(M) and from there the slip road at the M6 junction, Spaghetti, for the south, not joining the M6 but turning off onto one of the service roads which ran down to the canal and the crime scene. About 20 yards above the tow path was a patrol car where two bored PCs sat trying to get comfortable, they nodded back as Ray slowed and gave a smile and a wave.

‘Happy days.’ he mumbled sarcastically remembering how he began his career in the police. There was “Police” tape around the site and further down the tow path a uniform officer who had found a patch of sunlight. Everywhere else was dark, but not as dark as it felt, dark and dirty. The smell was of diesel and petrol fumes from the motorway above, and the noise, the higher pitched car engines swamped by the HGV dull roar. They filled the inside lane, driving only feet apart, and here on this stretch of the M6, one of the busiest

sections, much of the middle lane. Not that this could be seen, just heard. Ray waved at the PC who recognised the DI and walked towards them.

‘This is Billy Taylor, a specialist brought in on the case.’ Ray said, the constable gestured acknowledgement and walked back to his oasis of sunlight. Ray looked around but Billy was nowhere to be seen, a slight panic, but then he appeared from behind one of the giant concrete pillars supporting the motorway and its curling flyovers of slip roads. Billy was scouring the concrete surfaces, yes and sniffing, Ray held back a smile.

Then Billy took a pendulum from his pocket, a small lump of metal, actually lead, a fisherman’s ledger on a length of line which ended in a loop. He was swinging it in a small circle and walking about. The pendulum slowly ceased its circular movement, changing to a linear one which swung in the same direction despite Billy’s erratic walking.

‘It’s a pendulum used in dowsing.’ Billy said, putting it back in his pocket and answering Ray’s unasked question, ‘Nothing magical, just amplifies the involuntary nervous movements in the wrist and arm. We need to get over there.’ he added, pointing to the opposite bank of the canal.

‘There’s a footbridge just down here,’ Ray said, pointing, ‘or we can drive?’

‘We will walk.’

The parts of the land around the canal, not under the massive motorway pillars, has sunlight, there are grassy patches and buddleia, hawthorn, and rosebay willow herb. The buddleia and

rosebay were in flower, and lots of butterflies on the buddleia flowers. A strange colourful contrast to this dark and now evil place. They crossed on one of the typical cast iron footbridges from the time when the canals were built in the late 18th early 19th centuries or “cut” by the navvies, mostly Irish, who worked on the “navigations”, hence the term. Though footbridge is perhaps the wrong phrase, the main purpose was for the horses, which pulled the boats, to cross the canal where required. The grooves of the tow ropes still visible in the cast iron and on the brick bridge edges. They walked down the opposite bank.

Billy was examining the graffitied pillars, behind which was a massive wall of concrete stretching up to the motorway above and for a good 20 yards in either direction. This too was covered with graffiti, except where a bonfire had been lit from buddleia branches, bits of wooden pallets, and traffic cones, some of the melted remains could be seen. Here the wall was scorched black for a height of about six feet, and of similar width. The fire was months old, maybe made by rough sleepers in the winter, but now Billy was examining it very closely. Ray didn't notice at first, he was gazing out at the heat haze of the distant canal in the bright sunlight. When he did notice, he did nothing, but as Billy continued to scour the black concrete it drew him in to see what was nothing but a blackened part of a concrete wall. Billy was bending, his face close to touching, sniffing thought Ray, but as he too got closer, he uttered, ‘what the f...’. Because the black surface was not a uniform black, it had incredibly faint scratches, arcs, zig zags over an area of about 3 square feet at the right height of someone who could make marks, maybe with a pin.

‘Are there SOCO photographs of this?’ asked Billy.

Ray thought, he had since joining the team flipped through the SOCO

images,

‘I don’t think so.’ he replied.

He took out his phone and got a direct line to 408. Rash answered, Ray asked him the question, to which a hesitant reply came back the same as Ray’s. ‘Check!’ snapped Ray, and was about to hang up, but Billy grabbed his arm.

‘It’s writing,’ he said, ‘made with someone’s nails, scratched! so we need a full SOCO team here, and now!’

There was some discussion over the phone, The DIs were all out, the DCI and the DCS were with Chief Constable White meeting a guy from The Home Office, there needed to be a press conference follow up to the “Missing Girl” appeals, but now the more gruesome news. Rash was panicking, for he couldn’t disturb superiors in such a meeting, no way. And no way he could get a SOCO team out on his say so.

Ray spoke quickly to Rash, ‘Sorry Rash.’ He hung up. And stared at Billy, Ray looking lost.

‘I’ll sort this.’ Billy said, walking away, taking out his phone from the other pocket from the one from which he produced the pendulum. He walked away down the tow path, he was dialling then speaking, ‘better signal?’ was Ray’s first thought, but it was OK here? He could see Billy talking but not hear anything.

In the spacious office at the top of Lloyd House sat around a Jonathan Charles Extending Georgian Dining table were Detective Chief Superintendent Anne Jones, Detective Chief Inspector Sally

Arcott, Chief Constable White and Dr Paul Wybew-Bond from The Home Office. The Chief Constable had placed their “special” phone and leather-bound notebook on the desk and was talking with Wybew-Bond about the coming storm, the press conference, when “The phone” rang. The Chief quickly picked it up, the phone was one all Chiefs had, which was with them at all times, for certain calls, a terrorist bomb, a major incident, that kind of thing. The Chief listened for what was all of two seconds then put it back down. ‘Excuse me Paul,’ they were already on first name terms, The Chief rose, ‘Sally - a quiet word,’ The Chief beckoned Sally towards the window, something in a low voice was said, the only words the other two heard was ‘... and on my direct orders.’ at which Sally said ‘Excuse me.’ and left the room.

The first SOCO van arrived just 15 minutes later, the photography team, a white transit drove down the service road to the crime scene, on the opposite bank. There was a staring match after they exited the van, no need to shout, Ray’s face saying ‘Stupid!’ as he pointed to the ground on his side of the canal, they replied with looks of ‘Why the f should we know, the other side.’ They decided not to let the other SOCO teams know, revenge by proxy? Which it was when the two other transits and two squad cars arrived. ‘Excessive cavalry.’ thought Ray.

The photographic team, two guys in scene of crime suits, which were irrelevant, came along the tow path on the right side now, to Ray’s greeting, ‘You were fast!’ and he meant it, he’d never known such a rapid response.

The shorter of the two said, ‘We were sent by God!’

‘AKA Chief Constable White’s messenger.’ said the taller.

They were shown the blackened concrete wall and the faint marks, they looked closely, very closely then looked at each other, the taller, raised his Canon 1dx mark iii and took a ream of shots like a quick-fire automatic rifle. At this his partner was giving the look, 'you must be joking'. The results could possibly be described as a very abstract artwork, multiple black squares, 'Might win the Turner Prize!' the shorter guy quipped. They stared at the wall, it almost stared back. A minute passed.

'You need specialist gear, like archaeologists use.' Billy said.

Lights came on in the heads of the two photographers. Both knew, because both, obviously were in photographic clubs, knew of two or more possible candidates, at the University and the Museum. They walked away talking on mobile phones. Once the other two teams arrived, they could do nothing. It was pointed out that the marks, effectively in charcoal were so delicate that no sample should be made until a clear photographic record could be made.

The DNA guy asked, 'for what, DNA?'

'Yes,' said Billy, 'you see these marks were drawn by someone's fingernail, see.'

The DNA guy looked very impressed, as was Ray. The other team also wanting samples had to wait. And more patrol cars were arriving, as the message of where the order came from spread. Then the DCI, Sally Arscott arrived with DI Benjamin Washington. The excess cars were told to, 'Bugger off.' Ray being asked by Sally to deal with that problem. Meanwhile the two photographers had talked to their fellow club members, one from Birmingham City University, a photography lecturer at BCU, Another from The University of

Birmingham in the Archaeology department, he also knew a guy in the Science School and possibly Medicine.

Chapter 10: University Challenge.

The two university's names cause much confusion, and competition. BCU was once the old Polytechnic, and some from "The University" referred to BCU as "The early learning centre". The University of Birmingham being a Redbrick which was in The Russell Group of the 24 UK's top universities. The museum came up empty. Sally took over the calls, she was good, the urgency explained without detail, and the prospect of helping the police with an unspecified major crime was sufficient bait. That, and the time of year, July, so a lack of students, life in academia was dull. They all 'jumped to it'. They had a guy from BCU, someone from the medical school at 'The University', a person working in the Physics department and one in Archaeology.

Some of the SOCO team wanted to try to screen the wall, but Billy stopped them, it might damage the image, he had his Moleskine note pad and was drawing in it what looked like feint scratches, arcs, zig zags. There was one remaining patrol car on the right bank, which was now the side of the canal Billy, Ray, Sally, Ben and the SOCO guys were on, they were co-opted to guard the drawing, whilst the others returned to their cars and waited, or in the case of Sally took calls from Anne and The Chief Constable.

The BCU guy, the lecturer, was in fact female, and arrived first, the BCU campus she worked in being literally just down the road. She had a full plate digital camera, some lights, and an Apple MacBook Pro 16" M1 Pro Chip. The two SOCOs were looking and chatting, and though Gay, the lecturer's name, looked very attractive in Ray's eyes, the SOCOs were eyeing the camera and the Apple Mac respectively. Billy continued to draw. Sally was now watching this scene having finished her phone conferences with higher beings. Gay worked well,

using lights and taking pictures from sharp angles, this having more shadow and so giving more relief to the flatness of the feint marks. ‘Smart.’ thought the smaller SOCO. The results were terribly distorted, but once on the Mac she began the digital magic. She twisted the pictures, enhanced, and then reversed them so the lines appeared black on white. She certainly knew her stuff, had all the right gear and knowledge of how to use it, including the small aluminium stool she unfolded to sit on whilst she worked the magic. Sally, Ray, Ben and the two SOCOs watching.

Gay stopped suddenly and said, ‘Yep, I can see I’ve captured the marks, if you don’t mind, I’ll get back to the Uni finish the job, and email the results.’

Sally said she’d rather get these on a pen drive, and could Ben go back with her to collect the results, ‘Fine.’ she said and walked back to her car with Ben, just as “The University” team arrived. Rivalry is a useful tool, and after Sally had introduced herself, she mentioned BCU’s excellent performance. The University teams first attempt was a FAIL, the guy from the medical School had brought his Canon 1dx mark iii. Next up was the Archaeologist, a bearded youthful looking Jonathan with a setup similar to Gay’s, different camera and a Windows PC. He worked in a similar way, but lacked a folding stool so thought it best to ‘go back to base and work on this over coffee.’ All this time two things were happening, Billy was still drawing, some 7 or 8 pages by now. Meanwhile the physics guy, possibly? very pale, with sunken cheeks and long hair to his waist, tie dye T-shirt and combat shorts, had been carrying in his gear. And lots of it. Once the Archaeologist had finished, Nigel, his name, began. First surprise was no camera, or lap top computer. He had a computer, but obviously not retail, about the size of a small fridge, those that hold beer, and like those it had a clear front door, but it had fans, lots of fans at the

back, and a surprisingly small flat display. The question of power was solved when Nigel cranked up a small generator. He grinned, 'had to borrow this, hope they don't miss it?' He grinned again, Sally, a DCI, looked worried, not wanting a "Taking without permission." problem. The "fridge" started to make noises, the fans, the hard drive and then a purple light through the glass door flickered into life to reveal computer cards and thousands of wires. His other gear looked equally hand made. He spoke as he worked, though not to a particular audience.

'I'll try the laser!'

First, he placed two rods either side of the blackened part of the wall, well away from the image, and asked Billy to step back. The rods had mirrors along them,

'Datum points.' he said.

Then taking a box which was connected to the "fridge" he began frantically waving it across the surface, no attempt at method.

'The Datum points mean the scanning can be arbitrary, in the lab it saves having stepper motors, and it's infrared, so you can't see it, we use this to scan metal surfaces for all sorts of reasons, nano fractures, even crystallines.'

After about 5 minutes he stopped.

'Now the X Rays!' he announced, like presenting the star act.

'Don't worry, it's far less than even your dentist's.' he laughed.

He had a thing that looked like a vacuum cleaner, again linked to the fridge, and slowly “painted” the wall from about a foot from the surface, which took another 5 minutes.

‘All done.’

he said switching off the generator, he began unplugging and dismantling. With a grunt he picked up the fridge,

‘It’s not really a computer,’ he said, ‘more a super recording machine, back at base we will let Robbie chew the data overnight.’

‘Robbie?’ asked Ray,

‘Yeh, Robbie, I think it’s an acronym, don’t know of what, it’s like a small neural network thing.’

His voice trailing away as he took it towards his van, which had “This van runs on Hydrogen, the Fuel of the Future.” and the University’s logo written on it. He returned.

‘If you pop round tomorrow around 11, should be done, thanks this has been great, really exciting, like real police work, in the field.’

‘By his skin colour he doesn’t look like he gets out much.’ Ray said, while Sally had stopped worrying about generator theft, but now was worrying about the cost of running a ‘Neural network thing.’ overnight. The day was the strangest she could remember and wasn’t over. Billy had finished drawing and was talking to the two other SOCO teams, about taking samples, something like hungry dogs they were now champing at the bit, to mix metaphors. Eventually people drifted away, leaving two patrol officers to cordon

off the area and take the first watch this side of the canal.

Ray drove Billy back to Lloyd House, deep in thought, then on the elevated section of the A38(M) Ray said,

‘That call you made, it was to The Chief Constable, wasn’t it?’

‘Yes.’ replied Billy,

‘I have the emergency number, they – Chiefs, have them at all times no matter what.’

‘Blimey, why did you get it, how and why?’

‘When I met Rebecca Sharif and The Chief Constable, after Rebecca left, we talked, I explained what would likely happen, so I got the phone number, we talked for 15 minutes.’

‘How were you convincing?’ Ray asked.

‘Oh, some details and reasons for non-related things, some personal some to do with the force.’ replied Billy.

Ray lost for words, then said ‘And what will happen.’

‘A maelstrom, and not catching the killer and more.’ was the reply.

‘Not?’, thought Ray, but said nothing.

Chapter 11: The Storm approaches.

The team reassembled in 408 except for the 2 on night duty. Ben had arrived in 408, a patrol car waiting as he left the BCU building, he had brought the USB pen drive, which he was uploading into a separate folder in the SOCO resource area for operation Aston. Sally stood and said,

‘Before anything there is an update next door with the DCS , the advisory team and our head of public relations. It seemed there had been a deal of activity since Dr Paul Wybew-Bond’s arrival.’

Sally explained, the constables on the scene underneath the junction would soon get company and the planned night team of DI Ron Smith and DS Kate Moore would not be needed at the moment. They moved to the next room, and they sat as before, though all in a semi-circle. DCS Anne Jones addressed those assembled.

‘Some of you already know but having taken advice and soundings from a number of sources, and the impending interviews on Monday with the art students and Mahjoub and Rebecca Sharif it’s almost certain that the details of this horrific event will become public. The Chief Constable, the Home Office exec, our own head of public relations and others all agree that it would be best if we, West Midlands Police, pre-empt any leak, and by that I mean we will have a press conference at 11 tomorrow, and I anticipate another on Saturday when the media storm begins.

And it will be a storm. We will need to close off the whole area underneath the Gravelly Hill interchange, and we anticipate not only intense media coverage but the accompanying interest and usual

claims from the public. We estimate given the nature of the crime we would, if not prepared for this, be overwhelmed. To this end we have or are in the process of setting up comms and caller support on two floors in Maclean House. We will be in charge, but experienced officers from both the Met and other forces are on their way. All this is in view of the lack of progress but more importantly the details of this crime cannot remain as that of a missing child. I'd like the advisory team to be given access to 408 when and if any need to be called in to help with the detectives leading the investigation. Thank you.'

Chapter 12: Lines.

Billy was not in the position to make the point that progress had been made or was this the time and place to make this known, he would need hard evidence, and that would be soon. As they walked back to 408 Sally said to Billy,

‘Well, did you smell anything?’

‘Yes,’ he replied, ‘I could smell death, a body in a wood, and tall pine trees, I could smell venom, burning and burnt wood and something else which I think the writing on the wall will tell us.’

She looked briefly into his eyes, then walked on. The photographs from Gay were excellent, 10 high-definition pictures in black on white, some detailed close ups and a set of lower definition in white on black, plus the original distorted shots. Ben had displayed them onto a set of large screens which had replaced the old pin wallpaper methods. The whole group was looking at these zig zags, arcs, and lines for some time until Billy spoke,

‘Could I have two sets of these on A4 do you think?’

‘Sure,’ said Sally Arscott, ‘any particular reason?’

‘I need to fully read them, some I have,’ he held up his Moleskine notebook, ‘and then try to translate them.’

‘Read?’ said Reverend Poole, ‘but it’s just scribble.’

Which is what everyone thought except for three, Billy of course,

Professor Catherine Mulberry, and Ray. Ray because of how his mind works, it has limits, and these he never worries about or attempts to go beyond, what is beyond he knows is true or not on the basis of trust. He trusts Billy, so if he says he can read scribble, he can. This doesn't mean Ray is somehow impaired regarding intelligence, he's worked this out long ago. He can play checkers, or drafts as he called the game, very very well, but not chess. So, a nephew who was reputedly an excellent county class chess player, but extremely arrogant, was shocked at being well beaten three times in games of checkers with Ray. Ray was also excellent at dominoes and cribbage but had decided he could never play bridge.

'Read as they might be runes, or hidden runes amongst the noise.' said Professor Mulberry.

'Translate, read, but only try to translate into English, how is that possible if you can read these runes, understand them, but not be able to translate?' asked Dr McNeil the Criminal Psychologist.

'Oh,' said Billy, 'firstly some languages are not declarative or propositional, more expressions of feelings, like some regarding say a rite of passage ceremony, they might translate easily into dance.'

'So, you could dance this "text" then?' asked McNeil.

'Not this one I think, and with some others I'd have to be naked.' replied Billy.

Ray and others did manage not to laugh, though some responses ranged from annoyance to stupefaction.

It took Ben 30 minutes using a blue light to get to the University of

Birmingham and collect the image files from Jonathan who had phoned to say they were ready. They were good, but not as good as Gay's. 'One nil to BCU.' thought Ray. Collecting his copies of the BCU photographs Billy left for his hotel.

He took a circular route down Bull Street, 'Trams, he thought,' passing the old Lewis's store to his left, now offices, once "The" department store. He remembered its 5th floor the "Toy floor", where as a lad he was taken to see the real Father Christmas. He continued walking, taking a right into High Street. He was looking for the old Dixons, a camera and computer shop, but looking up Union Street he could see that it was now a Sainsbury's local supermarket. Still further down High Street was a new shop, Curry's Black, whatever that was, looking harder he could then see, it was what he wanted, a version of PC Warehouse. He hadn't expected this chain of events, so not brought his laptop. Not for a funeral. He walked into the shop took the lift to the first floor and scanned the isles, seeing a cheap Lovono ideapad.

'Can I take one of these?' he said to the sales guy, and no he didn't want a more powerful model, or MS Office, or an extended warranty and no he wasn't bothered about the colour. Though he was glad it turned out not to be pink. So, he walked up New Street, crossed Victoria Square and over the bridge to Broad Street, and the Hyatt.

In his hotel room, he took a shower, and realised he needed more clothes. He had one change left apart from his black suit, which he had to buy just for the funeral. Another shop in town he thought. He un-boxed the laptop, then thought, 'no bag either', grabbed some Hyatt note paper and with a Hyatt pen made a list. Underwear x2, trousers shirts and socks, also a bag of some sort. The laptop booted up and after all the Microsoft nonsense he logged onto the Hyatt's

WiFi. He downloaded some software including Open Office. So ready to go.

He did some work on the ‘texts’, from the BCU pictures and from his notebook. At about 7 o’clock he went down to his supper, as he now called it, not dinner. Whatever else came along, Friday was set to be a big day. He ordered Orkney Scallop cauliflower, soy caramel, shiso, starter, then Roast Quail confit leg, chamomile, girolles and finally warm malt cake with juniper, red berries, smoked caramel, with two glasses of red wine.

Before returning to his room, he took a walk around the canal. This took him right down Bridge Street for a few yards, then right again onto the tow path which ran both sides of the canal. He walked underneath Broad Street, and past the back of the ICC, International Conference Centre, and Symphony Hall. Then past the Malt House pub, over two more bridges and back along the opposite side of the canal. Bemused by the burger bars, restaurants, and bars. All bar One, Slug and Lettuce, where once was a polluted dirty canal and abandoned and decaying remnants of Victorian industrialization. And so back to Bridge Street via the Mailbox, to his hotel room and sleep, and dreams.

He woke about 3 in the morning. He got out of bed, put on his dressing gown and turned on his new laptop. Then he loaded Bing Maps, he zoomed in to the West Midlands, then he looked at the screen, briefly thinking. He fetched the pendulum from his jacket pocket, this was difficult but not impossible. He held the pendulum in his right hand and with his other used a finger to trace across the screen, glancing at the pendulum’s movement as his finger moved. The circular movement became linear. He zoomed in on the map and switched to the Ordnance Survey view. Continued zooming in, then

stopped. He made a note in his Moleskine Notebook, closed down the laptop, put the pendulum back in his pocket and then went back to sleep.

Chapter 13. The Chase.

Wikipedia gives ‘Chase is a term used in the United Kingdom to define a type of land reserved for hunting use by its owner.’ it adds ‘Cannock Chase (grid reference SK000165), often referred to locally as The Chase... It comprises a mixture of natural deciduous woodland, coniferous plantations, open heathland, small lakes, and the remains of early industry, such as coal mining.’

Ray woke early but his phone rang before he could get breakfast, cornflakes, he loved them.

‘It’s Billy, Ray! we have to get over to Cannock Chase as soon as possible, pick me up, I’ll wait outside.’ then he rang off.

Ray not stopping for cornflakes, he picked up his jacket. It was a drive from Edgbaston where his flat was, and to drive to the Hyatt could take 15 minutes or 45 depending on how heavy the traffic was. Friday morning has the school, and the office runs, it was only ever heavier when England were playing at Edgbaston! but Ray had a blue light and siren, jumping traffic lights and cutting over lanes, this was one bit of being a copper the child in him loved, that and he still liked cornflakes. As he drove up Bridge Street, siren screaming he saw Billy sitting on the wall outside the Hyatt enjoying the sun. He pulled to a stop, looked at his watch, and thought, ‘12 minutes- not bad!’

Chief Constable White was at breakfast, coffee, and croissant. Used to these kinds of things, it’s part of the job, difficult at first but they are trained, role played and so now confident. The team for the press conference would consist of White, DCS Anne Jones, DCI Sally Arscott, and the head of public relations - ‘never could remember his

name White thought', and Dr Andrew McNeil the Criminal Psychologist. It would be short, along the lines of,

'The situation regarding the missing girl, Eve Sharif is now a murder enquiry. I have to release some gruesome details as we are yet to find the body, only her head has been found a few days ago underneath the Gravelly Hill interchange. We did not release this information earlier as this might have jeopardized our ongoing enquiries. We have of course kept the parents fully informed. We are asking for any previous sightings of the girl or any other information.'

That sort of thing, short and direct, you couldn't lesson the facts. There would be a telephone number, email contact and messaging number. There would be a picture of the girl as before in the "Missing girl." press conferences and the contact numbers, no questions, but a fuller press conference tomorrow Saturday the 7th at 11 AM and a final,

'That's all at this time I can't answer any questions, thank you.' Later added, thanks to Billy,

'We are following several positive lines of enquiry'.

Then a media explosion. The parents would not be present. And a press conference was scheduled on Saturday with possible world-wide media.

Billy got into the front passenger seat of the Ford Mondeo and said,

'To Cannock Chase, A460, left at Moor's Gorse down a track, Rainbow Valley - and can we do this quickly, I might, almost certainly will need to speak to your boss before 11.'

Ray wasn't sure of which boss but made a terrific sweep and headed down Bridge Street, Holliday Street, Holloway Head, the Pagoda island, A38(M) M6 and Cannock exit. They flew through the tunnels and over the flyover running against the tide of the contraflow, with lights and siren. As they hit the M6 off the A38(M) beneath them teams of uniform officers were watching as civilian contractors were setting up tents, a mobile canteen, and toilets. The whole area now fenced off with temporary metal fencing and patrolled and guarded by foot soldiers of The West Midland Police, as this would become a major "attraction" to the media and public. They had even closed the canal causing detours of miles for holidaying boaters.

Ray drove off the A 460 at Moor's Gorse down the track, Rainbow Valley, for about a mile when Billy said 'stop'. Killing the siren but not the lights they got out the car. Billy looked around, smelt the air, so Ray did. Nothing, after what, six days?

'Ray,' said Billy 'stand on the car and see if you can see anything.'

It was not Ray's car, and Billy had asked so he did. Looking round, across the bracken,

'Nothing,' he said, 'Nothing at all – might be a patch over there some burnt branches... but nothing.'

He climbed down with a jump, disturbing a snake which was warming itself on the path,

'Blimey a snake!'

But Billy was already on his phone and Ray guessed the next.

Cannock Chase being in Staffordshire is outside of Chief Constable White's patch, so a phone call was required, dialling the number for the direct emergency line to The Chief of the Staffordshire force.

'Hello this is Cheese here, is that Orange?'

'Yes.' came the reply after 5 seconds of delay.

Cheese continued, 'The missing girl is now a murder, I've a press at 11 but want a SOCO team in Cannock Chase ASAP, Moor's Gorse down a track, Rainbow Valley, can you send some troops, initially liaison, but you might want a DI there to meet and greet. There are already two who are on the case, they were too early for me to know.' Chief Constable White lied.

'Done,' was the reply, 'be in touch, good luck with the press.'

The call finished. Cheese was from "chalk and cheese", chalk from "chalky white". Orange is not the only fruit, apples are, and so the game that the area's Chiefs played had evolved, at first for fun, then realising the added security they kept it up, added to that each time the names must change. White could be "emulsion", a "shade of pale", Chief Constable Macintosh could be "Orange", "Raincoat" or "Big with fries". So, a single eaves dropper would not get the secret, and it kept minds active. Some even spent odd afternoons in slack periods working these out in advance. A special bonus was when a new Chief was appointed, waiting to see how long before they caught on.

Billy and Ray had walked to meet the SOCO team at Moor's Gorse just off the A 460, not wanting to disturb the track any more than

necessary. Two Staffordshire PCs had arrived just as Billy and Ray got to Moor's Gorse; they had driven from Cannock. About 15 minutes later an unmarked car but with blue lights flashing arrived with a DI and DS, introductions were made. It was a pleasant summers morning and a drive to the Chase was a better option than sitting inside Police HQ in Stafford. The Staffordshire police knew about a missing girl, the DS said naïvely.

'Missing, why then are you here?'

The look from his DI said it all, 'obvious missing is not the reason, and this location can only mean one thing', though he was wrong on the detail. Eventually, what seemed an age, the SOCO team arrived. Two vans. Billy spoke,

'A mile down, check for other vehicles, then the bracken, then the burnt patch about 10 yards right of the car. You need to get ash and soil from under the top layer of ash, there should be traces of blood that has not been burnt underneath. And anything else.'

He got a look of 'Are we stupid or what!' but after about 20 minutes a SOCO waved to Billy and Ray as she walked back to Moor's Gorse, and spoke,

'You can take a look now... but only look, just the scene of a fire, and disturbance in the bracken, but I'd say not by a group.'

She handed two pairs of rubber boots. The Staff's DI looked at them,

'OK?' questioned Billy, 'Sure.' said Ray,

and looking at the two Staffs detectives said, 'boot up and join us if

you want.'

Of course they did. The two PCs had to stay behind, they looked on. The scene was not much, no body, a fire had been lit, bracken then branches over maybe a sheet of polythene, the burnt edges remained.

'Get the samples back for analyses now.' said Ray.

So, two officers left in the one van leaving the others. Ray asked that the area be cordoned off and a couple of PCs kept on duty even after the rest of SOCO left. Then they reversed their car, shook hands with the Staffs detectives and left for Lloyd House. On the way back Billy phoned to tell Sally a possible site of interest had been found. The Chief had been told of the "writing" and now of Cannock, so could now reasonably add 'we have what we consider two promising and definite lines of enquiry.' into the press conference. Anne puzzled at the word 'definite'.

Traces of blood, some which had been exposed to heat, others in the soil likewise. A DNA test result is possible in as little as 24 hours. Samples sent to the University hospital would be ready in 10.

There is little literature regarding the effect of fire and extreme heat on blood and the detection of blood and DNA, but what there was, had involved Dr Anke Krebs of the University of Birmingham. The Doctor though on leave was at home, he got the call and was now in the lab waiting for the SOCO team from the Cannock site.

The press conference went as well as could be expected, the 'Definite lines of enquiry.' helped, and now the news spread out not like ripples on a pond, but much much faster. By midnight the match

was made, the blood at Cannock was that of Eve Sharif. Two immediate things followed from this, first the Saturday conference could now be not “promising and definite” but “definite”. Second the two Staffordshire PCs would by 12.30 PM not be alone, and by morning the area had the same metal fencing and facilities as under the A38(M) M6 junction. And the footpaths and car parks closed, as well as cones alongside both sides of the A460. Staffordshire Police had a major incident site.

Chapter 14: Holland.

In the meantime, as arranged, Ben re-visited The University of Birmingham to get the results from Nigel in the Physics Department. Ben found him in a lab where you might bring a Frankenstein to life. Ben was sent as he now knew his way around the Campus, even where the physics building was. Nigel was alone in the lab and sat at a bench and he looked like he was repairing what was an electric toy train. He looked up at Ben,

‘Hi, it’s Western Enterprise, D1000,’ he put the train down and said, ‘Ah police, yes, the canal, yes.’ Ben was waving his warrant card and said,

‘The pictures?’

‘Sure,’ Nigel replied, he picked up a flash drive, ‘I should go through these pictures to explain, it’s complicated.’

Ben had a brief conversation with Sally, re “complicated” and she agreed to Ben bringing in Nigel. Nigel enjoyed the car ride, with blue lights flashing, and on arriving at Lloyd House took the ID lanyard and placed it over his head along with another two or three he already had. Ben was wondering if he slept with them on.

The team gathered around the screen as Nigel plugged in the drive.

Sally said, ‘Nigel should we let your line manager know where you are?’

Nigel looked up puzzled, ‘The Dean?’ he said.

‘No,’ replied Sally, ‘a head tech, or department head.’

‘Oh, the head tech would be no good, and the Department Head is me, hmmm... Doctor Nigel Summers.... or is it Professor?’

Some mouths opened and closed. And Ben was typing, ‘fuck’, he couldn’t help saying, which attracted Sally’s gaze, there on the University’s site,

“Head of Physics and Nuclear Research, Professor Nigel Summers, a list of qualifications and visiting universities, Stanford, MIT, Princeton, CERN...”, and finally “Nobel Prize for Physics 2001”.

Ben could have sworn he heard Sally say ‘Shit.’, she beckoned the others over one by one, eyebrows were raised, or grins, and then Professor Mulberry whispered,

‘I know I could have told you, the geek they all seek.’

Nigel was now talking in English, but no one could understand, they could only follow as he seemed not to comprehend or bother with the concept of sentences, some were wondering how he could breathe, one person decided he was using the Tibetan breathing technique used in throat singing. Eventually images appeared, similar to Gay’s but everyone had to admit sharper, again black on white, and with meaningless figures along the top and bottom, not to Nigel they thought. As if reading their minds,

‘Don’t know what those figures are at top and bottom, no clue, they must mean something.’ he said.

‘Now the X rays!’ continued Nigel, this was like the star act was due on next, and it was.

The images were still black lines but now on a pale amber background which gave them an odd ethereal character, and there were thousands of lines. Nigel was now talking about angles of polarization, Fuzzy logic? Heuristic interpretations from Robbie and getting excited. The images changed, slowly the dark lines with each successive image disappeared, the familiar lines of his early images of Gay’s appeared, they too in successive images disappeared revealing slowly on the pale amber background the image of a five-pointed star with eagle and crescent, but upside down.

Professor Mulberry and Billy both said in unison ‘Santo Daime’, Billy added ‘upside down and not six points, a hexagram but a five-pointed mullet.’

Professor Mulberry explained that Santo Daime is a syncretic religion that began in the 1930s in the Amazon, incorporating several religions and traditions, some in which Ayahuasca is used, which has substances containing DMT, a psychedelic drug which can give extreme hallucinogenic effects as well as being a strong emetic, and that the use of Ayahuasca was gaining popularity in the west with people wanting to experiment with its effects. She went on to add that her interest in these syncretic religions, in fact in all religions was from a purely academic stance. ‘It’s animal behaviour, I am an unrepentant atheist.’ she finished, with a glance at Billy.

But Billy wasn’t listening, he leaned over to Ray and quietly said.

‘We have to go to Amsterdam.’

Of the various other activities, of which there were many that Friday, was the problem with Amsterdam. At one point it was 'Out of the question.', then 'Sometime next week maybe.', 'Monday.', then finally 'You are booked on the morning plane from Birmingham Airport, the Dutch police are expecting you and will have someone to meet you, show you to your hotel and liaison.' The "you" being Billy and of course Ray.

The pattern was obvious, the news conference began at 11 and was all over in 15 minutes, once the front bench left ignoring the shouts from the media, they left too, or phoned, emailed, and texted. To the cynical, and the very very cynical, it ticked so many boxes for the news media in summer when nothing much was happening. A young girl, whose parents were of African, Asian origin, whose mother was an ordained priest, and the means of death horrific. So, by 12.00 PM the news was world-wide, European News Headlines, in North America, Americans were waking up to this news.

The requests from Chief Constable White and Dr Paul Wybew-Bond about the proposed Amsterdam trip travelled to the Home Secretary, who contacted his opposite in The Netherlands, who was watching the news at that moment, and so the details being settled. But that was not the end, when the Dutch Minister of The Interior told his boss, the Prime Minister of The Netherlands, he immediately contacted his opposite in the UK. Nothing much more happened at this level, except the hotel reservations upgraded and a senior member of the Amsterdam police and the liaison officer would greet Billy and Ray on arrival.

This gave Billy the late afternoon for shopping. He bought clothes in Primark and TK Max, but a bag was important, so he went into what old Birmingham calls Rackhams, the rest of the world The House of

Fraser, a department store. He bought a leather satchel for his computer and any other things like books, and a travel bag on wheels, on offer because of it being bright red. That evening they both, Billy and Ray, prepared, packing. Billy had dinner at 7.00 PM. A starter of Grilled Vegetable salad egg yolk, chicken skin, buttermilk, followed by Cornish turbot, oyster tempura, caviar, leek, and finally Frozen Meringue, cucumber, sorre, and two glasses of red wine, even with fish.

Chapter 15: Amsterdam.

The next morning a car, driven by Kate, she won the lottery, took them down the Coventry Road, blue lights, and this time a motor bike escort. Check in was quick, they discovered, for business class. A short flight, and a Q and A from Ray on both Santo Daime and Dinka. Ray asked Billy why they were going to Holland to talk to members of the Santo Daime religion. Billy said there were three reasons, whilst he knew of at least two “churches” in London, the religion which began back in the 30s first came to Europe in The Netherlands, so it was more accepted there, secondly because of the use of yahuasca, a banned substance in the UK, the UK churches were not amenable to questions, the Dutch authorities being more easy with its use especially in a “religious” setting, toleration was something the Dutch were proud of.

‘And the third?’ Ray asked,

‘Art, I think it might be art, we should find out tomorrow.’ Billy replied.

As for the Dinka, Billy was getting out his Moleskine notebook at this point and explaining some of the drawings was Dinka, and it was a kind of ‘map’.

‘With boundaries?’ Ray asked.

‘No.’ said Billy, but then froze, and turned to a new page and was drawing and writing.

‘As soon as we disembark, I need to speak to Sally.’ he said.

The KLM flight landed and whilst taxiing one of the hostesses began on speaker,

‘Will passengers remain seated, and once the seat belt sign is off could Mr Wood and Mr Taylor come to the forward door. Thank you’.

The arrival was more impressive than the departure, they were met at the exit of the plane by two Dutch police, a man, their liaison officer called Frans, and a woman whose rank was much higher, they were taken downstairs to a car and began their drive to the Hilton. While they were driving Billy excused the phone call, and after a few minutes was talking to Sally. The message was, check the distance from where the head was found, and using this point as the centre of an equilateral triangle, and the wall opposite, using this as the top point of the triangle, check carefully on anything at those other points, ‘OK, I’ll send a fax from the hotel when we arrive.’ he finished.

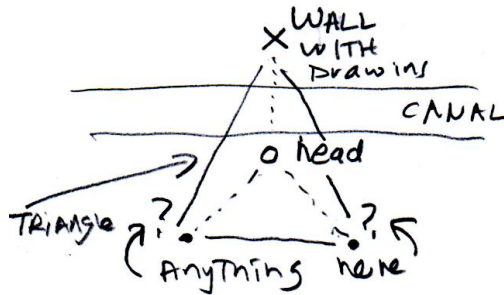
He then immediately phoned back,

‘And if there is something there like a wall or pillar and you find nothing, get Nigel to scan both, if you show him the drawing, he’s a bright boy he will guess what we are looking for. Oh, and maybe checkout the Art thing. Bye.’

When they arrived, Billy sat in the foyer and drew an equilateral triangle. In the centre he put a circle, and wrote “Head”, across these lines marked “canal” and the top of the triangle, he marked “wall with drawing”. At the other two points of the triangle, he wrote “?”. He then asked the clerk on the desk, who showed him into the back office and a fax machine. Another call to Sally for the

number and it was sent.

Hilton Amsterdam *****
Amsterdam, Holland FAX +31 020 7866



They checked into their hotel rooms, the two Dutch detectives heading back to their HQ, Billy only slightly disappointed that it wasn't 'The Room'. When he said this to Ray, Ray seemed puzzled.

'The Room,' said Billy, 'That John and Yoko stayed in when here.'

'Oh.' was the reply.

Arrangements were made for an afternoon briefing and then the itinerary for the next day. They had a light lunch in a cafe and took a taxi to the Dutch Police HQ. After the meeting they walked back to the hotel, had a meal on the evening and sat in the lobby, anything like tourism would be inappropriate.

The venue for the press conference was changed to a larger room,

The main UK stations had TV gear, and some were also present from France, Germany, and Holland. CNN and other US stations had teams in Europe on their way and were flying in journalists from the States. All the major newspapers were also present. The conference was a media frenzy but White came out OK, if not better than The Chief Constable or any in the Force expected.

White could now add to what was said at the previous conference, 'We have DNA confirmation, and a possible murder site, but no body as yet.'

That now more lines of enquiry were being investigated and there was support from other police forces, no effort is being spared. Still with no questions allowed, the conference finished, with cries of 'Chief Constable, when do you expect to find the body?' echoing in the room, as if anyone knew. As if? White now believed that someone had been right so far, Billy, so two people knew.

At the other two points of the "triangle" that Billy had drawn and faxed to Lloyd House, underneath the junction was a concrete pillar and a much older brick wall from the time of the building of the canal. Nothing to be seen, but Nigel was delighted to help, now knowing more about the investigation, but this didn't faze him. It was the geometry that fascinated him and working on something far more tangible than elementary particles. Even the press around the site made this all so different. At midnight DCI Sally Arscott, and DI Smith, DC Asiff, and DS Moore were still in 408 at Lloyd House when the call came from Nigel. Seems he decided to increase Robbie's neural network nodes.

'Same,' he said, 'I'll bring the flash card over in the morning.'

He declined a lift into the headquarters in the morning, he would cycle, of course he would, if it was December and snow, he would probably use skis, thought Sally. Sally messaged Ray, who replied, but didn't wake Billy. The four detectives left 408 to go to their homes and get some sleep. Outside Lloyd House the media presence had grown, as it had at Spaghetti junction. In Cannock a large car park on the edge of the town became a media camp. From there TV journalists could stand with the Chase in the background giving their reports which repeated endlessly the same news with faux concern. The FA Premier League had finished in May, Aston Villa finishing 10th, so avoiding relegation, their ground not in use but more importantly it had a large car park for the media, and facilities for food and such like. Power League Aston, a football based private leisure centre offering five a side football events nearby had a car park where cameras could film journalists with the junction behind them, perfect. A limited group was also outside the empty home of the Sharifs, a PC standing outside. The Sharifs still in a secret location and recovering from shock.

Chapter 16: Sunday.

Sunday in Birmingham consisted of briefings, at many levels then up to the Home Secretary.

The team had drawn a map of the scene at Spaghetti, the triangle, the three points at each an inverse five-pointed star with eagle and crescent. Professor Mulberry had been busy explaining the Santo Daime religion, or “cult” as she called it to various people in Lloyd House. It was after all her current area of research, and with the trend in the popularization of Ayahuasca, especially in the US, who knows what this might bring. The experience of “egolessness” that the drug gave was becoming a “must have”, from the use of the substitute DMT to expensive trips to South America for the “original” experience with a shaman guide. Despite her “disappointing” work in The Netherlands, this had changed all of that, she anticipated funding for Brazil and the Amazon, hopefully by next winter. She did though, Sally thought, look tired, darkness underneath her eyes, despite the make-up.

Sunday morning, in Amsterdam, the breakfast at the Hilton was good, but only for Billy, no cornflakes for Ray. Billy was informed of the “triangle”, with the other two sets of “writings” on the old wall and pillar. He took this information with no surprise, saying to Ray,

‘The stars at the three points were a boundary to keep something in, but the zig zag writing is a map, an exit, a way out. The “maps” were drawn on top of the stars.’

‘Keep what in?’ asked Ray.

‘The soul of Eve Sharif.’ replied Billy.

The itinerary was to visit two “churches” of the Santo Daimé in Amsterdam. Both had been contacted prior by Frans their Dutch police liaison officer and agreed to meet with Frans and the detectives from England. The first group they contacted and had met in a large house in a district called Halfweg in the suburbs. Clean streets and neat modern houses. The second group they met were closer to the centre and more what Ray expected, a canal with a street either side, older terraced houses, maybe once belonging to merchants, 4 stories high. After fairly long conversations between Billy and the members, in each case brought out unprovoked the fact that both had had a series of interviews over a period of 6 weeks prior with a Professor Catherine Mulberry, who had seemed very friendly at first, then not so, such that both groups declined to continue the meetings. Part due to her wanting to take Ayahuasca as part of their ritual. Both had refused as she was not part of their faith, and it was not just an excuse for “tripping out” as they put it.

As Billy spoke Ray showed both groups the picture of a five-pointed star with eagle and crescent, they had found this strange, in fact both groups became quite nervous,

‘It should be a six-pointed star.’ someone said, as evidence of this they showed that they were all wearing a silver star as such on a chain, they all showed these to the three detectives as proof. At the end of the meeting with the second group the leader or spokesperson was shown the picture again, as she seemed doubtful, and Billy said, ‘It’s not that way up, turn it upside down.’, Ray did, which resulted in pandemonium. Frans now talking rapidly in Dutch slowly calmed the group, and then began a long dialogue, much head shaking, Frans finally saying to them, ‘Bedankt.’, and beckoning

Ray and Billy to leave.

Many religions are dualist, though some not, but the adoption of an alternative is often the case. Like in Christian monotheism, and the “alternative” of devil worship, and ideas around the idea of Lucifer. The upside-down star being a sign of one such example of this in the Santo Daime in Amsterdam. The name of this other group they wouldn’t say, but eventually Frans got a person’s name but that was all. He called this name in to his HQ, and after more Dutch neither of the two English detectives could understand, he was writing details of an address in Amsterdam. In English now,

‘This is not a good area, drugs, some crime, but also anarchists, neo fascists. It seems there are some artists who are activists, anarchists who they, the Santo Daime, say have corrupted their religion, they gave a name of one of the members of this group and he is known to us.’

To Billy and Ray Bijlmermeer seemed respectable, tidy streets, tall but seemingly well-kept blocks of flats, shops selling groceries and alcohol, and they noticed a tattoo bar, but these too, clean looking and neat. Not what Ray or Billy expected. But this was Holland. They entered one of the tall blocks, it too was tidy, the lift worked, nothing to say it was not a respectable building with respectable people. Frans knocked on a door and shouted ‘Politie!’ and the door opened. A man with many piercings and face tattoos answered, the room was dark with figures moving about, and now they could smell strong acrid scents. The guy knew his rights, from watching body language, no he was not letting pigs into his home. Frans was talking in Dutch, but then he said, ‘Professor Catherine Mulberry’, the guy collapsed in laughter, shouted the name and ‘Ja ayahasca veel ayahasca...’ to the figures in the room where laughter and screams

followed, finally the guy spat at Frans and slammed the door.

Billy just said, 'All I wanted to know, we'll fly back Monday, very many thanks.'

Frans drove them back to the much more respectable Hilton where he left them, they thanking him. Again, keeping a low profile, an evening meal, then a couple of hours in the hotel bar. It was best, if a photograph of two English detectives sight-seeing in Amsterdam whilst investigating such a crime was not to be risked, it would be hard to justify, especially to DCI Sally Arscott, thought Ray.

On Monday the arrival was reversed, the same two Dutch police, this time Ray and Billy were first on the plane with the air crew. The plane taxied to a runway and took off in a steep climb into another beautiful sunny blue sky. Billy watched the coast below of dunes slipping away, and then the North Sea, and some fishing boats. Ray had the aisle seat, and to him the narrow body of the plane and the steep climb made him think he was riding in an aluminium cigar tube. At about 30 minutes into the flight the seat belt signs lit up again and the pilot, who had introduced herself earlier in a Dutch accented English, and again in Dutch, German and French, informed them that they were diverting to London City airport, due to some technical warning light, not to worry as it is only a precautionary regulation. The plane flew along the Thames Estuary then banked and landed at the City airport. It was around 11 AM. Neither Ray nor Billy seemed particularly worried, but Billy paused briefly, looked puzzled, and then took the pendulum from his pocket, this time he remained stationary, it circled 6 or so times, then as before began to oscillate back and forth, 'So now it begins.' Billy said under his breath. Ray giving the expression of a puzzled Jack Russell.

Chapter 17: Three trains.

Disregarding any statements advising the passengers on the diverted KLM flight on how to get to Birmingham, the two quickly got a black cab at the airport for Euston Station. They made the 12 o'clock Pendolino Inter City to Birmingham New Street without a hitch. Again, nothing particular in this but Billy thought it strange, strange because there was no hitch, there should have been, if the "they" were to stop them getting to Lloyd House that afternoon. The "they" was as yet unknown, known about but not yet with a name to be discovered, the unknown people, factors and forces behind these events. The train was not very full, Monday lunchtime was not a peak travel time. They had glimpsed the Grand Union canal as they passed through Camden and its new apartment blocks, then the industrial sites which gave way to urban detached and semi-detached houses. Gardens with neat lawns, or scrappy wastes, most with conservatories, some with loft conversions and the numerous trampolines marking family life in the suburbs. The old landmark of the towers of Wembley Stadium on the right was now gone and, in its place, the giant metal arch. The houses eventually gave way to football pitches, scrappy fields with the odd black and white horse in them, and eventually golf courses and then finally the country, fields, and the occasional farm buildings. The London Midland and Scottish (L.M.S.) Railway followed the path of the Grand Union canal for much of the route to Birmingham, and from time to time it could be seen, with its narrow boats, now pleasure craft. And in Billy's mind he thought of its course running north and into the network of canals in Birmingham where it would run through Bordesley to link with the Fazeley Canal, and the dark spaces underneath the M6, A38(M) junction, the scene of finding the head. They passed through the edge of the Chilterns whose hills could be seen in the distance,

but here there was a flat and fairly uninteresting landscape which slipped quickly by. The train sped through Bletchley and Milton Keynes Stations. Which made Billy's mind tour the rooms of his flat, only a mile away. He pictured this, nondescript except for the drawings and books which filled bookcases and overflowed onto tables. He didn't miss this, living there that is, though, he thought of moving but where, back to the Amazon?

At one point near Rugby the even newer transport system, the M1, ran parallel with both the canal and the railway, now the new Pendolino trains travelling at 125 mph no longer keeping pace with cars on the motorway, but outstripping them. And a motorway on which often the traffic was stationary. Missing any food on the plane they got sandwiches, the standard egg and cress of railway journeys. Billy opting for mineral water, and Ray a rather lacklustre coffee. The train stopped at Rugby, then out of the station past closed and derelict engine works, but the still very much active cement works, pouring steam into the air. A point where the old L.M.S. lines split, with two heading north to Manchester, and the other, which their train took, northwest to Coventry and Birmingham. Pulling out of Coventry past closed factories associated with car manufacture. 'Peugeot?' thought Ray. The train passed through a couple of commuter stations, the countryside becoming more lush, the fields now lined and dotted with oak and ash trees. They approached to where the line crossed the river Blythe, a small river but evidently 'a particularly fine example of a lowland river on clay'. Billy pondered on its source a few miles south, and how there must be fields where rain falls and at some point, there is a watershed of maybe inches, where the rain would drain into a ditch which in turn drain to the Blythe, and thence to the Tame, hence Tamworth. He and his father had fished the Tame, not though the Blythe, its waters belonging to the Packington Estate. The Tame makes its lazy way north to the

Trent, one of the big three river systems of England, and so to the Humber and the North Sea. What of the other nearby raindrop, into a ditch which eventually would find its way to the Avon near Coventry, this Avon being that of Shakespeare. He knew of another two and had once an argument with some old boys in a pub who claimed there was just one river Avon. That of Warwickshire, Somerset, and Hampshire! This Midland Avon joining the Severn at Tewkesbury and then into the Bristol Channel and the Atlantic Ocean. Rivers and seas, hills and mountains and man's consciousness in these places, is the origin of the religions of mankind he thought, they bind and create, they do not alienate, and if one could become attuned, they would speak, as they did to Billy. The rivers seem to talk, from fishing as a lad, through his travels, and now he watched the brown Blythe below, mumbling something, taking all the time in the world. To the left hidden by the dense summer foliage the old packhorse bridge and beyond that the sleepy village in the summer heat of Hampton-in-Arden.

A sudden sound, 'BANG' a tremor, jolt as the train braked, noises, screams, luggage falling, people facing forward lurching out of their seats. The train manager in his office thrown from his chair. The girl in the refreshment bar thrown onto the floor. Ray was lurched forward, the table stopping him, Billy was not, he was already holding the table. It was seconds, but seconds of terror and screams from many as they thought the train had derailed. Eventually, though only after a few hundred yards the train halted. The train manager got to his feet, shaken, he had hit his head and knees going over but was OK, and realised what had happened, an emergency stop, but very severe? The girl in the refreshment bar came worse off, she had cuts from edges of the table and display cases, and her hands and knees were hurting. A few children were still crying, but except for a poor man who it seemed might have a broken arm, nothing more

serious, and only a few cuts and bruises and shock. The train manager tried to contact the driver but nothing. He managed to get through to control in Birmingham, and give the rough position and status,

‘Emergency Stop just outside Hampton-in-Arden, maybe 500 or so yards from the station.’

He then walked the length of the train, or semi ran, limping, and confirmed no serious injuries save a possible broken arm. He then walked back to the front of the train, to the door to the driver’s cab, and opened it with his pass key. There sat the driver, Keith Allen, stiff and unmoving. Dave, the train manager, put his hand on the shoulder of the driver, ‘Keith, are you OK?’ It was clear he was not, his body was frozen, his left hand still on the emergency brake, a fixed stare, not into the blue sky, the trees along the track side heavy in deep green summer leaf, no, he was staring into a void. The procedure was clear, down the line to London trains were slowing at signals turning amber then red, and so then stopping. Display boards moved from delayed to cancelled. Billy and Ray had found the Train Manager, and with the warrant card persuaded him to let them out of the train. The safest place for the passengers being inside the train. Trains were now halted behind them and those ahead on the down line until the rescue teams gave the all clear. Ray and Billy climbed down to the track, Dave above turned his key and the door closed. They walked towards the station, past the immobile driver out of view, and within 50 or so yards came to an access point to the track for maintenance.

Ray shook the gate, ‘locked,’ he said, ‘we need to get to the station.’

As he was saying this Billy had slipped his hand through the gate to

reach the padlock. He opened it and pushed the gate open. Ray walked through followed by Billy, who closed the gate and the padlock. Ray turned back and tried the padlock, it was locked. Gave a shrug and followed Billy down the track. The track led down to a main road in the village, a village which still had a remote charm despite its closeness to the city, the airport, and motorways. The track now a lane, called Station Road, for obvious reasons, led to what was called The High Street. Hampton-in-Arden station was to the right across the bridge over the railway. The station was unmanned, but a hire taxi waited opposite by some tall fir trees. Billy crossed and before he spoke, the guy, whose window was open shouted, 'Hire only mate, you'll have to phone it in, I'm on lunch.' Ray produced his warrant card and said, 'Police emergency, we need to go to Lloyd House, city centre, Now!'

They had called 408 and let Kate the DS know that something had gone badly wrong with their plans, she knew they had been diverted to land in London and were on the train. Now they were not. Seeing the hire car they had thought this might be quicker than waiting for a pick-up from a patrol car. The driver Raz, turned right down the B4102. Thinking he was on official police business, which in effect he was, he ignored speed limits, this was fun he thought, not another boring afternoon. Billy and Ray were both seeing the map in their minds eye, the curling A roads, and blue motorways. Raz made a left onto the A452 which headed north towards Brownhills and Cannock, but left again at Stonebridge Island, then a short drive down the Coventry Road, A45, and took the slip road onto the M42 North for a mile or so where it merges with the M6, and onto the M6 back towards Gravelly Hill and the City Centre. As they drove down dual carriageways in the opposite direction the blue lights and sirens of police, Ambulances and Fire engines passed. 'Whatsup?' said Raz. Billy and Ray said nothing. On the motorway Raz got a call from Pam

the dispatcher, seems a demand for cars at Hampton-in-Arden, ‘Sorry Pam I’m on official police business.’ was his reply. The media were still outside Lloyd House, though only two camera teams now, so Ray told Raz to drive them round to the car park entrance.

Raz asked, ‘The cameras, it’s that poor girl, right, you anything to do with this, are you, right?’

Ray nodded, and said, ‘Drop us here.’ which Raz did, and Ray got his wallet out and Raz said,

‘So me bringing you here, that’s part of all this investigation, right, keep it right, I’ve a story to tell – No charge!’

He drove away with a sense of purpose in something bigger than just driving a hire car. Maybe it would change his life?

Cala Drive in Edgbaston loops round in a horseshoe from Wheelleys Road which runs from The University of Birmingham into the city centre via Bath Row. At the base of the loop are four flat roofed houses. These houses were built in the 1960s. The area is part of the Calthorpe Estate, the Calthorpe’s were a prominent Birmingham family and one of the University’s benefactors, it being built on their land. The estate had many fine Victorian Mansions with angled roofs and tall chimneys in the High Victorian Gothic style. The 1960s “Modern” houses and low-rise blocks of flats were built on spare parcels of land in between the mansions, these were designed by John Madin, a local architect responsible for many of the City’s buildings of the 1960s and 70s. Now they were being demolished, or about to be. Madin’s style was “Brutalist” though these houses were not so brutal, but the 60s penchant for flat roofs in a wet climate proved to be a mistake. Madin was also responsible for the “New”

library, an upturned Ziggurat, which replaced the demolished Victorian library which was a copy of Oxford's Bodleian. His "new" library not lasting as long as the Victorian library, had been demolished, and the new new library built next to the Rep, designed by Mecanoo, an architecture firm based in Delft, in The Netherlands.

Professor Catherine Mulberry owned the end house to the left facing down the drive and had decorated and furnished it in keeping with its design date of the early 1960s. Some G-Plan furniture and a Robin Day dining table and chairs, an Eames classic lounge chair, and though of an earlier date, Festival of Britain fabrics and house wear. The house had a garage in which she kept a classic Wolseley car of 1950. It was 12.30 AM as she left the house, got into her car, and drove down Wheeleys Road to the University of Birmingham, parking in the staff car park. She walked through the campus past the Barbara Hepworth sculpture she knew so well, made at a similar time to her house, she liked that piece, it being outside of where she worked, though her building was not modern but high Victorian. She walked through the campus past the physics lab where Doctor Nigel Summers was working on his Western Enterprise locomotive. She walked on out of the campus and onto the platform of the station, University, and caught the train which ran into the city centre. This line which ran down to the west country, Cheltenham, Gloucester, Bristol and on to Exeter and Cornwall. From the University station the line followed the Worcester canal which would join the others at a junction by the ICC conference centre, and one, The Birmingham and Fazeley Canal branch which ran north underneath the M6 A38(M) junction. Her train would continue following the canal into Birmingham, but it terminates further at the City of Lichfield. The canal was to her right, she could see it from the train, and it passed the bottom of her garden in Carla Drive. A beautiful garden who the previous owner had a professional designer create. Landscaped,

which had a feature rockery with stones brought from Wales. A path led across a lawn to a small pagoda, behind which was a gate onto the canal and a small bank of grass, this which was the other side of the canal from the tow path. Here she had a bench where she would sit on warm evenings, watching the narrow boats on the canal, the cyclists, runners, and walkers on the tow path. Within 15 minutes she was in New Street Station, and then after a short wait caught a stopping train to Coventry. Travelling past reclamation yards of scrap cars piled high. The inland container port at Livery Street with its cranes loading and unloading containers from trains to lorries. Through the east of Birmingham, an industrial landscape which gave way to the working-class rows of council houses and then on to Birmingham International station, for the Airport and National Exhibition Centre. The train stopping at Stechford, Lea Hall, Marston Green, Birmingham International and then on to Hampton-in-Arden. She alighted at Hampton-in-Arden station, and walked up the steps to the exit, but crossed the railway line and descended to the other platform, the up line to Birmingham. The platforms were both empty, so she walked to the south end of the platform then down onto the gravel ballast, stepped over the first rail and began walking between the rails on the track which led towards Coventry. A steady pace for some 15 minutes? The tracks now rising on an embankment, she could see the lakes and River Blythe, but not looking to the right where she might glimpse the packhorse bridge. She looked straight ahead as the Euston train approached at 125 miles per hour. She no longer focused on anything in this world, or if it was it was curled deep in the layers of strata beneath her. Her eyes were now a void which impossibly Keith Allen briefly saw as his hand punched the emergency stop lever.

Such a collision is very one sided, it's said if this kind of thing happened at night, and it sometimes did, the driver could be

unaware. Unfortunately, Keith Allen was not, and if there were such things as souls his was now wrapped with Professor Catherine Mulberry's in deep sediments. Her physical body destroyed beyond all recognition, a particular nasty clearing up job in the line of work of those who between long hours of boredom had to do such work. Some fingers indicated it was likely a woman.

The Fire teams and Paramedics arrived after about 15 minutes. The more serious and those in shock were taken to the Hospital in Solihull. Passengers were helped down onto the track and told a shuttle train would soon be at the station at Hampton-in-Arden. Some rather than wait for this telephoned for taxis or hire cars. The paramedics had difficulty getting Keith Allen to lift his hand from the emergency stop lever, slowly guiding him to an exit and then to an ambulance.

Chapter 18: The Magic of Trees.

At the hospital Keith Allen was examined, nothing was physically wrong with him, but he was kept in for observation, obviously in some sort of trauma. His wife, Helen, paid a brief visit in the early evening, but he showed absolutely no sign of recognition. She left in tears. An hour later he said 'Toilet.' as a nurse passed. He made to get out of bed, the part of his brain which managed the more basic animal functions was working. His wife visited again in the morning after dropping their children, a girl of 10 and boy of 12 at their schools. She worked in an alternative medicine centre in Solihull, which was also where they lived in a modest semidetached house. The centre had various treatments, reiki, Yoga, meditation and in her case chiropractice. The town of Solihull on the outskirts of Birmingham had always been very middle class and sort after by the upwardly mobile of the city. Though, as residents would make clear, it was not part of the City of Birmingham. It boasted excellent facilities, and very good schools. It wasn't surprising then that the successful families of Asian descent now occupied many of the larger Solihull detached houses. Sikh, Hindus, and Muslims. Sikh's houses tended to have ornate railings and gates; Hindu's often had the Om symbol displayed in a window. All loved cars, no more so than the Muslim families. The driveways of the large houses seemed to have a minimum of 4 cars. A top of the range car, possibly a Mercedes, BMW, Range Rover, Jaguar, or even a Bentley, a more practical estate, possibly also a Mercedes, and sports car or cars for the older children, possibly Porsche, and surprisingly a cheap runabout automatic, like a Micra, maybe used by a granny. The large, detached houses accommodating extended families, and hosting parties with invited business partners and their families together with other friends.

Birmingham remained a “Mo” town. Helen being a chiropractor had almost a total female and Asian clientele, and she had very good relations with them. This morning, she had cancelled her sessions in order to visit the hospital, and it was not long before her clientele and beyond knew why. By the second day flowers were arriving at the hospital ward where Keith Allen was recovering. As were offers of a private room being made. By the second day Keith had begun to eat, and on her most recent visit he had took hold of Helen’s hand, she left sobbing, but with hope.

To her clientele, if she was not family, she was close, anyone who has endured back pain would welcome the relief given. On more than one occasion one of her ladies had grasped her hand and said quite plainly, ‘Oh thank you a thousand times, the pain was worse than childbirth.’ So, confidences and unpaid and mutual talking therapy went with her paid professional work. By the weekend Keith could smile and say a few words, the smile though was false. He was by the following Monday taken home. He had a long convalescence. He missed the enquiry and could not talk of the event. Each night the dream was the same of Catherine Mulberry’s face. Weeks became months, when he first sat in the car for his wife to drive him just to the garden centre, the sensation of movement at any speed was overpowering. He could not even sit in a rear seat.

They managed. The children were excellent. In the holidays Keith would look after them, play in the garden or take them for walks. At other times he would walk around his local streets on his own. He became more interested in gardening, buying power tools. He could even walk to a local garden centre, which he would do often. One day in early Spring he saw a tree, a Rowan tree, or Mountain Ash. He ordered for it to be delivered and planted it at the back of his garden.

The Rowan is said in folklore to have apotropaic powers, in particular in the warding off of witches and fairies, in other traditions the rowan is known as the "portal tree". It is considered the threshold, between this world and otherworlds.

Keith could still only walk, and so not travel any distance, and the dreams persisted. One day he was mowing his now immaculate front lawn and a neighbour asked if he could cut theirs for them. He was happy to do so, but after he was doing this for now three neighbours, it was made clear, ‘Look how about you do the front and back gardens, and we pay you?’ Peter the guy across the street who worked for BT said. And so, it began.

At some point one of Helen’s ladies asked,

‘Could Keith help us, my husband won’t garden, my children certainly won’t, and my mother-in-law constantly remarks on the poor state of our garden at the back, so I have to do it, we tried to get a gardener but round here they are gold dust!’

The front garden now being paved and stocked with high value cars needed no attention. But the back garden was often used when they held the frequent parties, and the lawn was a mess, and the flower beds untidy. It was a short walk to where she lived, so Keith agreed. He could take all his tools in the wheelbarrow, no problem. Soon the back lawn of Mr and Mrs Ashraf was like a bowling green, the flower beds as good as those she had seen in the botanical gardens in Edgbaston, Mrs Ashraf’s Mother-in-law had remarked. Business colleagues of Mr Ashraf also admired the garden, and this made him proud to have the best lawn in his street. Keith’s work grew, and so he became self-employed, his wife helping with the paperwork.

The idea one day somehow appeared to him that ‘One was not enough’, so he ordered another rowan tree, it came, and he planted this at the back of his garden about 12 feet from the other tree. That night he could not sleep, anyway he did not want to sleep and so dream. Several times he looked out through the window into the dark, not seeing the trees. About 5 o’clock dawn was breaking, he went downstairs to make coffee, but before doing so opened the kitchen door and stood looking at his garden. He felt it was his but now in a strange sense that in fact he belonged to it, a stupid idea. He looked at the two trees, the neighbour’s cat, a black and white tom that his family had semi adopted came and sat next to where Keith was standing and was also looking at the trees. The whole universe suddenly stopped, briefly, then moved on. He gave the cat some milk, drank his coffee and went back to bed. He slept, to be awoken by his wife telling him it was 7.30. He had no dream. He never had “that” dream again. At breakfast around the kitchen table he said, ‘I need to learn to drive and get a van and be a proper gardener!’ ‘Go Gardener!’ his daughter shouted. Which after many attempts he did. And “Go Gardener” was written on the van. A year later he woke at 5 o’clock. Went downstairs and looked again at the trees and was joined by the cat. The universe again skipped a beat. The magic of trees, this is how religions begin?

Chapter 19. Case closed; cases opened.

Raz the driver of the hire car that had brought Billy and Ray back to Lloyd House from Hampton-in-Arden drove away and the Monday afternoon still had a beautiful blue sky. They entered the Police HQ via the security exit of the underground car park, thus avoiding the press. This now the preferred means for entering the building unnoticed. They took the lift to the fourth floor and entered room Washington

There was an informal meeting in progress, with DCI Sally Arscott in the chair. DI Ron Smith and DS Mohammed Asiff had interviewed the parents, while DI Benjamin Washington and DS Rashad Mahmood had interviewed the two art students from the School of Art in Margaret Street.

From the parents they learnt that Mahjoub Sharif had attended an evening lecture at the University of Birmingham on the native religions of Africa. Being from the Yemen he had been interested so had attended. And yes, he did recall the lecturer, whose name he had forgot, no she had not mentioned the Dinka. And no, he didn't recognise the snake sigil. This was the one positive lead. Rash had checked with the university and the lecturer was Professor Catherine Mulberry. Mahjoub remembered the lecturer, after the lecture he had a brief conversation with her. And yes, he did say he was from Sudan, and recalled he did mention about his wife and daughter, he thought it kind of her to take an interest. Rash had also then tried to contact Catherine Mulberry but could not.

The DCI thanked them both and said that contacting Catherine Mulberry was a priority, especially now it seems she did have previous contact with Mahjoub Sharif. At the word "contact" if

anyone was watching, and Ray was, Billy could not restrain raised eyes.

DI Benjamin Washington and DS Rashad Mahmood who had interviewed the art students said nothing much was useful about the students finding the head. Almost by chance, they asked about the sort of art they did, why the canal under the junction and were any others involved. They of course mentioned Bill Drummond, and another artist, Christian Mallek as well as a group of students and past students. They explained that Drummond painted large texts, which they thought boring whereas Mallek was gross, he was a “Self-harm Artist” who would cut himself, he did a piece at the canal where he wrote signs in his own blood. The place to find out more they explained was here at the Art School, talk to the tutors, or at Digbeth. ‘Why Digbeth?’ The detectives had asked, well there were art studios there and shows, in the “Union”, a kind of art collective in a warehouse on the Grand Union Canal, and nearby other places using old factories and the railway arches, near The Custard Factory. Digbeth projects and IKON EAST.

The “Self-harm Artist” was an obvious line of investigation. The East Birmingham art scene being off everyone’s radar. Everyone except the DCI. Sally Arscott’s partner had a unit in the Custard Factory, the old Bird’s custard factory was now an art and craft site, a community of media companies, artists and small creative enterprises, a cafe and gallery spaces. Her partner had a unit there where she hand-printed fabrics.

‘Even if nothing positive there might be links or information,’ the DCI said, ‘we need to see how far this self-harm goes and does it extend to harming others?’ she then looked at Ray and Billy. They told their story, the group in Bijlmermeer were certainly of interest, and

Catherine Mulberry again was involved, progress.

‘That’s looking like no coincidence, we must track her down. So, tasks for Tuesday, find out more about Art and find Catherine Mulberry!’ DCI Sally Arscott had a plan.

Detectives were updating the “Operation Aston” databases, including Ray. Billy said he had things to do, but before he left, he asked for a quiet word with the DCI.

‘Sally,’ he said, he was after all a civilian, ‘I didn’t want to undermine your authority,’ she frowned, ‘but it’s vital the DNA of the Hampton-in-Arden suicide is checked against Catherine Mulberry’s. You know I could ask someone else, but I’m asking you, and checked ASAP.’

‘You mean,’ she began.

‘It will match.’ he said with what looked like an apologetic smile. She actually thanked him, he left the room, and the building. He walked back via Steelhouse Lane, the old cop-shop, and Newton Street, and onto Corporation Street where the Law Courts, Birmingham’s Crown court was, still there, not demolished, a magnificent Victorian terracotta building. He admired it but was more interested in the Spectrum Art shop on the corner. He went in and bought a flip chart, marker pens and tracing paper. He continued down Corporation Street past the old Lewis’s, which on this side the ground floor was a massive Whetherspoon’s pub, The Square Peg. He continued down Corporation Street and turned left down New Street, which took him to Waterstones book shop. He bought an OS map, one of the Midlands, and a larger scale Phillips map of Europe. Back in his hotel room he spent a couple of hours working.

Then he had supper, starting with Tunworth & Swede Parcel, cultured cream, coriander followed by Fallow deer, braised shoulder, beetroot, and leaves, finally White Chocolate, vanilla, pine, lemon thyme, with just a glass of wine. Back in his room he worked for another two hours, then took the lift to reception. He walked out of the hotel, the air cool now, and the warmth of the day coming from the pavement, he looked at the canal then went back into the hotel. Greeted by the doorman who was getting to know Billy. A thought struck him, he turned left into the lounge and ordered a double Laphroaig whiskey. Sipped for half an hour his mind wandering, then took the lift back to his room for a dreamless sleep.

Tuesday morning Professor Nigel Summers was in the physics lab at the University of Birmingham and playing with his now repaired D1000, Western Enterprise, it was running around an oval track. Billy had finally found him after exploring the campus.

‘At least it’s not a figure of 8 track.’ thought Billy, though he thought aloud.

‘Not possible,’ replied the Nobel Laureate, ‘you see the cross of the figure, the tracks carry the voltage for the train, at the cross the positive rail would cross into the negative and visa versa, an electrical short, it’s why when you want a figure of 8 you need a flyover.’ The word “flyover” hung in the air for a while, and the thought ‘figure of 8’.

‘Doctor,’ began Billy,

‘No, Nigel, please,’ Nigel interrupted.

‘Nigel, when you said “Same”, with the other two sites you scanned

did you mean just “same” inverted eagle and star or,’

‘No, both, the Star had the lines which appeared over the Star.’ he replied.

‘And like the other set of lines did it end with this.’ he took out his Moleskine notebook and drew what looked like a figure 8 drawn twice, superimposed and on its side.

‘Yes, in both.’ Nigel replied.

All this time the diesel hydraulic loco was running around and around the track. Minutes passed,

‘Nigel?’ Billy spoke, ‘could you make a more portable scanning machine so we could scan the other pillars at the junction to see if there are more signs and lines marked on the walls and pillars, would that be possible? So, we could do this in real time?’

Nigel gave an immediate response,

‘Simple, it would take an hour or two to make a rig, but I would need to do the scanning, apart from the delicate equipment, the need for tuning and use of X rays I would have to do it if you wanted any results. But I’d be happy to do this, I mean it’s the vac, I’ve fixed The Enterprise,’ smiling at his ‘joke’, ‘so nothing on really other than this quark stuff.’

After a spate of “are you sure” and repeated signs of enthusiasm it was agreed, Billy would arrange that he should be allowed access.

Billy caught the train back to the city centre, following the route that

a day earlier Professor Catherine Mulberry had taken to her death near the river Blythe. His mind was working with ‘crossover’, ‘polarity’, ‘flyover’.

The previous day DI Benjamin Washington and DS Rashad Mahmood had arranged to meet Professor Jimi Silver the following morning, a lecturer at Margaret Street School of Art and a specialist in “Radical Performance Art”. To their great surprise DCI Sally Arscott and detective DCS Anne Jones wanted to tag along, and even more a surprise as they were about to leave The Chief Constable joined them wearing civvies, and saying,

‘Could we introduce ourselves just using first names.’

The other two senior officers seemed to agree. Given the previous review of the situation and the high possibility that somehow some elaborate, weird and disturbed artwork was involved these senior officers were keen to be in attendance. Though they still thought such extremes were unlikely.

So, Sally thought she needed to know more, Anne was suspicious of “Modern Art”, and The Chief, who already knew.

Jimi turned out to be a woman in her late 50s wearing all black leather. She showed the detectives into a lecture theatre which had dimmed lights and began. She was holding an iPad, and swiped pictures as she spoke. These were projected on to the lecture theatre’s screen. Much of what she said was not in any known language to the police. “Hegemony”, “Ontology”, “Telos”, “Dialectics”, “Phenomenological”. And names of persons she seemed to think as well known as Freddie Mercury or Taylor Swift, names such as Lacan, Deleuze and Guattari, Derrida, Baudrillard...

Žižek and Hegel, she laughed knowingly at the last two as if it was some well-known joke.

The first picture was of a man sat on a chair, his face painted gold holding a rabbit. 'Of course Beuys,' she said 'How to explain pictures to a dead hare, from 65.'

A general thought of the detectives was 'not a rabbit then?' Next some pictures of naked and semi naked men, and animal carcasses, blood and offal smeared over their bodies, 'Nitsch, Muhl and Scharzkogler – who killed himself as a work in 69.'

This fact alone rang bells, whether deranged or not, whether sensation for the sake of making it in the art world, if so called "artists" could kill themselves as part of their practice yet alone subject themselves to degradations and self-harm, the "Art" aspect of the enquiry now far from being thought ridiculous began to be taken far more seriously. Was Billy right? Another finally Christian Mallek, who Professor Silver had written a monograph on. Various pictures of him naked bleeding from various cuts to his body. Offal eating again and dead roadkill. And one picture of a "banquet" where what looked like a dead monkey was being eaten. The Professor talked some more, asked if there were any questions, which there was one,

'Is any occultism related to these "performances"?' Sally asked.

This set the Professor off again, the gist being that Mallek had used some performances to mock religions, like the Eucharist, by drinking real blood, and fabricated new religions with elaborate ceremonies.

'Anymore?' the professor asked and looked upset that there wasn't.

They thanked her and left. The Chief saying that the lecture had ruined lunch, as it had for all the others. It was another bright sunny July day, they had walked to the Art School, so they were walking back, still acting informal.

Sally said, 'Maybe the sort of thing in art is the idea to push this kind of thing to further extremes, which could be what Mallek is doing now, and we know some months ago he was at the scene where the head was found. Ben,' she went on, 'get Mallek's agent or gallery, maybe from the Professor at The School of Art, and see what else you can find out.'

Back at Lloyd House, in 408 was just Ray and DS Kate Moore. DI Ron Smith with DS Mohammed Asiff had gone to Digbeth Projects. DI Washington and DS Mahmood walked into 408 with DCI Arscott. The Chief and the DCS having gone to their offices for a lunch which was just a coffee. Billy walked in just after, sat at his desk and said to all or no one,

'I've asked Nigel, err, Doctor Nigel Summers, to scan more of the pillars.' Billy said breaking a silence, with no response.

Ray's phone rang, he listened and wrote something down.

'The DNA!' he said 'confirmed, it was Professor Catherine Mulberry's, she was the suicide.'

Action at last. The discussion that was about to take place about "Modern Art", or "Post-Modern Art" never happened. Everyone left save Billy, Ray, and Kate, being told to 'Hold the fort'. Smith and Asiff led the first team, to search Mulberry's house, the other team went to the University.

The headless body was found in Professor Mulberry's deep freeze. Motives, methods were needed but it seemed like "Game Over". Much more forensics of course, of the house, her place of work and her car. CCTV of Mulberry's movements. The Mahjoub Sharif link. The Sharif's were interviewed again, and another link in the chain of this macabre tragedy came from Rebecca. She was asked to think of any link she might have had to Professor Mulberry. She said that she had never met her or even knew her name. Almost in passing, like thinking aloud, she said that the only Mulberry she ever knew was a student at university. A Stuart Mulberry.

Early evening the teams met, again in an informal meeting chaired by DCI Sally Arscott, but with Dr Andrew McNeil now in attendance. In the process of this the background of Professor Mulberry was given by DI Ron Smith, Sally was now being positive, at each bit of data she said 'well done...' but noted that the Amsterdam link needed looking into, that group, the Bijlmermeer group, would now have to be interviewed. Ron continued,

'Both her parents are dead, she had one brother Stuart, who committed suicide.'

'Stuart?' said Ben, 'Rebecca Sharif said she knew of a Stuart Mulberry from university.'

Sally interrupted, 'So that is another positive line, we need details, and we will be talking ASAP to this Bijlmermeer group.'

Billy, frowned as the telephone rang, Kate answered and after a brief exchange said,

‘Ma’am it’s a Brigadier Frans Marijnissen who wants to know who the senior detective as his Superintendent Geert Wilders needs to talk with that person urgently.’

Both Ray and Billy guessed who Brigadier Frans Marijnissen was. DCI Sally Arscott took the phone immediately, the conversation was brief and one sided, though email addresses were exchanged, Sally wrote these down, thanked the Superintendent, and hung up. She didn’t speak at first, sat down and said,

‘The Bijlmermeer group, they are all dead, details on the way.’

There was a long silence. Then Sally spoke.

‘The link needs to be explored but we have now reached a positive stage, there will be a press conference tomorrow. Ray, Billy, will you look at the Amsterdam material, Ben, continue with the house in Carla drive, Ron, we need details of Stuart Mulberry, could Dr McNeil join your team, but it’s late now, we need food and sleep, all – very well done, oh and a meeting back here for progress report at 2.30 tomorrow.’

Before they left Billy took a call from Nigel,

‘Seems Nigel is finding more “texts”.’ he said aloud to no one, and no one seemed that concerned.

Early evening and Nigel sent his pictures to Billy’s email account together with a detailed plan of the Spaghetti site showing various pillars and linking them to the texts. What was also interesting was that these texts had no reversed 5-star Santo Daime symbols. Billy took out his maps, flip chart, and tracing paper. He stopped work at

9 o'clock, went for a short walk, it was too late for the hotel restaurant, he got some sandwiches from the Tesco Local in the Mailbox, and mineral water which he took back to his room.

Wednesday morning saw DCI Sally Arscott's plans put into action. DI Ron Smith tracked down the details of Stuart Mulberry, his suicide, and some of his friends at the time, two of which he managed to telephone. DI Benjamin Washington continued the house search at Carla Drive, the academic material he gathered for Billy to look over. Other material was bagged and labelled. She had an extensive library of books, most to do with her subject, but also some books on Modern or Post-Modern Art that caught his eye. And photograph albums. Strangely no computer, phone or laptop. He wrote in his notebook, "phone found? @ Hampton???"

Ray and Billy were checking the images sent via email from Amsterdam. They were rather shocking; he exchanged emails with Frans Marijnissen. Then had a long conversation with Frans. He really needed to get back to Cannock chase but there should be time for this. And there was something very interesting in both the images from Bijlmermeer and the time.

Around midday a video link was set up between Amsterdam Police HQ and 408 in Lloyd House. The large display screen was used.

Frans was recognised by Ray, with his superior. The details were that from reports of a disgusting smell, officers had entered a property Tuesday morning, the same property as Ray and Billy were refused entry the previous 3 days ago. There were six occupants, all dead, and had been so for around two days. Possibly suicide. They were known to the police for minor drug offences and classed themselves as anti-establishment art activists. Frans introduced himself and his

superiors and described the details of the investigation so far. He showed a map and still pictures of the building. Frans then warned that the scenes inside the apartment were horrific and then after a few seconds a movie was shown. The first images were of the door being opened and of the hall, they looked like they were taken from a police body cam, Frans was commentating,

‘No signs of forced entry, hall clean and tidy.’ The door opened to the living room, the walls had sigils in what looked like blood, on the sofa were two bodies, naked with their stomachs cut open, a blood-soaked floor. ‘Signs of the heavy use of narcotics.’ Frans said. The images moved unsteadily, perhaps the police officer was avoiding the blood on the floor, the shot moved into the first bedroom, two more naked disembowelled figures were sitting up on the bed, eyes and mouth wide open, and again blood on the walls and the sigils. The second bedroom showed similar images.

Rash threw up, two others left the room quickly. There were some conversations and discussion of the obvious link to Professor Catherine Mulberry, they knew of her, and they seemed to use drugs, so ayahuasca was part of this. For most little or no lunch, the rest of the day was spent either at the University or Cala Drive. Also preparing information for Amsterdam. There seemed some connection, to Mallek? certainly to Professor Catherine Mulberry.

The mood of the press conference which took place mid-morning that day was calmer than the previous ones. It was confirmed that a body had been found, as yet not confirmed to be that of Eve Sharif and that a possible suspect was under investigation, again no more details and no questions. Some journalists were shouting about a link to a suicide, but The Chief Constable was ignoring these. The media had decided the case was all but closed, a few more days of

sensational headlines but the circus was already leaving town, as one was arriving in Bijlmermeer. A terrible tragedy but it looked like it was over, “closure” possibly is the now popular phrase. Throughout the day the media at Aston and Cannock began to pack up and leave, as the case seemed to be all but closed, a victim and a suicide associated with drug use. The Chief Constable knew otherwise.

Billy now had the images he wanted from Bijlmermeer, leaving the building he took his way back to the hotel. He followed a long route, walking down Livery Street where he could get onto the canal tow path where the arch of the Great Western Railway spanned the canal. The Grand Union Canal took him under Farmers bridge and back to the ICC and from there to the Hyatt. He sat on a bench overlooking Gas Street basin. Another hot day, plenty of people enjoying the sunshine. He fetched out his phone as it rang, it was The Chief Constable.

‘I thought it was you,’ Billy said, with no sound in reply, ‘there’s nothing more you can do, you need to show a concern, and even if you acted on what we know, think of the consequences.’
‘Sure.’ came the reply and the call ended. He sat for over an hour, then went back to his room, where he found his cleaned clothes from laundry. He looked briefly once again at the new sigils, then showered, dressed in clean clothes, and took the lift to the restaurant. His meal had become a ritual, he thought, a strange space in time eating food as much a ritual outside of time.

He ordered Celeriac Remoulade, Roasted Beetroot, Carrot Râpé to start, then Packington Pheasant Breast, Savoy Cabbage, Celeriac, Chestnuts, followed by Chocolate & Pear Tart, Pear Yoghurt Ice Cream, and decided on a bottle of red wine, whatever his waiter suggested. Afterwards he took a stroll around the canal and an early

night, though he woke at 2 in the morning, as did Chief Constable White. At two thirty no alarm had been raised so both returned to sleep. Billy thinking of tomorrow and of Saint Chad.

Chapter 20: Game On.

The mortuary in the Q.E. (Queen Elizabeth) Hospital is like most not signposted as such, “path lab” is often used. Tonight, as on the previous night, the service roads had two police patrol cars parked on them, inside two more officers were on duty. Though the lab now contained the remains of Eve Sharif this was considered generally a tad excessive. However, the request for 24-hour cover of a medium security risk, amber, had come from White. Around 2 in the morning two teams had approached, the first team of 4 armed with Heckler & Koch MP7 sub-machine guns took out the two patrol cars, gagging the officers and immobilizing them using nylon ties. The officers recognised the fact that these were serious people with serious weapons, the actual weapons, the arms instructor’s debrief had identified them the following day. As the instructor said the Heckler & Koch MP7 was designed to defeat Kevlar body armour, which neither of the 4 officers were even wearing. The second team entered the path lab and similarly disabled the police officers on duty inside the building. No serious violence, but a terrifying 10 minutes. The team had no precise knowledge but quickly located Eve Sharif’s body and removed it, placing it in a bag used for such purposes. They exited the building as two black transit vans synchronised to pick them up drove to the lab’s loading bay. No conversations were heard, CCTV showed 8 individuals dressed in black, two seemed to have night vision glasses. A single van was found burnt out in a sandpit on the Packington estate, later that day. The alarm at the path lab was raised at 6 by the cleaners, the security CCTV cameras were working and recording but no one was actually watching. The “closed” case was now “open” again. On being informed Chief Constable White was only first annoyed at not requesting armed officers, but reconsidered, not only would this appear mad,

overzealous at best to use armed officers to guard a mortuary, a fire fight inside the city's major hospital was certainly something that could not be contemplated. The Chief had been warned and was satisfied the actions were in the circumstances appropriate. The next press conference would be an addition to the previous ambiguous remark, 'At this point in time we will continue our investigations.' and not 'We are not looking for any suspects after the suicide of ...'. Now anti-terrorist units from the Met would supplement the West Midlands units. And of course, the parents would have to endure another nightmare.

The team was now tasked with the arduous and boring work of using CCTV city wide to try to track the transit vans. And pointless, as this was such a pro job, nothing would be found, yet the authorities could not be seen to be inactive, cut corners, or be confounded. The parents informed and offered support and counselling; forensics deployed to the 'path lab'. Any CCTV of the vans was not only to be followed up but any other registration plates of cars in the vicinity of the lab or the vans identified, and their drivers questioned. Not only was the whole team thus employed but as the data arrived more officers drafted in. Billy was not missed. Though Ray had tried several times to telephone Billy with no luck. His hotel phone and his mobile, and everyone was too busy to check the hotel in person. This was now around mid-morning.

So, when checking emails that had not been checked first thing, as first thing kicked off at 6.30 AM when the alarm of the missing body was raised, the circular email from Billy Taylor was not of more interest than it might be considered normally.

"Hi, Billy here, I'm in London today at the BM & BL, back for 6.00 and if anyone is interested, I have some details about the case I would

like to share & Nigel seems to think the zig zag writing is now on yet more of the columns, interesting!”

The DCI translated BM & BL as British Museum and Library. And got on with the Path Lab incident, this was more in the line of traditional police work, so no one seemed concerned. At 12 o’clock after surviving the press conference The Chief Constable was talking to the DCS and DCI, it seems White was in the loop re the Billy email, which was surprising, even more surprising that The Chief Constable would be attending Billy’s 6 o’clock appointment. Which effectively meant everyone would be.

Chapter 21: Lichfield.

Billy woke early, despite what he considered distractions he worked in his hotel room for four or so hours, He then had breakfast, and before walking to his destination, New Street Station, he first turned left up Broad Street and then right again into Oozells square, part of the development that had taken place from the late 1980s onwards. The square had restaurants on three sides, two Italian and a Thai, the other side of the rectangle was the Victorian Neo-Gothic former Oozells Street Board School, now the home of the Ikon gallery, started in the 1960s by a group of local artists now had grown into a major gallery for the exhibition of contemporary art. The centre of the square had a water feature and sculpture by Paul de Monchaux. Billy entered the gallery but only to go into the shop and buy some magazines. From here he took the bridge over the canal at Brindley Place, through the ICC and onto Centenary square, past the Repertory Theatre, and the new library, through Chamberlain square and so onto New Street, he walked down the full length of the now pedestrianised road. At the end of which to the right was The Bullring, or Bullring as it was now called. The third incarnation he had known, the first a hazy childhood memory of an open market, a large red painted mine converted into a box for charity donations, and the stalls selling all kinds of things, from food, housewares to pets, you could buy goldfish, canaries, budgerigars, kittens, and puppies. However, his destination was not Bullring but the once Times Furnishing Store and one of the tallest buildings in Birmingham city centre when it was first built. Folk law had it that it, and Lewis's (not John Lewis) which was a massive department store of six floors with escalators and a roof garden, neither was bombed by the Germans in the war as they used these to navigate to the more important targets of the car factories, which were then not making cars but

Spitfires and Lancaster Bombers. They missed these but did hit the BSA in Small Heath killing those workers sheltering in the basement when the building collapsed. This may well be true, he thought, entering the building which was now a Waterstone's bookshop. He took the lift to the fourth floor and found a copy of 'A Thousand Plateaus', he already had a copy, but that was in Milton Keynes. Leaving the store, he crossed the square past the giant bronze bull, and the fundamental Christian preacher and the tables of free copies of the Koran behind which stood men offering these to the uninterested shoppers. Apart from a love of cars the people of Birmingham were addicted to shopping. Liberation of Sunday trading made things worse, such that the cold turkey of Christmas Day would mean crowds of retail junkies on Boxing Day, guaranteed every year. Billy went down some steps by the Rotunda, aptly named, which was once a Lloyd's bank, and offices, and site of the IRA bombing of the pub at its base, the Mulberry Bush. Billy was a PC at that time. Entering the new, New Street Station, he got a ticket from the automated machine and descended the escalators to the platform. Not to catch a Euston train. There was a symmetry at work even here. The train he caught yesterday from The University continues on from New Street through Aston underneath Spaghetti junction and on to Sutton Coldfield and terminating at Lichfield City Station. He thought of these journeys like the writing on the pillars, of which he was slowly getting the feel. The train pulled out of New Street heading North, this part of the city also very industrial. It followed the A38(M) or visa versa, and the Fazeley canal, and briefly at the junction crossed the river Tame, another line on a map? The train headed north through rows of houses which showed the pre-war and post war development from Victorian to the present penchant of flats or apartments as they are now called. Four Oaks after Sutton is the north of Birmingham's equivalent of the upper middle-class housing of Solihull. It is the last stop in the West

Midlands, or Warwickshire as Billy thought, and now the landscape of South Staffordshire seemed very different, more open fields and copses of firs, not the lush deepness of Warwickshire with its oak and ash trees. From far off the Three Sisters can be seen, the nick name of Lichfield's fine Gothic Cathedral. The three being the taller central spire and the other two spires either side of the front facade. Billy's interest was not just because he had spent some ten years living on an estate in the city and knew it well. This was no trip down "memory lane". Its position was haunting his mind, its position in the centre of another triangle.

Leaving the station, which had a plaque in memory of an IRA shooting of some soldiers there, from the nearby barracks, he crossed a main road and began to walk towards the cathedral. The shops had changed, more restaurants, but not as radically as Birmingham. He walked down Saint John Street, he didn't remember that name, then Bird Street, which he did, now pedestrianised. To his left was Beacon Park where the Lichfield Bower takes place each spring and has for over 800 years. Vans and tractors pulling trailers with people in costumes on them, "floats", would form a procession around the city centre, and then antics in the park, including youths trying to ride steers. So probably much older and pagan thought Billy. He took a footpath to the right with Minster Pool on his left. His dad had fished there. A beautiful pool with the cathedral behind it. At the top of the path was a cobbled lane which ran to the left into the cathedral close, but first just on the right was a very old bookshop. Selling second hand books and always, for obvious reasons, a facsimile of Dr Johnson's Dictionary in the window. He entered; the proprietor glared at the Waterstones bag he had. It would have been in his new leather bag, with his new laptop, but he deliberately left these behind and also his mobile phone. He spent over an hour, browsing, and out of sympathy bought a small book,

an old Victorian book on English cathedrals. The weather was still fine, he bought sandwiches and water, and sat on a bench overlooking Minster pool. The warm sun, the pool and cathedral were far from his mind, as was the city centre of Birmingham. He took his time, the “they” thought he was in London. The rest of the afternoon he spent in the cathedral. The front facade always took his breath away.

He was fairly familiar with the cathedral, but made the circuit, but his real target was a small chapel, The Chapel of Saint Chad. It is situated at the apex of the transept on the right, up a few stairs and is a small stone chapel. Here Billy sat for well over an hour. It is a dark place even in high summer, but there are of course different darkneses. Leaving he retraced his steps down the side of The Minster Pool, where on the corner was now, new to him, a restaurant. He had some soup, and bread, and with it just one glass of wine. He walked to the station and took the train back to New Street. The Hyatt is close, but he was tired so took a taxi. It was mid-afternoon, and he had a little more work to do, added this event to his notes, and to his drawings details from his Victorian book of English cathedrals. He had been casually looking through its pages on the train, and for a long while looking at a lithograph of Lichfield Cathedral, then he noticed at the back of the book a map of England and Wales showing the places of the Gothic Cathedrals. He had arrived at the Hyatt mid-afternoon, and went straight back to his flip charts and laptop. He ignored the emails; his phone was still off. Around 3.30 PM he noticed the emails from Ray. The first was short,

“Body stolen from path lab last night, pro job, be at Lloyd House ASAP – Chaos – Ray.”

Billy now saying to himself, ‘Earlier than I thought.’

There were a few more to the effect of “Where the hell are you” And finally,

“Big Meeting at 3.00, be there!”

Billy grabbed his bag and the flip chart and took a taxi to Lloyd House. He was late and missed the Big Meeting.

Chapter 22: Takeover.

Thursday at around 11 AM there was a meeting with Dr Paul Wybew-Bond of the Home Office, Chief Constable White and DCS Anne Jones. It was brief, and afterwards the message from DCS Jones was to 'Stand down until further notice.' By 12 noon several people arrived from London, and had to negotiate security and be logged, despite The Chief Constable, Dr Wybew-Bond and DCS Anne Jones being in the lobby to meet and greet, their presence had to be logged, and so their presence was known to the team in 408, and it seemed related to the 'Stand down until further notice.' order. The visitors from London were identified as a Sir Mark Bradbury, Home Office and Paul Wybew-Bond's superior, Sarah Cooper of the Serious Organized Crime Unit, SOCU, no rank was given but she had a lackey Brian Skelton, also a Special Branch officer, Saqib Ashraf, and Jane Smith, Home Office but probably MI5, Jane Smith! The 8 went immediately to The Chief Constable's suite, and the Jonathan Charles Extending Georgian Dining table was fully extended. There was also a buffet in the corner, and bottles of mineral water on the table. The discussions took place entirely between The Chief Constable and Mark Bradbury, the others listening and some making notes. The Chief asked or confirmed certain points, and was told, 'No SOCU would not want the services of Billy Taylor, but his secondment to the WMP was The Chief's affair. Yes, there would be some liaison with the remaining West Midland team.' At the end of the meeting Mark Bradbury left to travel back to Whitehall, Cooper, Skelton, Ashraf, and Jane Smith had their own meeting in another office put aside for them, and after this meeting ended Ashraf, and Smith also left for London.

Further notice came at 3.00 PM at a meeting of the full team in a very

formal session in 407. Two Rows of chairs, facing another 5 chairs. The team walked from 408, following their DCI and sat looking at the empty chairs, and sat for 15 minutes. Important people like to keep unimportant people waiting thought DCI Arscott. At around 3.15 Dr Paul Wybew-Bond of the Home Office, Chief Constable White and DCS Anne Jones, and two others walked in and sat down facing the team. The Chief stood up and spoke.

‘I want to keep this short, but the recent events mean at the request of The Home Secretary, given the international connection and the nature of the theft from the path lab, The Serious Organized Crime and Anti-Terrorist units of the Metropolitan Police, together with Special Branch and MI5 will take on the heavy lifting of this investigation. The local search, and liaison with the parents will be handled by DI Benjamin Washington and DS Kate Moore, the rest will be assigned other work. The investigation will now be run from London by Sarah Cooper, with a DS liaison officer attached to DI Washington who will obviously report to his DCI. The Met DS liaising between Birmingham and London. Thank you all for your work to date.’

The 4 sitting rose and walked out, Ray guessing the tall woman who looked at no one and had no rank was Cooper, her colleague who just looked at her, her lackey. As they left DCS Anne Jones turned to Sally and said, ‘Keep the team in 408 we will be back in 5’.

The team moved back into 408, where Billy having missed the meeting was waiting. Ray broke the news to Billy of the Met “Takeover”, Billy who was as often didn’t show surprise said, ‘The military nature of the theft, obvious.’

It was more like 15 minutes before the DCS and The Chief Constable

came into the room. The Chief unusually in shirt sleeves and looking fed up, and began,

‘Sorry to keep you waiting but we had to see off our guests, and sorry, our hands are tied,’ pausing then, ‘but not our feet, The Met don’t need Mr Taylor, but I do. And though some may have other duties, this is flexible, Billy you were going to give us some kind of presentation at six?’

‘Yes.’ Billy replied.

‘See you ALL there then.’ The Chief said, leaving the room, and beginning to smile.

The DCS then spoke,

‘The Met won’t be needing the expertise of Mr Taylor, but no matter we will, and Ray you will keep your old friend company. As to Ben the only DI now on the “Aston” team, if you require any additional help, I’m confident your DCI will provide it, and I will see you all at six.’ She then also left. Next up was the DCI.

‘I think though some of you are no longer in the Aston team, rather than moving you out of 408 it would be best if you remain in the meantime. Together you already are a resource in your common knowledge. As for DI Benjamin Washington and DS Kate Moore, can you begin with looking into the local connections, start with the “Art” connection, at Digbeth. And you Billy?’

‘I’ll be in Paris tomorrow.’ he replied.

Billy no longer phasing the DCI, she simply said.

‘See you all at six.’ and smiling left.

Chapter 23. Snakes and Rivers.

At 5.50, 408 now had the full complement of detectives, the advisors and to no one's surprise at exactly 6 o'clock Chief Constable White appeared asking if 'Anyone minded', as if! The setup was a large whiteboard, a flip chart, and LCD screen which Billy could project images from the lap top he had been using. After the usual pleasantries, welcome and pleased that you are all here etc. he began. He looked at his Moleskine notebook.

Billy spoke, 'First the news about the path lab, sooner than I thought, but the idea that Professor Catherine Mulberry's suicide was in anyway a closure is I'm afraid not the case. All I can say at the moment is that the removal of the body of Eve Sharif certainly wasn't part of Catherine Mulberry's involvement in the Bijlmermeer incident for obvious reasons, but that the reason for its removal is ambivalent. By which I mean it might be not directly part of the initial enquiry.'

'How so?' interrupted DCS Jones.

'Because it might be a case of preventing another player from doing the same.'

'We have three alternatives,' he continued, 'and a fourth which I'm yet unsure of. Professor Mulberry was part of a network, a complex network, one that I want to explore with you now. If anything, we have too much information, and perhaps this is deliberate.'

The Chief Constable looked pensive, as if eager to navigate this network. At least this kept everyone silent, trying to look like they

agreed. They soon might.

The screen showed an aerial picture of Spaghetti junction.

“Scenario one, the whole thing is an Artwork.” he wrote on a whiteboard,

“Scenario two, an occult organisation, maybe associated with an extreme political organisation.”

“Scenario three, both and a third and fourth set of players.”

‘If I now know Billy it’s three at least,’ whispered Ray under his breath. But The Chief heard and smiled.

‘Have you tried to draw it?’ Billy asked, and paused, then some realised that he meant the junction.

He noticed Rash trying, at least three times, The Chief watched him fail.

‘It’s very hard,’ he said, Billy also making several attempts. He then drew the Staffordshire knot. The LCD showed the knot flipped twice and aligning with the junction. ‘If you take a double version of it,’ he flipped the chart showing this, and the junction with an overlay of the sigil, then a picture of a snake coiled, and finally the Dinka sigil and that of Eve’s neck.

The detectives were becoming enthralled.

He then marked on a sheet a circle, and next to it wrote “Eve”, from this he drew a line down and ones to the right and left, and

diagonals, like spokes. He pointed to the line running down, and looked at his audience, 'A38(M)' someone said. Then to another, 'M6 North.' came the answer, then to another 'M42.', and another 'M6 South.' Billy then took a blue pen and traced the A38(M) and M42, the callers looked happy, then he wrote "River Tame". Mouths opened. He then wrote next to the M6 south, "River Blythe". He then marked a spot on this where the railway crosses the river and where Professor Catherine Mulberry committed suicide. Next, he moved to the M6 North, 'No river here,' he said, and before he could, Ray said,

'Cannock Chase, so that's how you knew.'

'I said the zig zags could be a map.' Billy replied. And now his audience were spellbound.

'The criticism is that by using lay lines, you can simply make them up, and link anything. But there becomes a point,' he drew on the line from the circle right to the edge of the page and wrote "Amsterdam". 'That's a punt,' he said, and turned a page, 'and this,' drawing around the circle "Eve" a rough sketch of England, looking at his notebook. 'The Tame flows through Tamworth, then the Trent to the Humber and North Sea, to the Northwest we have no river, but we end up at Chester, the Dee estuary. Southwest the Avon, then the Severn and the Bristol Channel, if we go down to London, we get the Thames, derivative of Tame. Tame, the name derives from the Celtic "dark" and Sanskrit word *tamas*, darkness.'

He paused then continued,

'We have three exits from the junction and on them Cathedrals Lincoln, Chester, and Gloucester.'

He paused again, then said ‘We need to press on.’

A new sheet, he wrote “Eve”. And looked around, blank faces, ‘her mother is?’

‘A Christian.’ shouted Kate the DS, ‘and Eve, in the garden of Eden, the SNAKE!’

‘And,’ continued Billy, ‘the snake was in a tree. And Christianity has the figure of a Christ dying on a tree to free humanity from original sin. I’m not saying this is in anyway true but someone out there might want to imply this like,’ he paused, ‘an Artist?’

‘So, scenario one, part of an elaborate hoax, an artwork, a very macabre artwork, or part of a macabre religious sect.’

Ray couldn’t stop himself, ‘Or both!’ he almost shouted.

Billy continued, ‘We have 3 exits, if we include our line to Amsterdam via Ely Cathedral, built on the island of eels or sea snakes, and then extend our line down through the Thames at London we get to Paris. That’s where I’m going tomorrow.’

‘What about the others?’ The Chief Constable asked.

‘To Chester nothing it seems, to the Northeast, Oslo, the Cathedral of Our Saviour and to the South West St David’s Cathedral and then New York.’

‘So, we have 3 exits, 5 directions, the inverted Santo Daime use a 5 pointed star. So, we have 3 and 5, prime numbers, the first being 2. If

we add 2 to 3, we get 5, if we add 5 to 3 we get 8 if we add 5 to 2 we get 7. If we use 8 so and draw another 8 we get yet another version of the coiled snake. The 7 - the number seven has great symbolic associations in religion, mythology, superstition, and philosophy, but we aren't bothered with seven but with 8. 7 is the highest number of items that can be cognitively processed, held in your head, 8 cannot. You turn 8 ninety degrees you get the sign for infinity, a number you can't hold in your head and another symbol is Aleph, the Hebrew letter, and, ' the screen showed the Hebrew Aleph on the wall in Amsterdam.

Some were lost, some puzzling, 'But why?' said the DCS, 'Well,' said Billy, 'it looks like some kind of religion but it might be some kind of Art?'

Ben shouted! 'Christian Mallek is based in New York!'

'And is currently in Oslo.' Billy added, surprising everyone. He held a copy of Art Forum he had purchased in the shop of the Ikon Gallery.

'And yes he has worked at Spaghetti junction,' Billy said, 'and is associated with Professor Catherine Mulberry, she had a couple of monographs on his art, they were signed, he has been visiting Oslo,' Billy now waving Art Forum, 'he talks about this in an interview, he is based in New York, So here and Amsterdam is a link to Santo Daime religion, or rather a negative version of it, real or fictional, his interest in Oslo, I suspect might be Anti-Christian, fake or possibly not, Norse mythology, as for New York, he has in his Art Form Interview mentioned Neo-Jacobinism and Accelerationism but that seems too political, I would look for something more to do with occult or minor religions.'

‘What!’ said Ray.

‘There are Anti-Christian groups in Scandinavia of various types, some very sincere about their heritage and identity,’ Billy began, ‘some more neo-fascist, others into rock music, drugs, and crime. There have been cases of arson of churches. They are drawn to the pre-Christian religions of Scandinavia. Neo-Jacobinism and Accelerationism are even more vague. Neo-Jacobinism is a term used for contemporary groups associated with left politics and anarchism, but again Mallek seems to invert ideologies. So, you might find a group emerging with extreme right wing views, conspiracy theories and even religious fundamentalism, and a coming apocalypse. At its most simple Accelerationism is the idea that rather try to stall the apocalypse in whatever form, climate change, Armageddon, it is better to bring it on. All these are shapes that need filling in, but ones found on the drawings, texts of maps we find on top of the fake Santo Daime symbol, if it is fake, these seem to allude to these things and maybe more.’

‘So, who is making these drawings?’ Ray asked.

‘I don’t know.’ was Billy’s reply.

‘Let’s talk the art thing,’ he continued, ‘Mallek is well known, but not as well-known as Damien Hirst,’ the screen showed Hirst’s work ‘For the love of God’, a human skull, a real skull, encrusted with diamonds, most everyone remembered it, a couple of the younger DS’s had T-shirts with it printed on.

‘And more recently this.’

He now showed pictures from Hirst’s “Treasures from the Wreck of

the Unbelievable”. Statues and objects many seemingly encrusted with coral, from small items to massive sculptures of naked women and monsters. Pictures of divers underwater swimming around these prior to their “discovery”.

‘If the name gives it away,’ Billy said, ‘despite the film of the divers finding these objects, supposedly from a wreck from two thousand years ago, pictures and people involved all play it out as real, then the artefacts having fake coral, some even the McDonald’s symbol and examples of Mickey Mouse. It’s a giant pretence which cost Hirst maybe over a hundred million pounds to have made, a giant fiction.’

Another pause.

‘Now certain religions have been a subject of contemporary art, mainly though Christian, fairly safe, unlike Salman Rushdie. Even so I’m not happy with this kind of thing, it seems to be attention seeking and an attempt at sensation and shock, that said these artists also use sex and extreme images. Anyway, there is contemporary art which exploits religion, like Andres Serrano’s work for instance, Piss Christ, transgressive art, Gilbert and George’s Heterodoxy, The Chapman Brothers works such as Hell, mix Christian iconography with Nazism and McDonald’s, or Chris Ofili The Holy Virgin Mary, and more, so there is an established theme here.’

He paused again, as his audience tried to take this in.

‘Maybe you should get a job at Margaret Street?’ Ray said what some others thought.

‘No, it’s just a hobby,’ Billy replied, and continued, ‘Mallek is well known, but only in the art world. His current project being called

“For the love of the gods.” But the question here is how far does he go in creating a fictional cult or a real one. And who are its members, and where are they. And how far has Mallek already gone. I can say, with some help that he is associated with the Bijlmermeer group, and there is a link between that group and Professor Mulberry, Mulberry was known to the Bijlmermeer group and had a link with Mallek. The postmortem of Professor Mulberry shows DMT a powerful hallucinogenic and used by followers of Santo Daime. So, we need to know more about Mallek’s association with Digbeth and with Professor Mulberry. The other links are now it seems out of The West Midlands Force’s remit.’

The Chief agreed, ‘We can follow up these two lines of enquiry? We will see about Oslo, let the Met know, and maybe more on Mallek from Digbeth, that’s on our patch.’

‘And Mallek may have inadvertently found a real cult.’ As Billy spoke, he wrote on the whiteboard, “Mallek – Cults”, and then continued, ‘Professor Mulberry was not that aware of the Dinka.’

‘But she was,’ Interrupted DI Washington, ‘she gave a briefing on the cult, er, religion.’

‘Only after our initial meeting, if you remember, and prior to that had not recognised the Dinka Snake Sigil.’ replied Billy.

‘That’s right,’ said Ray, ‘she called you out when she first met you, but what about the link with Mahjoub Sharif and that course he took?’

‘It was on African Religions, and cults, in particular the West Coast, but that was the link and motive for being involved, if she was, with

Mallek.’

‘Revenge for the death of her brother.’ Ray concluded.

‘And that the Dinca sigil wasn’t originally on the girls neck.’

Billy continued, there was a stunned incredulity,

‘No,’ he continued, ‘if you look at an image from SOCO on the crime scene you can see in one picture of the bag the girl’s hair, and just a fraction of the neck, with no mark, it was not there when first found.’

He showed the image and the images taken in the path lab, it was obvious a small fraction of the sigil should have been seen on the scene of crime image, it was not.

‘And anything more?’ The Chief asked, almost out of the total confusion.

‘I’m working on that,’ said Billy, ‘in particular those sigils on the walls in Amsterdam. Some five-pointed stars, but also an inverted N or should we say Aleph. So, links to possible neo-fascists? I’ll know more after tomorrow.’

The Chief gave a ‘Why?’ look.

‘The third “they”, the Nag Hammadi,’ was the reply from Billy, ‘and Paris.’

The meeting broke up. As they left Billy was talking to Ray, it seems the team was still together, but Billy would travel to Paris on his own, the DCI wouldn’t wear that “jolly”. So, to cheer Ray up Billy invited

him to dinner at the Hyatt. They took a slow walk via the canals to the hotel.

Ray had for starter Norfolk Mussels with Bacchus, Garlic, Parsley Cream Sauce, followed by Bavette Steak, Garlic Button Mushrooms, Tomato, Triple Cooked Chips & Peppercorn Sauce, he couldn't resist steak, and finally Chocolate & Pear Tart, Pear Yoghurt Ice Cream and Hazelnuts.

For Billy Celeriac Remoulade, Roasted Beetroot, Carrot Râpé , followed by Packington Venison Fillet, Pommes Anna, Braised Red Cabbage, Roast Cauliflower and finally Iced Passion fruit Pavlova, Passion fruit Sorbet. The waiter suggested a glass of Sauternes with Ray's pudding and a glass of Muscat with Billy's, which seemed a good idea as they had finished the bottle of red. This put Ray in a good mood, so much so he insisted on driving Billy to Birmingham Airport in the morning for his flight to Orly.

Chapter 24: I love Paris.

Customs at Orly was simple as was the journey into Paris itself, unlike from Charles de Gaulle, the RER B took 40 minutes to the Rue de Rivoli opposite the Ile de la Cite, from there Billy took a taxi to the Palais de Tokyo on the right bank next to the Paris Museum of Modern Art, it was where contemporary art was exhibited. Normally in Paris he would walk along the Seine, but time was short, the metro would drop him at the Lena metro station, but that would mean changes which were complicated, so he took a taxi. The Paris Museum of Modern Art had a fixed exhibition of twentieth century art and was on the left of the crescent entrance road, the Palais de Tokyo being on the right. Its entrance marked by tall pillars, not an old building in Paris, it dated from 1937, and since that date it had been used for various purposes, now for the exhibition of avant garde contemporary art, and in keeping with this the interior was not decorated. Rather it had exposed cables, lighting, and trunking, with missing masonry. The exhibits at times being indistinguishable from the building, rubble looks like rubble. Billy was interested in more recent work, in particular that of Christian Mallek. He was right, there was some of Mallek's. Mallek was not present in person, but three videos were playing on old Sony monitors, now de rigour in the avant garde. In the first, a black and white image of him standing naked arms out, and bleeding from several cuts on his arms. The second was from a video of him being crucified, the action looked genuine, his palms had nails piercing them into the wood of the cross, though his feet were not nailed, just bound to the upright. Billy made some notes, and a mental note too. Obviously nailing the feet would be literally crippling, the palms obviously very painful, but not accurate, the palm could not support the weight of the body, so the Romans would nail through the wrists, skeletal remains of crucified persons

have been found as evidence of this practice. That the palm nails couldn't support the weight of the body was obvious when the assistants tried to raise the cross, the artist screamed, the cross lowered and the nails removed. The video ended at that point, or rather looped. The third screen showed Mallek in the process of taking ayahuasca, it was in what looked like a jungle setting, probably somewhere in South America, Billy assumed. The ayahuasca was shown being boiled and subsequently Mallek shown eating a large amount. He was then led into a small hut with his spirit guide, a shaman, or curanderos. He appeared once to vomit. The audio was fairly inaudible. The movie cut to hours later where Mallek spoke of his experience, he seemed ecstatic, and recounted his loss of all ego, a near-death experience and rebirth, and finally he announced his purpose on earth, and the true nature of the universe. This movie then also looped. Billy made some more notes and then wandered quickly around the gallery space.

Between the Pallais and the Museum of Modern Art was an open space, which was tented and served some excellent food. He had a simple meal of Halibut in a cream sauce with mineral water to drink, he needed a clear head for the afternoon. His destination the Institut de Monde Arabe (Arab World Institute) on the left bank of the Seine by the Pont de Sully. Again, he took a taxi. It is a spectacular building dating from the late eighties, a curtain wall of glass behind which are metal geometries of tiles echoing the geometries found in Arabic mosques, only these metallic tiles move in response to light. Apart from housing Arab artefacts it also has numerous items from the region including those from Hebrew and Coptic religions. Copies of texts, such as the Torah. The Coptic documents are some of the most significant outside of the Near East and Egypt. Billy was meeting a Doctor Aziz Bassily, who he had corresponded with and met once before when he was in Paris. Doctor Bassily was particularly

interested in The Nag Hammadi library, also known as the “Gnostic Gospels”, a collection of early Christian and Gnostic texts discovered near the Upper Egyptian town of Nag Hammadi in 1945. Billy’s and the doctor’s conversations revolved around two related themes, Gnosticism, especially more recent forms, and its associated symbols. They broke for coffee mid-afternoon, and before a final coffee Billy was able to examine a series of original drawings, which he began to copy into his Moleskine notebook, a habit of the years, before he realised it would be quicker to use his smartphone, though without flash. Their final parting was warm handshakes, and so Billy crossed the Seine on the Pont de Sully and caught the RER B back to Orly. He arrived back in Birmingham in the early evening, skipping the hotel restaurant he walked to the Tesco’s in The Mailbox where he got sandwiches and a bottle of beer, returned to his hotel room, he checked his emails and texts and replied to Ray, worked for a few hours before an early night.

Chapter 25: The Studio of Christian Mallek.

Friday morning DS Paul Bradley from SOCU arrived at Lloyd House. He cleared security and was met by DI Ray Wood, who introduced himself to the confusion of the DS,

‘I thought I was liaising with DI Benjamin Washington?’ the DS said.

‘You are,’ replied Ray, ‘I’m the official welcoming party, let’s go, we are in 408.’

Not a good welcome thought Paul, though he could understand why, having the case taken from these detectives after all their work. But this kind of work is what SOCU is very familiar with, so tough call but reasonable.

In the lift Ray said, ‘Sorry mate, but we are a bit pissed – your boss was hardly charming about this.’

‘Oh, she’s like this with everyone, you are nothing special to SWMBO.’ Paul replied.

‘SWMBO?’ questioned Ray.

‘She Who Must Be Obeyed.’ was the reply.

They both grinned.

More introductions with DI Ben Washington, as he introduced himself, and DS Kate Moore.

Ben explained they were off to Digbeth, which Paul had no idea of what or where, Kate must have picked this up,

‘Peeky Blinders territory,’ she said, and continued, ‘dystopian inner city, old industry, as used in the Spielberg film Ready Player One, I saw him when he came, really I did.’ Kate said.

Then Ben spoke,

‘The Art mob won’t be in situ till after ten, so in the meantime we should update you on how far we got when the “powers that be” thought that West Midland Police were not up to it.’

‘It’s OK, I’ve been fully briefed.’ replied Paul.

‘Maybe, as of last night I doubt it.’ Ben said, Paul looking puzzled,

‘We have, sorry, had several promising lines, but here are the things you can say you already know if they are part of your, “fully briefed”, that the body of the girl’s removal is ambivalent, Mulberry is associated with the artist Christian Mallek, he has links with New York, where his gallery is, also he has links to Amsterdam and Oslo. This may involve other religious cults, or fictitious cults, including Neo-Jacobinism and Accelerationism.’

Ben was enjoying himself; Ray was looking on with a smirk. The DS looking dazed.

‘That the snake image on the girl’s neck was added after the head was found, and that Professor Catherine Mulberry wasn’t aware of the Dinka religion.’ Ben finished.

‘No, I haven’t been fully briefed it seems, does Commander Cooper have this information?’

‘She would have if she had been here last night!’ Ben replied, thinking, ‘so she’s a Met Commander – higher rank than a DCS, interesting, I bet she will soon know’.

Ben grabbed his Jacket, ‘Come on let’s go, Ray hold the fort.’

‘Bollocks!’ was his reply, but he actually had nothing to do, and as he gets bored after five minutes, he decided to visit Spaghetti junction and see how Nigel the prof was getting on.

As The DI and the two DSs were leaving DS Paul Bradley said ‘Loo?’ the DI pointed to a door in the corridor, and turning to Kate said, ‘Phoning home do you think?’ DS Bradley’s call though was not a success, his superiors were travelling to Amsterdam to meet their opposite numbers, Hoofdcommissaris Geert Wilders and Inspecteur Lilian Paternotte.

So, Ray went down to the car pool and got in his Mondeo and drove off down the A38(M), he put the blue lights on for fun, though no siren, it was poor consolation for Paris but when on seeing his lights in their mirrors a Porsche 911 and a Ferrari Spider braked hard, it went a little way. He arrived at the interchange; Nigel was looking pensive in his van. ‘Whats up?’ Ray asked, ‘They won’t let me in.’ he explained. The two PCs at the gate recognised Ray, ‘Sorry Sir, orders from SOCU, no one in without their say so.’ Ray gave a grunt and then spoke to Nigel, who looked down fallen, he said he had plenty more columns to scan, and some he wanted to scan again.

‘Some again,’ said Nigel, ‘you see before I had a detailed plan, I accidentally re-scanned a clean pillar, and it had an image, the day before it had nothing. So, I made a detailed plan and for the last two days more texts are appearing on more columns, I was going to confirm today and let the team know.’

‘But that’s impossible,’ Ray said, ‘the security here is tighter than...’ he stopped thinking if promoted his language needed to be more “neutral”. Nigel smiled; he got the uncompleted metaphor.

‘We best get back then, but I’ll let Billy, and the team know, and be in touch, see you.’ Ray said, and both left the scene, and two bored officers continued walking nowhere, bored. Ray texted Billy and Ben when he got back to Lloyd House.

So, DI Benjamin Washington together with DS Kate Moore and DS Paul Bradley set out for Digbeth. They took Ben’s Black Mondeo, all West Midlands Detective Inspectors had these, only the higher ranks had Jaguars or Range Rovers. They drove to St Chad’s circus, another of Birmingham’s driver traps. In front of the Roman Catholic Cathedral, the first, as the locals would say, to be built after the reformation and designed by Pugin, who was employed by Barry to work with him on designs for the Palace of Westminster. From here they turned right at the old fire station island, avoiding the A38(M) and turned down James Watt Queensway. This took them down towards Bull Ring and then to High Street Deritend, past The Custard Factory and left down Heath Mill Lane. The area was as described to Paul Bradley, dystopian, he was not expecting the amounts of graffiti, almost a deliberate feature he thought, and also the impossibility of any stranger navigating these roads. They passed “Digbeth Projects” and turned left onto Fazeley Street. He could see amidst the old factories, some still working producing metal waste

bins, and taxi repair shops, the art connection, the small gallery units. A right turn at the entrance to Minerva Works and Ben parked the car. Ahead was the canal, The Grand Union, hence “Union Studios”. There were a couple of other art venues here, and a school of dance, in the most unlikely setting. Paul Bradley tried to picture Steven Spielberg here, but couldn’t until he thought ‘dystopian’, and so ‘yes’.

A guy was waiting for them, a little nervous Paul thought, Ben introduced them, ‘and DS Paul Bradley from the Met.’

The guy, Rob, the site manager, took them inside. The building was mainly concrete, no traces of Victorian grandeur, brutal concrete maybe of the 1920s, possibly offices or show rooms with Crital metal window frames. Inside, past an office, a flight of stairs led to a corridor along which were artists’ studios, and at its end the studio of Christian Mallek’s, or one of his many world-wide. The door had a number keypad.

Rob said, ‘This is, or was, Christian Mallek’s studio, he was last here about six weeks ago, he rented it in January, for six months, maybe that’s ran out, I would need to check.’

The DI said, ‘No need, we have a warrant.’

At this, without asking to see it, Rob punched the keypad and turned the handle, nothing happened. After the third attempt DI Washington said,

‘Don’t bother, he or someone has obviously changed the code.’ and before he had even finished DS Moore had put her shoulder to the door, took a pace back then slammed into it, the key lock falling to

the ground and the door swinging open. The three detectives stood looking into the studio space for maybe ten seconds, Rob was looking at Kate, but when he saw the detectives gaze, he too looked into the studio, and uttered, 'Fuck.'

The studio was once a clean white box which was around 20 feet across with a tall ceiling of glass, there being no windows. The walls had once been plastered and painted white; the floor tiled in grey. Now it was a mass of lines, sigils shapes, and crescents, pentagrams, strange letters, Hebrew? figures with two heads, all crudely done in red paint which had runs, and splashes, which had over painting in black. The signs were disturbing in themselves, but what was sickening was the violence of the black strokes, not helped by the strange musty smell from the room being closed throughout six weeks of a fine hot summer. DI Washington said,

'We need SOCO,' and looking at Paul, 'your lot I suppose?' as he spoke, and not realising it he had wandered into the studio in order to take in all four walls. He was taking pictures on his phone as if in a trance. The other three were still at the door,

'Boss,' began Kate, which seemed to wake the DI from his dream, 'Shit.' he said realizing his mistake, and edged back. Then he said to the Met DS, 'You need your team here, and we need to make this secure.'

'I can do that,' Rob, the site manager began, 'look there is a bar we can put across the door and padlock it.'

'Do that,' said Ben, 'and give me the key. And Kate get some tape,' he said handing his car keys. 'SOCO from London should take three hours, we'll get uniform here until then.' He took out his phone and

first called the DCI to keep her in the picture and a patrol car was despatched. By the time the two PCs arrived the door had the security bar across it and was padlocked, also police tape, “POLICE DO NOT CROSS” from the boot of the Mondeo was also across the door. Rob, looking shaky, gave the DI the two keys, Ben gave one to one of the PCs, ‘For SOCO when they arrive.’ he said. Outside the air was better, DS Bradley looked worried,

‘I’ve called it in.’ he said. And walked towards the canal. ‘What’s that,’ he said pointing.

‘Oh, that’s the river Rea, Birmingham’s Thames.’ Kate said and laughed, as it was a brick lined brook which only looked like a river after very heavy rain. Near Gravelly Hill Interchange, the Rea merges with the River Tame, with its waters eventually reaching the North Sea via the Trent and the Humber Estuary.

Back at Lloyd House the Aston team of two discussed with Ray the events at the studio, Ben showing Ray his pictures, which still had that edge to them. Ray looked worried, and thought of Billy’s reaction, surprise, or more likely not. He told Ben about his encounter with Nigel and the exclusion, which brought looks of annoyance. Paul Bradley looked nervous. They had paperwork to do, always paperwork. By 2.45 PM Ben asked Paul ‘Where the hell is your SOCO’, he gave a nervous reply that at the moment it was considered a low priority, the Amsterdam enquiries being paramount. Ben told his DCI who said to stand down the two PCs, making sure the people at the Union knew to keep out, that’s all they could do. ‘Just make sure you log everything.’ was her final comment.

Chapter 26: The Vodun.

The team share contact numbers so before anyone arrived on Saturday morning a provisional agenda was set by DCI Arcscott, which was ‘meet and share’, then Ben needed to chase the SOCO from the Met. By 9.00 AM DI Ray Wood, and 2 DSs together with Billy were in the corner of room 408 sitting around a table, Ray had coffee as did Kate, Billy and DS Bradley had water, Billy’s water was sparkling, and he looked upbeat. While waiting for Ben to arrive Kate related the journey to the studio, the lack of the Met’s SOCO, at which Paul Bradley was silent, and the scene inside Christian Mallek’s studio, as if to make the point she held her phone so Billy could see the picture she took from the door.

‘You didn’t go in did you?’ asked Billy.

‘No, DI Washington did and took more pictures.’ she replied.

‘Oh,’ Billy said, ‘not good, not good.’ He had taken Kate’s phone and was enlarging the picture.

DI Washington arrived.

‘Ben, you look like shit.’ is how Ray put it. Which was if anything optimistic, his eyes seemed not to focus but darted around and his whole body was trembling. Billy immediately put his water down and looked at Ben and said,

‘Give me your right hand,’ which Ben did, Billy turned his hand palm up, and taking a pen from his pocket drew on it, the Greek Alpha. ‘Now the left,’ he said, again turned it palm up and drew the Greek

Omega, 'Now take off your shoes and socks.' he said. To the others genuine amazement without question the DI did, in front of his colleagues and a DS from the Met. Others in the office glanced over but could see nothing, maybe Ray fooling around. Billy drew the figure 8 on his right foot and the Hebrew Aleph on the left.

'You can put your socks and shoes on now, and how do you feel?' he said.

'Better,' Ben said, 'much better.'

'Well, it will do for now, but could I have a private word, over there.' pointing to an empty space in the corner of the office, 'Yes.' said Ben, the others still speechless. The two walked into the corner, Ben's back to them, so the others could not see or hear.

'Well,' said Billy 'to save you finding words, you couldn't sleep well last night, when you did you saw terrible things, and when awake you felt a coldness run through your body with a fear you've never known, right?' Ben nodded, 'Were you frightened you might cause harm to your wife and children?' he nodded again. 'OK,' said Billy, 'the signs on your hands and feet will work very short term, and I must apologise and ask you some personal questions, OK?' Billy had explained more or less exactly Ben's nighttime experiences, after drawing on his hands and feet the fear had become a feeling of unease, this gave Ben, given his night of hell, complete trust in Billy.

'Ask me anything.' Ben said.

'OK, are you at all religious?'

'No not at all.'

‘Your family originated from the West Indies?’

‘Yes.’

‘Do you know what part of Africa before that?’

‘No, I guess the slave coast.’

The impertinence of such questions would at one time have caused DI Benjamin Washington extreme upset and anger, but not now, not here now.

‘OK,’ said Billy ‘I think I can sort this; can I see the pictures?’ Ben passed Billy his phone and not looking showed him how to view them. He took about a minute, ‘I need to delete these, OK?’ Ben nodded, ‘and you need to trash these if you can or get a techie to do it, remove all trace.’

‘I can do this, we’ve been shown how, was it the studio, I went in.’

‘Yes,’ Billy replied, ‘I need to get something, is there somewhere you can go in the meantime, not home but family?’

‘There’s my mother, but she is in a home, my sister in Solihull, she works from home.’ said Ben.

‘Check out she is there, and you can stay possibly till the evening. Give me the address and if I don’t turn up telephone this number.’ Billy wrote a mobile number, ‘and tell her all the details. Don’t go home.’

Billy left Ben and returned to the group. 'What's the matter?' Kate asked. 'Ben is sick, he needs rest, he is seeing if he can stay with his sister in Solihull.' Billy said.

'I'll drive him.' Ray said.

'No, you can't,' said Billy, 'Milton Keynes and back, how long with a blue light and siren?'

'Two hours tops even having to use the hard shoulder, 3 if we need to leave the motorway.' Ray said.

Ben had walked back and said, 'She's in and expecting me.'

Billy said 'OK give me her address and number and get over there now, we will square it with the DCI, or even The Chief, if need be, we should be with you for before one o'clock. Now go.'

He left.

'Ray, the car and Milton Keynes please, and maybe save any questions.' Billy said.

Billy and Ray left. Leaving the two sergeants looking blankly at each other.

As Ray drove out with the siren and blue lights, Billy first phoned DCI Arcscott, then a long call to Nigel, then another two to persons unknown. Ray tried to think who, amongst the traffic noise but he had no clue. But like Ben did now, he trusted Billy, and was pushing 110 at times. They made Milton Keynes in 50 minutes, another 10 to get to Billy's flat. They stopped, Ray expecting an invite, got none,

just a 'Wait here won't be long.' Long was ten minutes, he emerged with a plastic bag, he got back in the car, handed Ray the Solihull address, and gave a look. Ray put the siren back on and took off for Solihull.

Around 12.30 they pulled up at a very smart high-tech house in a leafy road in Solihull. It was very new, Ray guessed, built on land sold off from the extensive garden of the next house. The new house was mainly glass. They pulled in the drive, and Ben's sister appeared from the doorway. Ray seemed to think she was in fashion, not sure what but guessed by the way she was dressed, sort of casual but very expensive, make up and fantastic hair. She looked concerned. Billy took something from the plastic bag and left the car. He entered the house followed by Ray.

Inside Ben was sitting on a sofa that curved in a crescent across the room. There was a wall of glass that looked onto what looked like a traditional Japanese nihon teien garden. Billy noticed a bench, 'Excellent, can we sit outside, no just Ben and me.' said Billy. 'Sure,' said Ben's sister, turning to Ray, 'have a seat.' He sat in a fairly massive armchair whilst she walked up and down the room, looking out of the window. Billy and Ben were talking, for a long time, then it looked like Billy gave Ben something, an envelope which he had took from the plastic bag. Ben opened the envelope and took something out, Billy was pointing and talking, then Ben held it at arm's length, it was a mask, and African mask, his sister thought, a beautiful African mask. Ben held it at arm's length for 5 minutes and then they both came back in, Billy sat on the end of the sofa, Ben in the middle, his sister on the other side. Ben was not exactly smiling but there was a calm about him. He looked at Billy, and said, 'Show and tell?' Billy said nothing, no one did. So, Ben began.

‘You might not believe any of this, a day ago I wouldn’t have. Yesterday I did the most foolish thing in my whole life, I broke laws, rules, not the police rules, but laws I never thought existed. At the Union Studios I entered a room which was full of evil, which was like in another place, underneath the interchange. I did have a twinge of a warning but as a person who does not believe, sorry, didn’t believe in evil, I walked in, into a trap it seems. To put it bluntly I was possessed by evil. And that night it took me over; it was only weakness and fear that prevented me from doing something truly terrible. Really terrible. You know the case I’m working on?’ he said looking at his sister, she nodded.

‘This,’ he said taking out the mask, ‘was given to Billy here by an African Chief, for “safe keeping”, though maybe for this very event, Billy told me. It is old and very powerful, and he thinks the chances are our distant ancestors would have been part or associated with animistic religions of,’ he paused, ‘Beninese Vodun.’ looking at Billy for confirmation of the name being remembered correctly, ‘Again,’ Ben continued ‘I would have once thought this interesting but irrelevant. You see a tree without roots can’t withstand a tempest.’

A very nice analogy thought Billy,

‘And I was such a tree, and as soon as I held this mask, I grew deep deep roots. The name for spirit is the Vodun for the people of Benin, and what has happened here now, and I’m not embarrassed to say, is the evil Vodun is gone and my family, the Vodun from the mask is with me. Here sister,’ he passed her the mask, and she held it for a while then passed it back.

‘Wonderful.’ she said, also feeling something quite strange.

After a pause, Billy said, 'Ray and I must get going, I suspect Ray is hungry.'

'Nonsense,' Ben's sister said, 'I will fix us up some food.' It was a very good chicken salad. Over the conversation Ben and his sister asked Billy for more information, he said he would send them some material, a book or two, some copies of maps when things, these things are all over.

'Ben, I think that project you thought we might share, well we have one now.' Ben's sister said.

Eventually someone said that they should head back to the station. Billy said he'd like to visit the studio, and to Ray's surprise Ben said he would follow. They drove back to Fazeley Street, still no sign of the Met. They opened the door but did not enter. Billy looked around. And Ben was wary but un-phased. He held the envelope in his hand, with the mask in it, he felt something of the depth of the roots, only something of the infinite depth, they spread deep and wide into strange lands and ancient times, and more than ground him, they fed him, fed him something, the Vodun.

'So back to Lloyd House?' said Ben.

'We will see you there in an hour or so, we have to go back to Cannock.'

Ray gave a surprised look, then an 'Oh well.' look.

They were silent for much of the journey, an observer might have imagined Ray deep in thought, but he wasn't, he knew his limits, 'You're very good Ray, not to ask any questions.' Billy said.

‘I know.’ was the reply.

At Cannock the Staffordshire police may not have been told to let only Met approved people into the cordoned area, or if they had the manner of being told provoked a tribal response, anyway one of the PCs recognised the pair and let them in.

‘If they hadn’t, we would need to go back and around and got through the fence.’ Billy said.

They drove down the track to the point of where the fire had been. Billy took out his pendulum, first it circled then swung left and right, Billy turned at right angles, so now it swung away from him and back. He moved forward, the bracken was tall and thick, and gave a lush green heady smell, almost intoxicating. Ray followed and noticed ever so often a broken stem.

‘The SOCO would think this was made by deer?’ crossed his mind. At around 200 yards they met another track. There were still signs of a vehicle, and another much smaller fire.

‘Ray does this track lead out via another route to the A460? Have you an OS map?’ Billy asked.

Ray used his smartphone and Bing Maps, ‘Bing maps has OS maps.’ he said, ‘Yes further down there’s a right to the A460 or a left to a B road.’

‘Let’s get back, and we need another SOCO team here.’ said Billy. They walked back to the car, Billy taking some POLICE STOP tape to mark the first few yards of the route they took to the other track.

‘Can you call Lloyd House about another SOCO.’ Billy said. Ray did so, DI Washington answered, the request going then to DCI Arscott, from there to DCS Jones, back to DCI Arscott, with the instruction to ask the Met. Which she did and was told it would be actioned when appropriate. Billy just shrugged when he got this information.

‘Can you drop me at the Hyatt.’ he asked Ray who could see Billy was tired. Billy got back to his room late afternoon and slept for four hours. He woke too late for supper in the restaurant so ordered room service. He had steak and fries, which was good, and apple pie, with a half bottle of red wine. He worked to about half twelve, then went for a stroll just down to the canal in the cool evening air, and still people about on such a summers night in the city. He went back to his room and slept again; this time he did dream.

Benjamin Washington had driven back to Lloyd House arriving just after three, where in 408 there was a group of detectives including DCI Arscott.

‘How are you?’ she asked as he took his seat.

‘Fine, I’m really fine, actually better, that’s the word.’ he said, carefully putting down the padded envelope on his desk, his eyes would flick to it every so often.

‘Well, it’s not what your colleagues thought this morning, you seem OK now but I’d like you to go home, it’s a Saturday, I guess your wife will be there, so go, and be back on Monday at nine if you are OK. No argument.’ she finished.

‘Yes Ma’am.’ he said, picked up his envelope and left. Once again, he

drove down the A38(M) and M6 over that spot. And to Coleshill. His wife and kids were home, they made a fuss, but Sarah his wife looked concerned. Eventually the boy and girl decided to go out onto the trampoline.

‘Your sister phoned,’ she said, ‘told me you had a story.’

He told the story, calmly and yet was worried as the further from the events the more fantastical they seemed. He glanced at the envelope on the table. He thought that Sarah, a science teacher, whose mind like his stood for no nonsense might not believe, worse think he was delusional.

As if reading his mind she said, ‘Don’t worry I don’t think you are crazy, well you are, but not in that way.’ She smiled, then sat with him on the sofa, her face looking more serious, and she said,

‘You see I didn’t sleep much myself last night, and I could see something was really bothering you, you were crying out as if in a bad dream when asleep, and when awake you looked terrified, and it was odd, I was too, like I couldn’t move, then finally I fell asleep exhausted, and when I woke you had gone to work, and then the kids came in and things seemed more normal.’

‘About the time Billy was drawing on my hands and feet.’ thought Ben.

‘Then your sister phoned,’ she continued, ‘and she said you’d had some sort of shock over this case you are on, but now you are over it, in fact it seemed like you had some sort of epiphany, I had to look it up, it seems you have?’ she ended with a slight question. Then added, ‘let me see.’

He got up, and went to the table, and took the mask from the envelope, and gave it to her. She held it still for half a minute, he saw her eyes moving over the mask, and the introverted look when she was thinking, he knew it well.

Finally, she spoke, 'It's beautiful.' she said, 'so beautiful, so,' after another long pause 'precious, magical,' she said shaking her head. 'It's crazy, it's sort of, something of you?'

Again silence, other than the sound of the trampoline and the screams of kids having fun.

'Where shall we put it?' she asked, 'Oh I'll keep it safe in a draw.' Ben said.

'No, you can't hide it.' she said.

'OK, on the wall in my office.'

'No, it belongs here, in our living room.' She looked around, to the doors onto the garden, the bright sunlight streaming in, the kids still making a racket just out of sight.

'There, above the door, to watch over all of us.'

'And the kids?' he said.

She put the mask back in the envelope, and called the children in. Once they had calmed down, she spoke to them.

'Daddy, sorry, he is dad now, his family has a long history.' She

explained as before, the origins of his parents in the West Indies, they remembered the story of slaves and Africa.

‘So, in Africa, Dad’s great great great great grandparents were in a tribe.’ Both the boy and girl thought this super cool, the girl saying so. ‘And this tribe lived where they believed in magic.’ ‘Like Harry Potter?’ the boy asked.

‘No, it was real magic.’ Ben said.

‘Wow.’ was the boys response.

Ben took over, ‘Real magic uses things which can look frightening, and are, but they are on the side of the tribe, to frighten away bad things.’ ‘Cool.’ said the girl.

‘Now I’m going to show you one of these,’ Ben said, ‘please don’t be frightened, it’s our friend.’ He slowly took the Benin Mask out of the envelope and showed them.

‘Wow.’ the boy said.

‘Awesome.’ said the girl, and then ‘Dad is it from your tribe?’

‘Yes.’ he said.

‘And are we in your tribe, Mom and Josh and me?’

‘Of course you are!’

‘So,’ said Ben ‘where shall we put it.’ Both kids pointed to what they thought the obvious place, above the door.

‘OK we will hang it there but only the tribe leader can touch it, OK, and the tribe leader is,’

‘Mom of course.’ came the reply. And so it stayed in the tribe, for many generations till somehow it found its way back to Ouidah where it was created.

Ben had said ‘It’s very precious so we must keep it safe.’ as he said this, his practical brain thought ‘precious’, as in how much is it worth. He remembered Billy saying that it was for his keeping in the family and if they wanted it no longer, the label at the back, an address in Porto-Novo should have it. In all the events he had forgotten about this. That night after the kids were in bed Ben was on his computer in his study staring at a similar mask at auction. His wife came in and looked at the screen. And yes, it was a very similar mask, but then she saw its sale price at the Sotheby’s auction.

‘Shit!’ she said then covered her mouth for uttering such, ‘you don’t think?’ Ben nodded, ‘Tell anyone else it’s a plaster cast, not ivory, we wouldn’t have ivory in the house, and one day we will have to tell the kids or return it, but for now I think we need it.’

And so, it stayed in the tribe, for many generations, and it was not sent to Porto-Novo, but some of the “tribe” and the mask found their way back to Ouidah where it was created.

Chapter 27: Death by Fire.

Saturday midnight, several CCTV cameras picked up the black Ford Transit, some were Highways Authority cameras, as it negotiated the A38(M) M6 interchange and headed north, not joining the motorway but taking the A38, the Tyburn Road north to Lichfield. At the A38 – A51 junction the van took the London Road into Lichfield City. Cameras picked up its progress. The van drove straight on at the lights down St. John Street then onto Bird Street, and continued down the pedestrianised part, deserted at this time in the very early morning, on it went past Minster Pool on the right, and Beacon Park on the left, taking the right into the Cathedral Close. Here it drove directly onto the lawn in front of the great facade of saints. It stopped, nothing happened for five minutes, no one left the van, then, recorded on five CCTV cameras, it burst into flames. Lights came on and curtains moved. Directly around the Close are offices, the Cathedral Shop and a Museum, Erasmus Darwin House. Erasmus whose grandson was Charles Darwin.

The blaze lit up the entire Close, the burning van, its dancing flames bringing to life the statues on the facade of the great cathedral. A police patrol car arrived after only 5 minutes; the officers tried to use a small foam extinguisher, but the heat threw them back. Another patrol car arrived and finally the first of several fire engines. ‘A fire at the cathedral.’ brought engines from a wide area, even the central station in Birmingham went on standby. The fourth engine was more than sufficient, the blaze had been intense but soon extinguished. After it had cooled a fire officer used a tool to open the back door. Next to him stood a junior fireman, who simply said ‘Fuck.’ as a flood light revealed what remained of 8 humans. This was now Sunday morning, at the early service of the cathedral those going to take

communion used a side door, as did all the services for that day.

The local police radioed in the details as they arrived, Stafford HQ was by one o'clock being shaken into life. The prospect of a terrorist attack on a major cathedral had cause to wake everyone up, even to wake Chief Constable Mackintosh. A similar process occurred in the clergy, up to the Bishop and Dean. It didn't take long for the good news that no damage to the cathedral had occurred. Those at the top of the hierarchy actually went back to bed. Stafford police at a lower level soon realised the incident might be related to operation Aston and the theft from the path lab in Birmingham by eight well trained and armed persons in two black transit vans. The DCI at Stafford contacted Lloyd House, a duty officer then contacted DCI Arscott, who once was sufficiently awake told the duty officer to contact the Met. The same response came, 'It would be actioned when appropriate.'

By now Sally Arscott was in her dressing gown, her partner making coffee, she was sitting at a pine table in a large kitchen which had a Welsh dresser and an old Aga. A cat, a tabby, sat on the table looking at her, asking 'Why are you sitting at my table at this time of the morning?' It was a little impatient at not getting the normal answer, a stroke, and a saucer of milk. It gave a look of being not bothered and jumped down, crossed the floor, and exited the kitchen through its cat door, and into the still dark Sunday morning in Aston Cantlow, a Warwickshire village near Stratford-upon-Avon. The kitchen being in an old farmhouse which Sally had taken on when her parents moved to Spain. The cat was now looking for fresh food in the hedgerows. Sally had now reached a DCI in London and was informed that it would be dealt with in the morning. She replied to the effect that this was the morning! and to shake the person into action she mentioned, 'suspected' terrorists, associated with the

case of the path lab theft of a young girl's body, a possible attack on a cathedral, and 8 burnt bodies. And so, after a half an hour it was decided to contact Commander Sarah Cooper who was asleep in the Lennon and Ono room of the Amsterdam Hilton. She did not 'give peace a chance', there being no one of her level in Stafford she spoke direct to Chief Constable Mackintosh, woken for the second time and gave the order that the van should in no way be touched, but cordoned off. She would order a Met SOCU recovery team which was to bring it to RAF Northholt. And now she needed others to get her back to London as soon as possible. The first flight being 9.00 AM, it was a Sunday. Cooper tried to think of someone to blame, couldn't and ordered a coffee and early breakfast in her room.

Back in Birmingham most of the team were taking some time off after being on full duty and overtime for twelve days. DS Kate Moore who had been managing the communications across forces and ranks, was told she could too.

The Chief Constable of The West Midlands Police was at home, a large, detached house in Tanworth in Arden, a pretty Warwickshire village which still had a rural feel. Around 10 o'clock Sunday evening the special mobile phone rang, and before thinking a voice said,

'Is that the Isle of.' 'Isle of Wight! an easy one Chief Constable White thought.' 'Yes, and you must be faster than sound.'

There was a delay of 20 seconds, then 'Yes it's me, a good one by the way, I have the preliminary results from our friends in London, they have to tell me, it's not from courtesousness, you can find them in the normal place, and password'.

The line went dead. The normal place was a national wide police

resource database. The Chief thought to let the team know in the morning, but it had been ages, some real police work might be fun, so let's have a look, real "police work", the gist was CCTV showed a van arriving in the Close, and no one left, 8 dead, probably use of a flammable material, napalm like. So maybe it would be best to send an email to DCI Sally Arscott to let her team know, copied in DCS Jones and for some reason copied it to Billy. About a minute later the phone rang again, it was Billy, he had been given this number, wisely The Chief wondered? 'Hi thanks for that, so no gun shots, any weapons or ammunition found? Like those used in the theft?'

A few pleasantries then he rang off and White made another call this time to 'the knife', a poor attempt, and immediate response, better, 'Is that lemonade?' a 15 second wait, 'Good one, look you might like to ask, were there any weapons or ammunition in the van? It might upset your friend.'

'Hmmm, I'll ask, be in touch in the morning.' replied Chief Constable Macintosh of the Staffordshire Police Force.

In a corner of RAF Northholt, an airbase in West London near the A40 is Universal Aviation, and near that two aircraft hangers and an office building. Not part of Universal having its own perimeter fence. In one of the hangers was the remains of the Ford Transit from Lichfield, now empty. The facility could only cope with two postmortems at a time, the other bodies were in cold storage. In the office a phone rang, and a voice asked the same questions that The Chief Constable of The West Midlands had asked, but the voice was saying that the 'So and so from Staffordshire wants to know if any weapons or ammunition were found, as if we would miss that, and so a positive link to the path lab theft, well?'

The DS looked at a computer screen, 'Well!' came the voice, 'Yes Ma'am.' was the reply, 'each had what looked like what was once a Heckler & Koch MP7 sub-machine gun and there was ammunition.' The phone went dead.

Chapter 28: SOCU FAIL.

Monday morning at nine o'clock, a very one-sided private conversation between Sir Mark Bradbury and the Commissioner of the Met took place. Sir Mark wanted to know why the request for SOCO to revisit Cannock Chase was not acted on, why the SOCO request for the Mallek studio has yet to be acted on, why the Oslo and New York leads seem unknown to the new team, and how can the new team fail to account for a fire in which ammunition which was present did not explode, and why, here his voice became almost imperceptibly louder, 'why, oh why,' he repeated to draw emphasis, 'one of the world's leading and renowned physicists, a Nobel Laureate, was denied access to the initial site to continue his work!' He did not, he said, want answers.

By 11 AM a video conference was set up with Commander Sarah Cooper in New Scotland Yard, in Birmingham, DCS Anne Jones and Billy Taylor. Not in the conference, but watching, unbeknown to those taking part were Sir Mark Bradbury, the Commissioner of the Met, Chief Constable White, Special Branch and MI5, MI5 who were responsible for the unbeknown being unbeknown.

Commander Cooper apologised for not allowing access to the sites, and especially the distinguished professor, and that the SOCO delays were due to her not being at the helm, both Mallek's studio and Cannock Chase would be visited ASAP by SOCU SOCO teams and SOCU officers that day, and full access would be granted to all in the Birmingham team, and Mr Taylor. She added that she would be sending a DI Brian Skelton to help with the local enquiries. She repeated herself, SOCO teams were on its way to Cannock and Digbeth.

She then asked,

‘Mr Taylor,’

‘Please just call me Billy.’ he interrupted.

She began again ‘Billy have you any thoughts on the facts of the transit van fire?’

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘two really, we could suppose some suicide pact led them to drive to the Close and commit mass suicide, it chimes with Amsterdam and the Bijlmermeer group, but the groups themselves are probably not related, one a fairly anarchistic group, the other obviously military or ex-military. That and the site of the fire, a cathedral, and that the ammunition failed to explode, for me rules out the idea of suicide, and if so, maybe likewise the mass suicide in Amsterdam. An alternative conclusion other than mass suicide, I think can wait. Oh, and two other things, the team are having a meeting, a catch up and possible new lines of enquiry at three this afternoon, would you or one of your colleagues like to be included by video link, and also your SOCO team won’t have much joy in Digbeth.’

‘Oh,’ said the Commander, as if expecting more information but not getting any, so she continued, ‘We will look forward to 3 o’clock.’

Walking out of the room with her DI, she said, ‘How the hell did Bradbury know about this?’

‘Well,’ began DI Skelton,

‘It’s a bloody rhetorical question, now get your arse down to

Birmingham.’ she said.

DI Washington had let “The Union” at Digbeth to expect a Met SOCO team, and though now not strictly part of the Aston team DI Smith and DS Asiff would be there to meet them, even though a DI and DS from the Met would be at both sites, so he also let Stafford know.

This left Billy and Ray with the rest of the team in 408. Billy was still working on sheets of paper and making notes both on his new laptop and in his Moleskine notebook. About one o’clock a call came from DI Smith, Ray took the call,

DI Smith said, ‘The guys from London are here but there’s a problem in Digbeth, the studio, the room is bare.’

‘What, empty, someone cleared it out?’ Ray said.

‘No, it’s completely bare. No plaster on the walls, no floor tiles, no lights, electrics, stripped bare.’ was the reply.

Ray told Billy, who looked up and said, ‘I know, I did tell the Commander.’ and continued to work. The guys at Cannock had more luck. They found the site, but only after Ray talked them through how to find it. They had taken samples from the ash. Back in New Scotland Yard Commander Sarah Cooper had a problem with getting her head around the ‘bare’, as opposed to empty studio. It didn’t make sense. That there was literally no forensics, she recalled Billy’s ‘Your SOCO team won’t have much joy in Digbeth.’ So, she gave orders to her PA to get her a first-class ticket to Birmingham and a room, preferably a suite in a good hotel. Then she asked a DS to let Birmingham know she would be wanting an office space when she arrived Tuesday morning at Lloyd House in order to sort out the

mess. The DS edited the last part and added polite requests. Ray turned to Billy, 'You seem to know stuff that isn't, I mean how did you know about the studio, and other things, like,' he was remembering 'the body going missing, and why are the drawings getting done without anyone seeing, and,' he remembered the incident on the train, 'you had braced yourself on the train, and you expected the flight to be diverted, and the ammunition, it's not natural.'

Billy looked up, 'You're getting to be a good detective.' he said.

Back in 408, and Ben was looking good, 'You see a tree without roots can't withstand a tempest.' A very nice analogy thought Billy chatting with Ben. Roots, and he thought of Lichfield Cathedral having roots deeper than its three spires, grounding itself and the city, but did Birmingham have roots, he pondered.

'Billy?' asked Ben, 'about the mask,' 'Yes, no doubt about what you saw at Sotheby's?' replied Billy. Ben just blew out air and covered his face from a grin, life is strange he thought, and good, but then not so good for the Sharifs, he had a job to do.

DI Skelton had caught the one o'clock train and it was past 3 o'clock by the time he had booked into a room in the Holiday Inn Express Inn Holliday Street, too late for the meeting he thought, and decided to start fresh in the morning. Commander Sarah Cooper, after having a short team meeting caught the 2.40 train from Euston to Birmingham New Street, and by the time she had booked into her suite at the Hyatt hotel it was 4.30. The day had not been one of her best, and now she wondered why she had decided to travel up to Birmingham at all.

Chapter 29: WMP 1, The Met o.

The meeting was set up, the video link was in place by 2.30, but in London there was no Commander Cooper or her DI. There was a Candace Reilly, a DI from the Met's team who would take notes and record the session for the Commander. As before, unknown to most, there were eavesdroppers. Apart from the now smaller team, others from the old team were in attendance, they were not officially supposed to be present, but the absence of Commander Cooper had annoyed Anne Jones, so she, DCI Sally Arscott and the advisory team were all invited, and all attended.

At 3 o'clock the DCS gave a welcome, the DCI gave some introductions.

Ben gave a summary of the progress or lack, adding the now confusion over things like the studio in Digbeth, the Incident in the Cathedral Close, and the failure to find Christian Mallek.

Next up was Billy. He began by saying all could possibly be explained by careful rational reconstructions, but that he was going to propose an alternative, the irrational. After all he was not a policeman and had long ago abandoned police methods, this was fishlike, no one laughed or understood his analogy.

So, he began with the van.

'Could a team for reasons of their own commit suicide in the Cathedral Close? Yes.'

'Could an intense fire not set off ammunition, almost certainly not.'

‘Could a sealed room have all plaster work, flooring, electrics, removed without notice in an occupied building with CCTV, within some 36 hours? almost certainly not.’

At each of these he wrote on the whiteboard.

‘Could a person or persons disembowel themselves then write sigils in their own blood. From the medical evidence from Bijlmermeer almost certainly not.’

‘Could someone continue to write texts on subsequent days on the pillars underneath the Gravelly Hill Interchange undetected given the police presence? Almost certainly not.’

‘Have we checked the SOCO evidence and statements to find inconsistencies, small inconsistencies?’

Now another set of questions.

‘Has anyone checked with authorities in Oslo and New York for unexplained deaths, especially group deaths? There was a hotel fire in Oslo, and six people unaccounted for, for New York, nothing I could discover.

Who were the Oslo six? I’m here in an advisory capacity, and as yet think it best to leave it there. Other than one other example, but this can be rationally explained, how did the WMP SOCO miss the second site of a fire in Cannock, I suggest because those responsible knew something of SOCO techniques.’

Dr Andrew McNeil the Criminal Psychologist on the advisory team

asked a question of DCS Jones,

‘Would it be possible for the pictures from the studio in Digbeth and Amsterdam and any others that might be relevant to be seen by the group here, as some I think might not have seen them?’

DCS Jones said she saw no reason why not, but that the Amsterdam pictures were extremely gruesome so people might choose not to look at these.

Ben arranged this, pulling the images from the data base. When finished Reverend Poole asked, of no one in particular, what these signs or sigils mean, where were they from. There was a silence then Billy spoke, standing.

‘Various, and very interesting.’ he said, ‘Ben, the Amsterdam pictures again.’ he waited,

‘Here a sigil which is an altered Santo Daime image, the six-pointed star replaced with a five and reversed, which also appears at Gravelly Hill. Here the Hebrew Aleph reversed, crossed out, the sign for infinity but broken. And look at this, an Ouroboros, an ancient Egyptian symbol of a snake eating its tail, but you see it’s the tail eating the head. These also appeared in the studio.’

Billy paused for these to be shown, again those from Amsterdam and others, ‘A lion-faced deity found in Gnosticism, but it’s a domestic cat, another found in Gnosticism is a serpent with a lion head, here reversed, a lion with a serpent’s head, I could go on but you might get the picture?’ he said looking at Reverend Poole, who said,

‘They are like a blasphemy of a sect or religion.’

‘Correct,’ said Billy and went on ‘and that raises other questions, are these the work of an artist wanting to shock with a fiction, Christian Mallek, or is it that there are in reality such groups who use such blasphemous images as happens in many religions, for example Satanism does this kind of thing with Christian images and practices.’

‘Yes, yes I see.’ said Reverend Poole.

The DCS stood up, ‘Well someone should find out, someone should check out Oslo and New York, someone should check out the evidence we have, looking for inconsistencies.’

Billy added ‘And maybe one more thing I forgot, I’ve asked Nigel, sorry, Professor Summers to scan the pillars tonight around 12.30 to check an idea, sorry maybe not the time to say.’

‘I think the time to say is now, and the time to find out is as soon as possible.’ DCS Anne Jones said firmly, showing her frustration.

A uniformed PC came in and said, ‘Excuse me Ma’am,’ and approached the DCS, and spoke so quietly no one could hear.

‘Excuse me,’ the DCS said to the group, ‘I have to take a call, but please if you would wait.’ She left the room in a hurry. The wait was short, breaking up conversations. The DCS re-entered the room and said,

‘Well, the someone who should find out is now us.’ A long pause, for dramatic effect thought Ray.

‘I want teams to re-examine the evidence so far, another to chase

Oslo and New York, and another to deal with Christian Mallek and the occult aspect, that team should have Mr Taylor, sorry, Billy in it, Ray, you should then lead that team. DI Smith the evidence, DI Washington Oslo, and New York. We will meet tomorrow at 5.30. Billy, you said Professor Summers is working tonight, keep me informed.'

The DCS was talking with the DCI, and then left the room.

'Ma'am?' Ray asked the question of DCI Arscott that everyone was wanting to ask, 'How is it we are now back on the case, and what about the Met?'

'We are back on the case because the Home Secretary has asked us, and the Met are to give full support,' was the reply. 'Now it's 4.30, we can make a start.'

'Yes! One Nil!' thought Ray.

At 4.30 as she began to unpack, Commander Cooper's phone rang, it was the Commissioner with the bad news, the Met looked to be lost, not focused and unaware of vital information, compound by there being no physical Met presence at the four o'clock meeting, 'DI Skelton is dead meat.' Sarah Cooper thought. The Commander continued in a more conciliatory tone,

'Sarah it was obviously not my decision, it was from the Home Secretary, and I get the impression he was both in touch with MI5 and his superior, so I think we need to rescue the Met's reputation from this mess by being as helpful as possible.'

The call finished and Cooper called DI Brian Skelton and wanted to

know why he wasn't present at the meeting? He gave the same reason, that he had only just arrived, but that DS Bradley was present. But for Sarah a DS didn't count! And could he get a secure download of the meeting, and yes best to go to Lloyd House for that, and yes bring it back here for them to view, to be on top of things first thing. On second thoughts she would go with him and watch in situ and maybe have a word with DCS Jones. So, DI Skelton arranged a taxi for Sarah Cooper and himself to get them to Lloyd House.

Commander Cooper met with DCS Jones, though technically outranking Jones, said they should be on first name terms, and could she be kept in the loop with regards Professor Summers.

'Not a problem,' said DCS Jones, 'And before you see the video of our meeting, let me introduce you to the team, then I'll show you to your office we have for you.'

So, Commander Cooper met the team, including Billy. And whilst the others gave the proper 'Yes Ma'am', the exchange went,

DCS Jones, 'And this is Billy.'

Commander Cooper, 'Good to meet you in person Billy, and please it's Sarah.'

Knowing looks from the detectives.

'Nice to meet you, Sarah.' Billy replied.

Commander Cooper then watched the video in her new office, whilst DI Brian Skelton was shown his desk in 408.

Billy took a slow walk back to the Hyatt via the canals, it was still good weather, and a slow walk was good for thinking, or better letting his imagination wander. After a shower in his room, he dressed and went down to dinner. He found his usual table, one in the corner where he could observe the scene. While he was watching Commander Sarah Cooper entered, she had dressed down to casual trousers, blouse and flat shoes, Billy noticing, waved acknowledgement, and so she wandered over,

‘So, are you staying here?’ she asked.

‘Yes, and so are you?’ he replied.

‘Yes, me too, is the food good?’ she asked.

‘Yes, very, in my opinion.’ he replied.

‘Would you mind if I join you, promise not to talk shop.’ she asked.

‘Not at all, and please I enjoy talking shop, though obviously only in the circle of this ongoing investigation.’

She sat, and the waiter approached with the menus. Sarah Cooper looked at the menu for quite a while, then said,

‘Impressive, anything you’d recommend?’

‘What I’ve had so far is all good, so really I couldn’t say...’ he said, thinking that this was beginning to look like some kind of charm offensive. There was another pause.

The waiter approached, looked at Sarah Cooper who said nothing,

then at Billy, who spoke first,

‘I would like for starter Velouté of Roscoff Onion, Almond and Parmesan, followed by Suffolk Lamb, White Asparagus and then the Mint and Cherry, Kirsch and Dark Chocolate, thank you.’

Sarah Cooper said, ‘I’m thinking I will have the same.’

‘Thank you, madam.’ the waiter said, giving Billy a smile.

‘Oh, and a good bottle of red please, Dominique.’ Billy said, the waiter nodded and withdrew.

The conversation was a little stilted, Sarah Cooper trying to probe Billy’s background, and his sources of information, but she was amicable. They parted with ‘good nights’, and Billy took one of his usual canal side walks, Sarah Cooper went back to her suite to do some work.

Just past midnight Billy’s phone rang, it was Nigel, he was breathless and simply said ‘Billy you’ve got to get here, it’s writing, it’s writing itself.’

He quickly texted a round robin to the team and then got dressed. He took the lift down to the hotel foyer and walked outside, as he did Commander Cooper was also leaving the hotel. As usual two taxis were waiting on the opposite side of the road, but Commander Cooper noticed a patrol car at the top of Bridge Street, she sprinted over fetching her warrant card out of her pocket as she ran, shouting ‘This is Commander Cooper, we need you to take us to the Gravelly Hill Interchange immediately!’ The officers looked shocked, but they recognised Billy as he approached. The two quickly got in the back

seats, the blue light and siren were on and in a minute they were on the A38, then the A38(M). Billy was texting Ray to meet at the interchange, suspecting he would first go to the hotel, which he did. Next Billy was telling the driver the M6 slip South and then the service road. They stopped at the security gate, Commander Cooper again waving her warrant card and shouting at the confused constables who let them pass. Down the slope they could see lights, and two figures. One was soon recognisable as Nigel, the other a woman PC. Nigel turned as they approached, he had a UV lamp trained on one of the pillars, and as the two approached they could see themselves, faint lines were appearing, the circles, and zig zags. No one spoke, they watched for what must have been two minutes, then the writing stopped. Nigel was now using his real time scanner to capture the writing, which was already starting to fade. Ray appeared, breathless, and before he could speak Commander Cooper said,

‘I’d like a meeting first thing with all who are here, it takes some believing, I mean for me it does, everyone here to be present, including you officer?’ She was looking at the young PC.

‘PC Kaur, Ma’am.’

‘Well, get your notebook up to date and get home, Ray will arrange cover for PC Kaur, and the meeting,’ she paused, ‘I thought nine, but will you need time to prepare so you can explain?’

She was looking at Billy.

‘No, no,’ he said, ‘It’s all fairly obvious, nine, where?’ He was the only one who thought ‘obvious’.

‘Where? Oh, in my office, 410,’ she said, ‘and you Ray, though you didn’t see what we did could you be there, and would you mind being present Professor Summers?’

Nigel had been whispering ‘brilliant... brilliant...’ under his breath, ‘Please it’s Nigel, and yes it would be brilliant, brilliant.’

‘So, Ray, can you get a patrol car to take PC Kaur home, and maybe help Nigel pack his gear, then drive us back to the Hyatt.’ the Commander said, now not so much from fake charm, but having to try to take in what was unbelievable.

So, Ray drove the Commander and Billy back to the hotel, and wondered what the morning would bring.

Chapter 30: The Maze of Life.



At 8.55 in room 410 in Lloyd House sat Commander Sarah Cooper behind her desk, next to her sat DCS Anne Jones and DCI Sally Arscott. All three had coffee and had been there at 8.30 when the Commander had told her story. DI Ray Wood, Professor Nigel Summers and PC Kaur sat without coffee. At 8.59 there was a knock on the door, Ray sprang up and opened it and in came Billy with a large flip chart on an easel. He set it up, then disappeared, returning with his bag.

‘I must say that of course this is in confidence.’ the Commander said, there was silence. ‘Billy.’ she said.

‘OK,’ Billy began, ‘the drawings on the pillars are forming, or are going to form a maze.’ He flipped over the chart to show a circular maze in black and white, he then flipped again, this time the maze was in grey, and the pillars of the junction marked as circles, some filled in. It was clear they followed the maze pattern, those that were

filled in, and clear the pattern was not complete. He turned back to the first drawing of the maze.

‘This is the “Maze of Life” found in many Gothic churches and cathedrals, perhaps the most famous at Chartres.’ He paused, realising that to his audience it was not the most famous as they didn’t know anything about the Gothic ‘Maze of Life’.

‘OK,’ he said, turned to a blank sheet and drew a crude layout of a traditional church, a cross. ‘Obviously the cross is the Christian symbol or sigil, but there is much more to it than that.’

Ray thought if it is Billy there must be!

‘The entrance,’ Billy said pointing to the bottom of the cross, ‘Is where we enter the cathedral or church, or where we enter life, the doorway shape being obvious. Also, where the font is found traditionally. So, the door is our physical birth, the font is where we are born into the spiritual world of the church.’

The faces of the others were difficult to read, all but the PC’s and Nigel’s, who looked fascinated.

‘As we walk down the aisle we pass through life, in cathedrals the sculptures around the columns often show this. At the altar, the most holy part of the church or cathedral, life ends, it is where the sacrament takes place, behind it, the void at the end of the cathedral or church, this represents the afterlife. Sometimes you find a lady chapel, but let’s leave that out for now.’

‘Now?’ thought Ray.

‘At the point of the cross, the transept in the middle of the church, we often find this maze, which too represents the difficult journey of life. There was once one in Lichfield, the cathedral of St Chad, or Mercia, and there is another cathedral across the road, the Catholic Basilica also dedicated to St Chad and interestingly holding his relics, once held in Lichfield. So, the writing is telling us, where and when we will find Eve Sharif, but only once the maze is complete, and our work is completed, obviously.’

‘Obviously?’ thought Ray.

There was a long silence, then Commander Cooper spoke, ‘Drawings made by who, or what or how? The Dinka?’

‘Oh no,’ said Billy, ‘We are way on from that, they if you like were only the start, the tail of the snake, and the forces here are quite tremendous.’

The two officers who were not at the junction that previous evening could keep an open mind, for the others a whole new dimension had just opened up and Billy had gently thrown them in.

Commander Cooper spoke, ‘If you don’t mind DCS Jones, and of course at your discretion I would like to have PC Kaur in the team, and Nigel would you be OK to join our meeting this evening, you see we seem now bound by the events of last night, of course if you wouldn’t mind joining the team PC Kaur? Nigel?’

‘No Ma’am.’ she said.

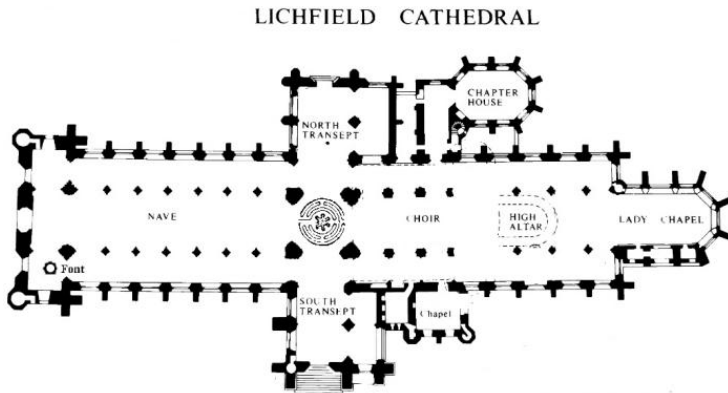
‘Brilliant!’ Nigel said.

‘At four o’clock then.’ DCS Jones said, in full agreement. The meeting over, the three senior officers remained, and when Billy tried to remove the easel and flip chart the Commander said,

‘Billy if you wouldn’t mind leaving that.’

So, he and Ray left, Nigel took the lift, and Ray said smiling to PC Kaur,

‘Best go and get changed to blend in with non-uniform CID.’



Chapter 31: For the sake of Art.

Back in 408 Billy approached Ben, ‘Ben,’ he said ‘I’d really like your help, I could do this myself, but it involves your investigations and I wouldn’t like to compromise these. I wonder can you find out how many were in the apartment in Amsterdam, I seem to recall six but the scene of crime pictures were not clear, I’ve had another look and obviously the nature of what happened and the violence, but were any or all tattooed, and tattooed recently? And there were six in the Oslo fire, six who?’

‘Art Students.’ said Ben.

‘Right, Ben, hope you don’t mind but any contact with Christian Mallek and any tattoos, recent, and maybe in Bijlmermeer?’

‘No, I don’t mind,’ said Ben ‘apart from what I owe you, you seem to be navigating this chaos better than anyone, thanks for the question, I’ll get onto this, I’ve a Captain in Oslo we are exchanging emails, though nothing from New York yet, and sure I’ll speak to our Amsterdam contact, Frans isn’t it?’

‘Yes, Frans.’ Billy replied.

Just then Commander Cooper entered with Saqib Ashraf, and Jane Smith, she was introducing them to the three teams, as Saqib Ashraf, Special Branch and Jane Smith, Home Office, or as the older or brighter detectives thought MI5. At each of the three teams she asked if they would not mind giving them a 10-minute heads up on progress? Saqib Ashraf wouldn’t give rank, but said to call him Ash, everyone did, and Jane Smith having no rank said to call her Jane.

The new reality faced by Commander Sarah Cooper was finding the hard logic that had got her promoted now looking fragile, she had to face the thought of having seen something that she would not believe of anyone else, that anyone claiming so, she would assume imbalanced, this was one reason she wanted PC Kaur around, a sort of living proof of what they all saw, and that too didn't make sense.

They spent 10 minutes with each group, making notes, DI Washington's ideas, and lines of investigation 'looked good.' said Ash, 'Thanks Billy.' thought Ben,

'New York might be difficult, a five-hour lag and a large force, different departments. I have some names, but New York is a big place.' Ben said to which Jane replied,

'If you get stuck phone me.' handing him a card with her mobile number on it, and just the words 'Home Office'.

Ray and Billy headed off to Digbeth, first to the studio spaces in Minerva Works, where some people were setting up an exhibition. Christian Mallek's studio space still barred and taped off. At Digbeth Projects they had conversations with the director, and his deputy, neither had seen or heard of Mallek in several weeks. As they were leaving, Ali Green, one of the art students who had found the head of Eve Sharif was entering.

'Hi!' said Billy, 'you are, sorry I've forgotten your name?'

'Ali.' she said sheepishly,

'Oh, sorry Ali, can I ask you something?'

‘Sure.’ she replied, ‘Did you meet Christian Mallek at all?’

‘Well, yes, a few times.’ she said. ‘Let’s get some coffee and chat if you don’t mind?’ Billy said.

They sat on stools made of car tyres and a table made from part of an air conditioning unit. Ray went for the coffees. Ali said she had been to a lecture and had a couple of tutorials given by Christian Mallek, also he was often around the canal, a couple of months ago.

‘Did he ask you to work with him on any projects?’ Billy asked.

‘Yes, but it meant getting tattoos, and real ones, and I wasn’t into that, anyway I didn’t like the images he wanted.’ she said.

‘Which were?’ asked Billy.

‘Well,’ she took a small sketch pad from her bag, ‘he left this behind after a tutorial, I never saw him again to give it back.’ she said, offering it to him, ‘Please keep it if it might help, it’s kinda freaky now.’

It was an A5, expensive leather-bound sketch pad, quite a few pages all covered in sigils, some Billy recognised others seemed to be alterations of these.

‘You sure?’ he said, she nodded, Ray arrived with the coffee.

Chapter 32: Changing Times.

Back at Lloyd House, DI Ron Smith, DS Kate Moore, DS Rashad Mahmood with help from DS Paul Bradley had been going through the evidence regarding Professor Mulberry's suicide, and the circumstances leading up to the incident in the Cathedral Close in Lichfield early Sunday morning. In both cases it was mainly tedious CCTV coverage. It took hours, but as before everything seemed fine, images of the professor catching the train from the university to New Street, then from there to Hampton-in-Arden. The van, first tracked on the A38(M) then all the way to The Close in Lichfield. Dozens of images, all showing the same story in each case.

And looking much as before, Paul, the DS from the Met, like the others was now bored, he was flipping the image of the professor in the concourse at New Street, then he thought he noticed an anomaly in one shot of the central area of New Street Station, he froze the sequence, zoomed in, the time on the CCTV clip which showed Professor Mulberry walking across the concourse was different to that of the time shown on the departure board. An error, or someone who could alter the CCTV time stamps, that was possible. He found two more images from different CCTVs showing the same difference.

Checking back to the train from University he had no luck there, he did get a CCTV image showing Professor Mulberry boarding a train at University at 12.30, a 7 minute journey, the train departing on time, both CCTV and the Departure board showing 12.30. Paul almost in passing pulled up the image of Professor Mulberry's car in the university car park. Another image was a picture of her parking ticket, time stamp 12.25. He sat and pondered, then asked DS Kate

Moore,

‘Kate,’ he said, she looked up, ‘how long would it take to walk from the staff car park at the university to the station?’

‘Ask DI Washington, he’s a regular.’ she said.

So, he walked over to where DI Washington was at his desk, gazing into space, waiting for a call back from New York.

‘Excuse me Sir,’ he said, Ben looked up, ‘how long would it take to walk from the staff car park at the university where Professor Mulberry parked, to the University Station?’

‘About 15 minutes,’ replied Ben, ‘it’s right across campus.’ ‘What about 5?’ Paul asked, ‘impossible.’ was the reply. Paul went back to his desk,

‘Sir,’ he was now talking to DI Ron Smith, ‘There is something odd with the CCTV of the Professor.’ The DI looked up, he too had been staring into space, shook himself, ‘What?’ he said.

The others gathered round as Paul went over what he had spotted. The team now had images from the campus, it showed the professor walking slowly, stopping to look at the Hepworth sculpture. The last CCTV as she exited the campus was showing 12.45, 15 minutes after the other images showing her boarding the train. Maybe the CCTV at the university was wrong? They found images of her car from CCTV on the roads to the university, Arthur Road and Edgbaston Park Road and even one of the time shown on The Joseph Chamberlain Memorial Clock Tower, or Old Joe as it is known. They all confirmed the journey time and Catherine Mulberry arriving and getting a ticket

at 12.25.

‘What about on the train, did we check any CCTV from there?’ asked the DI. A rhetorical question, ‘We didn’t bother, we thought there was no need, we had the times of getting on and off the trains!’ Ron said.

Kate got the train CCTVs, from each carriage, no less than six cameras in each. All four detectives were now on their computers doing a visual search of the train, all four slowly came to the same conclusion, she was not on the train! They even had a station camera showing her entering a carriage, that none of the cameras in the carriage showed her entering, they showed no such event. Their boredom had vanished. They now applied themselves to the second part of the professor’s fatal journey, they had similar time anomalies and again, no evidence of her on the train. And it started to become clear it was hard to see how this could be physically achieved. At one point Rash had some conspiracy theory, but he admitted to his boss changing the hands on old Joe was stretching it.

DCS Anne Jones was making the rounds, good for morale, also to know what’s going on. Billy and Ray were out, Ben getting positive results from Oslo, and was checking something for Billy from Bijlmermeer, but New York was proving difficult. ‘Keep trying.’ she said, and moved on to DI Ron Smith’s team, now with DS Paul Bradley from the Met helping. The team seemed excited, Ron looked up,

‘It doesn’t make any rational sense Ma’am,’ he said, and went on to show the ‘evidence’, the CCTV of boarding the trains, both trains, and none showing her on the trains from inside the two carriages, this was impossible to reason.

‘Wait a minute.’ she said and walked to 410, knocked and entered,

‘Sarah,’ she said, ‘after your conversion to the impossible you might want to see this.’ So, curiosity led her out of her office and into 408. Ron rehearsed the events as before, the commander then wanted to see it all again in detail, so she sat and watched, the DCS left. The commander was now sitting next to Ron watching the impossibilities occur. Finally, she said,

‘And the van drive?’

‘Ma’am we’ve looked once but not the timings like the professor’s journey.’ Ron replied.

‘Then let’s do it, is there a spare terminal?’ she said.

Ron pointed to a spare space with a computer, looking a little confused. He now it seems had a Metropolitan Police Commander on his team. All five began, taking their time watching the CCTV and making notes, and sure enough inconsistencies began to appear, both on Police CCTV, Highways Authority, and Lichfield City CCTV. Times didn’t match, journey times on some, the van must have been travelling at 2 MPH and at others 120 MPH. Then Paul said,

‘I’ve been looking at a couple of the images of the van on the motorway and some on the A38, not the van, but close up, zoomed in and enhancing.’

‘And?’ said Ron.

‘There is no driver, no one at all in the front seats.’ He froze one such

image, then cut to another three. There was no one in the front of the van. There was the same silence of reason failing to engage, Rash briefly thought of 'Remote control.' but kept quiet, 'I mean the speed differences?' he thought. Sarah Cooper took out her phone and dialled,

'This is Commander Cooper,' she said, 'The van from Lichfield, where were the eight bodies?' The DI in Northolt obviously was confused, the commander asking again, adding, 'It's not a difficult question officer.' A pause, obviously a reply, 'in the van', and the Commander 'I know they were in the bloody van, but where!' A longer silence, maybe checking, 'So all eight were in the back, and no one exited the van, do you not find this strange?' she said, and not waiting for a reply ended the call. She spoke to the team, 'All in the back, CCTV shows no one leaving, I'll be in my office.' and she left.

Chapter 33: $2^2 + 3^2 + 5^2 + 7^2 + 11^2 + 13^2 + 17^2$.

Meanwhile Ben was still struggling with New York. He gave “Jane Smith” a call and explained his difficulty, adding that he was looking for the death of a group of six in the New York area, possibly art students and possibly having recent tattoos and maybe associated with the artist Christian Mallek. He had been trying for some time, it was now ten in the morning in the US. She asked for his email and said someone should be in touch. It was about 20 minutes later and he received an email from Mike Carter FBI Agent V. His email was quite to the point,

‘No such match in New York, match on 6 as of yet unknown persons found in a cellar in New Mexico. Please send details of the basis for your scenario.’

Ben sent the details and links to Oslo and Amsterdam. He received another email 10 minutes later,

‘6 missing persons, all students from different locations on the west coast, all students of art or art history. Will notify confirmation, thanks.’

The New York police and the Met in London were now focusing on Christian Mallek, his gallery, his homes in London and New York and a residence in Oslo.

It was now 3 o’clock, Billy and Ray had arrived, back from Digbeth via the Ikon and a long talk with the director. DI Smith’s team’s findings didn’t surprise Billy or did DI Washington’s findings. Billy simply waved the Mallek sketch book, then went and rescued his flip chart

from 410. Or tried to, it seems Sarah Cooper thought he would have more space to work in her office, if he didn't mind a spectator. She added that the SOCO results from the second site in Cannock suggest 3 persons, and traces of burnt plastic.

The 4.00 PM meeting was moved to 407 as it had more free space. Again, a semicircle of chairs and front row of Commander Sarah Cooper, DCS Anne Jones, DCI Sally Arscott, DI Benjamin Washington, DI Ron Smith and Billy. The audience made up of DI Ray Wood, Professor Nigel Summers, the WMP sergeants, DS Paul Bradley and DI Brian Skelton from the Met, 3 members of the advisory group and The Chief Constable. Also, Saqib Ashraf and Jane Smith.

The meeting began with the DCS welcoming everyone on this update, and then said Jane Smith of the Home Office would like to say a few words, which were to the effect that now it seemed three forces or organisations from outside the UK were involved, which might increase, so for this and subsequent updates they would be live streamed, in this case to officers in the Met, Amsterdam, Oslo and the FBI in New York. And Ray thought and listening in and watching, also people in Langley, Cheltenham and elsewhere. The DCS thanked Jane, and asked Billy to begin.

He outlined three areas, the USA, Norway, and The Netherlands, and three incidents which are connected to the A38(M) M6 interchange and the murder of Eve Sharif, and central to this it seems was the artist Christian Mallek. The interchange had markings found also in the artist's sketch pad and which appeared in Amsterdam and in a studio space of his in Birmingham. These were projected as he spoke. The images matching ones in the sketch book. These were not in the case of Amsterdam and the interchange of a known sect or religion but alterations, inversions of the sigils of Santo Daime religion. Also,

in Amsterdam on the walls were in blood similarly altered sigils from pre-Christian Germanic religions. The hotel in Oslo had no images on the walls but again the six victims were art students and had tattoos, only of Siberian shamanistic practice, again recent and again altered images. A studio in Oslo and a residence of Mallek's also had these same altered images. The six victims in New Mexico are yet to be identified, and here, he said,

'I will conjecture they will be six victims with tattoos, and these will be of altered images of Aztec origin. And similar will almost certainly be found in New York at Mallek's apartment and studio.'

He paused to drink some water,

'There seems to be one conclusion,' he continued, 'Mallek was going to exhibit or make 3 performances, in Oslo, New York and Amsterdam using in each case tattooed performers mimicking a known cult or religion. Each of the 3 groups was to be of 6, 666, an obvious ironic point. Another final event or events might have been planned. We have then the possibility that cults or religious groups became aware of Mallek's use and alteration of their faiths, and this was perceived as blasphemy which should be stopped, and so they were responsible for preventing these performances by very violent means. This is one scenario, and a line of investigation. This I think is highly unlikely, as at least one of these religions, the Santo Daime, is pacifist, but obviously this line of enquiry should be pursued.

The other option is that unbeknown to Mallek his alterations relate to actual inversions of the religions and cults, as in most religions there are those who invert not only the signs, but practices and beliefs. This I think, if this is the case, it will be harder to discover, as these "inverse cults" tend to be secret, partly because they defy

current moralities within the societies in which they exist. This often means they are associated with secrecy and criminal activity, though what they do is not considered criminal by the cult but is in the society in which they live. However, we are also being given signs and guides for which at this time I would say no more, but DI Smith will show you something our colleagues elsewhere should be aware of. Thank you.'

Then DI Smith took over, and in detail showed the inconsistencies they had found. To which Billy said,

'If you look at the other incidents, I think you will find similar. I can point to two others, at first the signs in blood on the walls in Amsterdam were thought to be made by the suicides, they could not have been, no one could do such with the fatal injuries they sustained, and the blood on the walls isn't human. Secondly the signs under the A38(M) M6 interchange are drawing themselves.'

Nigel now showed the events of the previous night, when he had finished Commander Sarah Cooper stood up, introduced herself, and said,

'And witnessed at first hand by myself, Mr Taylor and the officer at the scene, PC Bibi Kaur.'

She then went on to say that the meaning was as yet ambiguous as was how these were being made.

Finally, Billy stood up and said,

'There seems to be at least two levels, that of Mallek's spoofs, and those to whom his inversions are real, and a third level, or possibly

more we have not yet identified but seen in the pillar writings.’

He sat down, there was silence then DCS Anne Jones stood up and thanked all for attending – and couldn’t think of anything more. No mention was made of the previous evening’s drawings being part of a Maze of Life.

The meeting broke up, people went back to their desks and completed paperwork. Billy was reading. He was still reading at 6.30 when Ray disturbed him, ‘Fancy a pint?’ asked Ray. ‘Sure.’ came the reply.

Billy and Ray took the lift down to the front exit and walked out into a bright summer evening.

As they were walking down the steps a voice came from behind.

‘Hey, going for a walk, may I join you?’ It was Sarah Cooper; her ulterior motive was to explore this “new world” that the previous evening had opened up in such a surprising manner.

‘Well, we are walking to The Wellington.’ Billy replied, ‘Interesting,’ Sarah Cooper said, ‘and my question is the same, may I join you?’ ‘Sure.’ said Billy, Ray looking decidedly defensive.

They all walked, Sarah Cooper, looking at Ray, said, ‘Ray, is it? We are off duty so I’m Sarah, OK?’ Ray nodded still apprehensive.

They took a slow walk past the Wesleyan, a large strangely shaped post-modernist office building, then turned right down Colmore Row, past St. Philips Cathedral. Sarah obviously wasn’t familiar with Birmingham,

‘It’s a very good and rare example of the Baroque and has some rather fine stained glass windows by Burne-Jones.’ Billy said.

Sarah smiled, as did Ray but not for the same reason. They turned left into Bennett’s Hill and then into The Wellington, Sarah still trying to be nonchalant. Ray walked up to the bar, Billy said he’d have a pint of Fireside, Ray had decided on a pint of Mad Goose, and looked at Sarah who said, ‘Whatever Billy’s having.’

‘Let’s sit.’ Billy said. Within a few minutes Ray joined them with the beers. Billy and Ray drank, Sarah took a sip, and decided it was good. The conversation was inevitably about Billy’s experience and interests in comparative religion. Eventually, and after a second round of drinks which Sarah fetched, she managed to guide the conversation to ‘beliefs’.

‘There is no answer, or at least I have no answer,’ Billy said, ‘religions are complex and deep in human psyche, and as Ninian maintained have a number of dimensions, perhaps more than he thought, and ignoring these can be the cause of alienation. You can’t use simplistic logic, only if you want to close things down, like what is actually happening under Spaghetti junction.’

‘And what is happening?’ asked Sarah.

‘I think a collapse of some fundamental forces.’ was the reply.

‘And?’ she asked.

‘Very very dangerous, and also I’m very hungry, it’s early but I think I’ll get something to eat.’ Billy said.

‘Shall we eat at the Hyatt?’ Sarah asked, ‘and you also Ray?’

Before Billy could speak, Ray, at the promise of fine food said, ‘Yes, sure, that would be great!’

As soon as they entered the restaurant in the Hyatt they were shown directly to a table, and Dominique the waiter immediately glided over with menus for Mr Billy, the lady, and his guest.

For a starter Sarah ordered Velouté of Roscoff Onion, Almond and Parmesan, followed by Halibut, Cucumber, Mussel and Dill and for dessert Apricot Soufflé, Almond, and Vanilla.

Billy, chose Ballotine of Duck Liver, Sour Cherry, and Pistachio, followed by Cutlet of Suffolk Lamb, Roscoff Onion and Mint, and Cherry, Kirsch and Dark Chocolate.

Ray asked Dominique if he could just have some soup, and a rare steak, and ice cream to follow. To which Dominique said, ‘Certainly sir, and with the steak, fries?’ Ray gave a nod.

‘And wine?’ asked Dominique. ‘Oh, a glass of a good white for Sarah, and red for Ray and myself.’ Billy answered, then looked at Sarah questioningly, ‘Fine.’ she said.

Chapter 34: Eight days earlier.

Around mid-morning a van pulled up by the service entrance of a tower block in Bijlmermeer, two window cleaners opened the rear doors and began putting on their gear, safety harnesses, hard hats and abseiling equipment. They entered through a service door and took the lift to the top floor where they gained access to the roof, making good their ropes, then began abseiling down the north side, cleaning windows floor by floor, as they passed the sixth floor, whose blinds were drawn, one of them attached a small box to a ventilator, unseen to anyone who might be watching, while the other cleaner covered the other vents with tape. One continued on their way down slowly, the other waited only about two minutes cleaning, then removed the box and uncovered the other vents. Once done he began descending to join the other cleaning the windows, working quickly. Having completed cleaning the north side windows, on the ground floor they returned to the service entrance, took the lift back to the top floor from there the stairs to the roof and removed their gear. They took the lift back to the ground floor, took off their climbing gear and waited in the van. Another van was parked nearby. What looked like four workmen had two large, wheeled containers, another person dressed in a cheap suit, who had arrived in a Volvo was holding some documents and an iPad, and seemed to be giving instructions. They all entered the block via the service doors and took the lift to the sixth floor. By now wearing protective clothing, and rubber boots. The clothing bore a logo and read in Dutch, 'Public Health Environment Agency'. They quickly opened the door to 602, and once in the hall donned face masks. Inside the six occupants, two in the living room another 2 in each of the bedrooms were unconscious. The driver of the Volvo waited in the hall with the two containers. He had spread a poly sheet on the

floor. The four worked quickly, one was daubing the walls with signs in pig's blood. The other three undressing their victims and disembowelling them. They were careful not to step in any blood, but they were covered in it themselves. The whole process took under two minutes. Back in the hallway they dumped their blood splattered protective clothing in the bins, and face masks, and wheeled them out to the service lift, the Volvo driver rolling up the sheet and also placing it in a bin. Leaving, locking the door, taking the lift down to the service exit. Minutes later they were heading towards IJmuiden. The walls of 602 already had the 5-pointed star and inverted sigil of the Santo Daime, now each room had another, a snake with a lion's head. This was around the time Professor Catherine Mulberry was walking down the tracks towards the Euston to Birmingham train.

In Lileaker a neat suburb of Oslo, six art students checked into a motel having got back from a visit to the extreme north of Norway a week before. They would be departing for their home towns the next day as this was the summer vacation. Christian Mallek a month before had given a presentation at the Statens kunstakademi, (The National Academy of Fine Arts) in which he discussed his work and a forthcoming exhibition – or installation in the Astrup Fearnley Museum of Modern Art, he outlined the performance would require a group to identify with a shamanistic religion of his invention. Whilst he was at the Academy, he also gave individual tutorials for students interested in performance art, and the six were keen to take part in the planned performance later in the year. Mallek had explained the need for a “proper” performance of Shamanistic acts, and this should not involve the gallery or academy knowing. He planned that those who wished to take part would be taken north into a wilderness where they would experience Shamanistic practices. Part of this would involve initiation including eating Fly Agaric

Mushrooms (*Amanita muscaria*) and having a shaman spirit guide in the form of a tattoo made with a knife and ink. The experience had a profound effect on the group. Mallek had chosen well, they felt like it was the beginning of their career in the art world, this was real art, not student stuff following the stupid health and safety nonsense. A real performance which involved real commitment.

Four of the other rooms in the Lileaker motel where the students were staying were occupied by what looked like military types from Germany, they had flown into Oslo on the previous Saturday and checked into their pre-booked rooms. That afternoon a fire broke out in the air conditioning units of the hotel in the corridor where the students and Germans were staying. Despite the alarms not working, all were evacuated except those in the three rooms the students occupied.

Carbon Monoxide (CO) freezes at -199 centigrade. The Germans placed a block of frozen CO above each of two air conditioning units, also abrading some wires. The abraded wires, which would be the “cause” of the fire by the investigating team, and not the actual cause of melting CO, creating, and shorting in the units. The fire was minimal, and soon dealt with. That the six students had succumbed to carbon monoxide poisoning from such a small fire was a mystery. The eight “Germans” checked out later that day to fly to London. The authorities asked them to leave IDs and contact information, which, in view of the “accident” were not checked out until contact was made with Birmingham and were found to be false. The student deaths were recorded as occurring at the same time as Professor Catherine Mulberry was walking down the tracks towards the Euston to Birmingham train.

Mallek’s website had details of his past work, including videos, and

also his blog where he wrote day to day details of his activities. Early in the year he had been posting about his proposed project,

“For the Love of the Gods”,

and it included the idea of basing one performance on Aztec religious practice, or a fabrication of the Aztec religion. This was to be part of exhibitions planned in Oslo, Amsterdam, and New York, with final events as “Of yet unspecified locations.” The blog later stated that for the North American Project he was looking for suitable candidates and gave a link to an application form. The form required that the person be qualified in Art to at least degree level and have an interest in “Extreme performance art”. Interested parties should submit work examples, either dissertations and or actual recordings of the applicants art. The initial response was over 150 applicants. These were shortlisted personally by Mallek, documenting this all as part of his artwork, as in the case of Oslo and Amsterdam. Of the 15 shortlisted he carried out a series of one-to-one emails. The profile was of someone who was anti-religious, critical of the establishment and yet had indications of wanting celebrity. Mallek also noted any references to drug abuse and,

“To what extent would you use both your body and mind as a medium for artistic expression, give examples.”

This reduced the list to 10. He now arranged to meet each in New York. He provided transport and where needed hotel accommodation. He interviewed each in turn over a period of two weeks using a seminar room in his New York Gallery which he was signed to. He had a problem in that all 10 were prepared to submit themselves to ritual initiation ceremonies in his fake religion, including fairly extreme bodily harm including self-mutilation and the

use of hallucinogenic drugs. In the end he drew names from a hat of the final 6. He then told the other 4 that final selection would take place in July.

The six were given illustrations of tattoos of altered Aztec images and were sent Puile (*Ipomoea violacea*) a hallucinogenic drug with which to “experiment”. They were to film themselves doing this after the tattooing. Finally, they were told that the initiation would take place on Monday the ninth of July. An address in New York was given, and the times. These were 8.00 AM 8.15 AM and 8.30 AM. The venue was a 5-story building no longer in use, rented by Mallek, he would meet them there. He never did.

The first pair of candidates arrived at 8.00 AM. A man and woman met them outside saying they were representatives of Mallek, they were not, they were members of an invert Aztec cult based in old mine workings in New Mexico. They took a lift to the 5th floor. The room had the altered Aztec images painted on the walls, and they were shown to a wall at the far end of the room with a curtain made from the plastic sheets, the sort found in warehouses. They were asked to strip and stand in front of the curtain in order to be photographed for Mallek. The woman with her camera moved towards the two students and pushed them through the curtain into an empty lift shaft where they fell the 5 floors, 100 feet, to their death. Three people at the bottom of the lift shaft spray painted each body with a snake sigil which had a lion’s head, then wrapped them in industrial cling film. They put the bodies in the back of a truck in the service bay of the warehouse. This was repeated twice more, at 8.15 AM and at 8.30 AM. The 3 didn’t bother to wash the base of the empty shaft, and by 8.40 all 5 “representatives” were on the road heading for New Mexico. When recovered from the cellar in New Mexico the deaths of the six students were established at some

time around July 7th. It was not established if it was around the same time as Professor Catherine Mulberry was walking down the tracks towards the Euston to Birmingham train.

Chapter 35: Wednesday eighteenth of July, Two Meetings.

Billy arrived at Lloyd House at 9 o'clock on Wednesday morning and was asked at reception to go immediately to The Chief Constable's office on the top floor of the building, which he did. The Chief Constable's secretary told him to go right in, which he did. Chief Constable White, Jane Smith and Commander Sarah Cooper were sat around the Jonathan Charles Extending Georgian Dining table, The Chief offered Billy a seat. White spoke,

'Billy as of this morning The West Midlands Police have no direct involvement in what was operation Aston. The matters relating to this, as you eloquently showed in your presentation yesterday mean that authorities in the USA, Norway and the Netherlands are involved, and the nature of the investigation is now international and, quite frankly, beyond the scope of normal police work. That being said, here in the UK the matter is being dealt with by agencies in an operation in which Ms Smith will be a senior supporting figure. As the centre of these incidents is still the interchange, and the events around Eve Sharif, we will be providing a facility here which will be in direct contact with Cheltenham, The J. Edgar Hoover Building and Langley who will be heading up the new operation, and in turn to the other respective agencies. The team here will be Ms Smith, Commander Sarah Cooper, who will be on official leave so we will refer to her as Ms Cooper, she will have as an assistant PC Bibi Kaur, also on leave. We, or rather they, would like you to join them, in the hope they can complete this investigation.'

Billy looked uncertain.

Jane Smith spoke, 'Billy I doubt if we can make any progress without you?'

'Not a worry for me, but,' he said.

'You want to co-opt Ray Wood, it's done.' she replied, 'We have a video link with the parties concerned, in this instance Agent Carter will be in the loop, while we complete the secure control room here, we will use Sarah's 410, the secure room will be ready by tomorrow.'

'Completed', thought Billy, 'they have been already working on this, and the team, my guess is the Commander has been speaking to Jane Smith early this morning about all of this.' His thoughts were close, but the work had begun at 8.30 PM the previous evening.

'And of course we need Nigel.' said Billy.

'Well, we thought,' began Smith.

'We need.' Billy was affirmative.

'The Americans are sending over a team, better equipped, and will be ready tonight.' Smith said.

'We will all go and see.' said Billy.

'OK to that.' Smith said, 'now we have a live stream with Washington at 1.00 PM, with Mike Carter in the chair for the US, he has questions he'd like to ask, so say meet in 410 at 12.30.'

Jane Smith said, getting up and leaving. The others made their goodbyes to The Chief and left.

‘Billy,’ called out The Chief Constable as Billy was leaving, ‘I’ll keep you informed, but you already know the rest.’ Billy said.

Sarah Cooper as she now was, went to her office in 410. Billy went to 408 where the mood was despondent. They had arrived to be told by DCS Anne Jones with DCI Sally Arscott in attendance that other agencies were now taking over the case. Though DI Ray Wood and PC Bibi Kaur were on leave and secondment to Jane Smith’s group and needed to be in 410 at 12.30 PM.

Ray said to Billy it seems contractors had been in from last night working in the basement, there were a set of rooms set aside for use in civil emergencies. The building, Lloyd House, was taken over by the West Midlands Police in 1974, and although not advertised, a secure control centre was made in the basement, it was still the cold war, though not like the 50s and 60s, Birmingham’s post office tower having an atom bomb proof shelter. The Lloyd House “bunker” as it was called, was not deep enough for that, but nevertheless was required as a control centre for a scenario where there was some survival. It was no longer a secret and had been upgraded to meet with terrorist, and biological threats and similar events, in the 1990s.

‘Evidently,’ Ray said ‘there is some military around, guards it looks like. And I’m on holiday, but not it seems, still working for a new firm, the rest of the team obviously pissed, except the young PC who thinks it’s Christmas.’

Billy said he was going back to his hotel to do some reading and left.

At 12.30 PM, in room 410 Sarah Cooper was at her desk, there were four chairs facing a larger screen, each with a small table, Bibi Kaur

sat at one, with her notebook open, a new Moleskine thought Ray, who sat at another. Around 12.25 Billy came in and sat at another, Jane Smith arrived at 12.45 carrying a Starbucks coffee with “Jane” written on it. The large screen showed an FBI logo and an inset of Sarah Cooper from her web cam. Around 12.55 a technician appeared who seemed to be checking things. He sat and spoke.

‘To whom am I speaking?’

‘Sarah Cooper.’ was the reply.

‘Hi Sarah,’ the technician replied, ‘agent Carter will be wanting to speak with your professor Taylor,’ he paused, ‘we need a web cam and microphone for him.’

There was an exchange of looks between Sarah and Jane which Jane won, Sarah got up from her desk and Jane said to Billy, ‘would you?’ Sarah and Billy changed places. At precisely 1.00 PM Mike Carter FBI took his seat. He was now in The J. Edgar Hoover Building Washington, DC.

‘Professor Taylor,’ Mike Carter began, only to be interrupted by Billy. ‘No not professor, just call me Billy please.’ This threw the agent, his cool introduction ruined, he straightened his tie, which didn’t need straightening, and tried again, ‘Mr Taylor,’

‘No no no,’ said Billy, ‘if you can’t use my name then you had better get someone who will.’ Billy said. Ray was desperate not to laugh, Jane looked annoyed, Bibi looked confused, but Sarah was smiling, enjoying this. It was obvious that Mike was hearing something on his earphone, and tried again, ‘Billy,’ he said, ‘for this first session we just want to ask some questions, OK.’

‘Sure,’ Billy said, ‘and is it Mike?’ ‘Agent Carter if you please.’ ‘Sure Agent Carter.’ Billy said.

The agent had a sheet of paper and was also obviously being prompted via his earphone.

‘Billy,’ the agent began, ‘can you tell us about the significance of the sigils at the Interchange.’

‘Sure,’ said Billy, ‘only who is us?’

‘Er, well various persons involved in the case, why?’

‘I want to know how to pitch it, but OK, here goes. The site where the head of Eve Sharif was found was at the centre of a triangle. The corners having sigils on them, you should have copies of these by now. These had altered and inverted images of the Santo Daime religion, these were also found in the apartment in Amsterdam and the tattoos on the six killed there, but the sigils drawn on the walls in blood from a pig are different. These six, who were part of a proposed artwork by Christian Mallek, were murdered by a genuine group, in my opinion, as were the groups in Oslo and New Mexico. The Triangle was a containment for the spirit of Eve Sharif. Here I must add this can either be understood as what the believers thought, or as actual fact. The other texts or drawings were a means of the spirit of Eve Sharif finding its way out. The subsequent and on-going drawings are giving us information and showing our progress.’

It was obvious agent Carter was being asked supplementary questions.

‘Who wrote these sigils?’ the agent asked.

‘The altered and inverted images of the Santo Daime religion in Amsterdam, a negative dualism of the religion, drawn by that six. No drawings in the motel, but some at Mallek’s residence in Oslo, drawn by him I guess, as well as in Digbeth, in New York, I don’t know, Mallek, or the New Mexico five? The other drawings on top of these, I do not know specifically a name or names yet, but I’d say higher powers, and yet something else is responsible for the new drawings underneath the interchange.’ replied Billy.

‘Why contain the spirit?’ the agent asked.

‘To use its power, and not by Christian Mallek, he had no idea of what he was getting into, by the, let’s say the XDaime sect.’ Billy replied.

‘The later drawings, how giving information and showing progress?’ the agent asked.

‘Information, maps, pictures, the progress, they are drawing a maze, The Maze of Life, compare the drawings you have with the Maze at Chartres, you should have those.’ said Billy.

The agent seemed now to return to his script. ‘How do you read these lines as maps and drawings?’

‘Easy, you put them on a transparent sheet over a fine pattern of random dots, and rotate them getting moire patterns, you will get runic type texts, simple maps, diagrams, pictures, and sometimes even moving images.’ Billy said.

‘Easy!’ thought Ray.

‘Why this particular junction?’ was the agent’s next question.

‘The simple answer,’ said Billy, ‘was Mallek’s and other artists fascination, a more complex one was again a combination of randomness and geometries, as you will see in the drawings of mine you no doubt have. Note the shape of Mercia. The junction itself is like the randomization of a clover leaf. The area itself is a void. Or was.’

‘And the sig....’ here agent Carter was obviously being asked another question from someone, ‘Why do you say was?’ he continued.

‘Obviously, some major event would fill this void. Hence the need of a child sacrifice.’ Billy replied.

‘And randomization?’ Carter was continuing from his earphone prompting.

‘Randomness is often used in the occult, and religions proper, or in divination, the Tarot or in other cultures, the I Ching, or in ancient Israel, the priests used the ephod. Even in Christianity there is a tradition of using random quotes from The Bible as guidance. But of course, randomness is also a feature of modern physics, though the terms probabilistic, and stochastic are used.’ came the reply.

‘You say now other groups are responsible for the murder of those, for instance the Amsterdam groups, is there some hierarchy?’ the agent asked, obviously by now not understanding the question.

‘There is a hierarchy at work, certainly a tree structure, as well as a rhizome.’

Billy's reply helped no one, at least no one who could be seen in the live stream.

'So can I thank you Billy, you have been most helpful- just to confirm we will have a team at the intersection tonight and thank you again.' the agent was finishing.

'Just one thing,' said Billy, 'actually two, the 5 you found in New Mexico who you suspect responsible for killing the six art students, they did not wall themselves up in the cave and then set themselves on fire, you will find their hands were amputated before they were walled up, they therefore could not have entombed themselves, this information is from the Maze last night.'

'Rimshot.' thought Ray.

The live feed closed, and Bibi asked this question, directed at Billy, 'Sir,' 'Please it's Billy.' 'Billy,' she continued, 'why do you think these people do such evil things?'

'Well,' said Billy, 'many reasons, some are suffering from mental illness, or trauma, and feel society is evil, so they do what society thinks is evil, or they see themselves as superior, and ordinary people are like cattle, or they are weak and seek power, seek to be special, there are maybe as many reasons as people, maybe they feel part of a group, but then to be honest, I also think there are forces in the world which are not human, and these are also at work. So, look at the things that seem illogical, the timings of the journeys, the writing on the pillars, are they evil, or are they somehow telling us that these other forces are in play. Now in the cold light of reason this seems impossible, but some here have seen the impossible.'

He finished, and Sarah Cooper and everyone else was staring at him. He then said,

‘The Americans will want to take over, close us down or sideline us, but no matter, they will get lost, are we done? I think I’ll get some sleep before tonight.’

Chapter 36: The Cathedral and the snake.

But before that Billy had something to do. He took several sheets from his flip chart, and rolled these up, took a broad tipped felt pen and put it in his pocket, put the rolled-up sheets under his arm and left to walk to the Hyatt. He stopped at the Sainsbury's local by St. Phillips Cathedral and bought sandwiches and mineral water.

Once in his room he placed the sheets on the floor. Taped them together in a cross shape, then he drew a rough layout of the Cathedral at Lichfield, roughly six feet in length. He then took a shower and afterwards dressed in his Kanzu (A kanzu is a white or cream coloured robe.) which he had brought back with him from the brief visit to his apartment in Milton Keynes four days earlier, when he fetched the mask to deal with Ben's "problem". He lay on the plan, his feet at the west end, his head at the east.

At first there was a slow warmth in his solar plexus, the 3rd chakra where prana and apana, the life force blends, this corresponding to the cross at the north and south transepts, the position of the Maze of Life. Manipura. Descending to the door of the cathedral at his feet, the 1st chakra, Muladhara, the Root. Then to the second, Swadisthana, the Sacral, the cathedral's font, at the base of the spine where the coiled snake, kundalini, awakes. The 3rd Manipura chakra of Kundalini yoga, where prana life force radiates. It rises up the spine to the 4th chakra, Anaata, the Heart, the Chancel of the cathedral. Then the 5th chakra, Vishudda, the throat, the Choir. The 6th Ajna is the Third Eye, and the Alter, and finally the 7th, Sahasrara, the crown, the Lady Chapel.

Billy felt the whole cathedral rise up around him, its three spires, and

chapels, and beneath him the stones and roots of the building in the land. He woke around 10.00 PM. He changed into his clothes and sat eating his sandwiches and drinking the mineral water. Ray would pick him up at 11.45 PM.

Chapter 37: CIA.

Early in the afternoon at The Hoover Building in Washington, D.C., Langley, Virginia, and other institutions, in The Netherlands, the UK and Norway, in cryptography labs technicians were following the technique for reading the pillar drawings Billy had shown, copying them as transparent images and using a randomized background, sliding the drawings over these and seeing in amazement, simple maps, sigils and in some cases moving images. And all were astonished.

‘Sir,’ a technician at Langley, was speaking to Agent Mike Carter, though he was of a much higher rank than his supposed Agent grade V, ‘you must see this,’ Mike Carter watched an animated line drawing of 5 people, seemingly still alive yet missing hands and they were on fire.

‘What?’ said Carter,

‘It’s from the images you sent, and we tried that method, there are drawings, and what looks like maps and this.’

‘Son of a ...’ thought Carter, and ‘how the hell did he know about the 5 in the cave anyway!’

At 11.45 PM Ray stopped outside the Hyatt hotel in Bridge Street, Billy and Sarah Cooper were waiting outside, it was still warm, Billy was sitting on a low wall, Sarah was standing, looking occasionally at her watch. Billy was wearing a linen jacket over a shirt, and needle chord trousers, and as usual his favourite brown brogues. Ray was not in his suit, had on genuine Levi jeans, a denim shirt and leather

jacket. Sarah had impressive looking combat trousers, and also a leather jacket over a dark shirt. The two got into the Mondeo, Sarah in the front next to Ray. They drove to Lloyd House where Bibi Kaur was waiting, again in jeans, shirt, and jacket. In ten minutes they were underneath the interchange. There were lights at the lower level and groups of people around 3 of the columns, they were in Army camo gear, some with labels, indicative of rank. Also, there was a woman in an expensive suit, Katie Murkowski CIA, was talking to Jane Smith. Nigel had unpacked his gear and was watching the activity from a distance. The three approached.

‘High Nigel.’ said Billy, ‘What’s happening?’ ‘Oh, it’s the Americans, they have these Maser Scanners, very smart, they might even work.’ he laughed.

‘Oh, I see what you mean, they are looking at the wrong pillars, they are just continuing the run, not the loop back of the Maze. I’ll let them know.’ Billy walked towards Katie Murkowski and Jane Smith. ‘Excuse me,’ he began, but before he could continue the CIA agent said, ‘Please Mr Taylor do not interfere with our personnel, they are extremely competent and know what they are about.’

‘Fine.’ thought Billy, and said ‘Billy, not Taylor.’ under his breath.

‘OK,’ said Billy to Nigel ‘it’s this one here, yes?’ Nigel nodded a ‘Yes’ with a grin. They walked to a pillar and Nigel got out his gear, ‘Do you think we should try to tell them.’ Sarah said, ‘I’ve tried, you can try.’ said Billy. Nigel now had his generator running, which made a few of the US personnel look up, one openly laughed. ‘I expect they have high power lithium batteries.’ Nigel said. Sarah was now talking to Katie Murkowski and Jane Smith.

‘We have something Sarah.’ Billy called out. Ray had not seen this automatic writing on the previous occasion, he arrived too late, and now was fascinated, watching the pale shadow fingers spreading across the concrete. The group of three stopped talking and Katie Murkowski marched to where they were watching the drawings appearing, she began ‘What do you...’ then stopped as she saw the pale lines drawing themselves.

‘You’re looking at the wrong pillars, I tried to tell you, this is a maze not a spiral.’ Billy said.

After a good minute Murkowski snapped out of the spell, ‘Captain,’ she shouted, ‘get over here, now, with your dam gear.’ Jane Smith who had also not seen the automatic writing was like Ray stupefied but managed a ‘Fantastic!’ to which Ray offered ‘Fucking fantastic!’ The captain arrived with two others, they had a screen and a probe like a fish eye camera, a much smaller and neater set up than Nigel’s.

‘The next pillar is that one.’ Billy said pointing and looking at his drawing of the Maze of Life in his Moleskine notebook.

‘You, team Bravo, get your gear over to that pillar.’ shouted Murkowski to what Billy thought must be team Bravo, who did what the agent said. Meanwhile, if it was team Alpha now at the first correct pillar, their screen was showing nothing. A minute elapsed, Alpha having still no joy. The writing stopped.

‘I got all this on the box, we have about a minute to get ready for the next pillar.’ Nigel said. He and Billy began carrying the gear to where team Bravo now were. Ray would normally have done the heavy lifting here, but he hadn’t seen this spectacle of the writing on the pillars, he was a child again and it was Christmas, but he followed the

group, as did team Alpha, to the second pillar, team Charlie? looking on.

‘How many more?’ asked Murkowski. ‘Just one.’ said Nigel, pointing then restarting the generator. ‘Three every night it seems so far.’ The writing began again and now the six in the American crew were watching something they couldn’t believe. ‘We have nothing again Ma’am.’ the captain said. ‘Shit!’ was Murkowski’s reply. After the third with no luck from the Americans, Nigel gave Billy the pen drive with copies “The Box” had made of the drawings.

‘We will get these back to Lloyd House and I’ll get my prints of the writings for analysis, will you want copies?’ Billy asked Katie Murkowski. ‘Please.’ was the reply. Jane Smith approached, ‘The basement ops room is ready, we’ll go there.’ she said. The captain of the American teams was talking to Nigel,

‘We’re fubar on this,’ he was saying, ‘but hey prof, what say could you use one of these.’ he pointed to a lithium battery pack, ‘not much use to us.’, ‘Yes thank you, great, that would be great, and I’ll be back again tomorrow if you’re around.’ Nigel said. ‘I guess we will be.’ the captain replied.

Katie Murkowski and Jane Smith drove to the underground car park at Lloyd House, the others following in Ray’s Mondeo, Nigel had loaded his van and was driving to wherever he lived or probably back to his lab at the university. The other Americans went elsewhere, probably all the way back to the US base at Lakenheath where they had flown into only six hours before.

Chapter 38: Going underground.

In the car park of Lloyd House, the two cars passed through security, which now had an armed officer, they parked and entered the basement, ignoring the main lifts in the building, walked down a corridor which ended in another lift. Ray was the first to notice that the lift to the sub-basement now had a new door, card scanner and camera. Not quite the first to notice as Jane Smith had been testing it in the afternoon. At floor -2 was another corridor, with cameras, and a door, which buzzed open letting the six into a reception area. Here a woman in military dress, camouflage, sat at a desk, in front of three screens, showing the corridors, inside the lift and the car park. Another door buzzed open to let them into the new ops room. It had low lighting with eight desks with chairs, and breakout areas around low tables. It also had sleeping, cooking and bathroom facilities.

One wall had a large screen, whiteboards and two flip charts, with 8 chairs in front. It was very spacious and had obviously been very recently renovated, new lights, and wall linings. Ray remembered visiting it two years earlier, when it had, it must have been 20 desks, even the doors looked new but in fact were the old blast doors with new covers. Each desk had name plates. Billy sat at his, a computer which was already on, but not showing the West Midlands Police logo, but a coat of arms of HM Government. The others stood around, Jane Smith said, just hit a key or move the mouse. The screen immediately showed desk top icons, but not familiar ones, recognisable all the same, all the normal office apps, email, browser, file explorer, and some others.

‘I’ll show you all around this, it’s our own operating system and apps, based on a very old system, George three. It’s less hackable, and

code secure. Everything is in triplicate and can't be deleted. You edit a file, it's a copy of the old file, and so on. Anyway, put your pen drive in, and we will get Katie a copy of the images on the pillars.'

Jane took a usb pen drive from a desk draw and put it in the PC, there were now two icons, she dragged one across to the other, and said, 'All done.' giving it to Katie Murkowski.

'Long drive to Lakenheath.' she added.

Murkowski replied. 'No, a short drive to your Call-thorpe park and a helo back to Lakenheath, and I will see you all tomorrow.'

'Now,' said Jane Smith, 'print outs for Billy on clear sheets, and we can all go home.'

A few more clicks and that was done.

'A lift to the park?' Jane asked,

'I have transport.' said Murkowski.

When they got back to the car park there was a very CIA looking black van waiting. Jane offered to take Bibi home, and Ray drove Sarah and Billy back to the Hyatt.

By 9 o'clock next morning the new team were at their desks in the "Special ops room" as it was now to be called. Jane got the others to watch the large LCD as she showed the various applications on their new computers.

'You don't have to log on,' she said 'the camera does sophisticated face recognition. The rest of the software is more or less like Windows or the Mac apps you are used to. You can set up a forwarding application for your other email accounts. All comms goes through several fire walls and checks, if you find sometimes you

can't send stuff that's the security. The icon here,' she highlighted a little policeman, 'this will detail why and how to find out if it's possible to send or receive. Your desktop looks much the same as others, George, the operating system, is constantly mutating, which is just the first level of security. The plan for today is that Billy will report at 10.30 AM progress from last night, both to us here and via video link to the other stakeholders. Myself and Sarah will be talking to Langley and Washington at one o'clock, and we will be here in the afternoon, others can get some rest, we are out again at the interchange with our American friends tonight. Seems they are flying in some new equipment.'

Chapter 39: Primal chaos.

Billy began his update at 10.30.

‘OK,’ said Billy, ‘The Americans tried to read the pillars last night and failed, I guess they might try again, but for the moment they have to rely on Nigel, and we have got three more drawings last night, I guess Langley, and the equivalents here, in Oslo and Amsterdam are trying to decode these as I have. There is one slight snag, in effect the drawings happen to be signed as a delivery to me, I decode them, and then anyone else can. I’m not sure why, probably I was the first. So, Jane, I think you better get Nigel on the team, as it looks like if the messages are for me, he is the postman, the only delivery man. The only one so far to get the details we need, and what we see is literally only the surface.’

‘I will action that request for Nigel.’ Jane said.

Billy continued, ‘Anyway we now have a general picture of what is happening, and a clue as to why. I’ve emailed Superintendent Hoofdcommissaris Geert Wilders to check out activity around Tata Steel IJmuiden. And a House in Harrlem called Het Laatste Huis, and to check out activity around the 15th, this was from information from the pillars from last night, your guys will have it soon and the maps. The end of the Bijlmermeer nine.’ he said looking at the camera.

There was a silence but before any clarification could be got, Billy raised a hand and began,

‘So first, my Paris trip to the Institut de Monde Arabe, they have copies of the original of The Nag Hammadi library. And here it gets,

well deep! I think I have a picture of what is going on, so I'll now share this if I may.'

Bibi Kaur was taking notes in her new Moleskine notebook, Sarah Cooper and Jane Smith were obviously recording on their smart phones. At other sites no doubt there were others who would be recording this.

'Also known as the "Chenoboskion Manuscripts" AKA The Gnostic Gospels.' he added. He took a sheet from his flip chart pad and taped it to the wall.

'The One: Transcendent and ineffable.' he said and wrote this on the page now on the wall in a thick felt pen. 'The perfect being in Gnosticism, or at least most versions, it's a very defuse set of beliefs, very defuse so I'm cutting corners here,'

'Thank god.' thought Ray.

'The Hypercosmic Gods, they make Essences, Life, and Souls, of which is Sophia, or Achamoth the emanation of the One, and is identified with the anima mundi or world-soul,'

He wrote Achamoth below 'The One.'

'She is AKA Sophia the Greek for "wisdom", and births the Nous, AKA the Demiurge, who creates matter. Our Cosmos and is in some versions of Gnosticism a malevolent lesser divinity.' He wrote "The Nous".

'Remember,' he said, 'this is vastly simplified.'

Sarah Cooper and Jane Smith looked on knowingly, unlike Ray and Bibi.

‘In turn The Nous, consciousness, creates not only matter, this world we are in, but The Cosmic Gods, those who make Being, Nature, and Matter, the gods of classical religions including our three Religions or cults here, Daime in Amsterdam, Shamanism in Oslo, Aztec in New Mexico.’

‘But they are fake.’ Ray said.

‘Yes, Mallek’s fakes, and not Daime but a corruption of it, and not Shamanism but a corruption of it, and so too the Aztec. And here is the first cause of our killings, these were originally fake creations of the artist Christian Mallek, but unbeknown to him there are actual inverse versions of Daime, Shamanism and the Aztec, and these too are creations of the Nous, or more likely the negative version of it, and it looks like the whole hierarchy we are dealing with is just that, a negative version of the Gnostic hierarchy of emanations from The One, and I’ve never seen or heard of anything like this before.’

And Ray thought ‘And me too Billy!’

He paused.

‘Not only do we have a three, The One, Sophia, and The Demiurge, or Nous, but emanations who create these, if you like create as in artists create. And then their negative counterparts. Negative to balance the positive.’

He wrote “Art - Daime /Shaman/Aztec” and then crossed out Daime /Shaman/Aztec ~~Daime /Shaman/Aztec~~.

‘So, then who is responsible for these deaths? This is tricky, the inverted nous is produced by the inverted Sofia, but now it kind of reverses as the “Real” is made by the “Art”, the creative, not the art of Mallek but let’s say the art of chaos. So, the inverted “Real” Nous was responsible for the Lichfield deaths, the eight who were responsible for the Oslo deaths. The dead in the cave in New Mexico, was this a cult of an inverse Aztec faith, who killed Mallek’s fake inverse Aztec artwork, the six poor students? So, this negative Nous is an Aeon, a spirit or being, responsible for these deaths. Now why should this Aeon or being do this to its adherents, a rhetorical question,’

‘Thank god.’ Ray thought.

‘Because this is all wrong,’ Billy continued, ‘power in Gnosticism is top down, comes from the top, these deaths and the yet to be killed or destroyed are not from the top. The adherents did not get power or permission from the Demiurge, the negative Demiurge responsible for their cultic beliefs, so it punished them.’

There was now total confusion, “yet to be killed” was the general thought.

‘Yet to be killed?’ Ray asked.

‘Yes,’ said Billy writing “The Nous” and “Achamoth” on the sheet, and crossing them through, ‘Remember the inversion, and they in turn will be destroyed, a better term than killed, technically they are not living. The negative Nous or Demiurge did not get permission or power from above; therefore, it will be punished, destroyed.’
The “Nous” – “Achamoth”

‘So, the fake, the art versions, were killed by the real occultists.’ said Bibi. (d1)

‘Yes, yes, very good, they in turn killed, this time by what I will call inverted Nous, the inverted Demiurge.’ Billy said.

‘So, this inverted Nous ends the killing?’ said Bibi.

‘No, look at the list, the inverted Nous is now guilty, and will be punished from above.’ said Billy.

‘By the one above the inverted Achamoth, who is inverted Sophia.’ said Bibi.

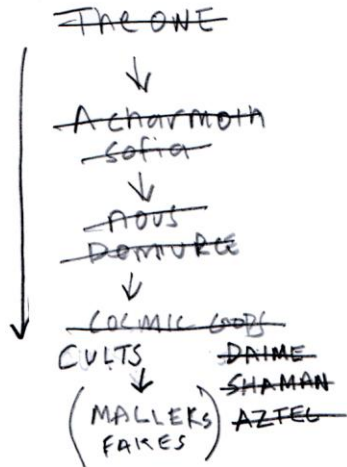
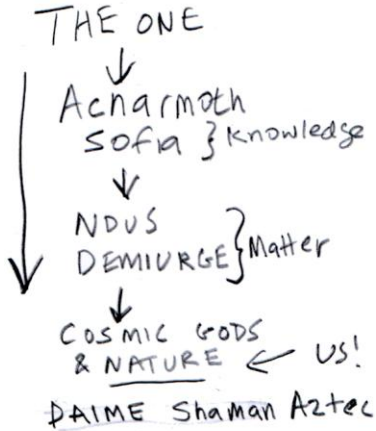
‘Yes, it looks like this, maybe a bit simple, we have to account for stasis and change, but yes something like that.’ said Billy.

‘Bit simple, ha!’ Thought Ray, and then said, ‘And then what?’

‘A destruction of everything all the way through the chain of being, into the void, the chaos the rhizome... the waters of the deep... chance randomness... the source of everything, the nothing negating itself.’ said Billy.

‘Err that sounds bad?’ Ray said.

‘Yes, and that is it, the end.’ Billy said.



‘And the girl? Eve Sharif, what of the dead girl, missing?’ someone asked.

‘Wait and see.’ was the answer.

‘Coffee break.’ Sarah said, ‘let’s take a half hour, I’ve some thinking to do.’

‘I haven’t.’ thought Ray to himself, ‘I’m just following Billy, or Billy and Bibi.’

After the half hour break they re-entered the room and Billy had made a large diagram using 4 sheets from his flip chart and pinned it to a wall. He said,

‘I’ve drawn this as our guide, there are a few missing details, but notice where we are now, the killings have stopped, and what for a better term, the powers will begin a chain of destruction.’

He pointed to the diagram, ‘The negative Nous is created by the negative creator of this Nous, and so on up to the One. After that it’s primal chaos.’

‘Primal chaos.’ muttered Ray.

GNOSTICISM

(Emanation of Aeons)

(MANY VERSIONS!)

FROM MOST POWERFUL
TO LOWEST
generates Matter



CREATION

The Breaking of symmetry = THE UNIVERSE

- * PERFECT BALANCE = NOTHING!
- PURE BEING = STASIS (DEATH)
- * PURE BECOMING = CHAOS

* When Xanthropos punished the cults it did so ALONE!
NOT VIA XCCLESIA

SO IF XCCLESIA PUNISHES XNATHROPOS IT TOO DOES SO WITHOUT ORIGIN IN BYTHOS/XYTHOS

WE MUST SAVE THE NEGATIVE AEONS

B.II

(d2)

Chapter 40: The appliance of science.

They looked at the diagram, all except Ray photographed it. Ray, Billy and Sarah guessed the diagram would be sent soon by Jane, not only to Cheltenham and Thames House but also to Washington and Langley. The reactions were in Cheltenham, that it started internet searches, in Thames House some senior figure expressed the view that 'Cheltenham will sort it out.' in Washington and Langley it was dismissed as stupid occult nonsense. Although a copy was sent from Langley to a department in the Pentagon. Here there was no response, other than one in person from General Lisa Britt to Katie Murkowski in Lakenheath, which was 'Interesting, keep me informed'.

As they were looking at the diagram, the door opened and Nigel walked in, Nigel or Professor Nigel Summers,

'Hi guys,' he said, then 'Wow, I like this,' as he saw the diagram, he approached as an art critic might approach an original Picasso or Monet. His finger showing his progress, looping back up, and then at the base of the diagram the 'Void', he uttered an embarrassing 'Yes!' and then said,

'It's $E = MC^2$, look the term is another word for Energy, the static "Reals" is Mass, and you should have included quantum probability in there.' and before anyone could stop him he got a pen out of his pocket and wrote inside the Void box. He then jotted down some obscure maths, and 'the 6 basic forces'.

Ray noticed Jane had photographed that and was now emailing. The included "quantum probability" and mathematics did nothing in

Thames House, in Cheltenham it was accepted and by some used the term 'obviously'. In Washington and Langley, it was worrying, uncomfortable, stupid occult nonsense was now a 'Wow.' to a Nobel Physics laureate. The diagram was therefore sent to M.I.T., Princeton, Cal Tech and a few other institutions. And to those in Washington and Langley the seeming acceptance and positive responses from these academic institutions was deeply annoying.

'Can we keep this REAL!' was one remark at a very high level in the Military. Unsurprisingly the political powers seemed to have repeated amnesia.

While all this was happening only Ray and Bibi noticed the two guys bringing in Nigel's equipment, so he explained,

'Guys, yes my stuff, I'm officially part of the team, seems someone big spoke to the dean.' he grinned and went back to the diagram. Eventually Jane showed him to his desk.

'Wow, guys this is like the movie.' he tried to remember it but couldn't.

'OK,' began Jane, 'if Nigel could be back here for one o'clock in case of questions about last night's work at Spaghetti from Cheltenham, or the States, with Sarah and myself, then the rest we will see here, say at around 11.30.PM, for our next trip to the interchange.'

'Jane,' Billy said, 'It's important the Americans don't touch the drawings on the pillars underneath Spaghetti.'

'I know, not to damage them.' she replied.

‘No no.’ he said, ‘if you believe any of this,’ he pointed to his diagram, ‘look what is drawing these, they, the Americans, won’t harm the drawings but the drawings will almost certainly harm them, and I suspect even agent Murkowski in the clear light of day and the scepticism of her superiors now has a rational explanation of what we saw last night, you might also, I quite understand, but if I am right then the danger is not to the drawings, but from the drawings.’ He emphasised the “from”.

‘OK I’ll pass the message on.’ Jane said.

Billy looked doubtful and left.

The one o’clock meeting was led by Mike Carter, but with 4 others, two of which were on a link from M.I.T. who recognised Nigel. Carter was impressed by the previous drawings, and how they were decoded but couldn’t understand the failure to decode last night’s. Jane gave the reason, which was not satisfactory, and the warning Billy had given, adding her own daylight scepticism. The two from M.I.T. then had a long discussion with Nigel, quite technical, at one point Nigel angling the PC so it could show the diagram. Most of the conversation then was about different cosmological theories.

By 5.00 PM the Americans were back on site, underneath the junction. Just one team at the moment, they had placed labels on the base of the three pillars from the previous night and were taking measurements. They labelled the next likely three and began cleaning them. In case some chemical was present to be somehow activated and fake the self-drawing drawings. Then a technician in full bio gear took samples from the three previous night’s pillars, placing them in bio sealed containers. He and his colleague who had photographed the procedure then set off back to Lakenheath. The

technician complained about feeling dizzy after about an hour, by the time the car pulled into the American base at Lakenheath he was in a coma. He was taken to a special unit, the car to a special biological facility on the base, and his colleague who felt fine, was examined and had samples taken by medics in bio suits, then he went into deep quarantine. This incident was passed up to Langley where for the next twelve hours it remained.

Chapter 41: Five Days Earlier, death by Fire.

North of Slaughter Canyon Cave was a track leading to some old mine workings, and though a couple of the buildings looked derelict and deserted they were not. The rusty sheds held a van and two pick-up trucks, one of the buildings had a cellar where the 6 dead candidates for Mallek's artwork were now being stored for collection. Above in a living room of sorts one of the members of the five assassins was peering out of the window. In the corner another of the five sat at a table, it had a screen showing six images from CCTV around the building, also a short-wave radio transmitter / receiver that hissed static. The heat even inside only just bearable. The figure turned away to retrieve a pair of binoculars, and scanned down the track through the heat haze, putting down the binoculars he shouted,

'Hey, take a look at this idiot!' he said this as he reached for his Ruger M77 hunting rifle. He was now looking at the figure through its scope.

'I see him!' called the guy from the corner looking at the screen. Two others were lying on a sofa, one grunted and he slouched over, a big man, took the binoculars and looking, he laughed,

'Got to be some joker.' he said.

Joker or not his partner with the rifle took a shot. And re-chambered another round.

'What the...?' he said, looking again through his scope. The figure was still slowly walking towards them. A shot at 500 yards by a

professional could not miss, even so the guy with the Ruger fired again. The noise had now stirred the other guy from the sofa and another entered the room. At that moment the hiss of the radio stopped. There was silence.

The guy who had entered and the radio guy had now taken out their handguns, Glocks of course, and moved to the other window. The other sofa guy, actually a woman, had picked up her Heckler & Koch G36. One of the handgun guys went to the radio, 'Dead.' he said. The other 4 were now looking out of the window. It appeared to be a tall guy in fancy dress walking down the track towards their cabin. It was the costume of a naked man covered with scales and a Lions head. The woman opened the door and shouldered the G36, as she did what appeared like arms or tentacles shot from the figure, who unaccountably was now only ten yards away. The arms ending in claws, swiped the woman's hands off with a swish, and at the same time it did the same to the other four, resulting in blood spraying everywhere. Each in turn slumped to the floor, first in shock then in a lack of strength as they bled to death. Or should have. The horror of the attack followed by the certainty of death, they were all professionals, had seen this sort of thing, had done this sort of thing, but there was now a new and greater fear, they weren't dying.

Slowly the lion man picked each in turn and carried them to a nearby cave. A distance of a thousand yards but each journey took no more than a few seconds. He placed each one in the cave, a cave of beautiful crystalline rock, placed them standing, then as the last one was in place covered the entrance with stones. The lion man was though not outside, but in the cave with them. The scales shone red and gold, and then he turned into flame, and the five figures danced on fire until they fell into darkness.

It was three o'clock on Sunday morning when the nine in Haarlem woke, one at a time from a deep sleep. This time sans feet, each was whisked away into a blast furnace at the Tata Steel works in IJmuiden. Careful work by the Dutch police reconstructed the journey from Bijlmermeer to Haarlem using CCTV footage. Their journey without their feet, the feet were found in Het Laatste Huis (The Last House), was traced using a map from the Maze of Life on the pillars underneath Spaghetti. That and the very occasional blood droplets found along the route. An odd route as it was in a direct straight line.

There were obviously no remains of the Bijlmermeer group except their feet, but their final destination, a blast furnace, seemed to be the only plausible explanation.

Chapter 42: CIA at bay.

Thursday night the teams from the US who had now been augmented with new equipment were already underneath the intersection, as the Americans called it. When Billy, Bibi and Ray arrived, Sarah Cooper and Jane Smith were already on site, as was Katie Murkowski CIA, the only person who knew about the earlier incident.

Professor Nigel Summers, without his generator, but with a lithium battery pack, courtesy of the American Army was ready at the first pillar of the three that they expected writing on that night, and then only three left to complete the maze. He was joined by team Alpha. Bravo, and Charlie were stationed at the other two pillars. Their equipment was now identical in practice to Nigel's, he had briefed their tech guys earlier, only their new gear used more powerful x-rays and was a much smaller set up. One scanner about the size of a chubby marker pen linked to an iPad, two other iPads held by the other two in the team, linked by Wi-Fi, and an officer, the same as last night. Nigel was still using his "vacuum cleaner".

At just after midnight Nigel began seeing the new writing, it was beautiful to watch, so delicate. It could be seen clearly with the eye but soon seemed to fade, but on his screen against a yellow glow many more lines appeared. Unfortunately, the US team still drew a blank. Then Murkowski gestured the team away and held a hand to pause Nigel's work. Another two Americans appeared wearing gloves, one with a sample test tube the other with a small chisel like a dental tool. Before Billy could intervene, the guy had tried to take a sample of the fresh writing. Things happened immediately, the writing stopped, what was already there dissipated, the guy taking

the sample screamed and fell on the ground, briefly writhing in agony, then lay still. At this his companion bent down, 'Cardiac arrest!' he shouted, and started giving sharp pushes to the soldier's chest, CPR.

Within seconds another soldier arrived with an AED (Automated External Defibrillator), his colleague stopped CPR and tore open the now seemingly dead guy's jacket and vest. There was a general shock, his chest was covered in red lines and skin whorls, it was the writing from the pillar now on his flesh. Neither CPR nor AED was having any effect. Billy now pushed through the group around the supine figure. He was holding a small envelope and took out something like a brown leaf and began wiping the victim's chest, and as he did it was like he was using an eraser, the marks disappeared, and with this the heart resumed beating, and as the last mark disappeared the soldier regained consciousness. Billy put the leaf back in the envelope and that back in his pocket.

'Nigel,' he said, 'the pillar and the others.' Nigel shook himself and returned to his work. He went on to scan the other two, once again no success for the Americans.

'Mr Taylor,' began Katie Murkowski... 'Billy.' was the reply. 'Billy,' she said, 'what the hell was that!' 'Snakeskin.' replied Billy. 'No, you fool, what has just happened.'

'Well,' Billy said, 'the messages are person to person, I bet if your guys used Nigel's gear, they would get nothing, and trying to capture divine words is asking for big trouble, is there anything else you've done here?'

'We had an incident earlier with taking a sample of that pillar,' she

pointed to the first pillar, 'before any writing.' she said.

'And?' said Billy.

'The person is ill.'

'How ill, and where?' Billy said.

'In a coma and in isolation at Lakenheath.' she said.

'I think you had better take me there tonight.' Billy said.

She walked away talking on her phone. The rest of the group were all moving at half speed on auto pilot. Murkowski returned, 'You can fly with me now to Lakenheath.' 'And my Bag Man?' said Billy. He beckoned to Ray, he came over, they both followed Murkowski to a waiting car. It drove to Calthorpe park two miles away. Ray had given Billy a "look" in the car to which Billy replied, 'We are going to Lakenheath by helicopter.' This all happened so quick Sarah Cooper and Jane Smith suddenly realised Ray, Billy and the CIA agent had gone. Murkowski was in the front passenger seat making calls, Billy sat with no expression, Ray's was anything but. The 124 miles from Birmingham to Lakenheath took just over an hour. The journey was quick, quicker than the US army team who would be driving.

At Lakenheath they were escorted by armed guards to the isolation unit. Two doctors greeted them. The guy who had tried to take the sample was still in a coma, and did not respond to treatment, his companion showing no signs of illness had eaten a meal and was asleep.

'I'll just see the guy in the coma and wake him up.' said Billy. The

doctors looked apprehensive, 'Let him go in.' Murkowski snapped. 'I take full responsibility.' She had, after all, seen just over an hour ago something fresh in her mind she was yet to rationalize. The double doors clicked open one after the other of the air lock. Billy felt the lower pressure in the isolation room, any leak would be outside air leaking in, and not potentially contaminated air leaking out. It was far less dramatic than the scene an hour before underneath the interchange, at least for Murkowski and Ray, but not for the doctors. Billy just took out the envelope which contained the snakeskin, he didn't remove it, just stroked the comatose soldier's forehead with the envelope, and immediately his eyes opened, and he was wide awake, and puzzled as to where he was.

'Can we get a lift back?' Billy said. Murkowski led them back to the waiting helicopter. By 3.30 AM Billy was asleep in the Hyatt hotel, Ray was in his apartment sitting in his living room, in a cheap copy of the Eames lounge chair. He couldn't sleep yet; he had opened a third can of Old Speckled Hen before he realised with a smile that he had never been in a US Military Special Ops Black Hawk.

A round table meeting planned for 9.30 AM Friday morning in the special operations room in the basement of Lloyd House was put back to 10.30 AM. CIA agent Katie Murkowski was delayed having spent most of the early hours in conversations with superiors in the USA. At one point someone had suggested removing the last three pillars as a 'precaution'. She pointed out that firstly causing the collapse of a major highway interchange in a country which is a NATO partner was not a legal or wise move, and it would make little difference to the legality even if it was a US major interchange. The task forces in the USA at Langley, Washington and elsewhere were now on high alert. 'But alert for what?' a general had asked.

By 10.30 AM all were in the ops room, Sarah Cooper, Jane Smith, Bibi Kaur, Nigel Summers, Billy Taylor, Ray Wood and agent Katie Murkowski. On video link was Mike Carter's team, and those of Geert DeWard in The Netherlands and Ingrid Harberg in Norway, also Thames House and others would no doubt be watching and listening.

Billy said he had decoded the previous night's writings and forwarded these to the other interested parties.

'If your ideas are in anyway realistic,' said agent Carter, 'what can we expect next, though I find this all totally ridiculous.'

Many shared his view looking at copies of Billy's chart, the large version on the wall of the ops room, and their own copies. Those that didn't find it 'Totally ridiculous.' had seen scenes and evidence of the 18 deaths of the students, and those of the 20 occultists. Also, there were now some very respectable scientific advisors, whose advice was to follow the only scenario that made any sense, or the 'Least nonsense.' as one had said.

Katie Murkowski put down her Starbucks and rose from her seat and moved to the chart. 'Who killed the 20 in ways we can't explain, the 7 in Holland who killed the Bijlmermeer group, the 5 in the States who killed the 6 art students, and the 8 who killed the 6 art students in Oslo?'

'This guy,' Billy said pointing to the diagram with the rectangle with "Xnthropos" written in it. 'See it's at the bottom of the negative hierarchy of Aeons.'

'Why this?' Katie Murkowski asked.

‘It’s the lowest of the negatives, so closest to humans, and killed the negative cults.’ said Bibi.

‘But why kill its own human followers?’ Katie Murkowski asked.

Bibi paused; Billy gave her a ‘go on.’ look.

‘Oh! they didn’t get permission!’ Bibi said.

‘Right!’ said Billy, ‘it’s a strict hierarchy.’ She continued,

‘And they thought killing the fake believers who were going to be part of Mallek’s artwork would please the Aeon, but killing without permission was not a good idea.’

‘I see.’ said Katie Murkowski.

‘Not me.’ thought Ray.

‘So that’s it.’ Katie Murkowski said.

Bibi thought, looking at the diagram,

‘Only if this Xnthropos got permission from its boss, Xcclesi.’

‘OK, but first, so why is this anything to do with Art?’ Katie asked pointing to the term written next to “Bythos”.

‘Because art is creative?’ PC Bibi Kaur said.

‘Absolutely,’ said Billy, ‘but more important what will the destruction

of a force, Xnthropos, which tempers dogma do? Let's say this anti dogmatic force allows some new ideas, some degree of change, without this what happens?'

'Nothing.' was Bibi's answer.

'That seems reasonable.' Ray said.

'No nothing, no new life, like death.' said Bibi.

'Not so good!' Ray said, 'So we get rid of this guy who will take out the first.' he continued.

'But then the reverse happens,' said Billy, 'we get new ideas not based in any facts of the matter or traditional religious beliefs, not only new scientific theories but any new ideas, even conspiracy theories! And new religions, like cults, like the ones in New Mexico, Oslo and Amsterdam.'

Ray spoke, 'Oh like all those nutter conspiracy theories like alien abduction and worse like those people in Texas ... err...'

'Waco - Branch Davidians...' said Billy,

'Yes Waco,' continued Ray, 'and all those others, not good.'

'Anarchy and chaos.' Billy said.

'Wait, stop,' Agent Carter was on the screen, 'wait, we need some time to think this through, say half an hour, no make it 12.30 AM your time, I need, we need, to talk to people.' His screen went dead, and the FBI logo appeared.

Chapter 43: The end of Everything.

By now Nigel had been on Wikipedia... and was looking at a list displayed on the large screen.

1985 MOVE bombing, Philadelphia, 1985
Alamo Christian Foundation
Arrest of Sant Rampal, India, 2014
August 2013 Rabaa massacre, Egypt, 2013
Grand Mosque Seizure, Mecca, Saudi Arabia, 1979
Heaven's Gate (religious group), 1997
Jonestown
Ken Ballew raid, 1971
Memali siege, Kedah, Malaysia, 1985
Miracle Valley shootout, Arizona, 1982
Montana Freeman, 1996
Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments
Oklahoma City bombing, Oklahoma City, April 19, 1995
Operation Blue Star, Golden Temple, Amritsar, India,
Peoples Temple
Rainbow Farm, Michigan, 2001
Ruby Ridge, Idaho, 1992
Shannon Street massacre, Memphis, Tennessee, 1983
Siege of Lal Masjid, Pakistan, 2007
YFZ Ranch

'Nigel, these are those associated with violence, nothing like this in all NRMs, sorry, New Religious Movements,' said Billy, 'and with the internet and social media an exponential growth, though many are short lived.'

Nigel brought up the list and placed it on the large screen,

‘Oh! who would have thought.’ Sarah Cooper said.

‘Him.’ said Ray pointing at Billy.

‘Over 6,000 at a fairly static minimum, and creatively changing all the time,’ Billy said, ‘It’s just a feature of human creative thinking, you can’t determine it, otherwise no new thinking, and new ideas often seem like crazy ideas.’

‘Like relativity.’ Nigel said.

‘The future of possibilities goes, or we have a future of chaos.’ Billy said.

‘OK,’ Katie Murkowski was speaking and pointing to the diagram, ‘and Real Negative Sofia?’

‘Without getting rid of the old knowledge no need for new, thinking isn’t needed.’ replied Billy.

‘And Negative Art Sofia?’

‘No new ideas – the last ideas stick, do not change, they turn to stone, it’s an idea of Deleuze’s.’ Billy said.

‘Uh?’ asked Ray.

‘A French philosopher, if we stop new thinking it’s like a river that gets sedimented, it gets clogged with sand, which eventually turns to rock, the river, if you like the river of life, stops, is gone, dried up

and dead.’ Billy said.

‘OK,’ said Katie Murkowski, ‘and these two guys at the bottom?’

‘If the real non one is destroyed, nihilism ceases, everything becomes meaningful, and so there is total difference, if you like Derrida’s play of difference, everything means whatever you want.’ said Billy.

‘Derrida?’ said Ray.

‘Another French philosopher.’ said Billy. ‘Ugh!’ was Ray’s reply.

‘So, no meaning just chaos.’ Nigel said. ‘And so creative nihilism allows new things to occur like life, creation.’

‘OK.’ said Katie Murkowski. ‘How do we stop this end of everything?’

‘Magic,’ Ray said. ‘probably.’

‘Well, I don’t believe in magic.’ Billy said.

‘If I report this I will be certified.’ Katie Murkowski said, ‘Me too.’
Jane Smith said.

‘Then don’t.’ Sarah Cooper said.

‘Then what?’ Ray said, ‘look at those images from New Mexico, how do you stop that, deal with that, with that creature.’

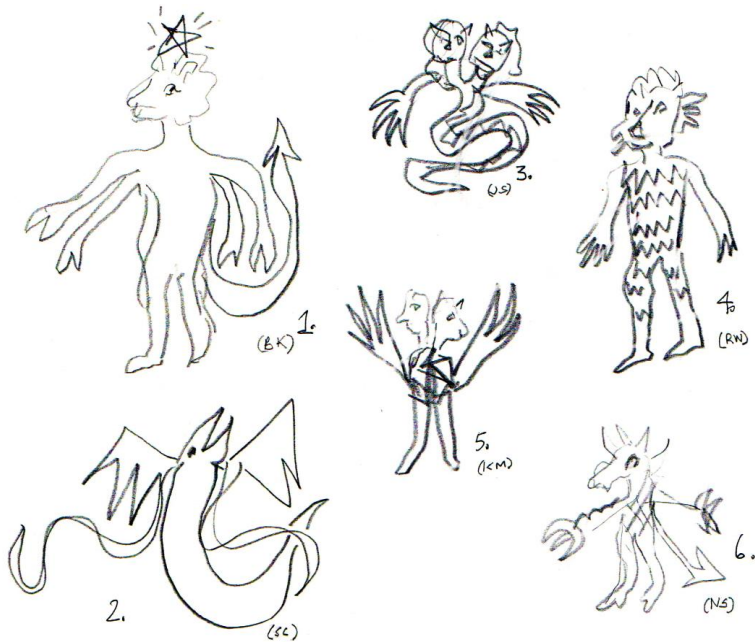
Chapter 44: Down the rabbit hole.

‘OK,’ Billy said, ‘You’ve seen the pictures from the drawings on the pillars of the thing in New Mexico that killed those five, and some CCTV videos. Let me first ask you to draw the thing from memory that killed the five in New Mexico, but don’t let anyone see you drawing it.’

He handed out sheets of A4, and though the senior officers thought this demeaning and ridiculous, but as what was occurring, they had no script for, they went along.

‘Now,’ he said, ‘hard as this might be, no talking, no questions, else you will ruin this.’

After five minutes Billy went round like a teacher collecting exam papers. He held up the first drawing, it showed a human figure with a lion’s head, it had four arms ending in what looked like crab claws, it had a long serpent tail and a pentacle on its head. Five of the six narrowed their eyes, one didn’t. The next drawing showed a creature with no legs but a thick tail, bat like wings and two tentacle like arms, a head that of a lizard. The reaction was stronger only the non-reaction from a different person. The next drawing showed a creature with a serpent’s body, long tail, and claws, and two lion heads. Number four was clearly a man, with scales, two legs, naked, a lion’s head, five was a human with large scaled arms with huge hands and the head of a man and a lion, last was a creature covered in scales and horns, with two legs, talons, a long serpent tail, and dragon like head.



‘Bbbuut...’ began Ray. ‘No!’ said Billy, ‘one more exercise again no cheating, now each using the CCTV database, write down the time shown on the CCTV when Professor Catherine Mulberry boarded the train at the University station, and the time she first appears at New Street, I’ll give you 5 minutes.’ Five minutes later.

‘OK Ray?’ Billy said.

‘12.30 and 12.40’

‘Sarah?’

‘12.31 and 12.39’

‘Jane?’

‘12.30 and 12.38’

‘Katie?’

‘12.29 and 12.41’

‘Bibi?’

‘12.28 and 12.40’

‘Nigel?’

Nigel said, ‘The first CCTV wasn’t working, or any of the others, all showed the same time. 00.00... so the times we see, and the creatures are? in our heads, incredible.’

‘Or real.’ said Billy.

‘Or real!’ said Nigel, ‘you mean reality both constantly changing and constantly being the same. Wow.’

‘Impossible!’ said Sarah.

‘Could be.’ said Nigel. ‘No, not impossible at all, but a very strange universe! No, it’s not a universe, it’s universes, multiverses, this is great! Crazy and great! universes morphing into one another. Not one anything that we see existing, but then you wouldn’t would you. Like if you are on a train, or a bus, or plane, you think you are always stationary, and in your space-time frame you are. It’s simple relativity. Only when you observe other time-frames do you become aware, it’s simple.’

Ray was thinking ‘no no no no no... Nigel, no, not simple’.

‘OK,’ said Billy ‘this is what I think this is. Remember I talked about the powers in Gnosticism, the Nag Hammdi, I mentioned three, and their names, The One, then Achamoth who is Wisdom or Sophia, and the Nous, The Demiurge, the Material Creator. These have other names within Gnosticism, and they have partner forces. So, there are creative forces, the art forces, and the stable forces they create, so we have six basic forces.’

‘Like the six fundamental Quarks.’ Nigel said.

‘Yes, I suppose,’ said Billy, ‘and you call them by funny names?’

‘Up, Charm, Top, Down, Strange, and Bottom.’ said Nigel.

‘And do we have anti particles?’ Billy asked.

‘Yes, six antiquarks.’ said Nigel.

Nigel began writing.

Billy was looking at a spreadsheet on his laptop, and looking up said,

‘Well in this version of Gnosticism, one I’ve never come across before, the nearest I know being Valentinianism, we have six positive forces or Aeons, Anthropos, Ecclesia, Charis, Ennoea , Sige, Bythos, and now it seems their negatives, I’ve named them, we have, Xnthropos, Xcclesi, Xharis, Xnnoea, Xige and Xythos. For obvious reasons.’

‘Bloody obvious?’ thought Ray.

‘Can you or anyone change how these Quarks behave?’ Billy asked looking at Nigel.

‘No.’ said Nigel.

‘Now let’s say these forces of Gnosticism are not Quarks, they are personifications of these forces.’ said Billy, ‘And they have been changed and are out of balance, and we need to put them back into balance. They are six Aeons of Gnosticism and are personifications of forces, emanations, and being personifications, as we are persons, we can put them back into balance, or harmony is maybe a better term. Persons can interact with personalities, it’s fundamental to many religions, it’s called animism.’

‘So, what will this disharmony do, what we are seeing, time, events matter all changing differently, out of balance, and it ends in two things that can and will occur in our world, that of total solidification, and total chaos. Like the experiments with CCTV, all observations are either null, fixed, no change, or constantly change, what would that mean?’ Billy asked.

‘Well, the end of science, which uses data, and I guess the end of the Universe as we know it, and it makes sense in the physics, if everything is matter, no change, if everything is energy, no time or space, the time dilation found in photons.’ Nigel said.

‘And because we can interact with these Aeons, we can possibly restore the harmony, the harmonious play of forces, like a single tune, not the many, like the cacophony we are slipping into. Now,’ said Billy, ‘If I told our master’s about these Aeons they would,’

‘Laugh their socks off.’ said Katie.

‘Right,’ said Billy, ‘but if you and Nigel made the science case, and it checked out, would they give us free reign?’

‘Well, they might say – “So what this is, is just a local event of a few deaths why bother?” – I suspect that would be the response.’ Katie replied.

‘It’s not though,’ Nigel said, ‘like a domino effect, if these actions take place, they become universal, we might already see signs.’

‘Such as strange events, in physics or even politics, or biological?’ said Billy.

‘Well, if they were convinced of this, they’d have no choice but to see our solution, and take it seriously, if we have a solution that is. And as long as they could avoid any outcry.’ said Katie.

‘We have a solution. So, I, we, need you to do this.’ Billy said.

‘What of Symmetry breaking?’ said Nigel, he was still writing.

‘The tune must change but remain in harmony, the Aeons are different, but they must not destroy each other.’ Billy said.

‘Right.’ said Nigel, still writing, what looked like maths.

Chapter 45: Costa.

‘Katie, hope you don’t mind first names, it is actually useful, I mean considering psychology we need to have a certain non-orthodox dynamics, it will really help.’ Billy said, and continued, ‘We are going for coffee in Costa outside, see you there but first to pre-empt your superiors get a message to all concerned. Ask them to repeat the experiment we have done with the images of the Demiurge, the timings on CCTV, same conditions no cheating. Mention the likely outcomes of no change or chaos, of no symmetry breaking, and ask for their guys to verify, and also hint at strange events. Ask for a delay till 2.00 PM for a pow wow, they will want at least that time to take things in.’

Then Nigel said, ‘Here’s the scenario using QM and not Aeons,’ passing several sheets of paper covered in equations, ‘If you scan these and then my colleagues will see the likely outcomes, basically no symmetry breaking or alternatively no symmetry.’

Ray sighed, and again thought ‘basically!’

Katie then said, ‘Sure Billy, I just wish I could see their faces, I’ll make the secrecy of each a priority, hint at the consequences might already be seen to have begun, and send Nigel’s,’ she paused looking at the sheets, gave a frown and then a shrug, ‘Nigel’s stuff, seems there are going to be some spinning minds in Washington and Langley.’ she replied.

‘And spinning elsewhere.’ thought Sarah and Jane.

The group left Katie to contact what was now referred to as “The

Stakeholders.”

15 minutes later Katie Murkowski CIA was now in the Costa Cafe. As she entered the lad behind the counter said, ‘Your colleagues are upstairs.’ She ordered a latte and went to join them. They had the upstairs to themselves. Katie’s first text from Langley was, “Delay till 3.00 PM”, the next, “Delay till 5.00 PM”, and finally “Delay”. As these texts arrived from Langley, CIA headquarters, the group of seven talked,

‘Containment and “selective amnesia” are the answer.’ Billy said. And explained, as each of the six made comments and tweaked the scenario. Katie Murkowski was sceptical at first, but smiled at the first text, at the second she laughed, which was the first time anyone had seen her do so, at the last text, “Delay”, she said, ‘They are wanting closure on what they cannot close, shall we give it to them, say at 10.30 AM tomorrow?’

“OK re delay-” she texted, “@ 10.30 BST 07/21 you will have a solution.”

In various locations in the USA, UK, in Amsterdam and Oslo the “experiment” was tried and re tried. When individuals watched an animation from the scripts or CCTV, then asked to draw the Demiurge, the drawings differed greatly. Same with notes of the CCTV timings, the results didn’t match. They got the same kind of results that were obtained as at Lloyd House, unaccountable differences. Psychologists were brought in to monitor some of the tests, just innocent CCTV timings, they failed to explain the differences and were dumbfounded when they had the same differing results themselves. Try as they might no theory held water. Even some very senior military figures tried the tests, rejecting the

messages arriving from the lower ranks, they had the same responses. An officer of Major General rank in particular tried this test using his secretary as the alternative monitor, then tried the same thing with others. In the end, using the most outrageous language, he gave up in confusion.

The psychologists conclusion was something was messing with their perceptions, but just what and how. The physicists who had been given Nigel's notes offered another explanation, of multiple time and space frameworks, which was as ludicrous to the agencies and military as the idea of Aeons. Though the consequences were very worrying. Through a complex means of double blinds the advisors of senior government were informed. The double blinds meaning any politician could claim no knowledge. So, the Military and Agencies met to attempt a response. At first the psychological idea seemed most reasonable; however, the unreliability of observations was then seen to be potentially catastrophic. The physics if correct was more so, and added to that Agencies reported rumours of experiments with viral cloning in non-western countries was giving some inexplicable results. Also, military activity which looked no longer defensive. The domino theory. The meeting was still in progress when the message from Katie Murkowski arrived to the effect that the Lloyd House special ops team had a solution.

After Katie's text for well over an hour, maybe two, the Lloyd House team worked refining the scenario. At one point the question was raised by Katie Murkowski,

'So, we are saying, or rather fabricating the idea that Christian Mallek found out about these actual cult groups based on the inversion of religions, Daime, Shamanism and Aztec, you call them XDaime, XShamanism and Xaztec,'

‘X the prefix for negativity.’ said Nigel, Billy nodded in agreement.

‘Then realized this, and that he had already created his own version using the 18 students, so he had a problem. Maybe he collaborated with the real cults, any way they killed all 18 of his students. They were murdered by the actual groups who then committed suicide, not unusual in cult religions, thus closing the cases, and avoiding the idea of higher powers not obeying our laws of time, space and logic?’ she finished.

‘You have produced a very nice summary of the idea; you might add the suicides would have been to unite with their gods.’ Billy said, ‘A cult fiction obviously’.

‘OK,’ said Murkowski, ‘the self suicide idea, fabrication, is neat, closes the cases, only we have the problem now bugging us and the guys in Langley and elsewhere, how and who is screwing with our perceptions, or worse with time and space.’

‘We give the suicide explanation and tell them to forget the odd perceptions, consider the case closed.’ said Billy.

‘I like it!’ said Murkowski, ‘But that works but isn’t true, and if these powers are real, and I’ve now had some convincing experiences, you say the case isn’t closed, why then should our masters give us free reign?’

‘Simple logic, if it’s true, the world ends and they have no solution, if not they fire a rogue group of agents.’ Sarah said.

‘So, we are bothered if these powers have taken some kind of

revenge on these deviant cults, but we can hardly arrest them?’ said Murkowski.

‘That’s a good question,’ said Billy, ‘and the equilibrium is now upset twice over, mankind, in the form of Mallek, has blasphemed in his acts, as have those occultists acting without permission. And then the negative nous or Demiurge has used material power not from its creator, so when that Aeon is destroyed by a higher power the balance of creation is split, the cosmos becomes out of balance with no negation, and so on, everything collapses.’

‘Including us.’ Bibi said.

‘OK,’ said Murkowski, ‘you’ve sold me a package, saving humanity is not part of my remit, only the USA part, so I guess I’m under an obligation. If the balances are broken things fall apart?’

‘I like your new tone since last night.’ Billy said, ‘And in this case without a negative there is unlimited expansion.’

‘Like an explosion.’ Bibi said.

Murkowski said, ‘Confirms the new weird after last night, so what we do is sell the closure by suicide to our superiors, and at the same time let them give us the OK to save the world?’

‘Save the whole of creation I think?’ Bibi said.

Now leading the group, without anyone knowing or objecting, even Murkowski, herself, Katie Murkowski said that she would book into a hotel, and be ready for the midnight appointment at the pillars underneath the interchange, and the final piece of the maze.

‘But first, lunch.’ she said, ‘Is there anywhere good around here, I mean really good?’

‘There’s a Michelin star in Waterloo Street.’ said Bibi.

The lunch at the restaurant was good, to Katie Murkowski’s surprise, that and the wine mellowed the CIA agent even more.

‘You are at the Hyatt?’ she said to Sarah,

‘Yes, Billy as well.’

‘Is it OK?’ said Katie,

‘Good enough for Clinton.’ she replied,

‘OK it will have to do.’ said Katie smiling, ‘but first something important.’ She looked at Nigel,

‘Nigel as a deputised CIA Agent I’m requiring you now to get a haircut.’ She rose, and pointed to Nigel, who followed her, she stopped to ask a waiter for the location of the nearest barbers.

The group had agreed to meet back at Lloyd House around 8.30 PM and work on the script for the 10.30 AM meeting on the 21st.

The members of the group began arriving at the ops room, Bibi thought she would be first, arriving at 8.15 PM, but Nigel was already in situ with his neat and rather smart new haircut. He had decided a grand entrance might be difficult. Bibi’s reaction was a ‘Wow! It really suits you.’ Ray resisted a quip, simply saying ‘Nice one.’

Later, as before the seven now arrived at the site of the drawings underneath the interchange, no US military, it was deemed a waste of time, and the last three pillars revealed their writing. There was a brief meeting in the ops room then people left for sleep.

Chapter 46: The Plan.

At 10.30 AM on the 21st of July, the meeting towards a way forward began. The live stream was set linking the US in Langley and Washington, also Amsterdam, and Oslo. Other agencies were also involved. Katie Murkowski began,

‘I want to present the stakeholders with a plan of how to move this operation forward with the minimum of friction from what appears to be an intractable problem arising from analysis of the data, I do not need to detail this as the agencies concerned, no doubt, have seen the quite irreconcilable anomalies which are there not in the data, but our ability to interpret it, and so action a response. I therefore propose a limited and extremely non orthodox approach with the aid of Mr Billy Taylor’s expertise in the field of comparative religion and occult groups. Something our agencies are somewhat at a disadvantage to engage with, as seen in our attempts to do so.’

She clicked and the first Power Point slide appeared. As the slides appeared she narrated.

AN INTRACTABLE PROBLEM

‘This will not be death by PowerPoint, but a check list.’

PART 1. CONTAINMENT - SELECTIVE AMNESIA

‘A somewhat unconventional approach, but for an unconventional

situation.’

CONTAINMENT - LIMITED INVOLVEMENT

CONTAINMENT - Within a designated group.

‘The designated group would deal with the problems, a group with minders, who can provide additional help on a NOT need to know basis. No reporting up, so deniability across the spectrum.’

CONTAINMENT - Specified group –

‘This will be The Lloyd Group a “black box” for further operations.’

CONTAINMENT - No need to know for the hierarchies.

‘There will be no need to obfuscate, and so no possibility of authorship or responsibility.’

SELECTIVE AMNESIA – SELECTIVE AMNESIA – AN INTRACTABLE PROBLEM

‘The limited information that wider stakeholders have will mean they will have a clean consensus.’

SELECTIVE AMNESIA – Only Two scenarios.

‘There will be very limited and edited public and wider institutional scenarios to be presented outside of The Lloyd Group.’

SELECTIVE AMNESIA – The Lloyd Group - tie up loose ends, no further action.

‘The wider story, The Lloyd Group will remain only to action loose ends, no further investigative action is required.’

SELECTIVE AMNESIA – The Story.

‘Christian Mallek, an artist, uses knowledge of 3 small cult groups. Amsterdam 7, Oslo 8 & New Mexico 5 to create fake groups of 6 for an Artwork. These fake groups were murdered by the cult groups who then committed suicide. Typical of such groups. Mallek is missing suspected in hiding or dead. The Lloyd Group’s task 1. The missing body of Eve Sharif to be found if possible. The Lloyd Group task 2. The murders and subsequent suicides offer the resolution to these incidents, they will attempt to find Mallek. And deal with any other phenomena attributed to either Mallek or the cult groups. There was, and is no, supernatural phenomena, just misguided cultists.’

PROBLEMS ACTUAL TASKS HAVE ARISEN FROM
INTRACTABLE PROBLEMS – RE DATA

‘This is what will actually happen, though no details outside of the black box will be given, there will be nothing to deny- but what will occur would be 6 events to be tasked.’

INTRACTABLE PROBLEMS – THE MAZE DRAWINGS, THE DIFFERENT
OBSERVATIONS OF TIMES EVENTS AND THINGS.

Task -1

Task -2

Task -3

Task -4

Task -5

Task -6

‘These are blank, opaque to all other than The Lloyd Group and a very limited low status monitoring and supply group, I would suggest one person from each of the three countries involved. As key, is the opacity of these six consequences they remain blank. However, it is very important without knowing any detail the significance of these consequences, so Dr Summers please.’

Nigel Summers spoke, ‘Failure of Symmetry breaking would be one consequence, you should have checked out possible scenarios with my colleagues and ask in the case of the standard model being true what would the cessation of symmetry breaking mean. Stasis, no change, no life. The alternative a total breaking of symmetry, chaos. Also, the unreliability of any empirical data, but that would be short lived and trivial.’

‘So, if there are any questions?’ Murkowski said, ‘if not we are awaiting the who wants eyes and ears if we actualise this plan. And then the stakeholders will facilitate using the two scenarios which

close down the investigation to the public and institutions. Any response?’

There was a pause of 2 minutes.

Mike Carter came online and spoke,

‘Thanks for that Agent Murkowski, if I can summarize, what we are saying it would be possible to attribute the murder cases rightly to these minority cult groups, in which suicide is not untypical, that this is the most likely and reasonable scenario, on-going investigation will task finding the artist Christian Mallek and sadly the remains of Eve Sharif. This would be our press release. And that the more difficult problems be addressed by a small group who are able to progress these matters without being subject to any normal constraints, then be free to interpret and action these rather difficult to accept data sets, and deal with any matters relating. That in the general interest these tasks will remain opaque to both the public and the institutional stake holders.’

‘Thank you for that very clear summary, Agent Carter.’ Katie Murkowski replied.

Agent Carter continued, ‘I think this may solve our problems, and I understand that both security and urgency are required. I suggest one “Face” from each of the stakeholders, one from the USA, The Netherlands, Norway and the UK. And can we do this by 2.00 BST today. Use this as a provisional meeting, if any can’t make that then notify Katie Murkowski.’

The screen went dead. Katie Murkowski said, ‘In other words deal with the crazy stuff and don’t let us know why or how, should suit

you Billy, and the brass are going to like this, and the politicos, I give them 2 hours.'

Billy showed the final results of the Maze, and that it confirmed their outline of tasks, 1 through to 6. There was some brainstorming on priorities once given the go, and Billy added he would need a globe.

'I think Argos or W H Smith might have a globe.' he said.

'Globe?' asked Sarah Cooper.

'Yes, you know a globe of the earth, say I see you all in Pret Colmore Row at twelve?' He got up and left.

The rest of the provisional Lloyd Group decided to take a slow walk to Pret A Manger, a nearby coffee shop, which took about ten minutes. Billy joined them a few minutes later carrying an Argos bag, he looked at the bag, 'Argos, obviously, a globe of the earth only twenty pounds and it lights up.' he said.

Meanwhile in the agencies or stakeholders involved in these events amongst other questions, the question Nigel posed was asked, the agencies checked again with leading physicists and got replies more or less the same, 'Symmetry breaking is important to the Standard Model, so the model would need discarding or modifying, but if the Standard Model is true then without Symmetry breaking there would be no material universe, but obviously there is one.' And in one case when pressed, 'but what if symmetry breaking stopped?' the answer was, 'then we, everything, would stop.' As for the other outcome, it ranged from 'No science.' through to 'no language.', 'no computers', 'no DNA', 'no periodic table', 'nothing, or everything all at once.' And 'if symmetry breaking was ubiquitous then certainly everything all at

once, chaos.’

Any objection that was ‘but this is local’ and the reply from all the experts was no – ‘the domino effect!’ And given also from other sources there were it seems reports of unaccountable political unrest, and some rumour regarding transmission of certain viruses, they had no choice.

The science looks good, Agent Carter thought, very good, and the idea of the limit of knowledge, so responsibility higher up the food chain in the top brass and politicians was very welcome. ‘A group of impressionable junior agents misled by a wacky guy, sounds good as a fallback.’ Which was sufficient to cause what happened next.

At 12.30 Katie Murkowski got a text, “Meeting 1 PM BST.” They drank their coffee; Billy drank his sparkling water and then they all left the coffee shop to return to Lloyd House.

Chapter 47: The Lloyd Group.

At 1 PM BST in the operation room Mike Carter came online and spoke,

‘Hi, we will empower The Lloyd Group and your contact called The Faces are Geert DeWard - The Netherlands, Ingrid Harberg Norway, Lisa Britt USA, Jane Smith is already part of your group, your only contacts, you screw up or this crazy stuff gets into the media, you are all deniable, good luck.’

His image disappeared and three others replaced them. Geert DeWard said ‘Hi, if you can just detail your 6 items, and from then on make contact only when any departure, conclusion or material support is needed, thank you.’

The Lloyd Group had thought Katie Murkowski’s presentation was impressive, and agreed she should continue.

She began, laying out again the consequences of a cosmic imbalance.

‘Apart from the story not being accurate, of suicide, the consequences of a higher agency or agencies being involved make a non-response fatal. This is a likely conclusion that others have made and facilitated the response of establishing The Lloyd Group and yourselves, the Faces, as monitors.

The equilibrium has been broken, an equilibrium between the negative and positive, and between the lower and higher orders. The negative Demiurge has used material power, without its creativity from above, so it will be destroyed. But destruction of the negative

destroys the positive and now the creative negative forces are out of balance everything collapses, the universe, everything.'

She went on,

'Task -1 The negative Demiurge's destruction prevented.

Without the negative there would be a fixed dogmatic world of no change, no ability to change.

Think of a universe where no change was possible, a slow decay would occur. No new life.

Task -2 The Creative negative Demiurge's destruction must be prevented. It slows the change without which you get chain reaction and destruction. Nothing stays the same.

Task -3 The personification of negative wisdom, Sophia, unlearning promotes learning. Thinking as a possibility ceases. Innovation ceases.

Task -4 The creation of negative wisdom. New ideas become absolute and total, chaos.

Task -5 The Non One in the destruction of nihilism the product of the Non One everything becomes meaningful. There is Being but not Becoming.

Task -6 The creative non one is needed to mitigate the creation of new meanings, for the creation of life and every and anything.

In short, the whole process of being and becoming needs to be in balance, even in creation. Too much of no change, everything stops,

becomes dead. In humans organs stop, lungs stop, hearts stop. Too much creation, chaos. In humans cancer.'

'Thank you.' Geert DeWard said.

'I have another diagram which might help the detail.' said Billy, 'I've used the names of 6 Aeons in a branch of Gnosticism.'

'Thank you.' Geert DeWard said again, and the screen went blank.

	Emanation of the One from Primal Chaos, Spirits,				
	Minor Gods, Forces of Nature, Here negative, Demons, Devils...				
		Destroyed by Without permission from above			
		& Excess of			
	Emanation of the negative aeons	-- These destroy Without Permission			
	<i>(Occult art Groups)</i>				
	<i>(Occult Groups)</i>		Kundalini Chakras	Imbalance – too great of...	Positive Aeons (Size = Power)
	↑				
	1 Xnthropos Negative Creation	Negative New Creation	3 Manipura Solar Plexus -Transcepts / Maze	Old Creation Dogma	Anthropos
	↑				
	2 Xcclesia Negative New Creation	Negative Knowledge	1 Muladhara Root - Door	New Creations	Ecclesia
	↑				
	3 Xharis Negative Knowledge	Negative New Knowledge	2 Swadisthana Sacral Font	Old Knowledge Dogma	Charis
	↑				
	4 Xnnoea Negative New Knowledge	Negative ONE	4 Anaata Heart Chancel	New Knowledges	Ennoea
	↑				
	5 Xige Negative ONE	Negative New One	5 Vishudda Thoat Choir	Old ONE Dogma	Sige
	↑				
	6 Xythos Negative New One	Chaos	6 Ajna Third Eye Alter	New ONE	Bythos

Chapter 48: The wisdom of Ray and the snake.

Ray said, 'I'm feeling lost.'

'Well,' said Billy, 'it's simple really, imagine you cut the positive wire to a car headlamp, what happens?'

'The headlamp stops working.' Ray said with the shrug of 'it's obvious'.

'OK.' said Billy, 'What if you cut the negative wire?'

'Oh, the same, I get it, and so these negatives? What are they?' Ray said.

'Emanations in Gnosticism, or you could say powers, spirits, gods or even angels.' said Billy.

'Or if negative, demons, devils.' Ray said.

'That's another naming way, and expresses the danger?' Billy said.

'OK so we find number 1 and keep them from getting destroyed, killed.' said Ray.

'Yes, destruction might not mean death, and the same for 2 through 6.' said Billy.

'Then what?' said Ray.

'Then we are done.' said Billy.

‘OK,’ said Ray, ‘talk me through the diagram.’

‘Right,’ said Billy, ‘We start at the bottom, where it all begins, we have the Aeon Xnthropos.’

‘You mean the devil.’ Ray said.

‘The Aeon Xnthropos seeks to punish the three cults for acting without its permission.’ said Billy.

‘By acting you mean the 8 guys who killed the students in Oslo by suffocation, the 7 who disembowelled the 6 ex-students in Amsterdam, and the 5 from New Mexico who killed the 6 students in New York by pushing them down a lift shaft, and by punishing you mean burning to death those 3 groups.’ said Ray.

‘Yes.’ Billy said.

‘So, everyone is happy, well just the demon is.’ said Ray.

‘Well, no,’ Billy said, ‘like in the police force, this demon, Aeon, acted like a constable who acts without taking orders from above and screws up.’

‘I see,’ said Ray, ‘like a DS acting off their own bat and screwing up will get it from their DI?’

‘Precisely,’ Billy said, ‘and so we move up the hierarchy of power, the food chain if you like, to the next Aeon, Xcclesia who now wants to punish Xnthropos, your DS who has screwed up.’

‘Right, so what happens?’ Ray said.

‘The power of Xnthropos, weakens, so the cosmos goes out of balance, in this case the forces of new creation are weakened, and the forces of dogma, of no change get stronger.’ Billy said.

‘Like things get turned to stone, and this demon Xnthropos stops this, but now can’t.’ Ray said.

‘Yes,’ said Billy, ‘and so we need to restore power to Xnthropos.’

‘So, we basically have to help a devil!’ Ray said.

‘Well, you could say it like that,’ Billy said, ‘and the imbalance ripples up the chain.’

‘So, we basically have to help lots of devils!’ Ray said.

‘Well again you could say it like that,’ Billy said, ‘and a weak Xcclesia means no firm foundation, just anarchy, a weak Xharis no new knowledge, a weak Xnnoea no old knowledge to build on.’

‘Like the internet replacing books?’ Bibi interrupted.

‘Yes, we need both.’ said Billy, ‘And a weak Xige, gives stasis, nothing changes, a weak Xythos, everything changes, chaos.’

‘So, we somehow help lots of devils and save the world!’ Ray said.

‘Yes.’ Billy said.

‘Simple then boss!’ Ray said with the maximum of irony he had,

‘seriously how do we do this, I mean I’ve no idea how we do this.’

‘Yes, you do.’ said Billy, and continued ‘Bibi tell us about your dream last night, or rather early this morning.... the Maze dream.’

‘How did you know?’ she said.

‘From the Maze on the pillars, so please tell us.’ Billy said, and now all the others were listening.

‘Well, I dreamt I was in a building with a maze on the floor, I wanted to walk down the building but had to follow the maze drawn on the floor like the pictures you have shown us and those underneath the interchange. And I kept trying but couldn’t find a way out.’ she said.

‘And what was the building?’ asked Billy.

‘A church, it was a church like the pictures you showed us of a maze.’ she said.

‘And you were at the transept, where the maze is, and what is called the Manipura.’

And then Billy related his vision.

‘I had a vision of the cathedral in Lichfield, it relates to Kundalini yoga. The maze is at the solar plexus, the 3rd chakra of Kundalini yoga, where prana and apana, the life force blends, this corresponds to the cross at the north and south transepts, the position of the Maze of Life. Manipura. Descending to the door of the cathedral is the 1st chakra, Muladhara or Root - then to the second, Swadisthana, the Sacral, the Font, at the base of the spine where the coiled snake,

Kundalini, awakes. Rises to the 3rd Manipura chakra, where prana life force is. It rises up the spine to the 4th chakra, Anaata, the Heart, the Chancel, then the 5th chakra, Vishudda, the Throat, the Choir, then the 6th Ajna the Third Eye, the Alter, and finally the 7th, Sahasrara, the Crown, the Lady Chapel and self-actualization and liberation from karmas.'

The group looked suitably stunned.

'Yoga?' said Katie Murkowski.

'We have groups of 6 students and 6 tasks, and a final 7th. Seven is like far too much as yet, let's play with six.' Billy said.

'Oh well in the Standard Model of particle physics, there are six types of quarks and six types of leptons, which is sort of what I was into before this stuff.' Nigel said, 'Oh and 6 is the smallest perfect number, see 6 has divisors 1, 2 and 3, and $1 + 2 + 3 = 6$, so 6 is a perfect number.'

Ray frowned, and said, 'Oh the M6, at the interchange 6 main slip roads, oh and the post code is 6 for Aston and Witton.'

Meanwhile Nigel was once again on Wikipedia.

'In Judaism:

Six points on a Star of David

Six orders of the Mishnah

Six symbolic foods placed on the Passover Seder Plate

God took six days to create the world in the Old Testament Book of Genesis; humankind was created on day 6. In the City of God, Augustine of Hippo suggested (book 11, chapter 30) that God's

creation of the world took six days because 6 is a perfect number.
The Jewish holiday of Shavuot starts on the sixth day of the Hebrew month of Sivan
Seraphs have six wings.

In Islam:

There are Six articles of belief.

Fasting six days of Shawwal, together with the month of Ramadan, is equivalent to fasting the whole year.

In Hindu theology, a trasarenu is the combination of six celestial paramānus (atoms).

In Taoism:

Six Lines of a Hexagram

Six Ministries of Huang Di'

And before anyone could stop him,

'Sexagesimal, also known as base 60 or sexagenary, is a numeral system with sixty as its base. It originated with the ancient Sumerians in the 3rd millennium BC, was passed down to the ancient Babylonians, and is still used—in a modified form—for measuring time, angles, and geographic coordinates.'

'Magic numbers?' said Katie Murkowski.

'Yes, very powerful.' said Billy.

'So, there are 6 of us excluding you!' Katie Murkowski said now looking very pointedly at Billy. 'As in you are deep into this stuff, and

we are between clueless and clueless.’

‘And you didn’t answer my question before the dream of Bibi’s and this six stuff.’ said Ray.

‘Well, I did, how we are, or rather the six will deal with the six emanations.’

Everyone looked clueless, then Ray said, ‘This is a nightmare?’ and then said ‘emanations, demons or devils, how do we, I, me, deal with devils?’

‘You said it, you will see, remember though one can help someone by helping them, or by letting them help you.’ Billy said.

There were bemused looks, he continued, ‘And we have six days in the week before Sunday, and Bibi what was the sixth guru noted for?’

She thought, then remembered, ‘The first Guru to engage in warfare, fighting and winning.’

‘And In the Guru’s house spiritual and temporal powers shall be combined.’ said Billy.

‘Let’s take Sunday off and we can’t work here we need something more comfortable, somewhere say like in the Hyatt.’ Billy said.

‘It will be done.’ said Jane Smith. ‘Say Monday at 10.00 AM? in the Hyatt.’

The others left save for Ray and Billy, and Bibi sitting in a corner.

‘Billy?’ said Ray, ‘can you explain it for me in simple terms, like for an idiot, not me you understand, OK?’

Billy began, Bibi was listening, ‘There are two opposing forces, you might say good and bad, but let’s not, let’s say like you and me playing checkers.’

‘I’d win!’ said Ray.

‘But not much of a game, no game at all without another player.’ said Bibi.

‘Yes.’ said Billy, ‘and here with one winner things remain the same or for the other there is a complete change. In one we are turned to stone, in the other we all explode, so how do we escape these forces?’

‘We might let the other guy win sometimes?’ said Bibi.

‘I don’t follow?’ Ray said.

‘We are stuck in a Maze, at the centre we are turned to stone, at the exit we explode.’ Billy said.

‘We are fucked then.’ Ray said.

‘We can fly out like in the myth, the Labyrinth.’ Bibi said.

‘How the F do I fly?’ said Ray.

‘You break the rules of the maze?’ Bibi said.

‘So, what you are saying is that like in a game you need rules, but here someone has broken them, cheated.’ Ray said.

‘Yes.’ said Billy, ‘Say they moved a piece whilst you were not looking, cheated.’

‘Then the games over.’ Ray said.

‘Not if you...’ began Billy. ‘Put the piece back in its place!’ interrupted Ray.

‘But that would be cheating too.’ said Billy.

‘But for good, to continue the game.’ said Bibi.

‘We help these devils?’ said Ray.

‘I prefer Aeons.’ Billy said.

‘And what are you doing then Sunday?’ Ray asked Billy.

‘I’ll find something.’ he replied,

‘No, I’ll take you fishing.’ Ray said.

Chapter 49: SUNDAY.

Bibi Kaur had a feeling she would be facing a challenge, was nervous but it was something inevitable. She had moved out of the family home when she joined the police, much to her parent's concern, but she was forceful, and proud. She knew her parents would be at the Gurdwara on Sunday, so she decided to go herself. She hadn't been for a while, working for the West Midlands Police often entailed weekend work and religion had become a low priority. Her parents were delighted to see her, she went back to their house in Four Oaks, and the extended family. Stayed until the evening then drove back to her small apartment in the city centre.

Sarah Cooper and Jane Smith went to London, Sarah to meet friends, Jane also as she no longer could visit Thames House.

Nigel Summers was restless, tried to read some material on Gnosticism, in the end spent three hours with his railway layout, a reconstruction of Snow Hill Station in the mid 60s, hence the Western Enterprise D1000. Then he read some Alice in Wonderland.

Katie Murkowski ran 10 miles along the canal tow path, then after showering spent time in the gym, caught a movie at the Everyman in the Mailbox then had an early night after dinner.

Ray and Billy spent the day on the river Anker, fishing. Course fishing, all the fish they caught, well they only caught three, were put back into the river.

Chapter 50: MONDAY The MOON. The 3rd chakra, Manipura, Solar Plexus, where prana and apana the life force blends, this corresponding to the cross at the north and south transepts of a church or cathedral, the position of the Maze of Life.

In the foyer of the Hyatt was a sign saying, “Lloyd Group in Clinton Suite.” The suite on the top floor had fine views across the city. A side table had water, a coffee machine and croissants, biscuits and fruit. Also, hot water and teas, herb, earl grey and Ceylon. There were armchairs around two low tables. And lots of fresh flowers.

Bibi Kaur had arrived first, she looked smart, was drinking coffee as Billy arrived, they exchanged smiles. The others followed on, Ray and Nigel looking apprehensive, Jane and Sarah trying not to. As each entered and gave Bibi the questioning look, she said ‘Fine, I’m fine.’ and smiled.

‘Yes, I was the first, it was a dream, but then not a dream,’ she said, ‘and so the Xnthropos lives. And now you want the story.’

Bibi woke in sheer terror, there was something lying on top of her, in a violent move she threw herself out of her bed and onto the floor. Her heart was racing, pounding, she thought she might be sick, but crawled to the door, opened it, closed it behind her and lay upright against it. Minutes passed, her heart rate dropped, but the sickness didn’t, and she was getting a pounding headache. She was in the living room of her flat, which was in The Orion Building. She forced herself to focus, first she realised her phone was on her bedside table. This made her annoyed, which helped, helped to focus. Her keys were probably on the coffee table with the TV controller. In front of her sofa. There was an entry phone in the hall, she could use

it to contact the concierge. So now, much calmer and becoming a police officer, she dragged the sofa in front of the bedroom door. Then stood up, as quietly as possible went into the hall, realising she should have taken her keys, 'idiot!' she thought. She picked up the entry phone, it was dead. Then tried her door to the hallway, it opened, 'Not good.' she thought. She tried the light switch, nothing. All she was wearing were pyjamas, so she grabbed a coat from the coat hooks in the hall. She thought about bolting the outside door, but that was stupid, the problem was inside her flat. Creeping back to the living room, which was a living room kitchen, she found a knife, maybe a bad move, but it made her feel better. Then she realised she was incredibly thirsty, and her head pounded, the adrenaline rush she thought. Only then with her back to the sink looking at the sofa against the bedroom door did she think, the dream, is this the dream or is it real? She looked out of her window, being one of the cheaper flats it looked into a courtyard, but there were no lights on anywhere. But there always was, the lights on the stairs could not be seen, but they were always on.

She had to think, there was no sound from her bedroom and the violence of her exit should have woken anyone. She could investigate, or she could get her keys, take the lift down to the concierge, or the car park. The latter sounded good. She quietly left the flat, locking her door. The lifts were dead, there were no lights, not even emergency ones. She tried the stairs, but it was descending into blackness. Then again, she thought to herself 'stupid', did she have a torch, no, she relied on the one on her phone. She went back to the hallway landing. The flat opposite was that of a Vietnamese student who called herself Sam. She knocked on her door, and called out 'Sam!' three times, with no response. She pushed the door, it opened, a shock. The hallway was pitch black; all the doors must be closed. She decided the best option was to go back into her

apartment, barricade the bedroom door with more furniture and wait for dawn, from the hallway window the sky seemed to be getting lighter, but there was a pink glow on the horizon she did not like the look of. She went back to her door and took out her keys, but as she pushed the door, it opened. Still, she carried out the plan with the barricade using the coffee table, an armchair, and the small dining table. Then she lay on the carpet, and despite not wanting to, fell asleep.

She woke, and her first thought was a shower, but not with somebody in her bedroom. And running the kitchen sink tap, and not in cold water she thought. Still in PJs and a coat, she left the flat, picking up her keys, and took the stairs down to the entrance lobby, there was no concierge as she expected, and she found her car in the car park, and it wouldn't start, also as she expected. No electrical activity. She wondered about water, that needed pumping, how long would that last. Outside she was on Navigation Street, no people to be seen, she surmised there would be none, she was on her own. There was a Sainsbury's Local store, and the door not locked. That is where she had breakfast. Some milk was still fresh, and sandwiches and fruit. She found some baby wipes and freshened up as much as she could, a plan forming in her head. First some clothes, and shoes, she looked at her bare feet, gave them a sympathetic wipe, and made her way down Navigation Street and into Grand Central, a shopping centre above New Street station. As she walked, she noticed that the hot July days of blue skies were over, it was rather dull, no longer hot but warm. She made for the Fat Face store, which had casual outdoor clothes, but not serious outdoor stuff. Here she could dress and find some shoes. Not that practical. And underwear, jeans a top and a jacket. Again, more fashionable than utility, but it would do for the present, and so she set off for Millets, a store which had more outdoor clothing and camping equipment which might be

useful. The store was in Union Street, not far, but when she got there the camping section was in the basement, and so in complete darkness. She remembered a more up market store in The Square, so she wandered through a shabby open market in Dale End, past some shops selling all kinds of novelty and hardware goods. She went in one of these and tried some torches, but they too didn't work. She did notice the replica guns, which she thought might be illegal, but here now useless, and then she saw the samurai swords. She took one from the window display, and examined it, tried it out on some shopping bags and plastic garden gnomes, it seemed to work. Better than nothing she thought. She found The Square, it would have had pigeons and a few rough sleepers maybe, but none now, only the flat sculpture of Tony Hancock, another famous Brummie. Across the Square was the store, she didn't know the name, she now saw it was called Snow and Rock. This sounded promising. It was, she found heavy duty clothing, very good boots, and back packs, sleeping bags, and gas stoves and even gas lamps. She would have light at night. She bagged these up, and then went down to another Sainsbury's local for a trolley, which she loaded up. The trolley was chained but, in the shop, where she found the sword she also took some bolt cutters, and some other things she thought might be useful. Bibi made her way back to The Orion building via St. Phillips square, again deserted of people, pigeons, and buses. It must have been early afternoon, she had a brake in Victoria Square, still sandwiches. And it was probably mid-afternoon when she returned to The Orion. Being on the third floor it took several trips to bring up her supplies. She decided to use Sam's flat for the night and sort out her own in the morning. In the meantime, she endured a cold shower, and noticed the water was running slower. So having dried and dressed went out again and got some large plastic bottles of water from the concierge's store, used for the water dispenser in the lobby. She also got instant coffee, soup, and milk from the Sainsbury's local. Back in

Sam's flat she lit the gas stove, so had warm soup and coffee, which was excellent. She tried the lamp, again success. Before it became too dark, she went out again for more supplies, and some more tools from a hardware store. Back in Sam's flat she heated a can of baked beans and drank more coffee. She barricaded the door and slept with her sword and gas lamp by her side.

The next morning, she decided to do something about the body in her room. She thought it must be significant and she couldn't just avoid it and let things slowly run down. And things were, water was running slower, but more than this, she took an early morning walk, the streets and buildings were looking shabby, and that pink glow across the horizon was bigger. So, after some breakfast, muesli and more instant coffee, she made her move. She wore a parka from Snow and Rock, had her samurai sword and an ice axe, also from Snow and Rock, and stout boots, ditto. She un-barricaded her bedroom door. She could see a shape still on her bed, so pulled back the bedclothes with the tip of the ice axe. It was a figure, she couldn't say a man or a woman, small and pathetic, in a foetal position, just skin and bone, and quite still. If it was some kind of demon, it seemed dead, if they could be. She poked it a few times with the case of the samurai sword, the scabbard. No response. After a while, she was looking at it for some time, she thought she should do something with the creature. In her short time in the police Bibi had seen some quite disturbing things, and this was nothing like as bad. She decided to take it to the Cathedral, maybe put it to rest in the graveyard. So, she bundled it in a sheet and took it down the stairs, and placed it into the supermarket trolley, a little undignified, and wheeled it to the Cathedral. She placed the bundle on one of the tombs. And walked slowly back to the Orion. She decided to continue using Sam's flat, so collected some things, including her useless smart phone. With no internet the next thing

that faced her apart from what to do next was boredom. After 20 minutes of thinking she thought, 'Waterstones' and 'Books'. Once again venturing out and with her equipment, sword, ice axe, and trolley she walked up Navigation Street and into New Street, and down to the Waterstones store. She found a couple of novels that looked interesting, a Harry Potter book, she had once owned a copy as a child, then a travel book on India. Some on star signs, and one on Sikhism.

Back in Sam's flat she made some plans. When living on her home in the flat she had not cooked much, and relied on her microwave and take outs, especially pizza. The plan included some food she could cook on the stove. Then she was to explore the city centre for any clues as to what to do, and to try to cook a meal. She decided to spend the afternoon exploring the south side, which took in the Mailbox. It crossed her mind she could use one of the luxury apartments, but not immediately, the lack of working lifts would be a problem. On her way back from a tour which was it seemed pointless she passed a Tesco's local, here found some vegetables and a lamb chop which though the freezer wasn't working she thought worth a risk. She had never been a cook, and on the evening thought about using the internet for some recipes, but of course a non-starter. She should have got a cookbook. The meal of fried vegetables and a lamb chop though was a success in comparison to what she had been eating. For a pudding she had tinned pineapple, which she thought was delicious. She tried to read the novels but found the travel book of more interest and the one on Sikhism. She had to use the Calor lamp later but was tired from an exhaustive day so slept well.

The next day was worrying, the shower was a drizzle, the city outside looked even more shabby, decaying, and the pink glare was stronger. After a breakfast she geared up with her equipment and trolley and

set off for the north of the city centre. She passed through St. Philip's churchyard, her first shock, the body of the thing she had placed there yesterday was gone. When Bibi got to Snow Hill, she thought a look in Lloyd House might be useful. Out of curiosity she climbed the stairs to the top floor. The first room was a conference room, but her second shock was now high up she could see the pink glow on the horizon was fire, the horizon was on fire. She quickly looked in the other rooms, finally Chief Constable White's office, which looked north. Here too the horizon was on fire. How close now, perhaps even her home, 'her home', she thought, in Four Oaks. She sat for a long time. Occasionally looking again. This was becoming more a nightmare, she had been pleased how she had overcome the difficulties, but now it was clear this world was literally ending. She wanted to get home, but now this was just Sam's flat. So decided to return, but first again out of curiosity looked around The Chief's office. There was a cupboard which had in it what she assumed was a spare uniform. Slowly going down the stairs she recounted the circumstances of her joining the police. Then that night beneath the interchange when she first became involved in this. There in was a possible answer, before the fire reached the interchange she would make a visit. Not today, first thing in the morning. The evening was despondent, she just heated some tins of curry and boiled some instant rice which was disgusting. She did manage to lose herself in the two books, India and Sikhism. And then slept.

Next day there was no water for a shower or to flush the toilet. She used the bottled water to wash and flush. She prepared herself, stout boots, trousers, parka, the ice axe, sword, tools, and lamp and stove. Some tins of food, some bottles of water all loaded into the trolley. So, she set off to walk to Gravelly Hill. In her head Bibi had thought it would take about two hours. And maybe a break, again

not having a smart phone or map, she had to guess. The one good thing was she could walk actually on the Expressway. How odd she thought. About halfway to the destination, approaching Aston she stopped, drank some water, and opened a tin of peaches in syrup. They too were good. It was after midday when she approached the interchange, though again without her smart phone it was a guess. The journey had seemed to take ages, mainly as she covered these distances usually in a car, the final slip road seemed to run on forever, 'Maybe I should have used the tow path.' she thought. She finally got to the service road which led down to the tow path. And there was in the place, that place where the head had first been found, was the body of the thing from her bed, from the churchyard. She stared at it again, things seemed hopeless, dead. She put out her arms and touched it, it was cold, icy cold. She sat thinking, but nothing. A childish thought, if it was cold then maybe it wanted warmth, so then build a fire. Which she did, near to the form, but not that near. Plenty of bits of wood, and branches, soon she had a fire built and lit. The flames seemed to give life as well as heat. And then the creature moved, slowly, slowly she watched it pull itself towards the fire, and then into it. And to her it seemed to disappear, as an uncoiling Manipura is associated with fire and the power of transformation, "Raising the kundalini", The Great snake or serpent, in Hindu terminology, Netzach is the quality of energy to overcome different obstacles. This was the way out of the Maze that Bibi had been trapped in. She took the long walk back to her flat, hers this time not Sam's.

The alarm on her smart phone on her bedside table woke her. The bedroom was bathed in July sunlight, she could hear the traffic all around her in the city. It was a dream, just a dream, but she felt so different. She sat up in bed feeling very happy. She got out of bed and stared in amazement at the ice axe on her bedroom floor, and

then tripped on the sword. Bibi sat on her bedroom floor laughing.

Katie Murkowski later that day updated the “Faces”.

“Xnthropos”.

Postscript:

Bibi Kaur gave up her flat and moved back into the family home, her older brother let her have the self-contained flat above the garages, but when she could she would join the family for meals. Though when she passed her sergeants exams and got promoted, she was head hunted by Sarah Cooper in the Met, where she quickly rose through the ranks. Being well liked and known for her quick thinking and adaptation to changing circumstances. She visited her family home in Four Oaks as often as she could, and regularly attended the Gurdwara in London near to where she lived. Between work and family, she managed a visit to India. She was also noted for her excellent cooking of traditional dishes, and her strange love of tinned fruit.

Chapter 51: TUESDAY From Tewesday, meaning “Tiw’s Day”, the day of Tiw or Týr, the god of single combat, Greek Ares, Roman Mars. The 1st chakra, Muladhara , Root – The Door or Vestibule, birth, the awakening of the serpent Kundalini.

Monday evening Nigel was in his apartment on the Bristol Road, the main road from Birmingham city centre to the University of Birmingham where he worked. It was a large 1920s apartment in one of several private blocks of apartments built in landscaped grounds especially for professionals. The entrance lobbies had marble floors and walls, with Art Deco flourishes in the brass wear on doors and banisters. Each block had its own concierge. The lifts were still of the period. His apartment, or flat as he called it, was on the fifth floor. His was three bedroomed, though he lived alone. The entrance door led to a small lobby, where glazed frosted double doors opened onto a large central hallway. Apart from the bathroom, kitchen, and utility room the floors were all parquet wood block tiles. One bedroom was his work room, the other where he had his rail layout of Snow Hill Station Circa 1960, before it was demolished in the 1980s, only to be later part reopened. The spacious living room which had divider doors had a large dining table, and some chairs, it and the other bedroom, the one he didn’t sleep in, had piles of papers, many of his own work, others of colleagues and students, all stacked on the floor. The walls of the large lounge might have had fine wallpaper, but now there were black boards, the main tool of the theoretical physicist. Covered with equations in chalk, physicists still used chalk, a kind of tradition. The train layout room, his bedroom, kitchen, and bathroom being blackboard free, though there was a white board in the kitchen. In term time he ate mostly in the University. In the holidays mostly ready meals and deliveries. He had an old lounge chair, in which he would sit and think. He was in the chair now, and

for once his thoughts were not physics or scale model railways, in his case N gauge.

The “philosophers stone” of physics was to unite the theories of the very small, atoms, quarks, and such, described by quantum theory, QM with the very large, the Universe, or Universes, Multiverses, described by Einstein’s theories of special and general relativity, SR/GR. But for once he was not thinking of this, or of his layout, but the likely dream that night he suspected he would have. He had assumed age as a probable criterion, he was older than Bibi, Jane’s age, he was not sure, but the rest he thought probably older, but he was not good at that sort of thing. It crossed his mind after hearing of Bibi’s dream and its grey non world and the changes it brought to her thinking; this might happen to himself. What strange new worlds would he explore, what changes, he might become religious, take up the priesthood, a logical move after his encounters with the recent phenomena, or become a train driver! Though he was neither atheist or theist, or agnostic, when asked he quipped... ‘No, I’m a physicist.’, and he was, other than a model railway enthusiast. He left his chair to sit at the kitchen table and ate a Pizza that had been delivered, and drank a can of lager, he didn’t like beer or wine much, but he thought it would help him sleep. He had bought some tools in a city centre hardware store on his way home, why, well he thought they might be useful. Only home did he think ‘useful in a dream?’ So, after his meal he looked through a few old 50s and 60s railway timetables from New Street and Snow Hill to pass the time. Snow hill had a simple layout, just 4 tracks on either side of the 2 platforms, New Street had 11 platforms plus through tracks, far too large to model... he thought. Maybe his dream would involve these, he pondered then went to bed.

At 8.00 his alarm went off, he woke, and briefly forgot about what

was happening, as he turned off the alarm. No, he had not dreamt. Now more awake he was disappointed, so he slouched into the kitchen and made coffee – Nescafe. Couldn't be bothered with percolators or worse grinding beans. 8.20 AM, he thought 'leave at 9.30, plenty of time.' He looked out of his kitchen window; he could see cars and buses in the morning rush hour on the road beyond the gardens. A gardener on a sit-up mower was cutting the grass, though it was turning brown from the days of hot sun. He walked into his living room, holding his mug of instant coffee, opened the balcony window and stepped out into the warm morning air. After a few minutes he walked back into the room, across the expansive lounge and into his study, then glanced at the railway layout. Took the mug back to the kitchen thinking 'shower?' He walked out of the kitchen and glanced down the hallway. Something through the pebbled glass of the double doors from the entrance lobby looked wrong. He was curious, so walked down and opened one of the doors, no front door!

He fixed staring, rubbed his eyes, and cautiously walked towards a blank wall, same decorations as the rest of the lobby, but no door. The thought stirred, he smiled, no door, 'I am in the dream.' he said aloud, but the electric works, he thought. Now his brain was in full flow, he picked up his land line, dead. No signal on his mobile phone, or PC. On the radio, static. He walked around his flat looking, went onto the balcony, shouted at the gardener with no response, well the mower was noisy. On the third tour he noticed his alarm, 6.66 AM 6666. 'No doubt.' he said and thought 'now what.' So, he lay on his bed and waited.

Around 11.00 AM he decided to make something to eat. He checked the freezer, full as before, then with a start, the pointless tools, rushed into the lounge and there they were, how odd, they were in

the dream with him. Or he thought maybe another option or options? He once more walked down the hall and banged on the wall where the door to the lobby, the lift and stairs had been, was now a solid wall. He slowly walked back to the kitchen and got muesli out of a cupboard; he had milk. So still walking round his apartment eating as he went. He stopped in the room where the railway layout was. It worked. He spent a good hour setting signals and points, controlling the trains, stopping at the platforms. He may be liked the fixed rails and logic of signals and points. Then almost like waking from a dream, though still nothing, nothing supernatural. Well, this was odd, hardly scary stuff, or other worldly, just ordinary, apart from the door, or lack of a door. Out of curiosity he checked the fridge and freezer, Certain of at least a week's worth of food, maybe a month or more but no fresh milk after the litre he had. And milk was about the freshest thing he ever bought. Then he remembered times he forgot to buy fresh milk, he had two boxes of long-life milk in the cupboard, and a tin of dried milk. His mind was becoming saturated by insignificance. Hot water, worked. Dishwasher, yes, and at least a month of tablets. Clothes! There was a washer dryer, though he thought he could dry clothes on the balcony. But soap? Or whatever. He normally dropped his clothes off at the college laundry or his cleaner would do this, she did the bed clothes once a week and cleaned the flat. But washing powder or whatever. He opened the cupboard under the sink. All kinds of cleaning equipment. He emptied these on to the kitchen floor, 2 buckets, scouring pads, bottles of cleaning cream and sprays. And yes, a packet with Daz capsules specially formulated for a low temperature wash.

He found a pile of dirty laundry, and then searched and finally found the manual for the washing machine in a kitchen draw with others for the cooker, dishwasher, microwave, and extractor fan. He took it into his study and began reading it. Stopped and opened a draw and

took out a new notebook, it had “University of Birmingham” printed on the cover. Then he took out a pencil, one with an eraser. Opening the first page he wrote, “Washing Machine”, then the brand and model. On the back of the manual was a space for the serial number, it was blank. He stared at that for a moment, a ‘Why?’ hanging in his mind. He went back into the kitchen and looked at the machine. ‘Crazy,’ he said, ‘why isn’t the serial number clearly shown on the front, and why had the installer not filled it in, in the manual?’ He stared at the machine, then went back and fetched the manual.

He opened the small door to the side at the top, he found the pre-wash, main wash, and conditioner sections. In the manual they were shown as a clean line drawing, what he saw didn’t match. It had dried deposits of powder, what appeared to be black mould, and some blue stains, he assumed was fabric conditioner. He scanned the floor, found a bottle marked conditioner, checked, blue, so likely, but mind you only likely the same, he reasoned. In physics experiments a p-value is used on observations to give a probability factor of the reliability of an observation, or dataset, a set could be of many thousands, millions. But that was the job of the practical physicists, he was theoretical. Searching he found a bottle of “multi surface kitchen cleaner”, he laughed, ‘Multiverse cleaner.’ he said. He found this one of the funniest ideas he had had. He repeated ‘Multiverse cleaner,’ 3 times almost having hysterics, which brought him up sharp. ‘But I’m dreaming this, no way,’ so he checked the corridor, opened the double doors, no front door. OK. Now the other door, the filthy powder door. He found a cloth, poured some “multi universe” cleaner on it and tried to clean the door, no good. Checking the manual it had a section on “cleaning”. He read it twice, seems the door pulled out freely for cleaning. Arrows showed how, this he assumed was to avoid using a natural language, which made sense, 8 or 9 or more minimum just for Europe? It saves many

multilingual translations, ‘hmm similar to maths in physics, a universal, no, a multi universal language.’ he laughed. The door didn’t simply pull out, there was a tab or something stopping it. He got annoyed. Hurt his hand on a sharp edge, then feeling in the slimy underside pressed something and pulled, the draw was free. Joy! Then looking in the empty slot, more black slime, bacteria? he thought, or mould?

And then the first realization occurred and an epiphany immediately after. The universal diagram was wrong. Not in a lack of detail, no that could be sorted mathematically, greater representation of data and variables, even bell curves of mould and spill amounts of fabric conditioner. But that created a problem, the greater precision the less like the real thing. Bingo. The greater precision the two theories SR/GR and QM had, the less alike each other they were and the less alike the whole reality they were supposed to depict. He put the draw down, went into the lounge and cleaned a black board. Wrote QM top left SR/GR top right. Then sat down, only to spring up a moment later. What of the negative Sofia he thought, or world spirit? He wrote “Sofia” between SR/GR and QM. Was he helping by being helped?

It was now around midday, and he was hungry. He went back to the kitchen and made instant coffee and ate five milk chocolate digestive biscuits. Before taking out the biscuits though he looked at his hands and washed them. He drank the coffee, looking at the washing machine, the empty powder slot and the dispenser draw on the work surface next to the manual. First, he just thought of the miss match between the dirt in the machine and the function of the machine, to clean. Then he thought of the miss match between the diagram and the actual dispenser. Theory and practice. He picked up the dispenser and looked carefully at it, more the dirt, stains, the catch,

which was chipped. He fetched his notebook and pencil and began drawing it. Then stopped, he wasn't an artist. His smartphone had a camera, so he photographed it from various angles, then printed these out on his printer. Then scanned the line drawing from the manual. Spreading these on the table, then picked them up and took them to the living room and the blackboard, but how to fix them under the headings. Back in the kitchen, then walking round looking for a wall, his bedroom. He found some Sellotape, scissors, and a marker pen. Wrote the headings on the wall of his bedroom, and taped the diagram under the SR/GR heading, and for the QM? The QM would need a more fuzzy diagram. But what of the reality, the photograph? Only if it was of all dispensers at all stages of being soiled. A fail. The QM would need a more fuzzy diagram so he put a blurred photograph for QM, he could have used a blurred line drawing. But what of the reality, the photograph? only if it was of all dispensers at all stages of being soiled. A fail. He wrote "dispensers" and an infinity sign underneath the two headings. Then lay on his bed, looking at the wall. By 3 o'clock he had drawn lines from each, a triangle, and crossed these out. QM ---/--- SR/GR same in the lines down to "dispensers ∞ " again crossed out. He could not reconcile SR/GR with QM, and neither with the totality of reality, a theory of everything.

Time passed, he thought of the manual for the washing machine, the diagram, the use of arrow symbols to save translation, and the benefit, but the downside, no detailed explanation such as, 'The dispensers will be all slightly different, and.... explaining these and allowing for more variation, the difficulties of removal', the whole experience he had just had. The problem was translation. A photograph was too specific, likewise an accurate drawing, or a schematic. Even the blurred QM image captured the difference but not to the specifics, to each actual dispenser, that was different from

each other and from itself as it became soiled and cleaned and chipped over time. It appeared like a series of portraits as it aged, each one capturing this change.... he thought 'aesthetically'. He rose and went into the study, in the corner was a small bookcase of his mothers, and some of her books. One on Rembrandt, he flipped familiar pages he'd seen as a child, the portraits showing a young Rembrandt, confident, and then the slow ageing, in not just the image but the way it was painted expressing the process, and the labour of this. It was definite, yet showed a process which was not, in its aesthetics.

He went back in the kitchen and looked at his drawing, a poor effort. And that was it, it showed his own incompetence, not just of drawing, but of removing the dispenser! He could improve perhaps, but it would just become more expressive of himself in relation to the dispenser, of all things. What about this 'but', no it is the reality, his reality! He spent two hours at the table drawing, aiming not so much at accuracy but expression. He finally, though not satisfied, took his latest effort, and taped it in the centre of the three, the QM, the SR/GR, and "dispensers OO" triangle. Wrote "aesthetic translation". He drew lines from all 3 to it at the centre of the triangle. Success, he lay on his bed for 15 or so minutes admiring the creation, until he realised how hungry he was.

The solution was beans on toast, and he ate it quickly, found another can of cheap lager in the fridge and returned to his bedroom. There was the answer. He needed to create an aesthetics which could take input from any of the three, and output to any of the three. An aesthetics. Had this whole thing been about art and what was real and what was not, he thought, and what language would this "aesthetics" be, signs, diagrams, logic, mathematics, no these were not real, not the reality of experience. It needed to be neither the

real itself, but an expressive picture, yes, but how? A picture is expressive, but static, a movie isn't but you can't see it all at once, as a definite thing, look at detail then look at the whole. You need to see the detail, the overall picture and what it expresses of reality all at once. He was trembling, yes Feynman diagrams. A brilliant idea but dead, the diagrams are dead, like those of the washing machine dispenser, they were not "alive" like the actual dispenser, unique. Someone had bought him a book at Christmas, he remembered, about physics, called "Fire in the Equations" but there is no fire in signs or diagrams, fire is like the grime and dirt in the dispenser.

Half an hour passed, and nothing. He picked up the book on Rembrandt and took it back to the bookcase, once his mothers. It was one of a few things he had kept after her death 5 years ago. For the first time he felt sad she never knew about his Nobel prize a year later. Lazily he looked through the books and some old vinyl records. The Rembrandt, some other art books, a book of Italian Cooking, sheet music, she played piano. And vinyl, all classical music.

Here was the answer, "Pictures at an Exhibition" for piano by Mussorgsky. He quickly found the score, scanned the pages, he couldn't read music, the detail, but he could see the expressive nature of the piece, the rise and fall of notes, he also guessed indications of speed, tempo and mood. And when played the reality! The diagrams, the mathematics was accurate, but dead. He had two worlds that of the abstract perfection, and the grimy reality. What he needed was something like the musical score, which was both accurate, yet also had the aesthetic of the actual expression of playing the music, playing it not mechanically. He would have to make his own notation, an aesthetics of physical reality, which sat in between reality and its formal representation. He went back to the kitchen and celebrated with another cheap lager. He remembered he

hadn't showered or actually done any washing, he showered and left the laundry until tomorrow. Though still light, he was exhausted. Could such a system be created, if he ever woke from this dream, he would try to create one. He slept a dreamless sleep inside a dream.

Nigel woke to another bright July day. His first action was to update the notes he had made with the marker pen on his bedroom wall, then he lay on his bed looking at these for the best part of an hour.

He went back into the kitchen and picked up the dispenser. He began to clean it, the sponge pad and the multi surface cleaner removed most of the grime using hot water. Then he used a kitchen brush, which cleaned some more. But there was still grime in the corners. He eventually used a new toothbrush. More hot water and there it was, clean, but certainly not like in the diagram. He thought about the instruments he had used in his cleaning performance, and how you might notate this as a score. Then realised it was 11 o'clock and he was hungry. He settled for coffee and beans on toast again. Then he cleaned the inside of the washing machine as far as he could, and put the dispenser back in. Putting it in was easy. He took it in and out, again now knowing the trick of pushing the catch up, that was easy too. He read the manual and selected the wash cycle. Put in the clothes, filled the dispenser with pre-wash, main wash powder, and softener. Closed the dispenser draw, and then the machine door, switched on the machine and turned the dial to eco wash, and nothing. Then the sound of running water, joy. After a minute or so he could see water in the machine and the drum began moving back and forth. Joy turned to satisfaction.

He looked around his kitchen, the soothing sound of the washing machine in the background. He looked at the various cleaning products, brushes and sponges still on the kitchen floor, so thought

he should put these back in the cupboard. But stopped as he looked into the cupboard and noticed how dirty it was. So, his next task was to clean this, which he did, and it was easier than the dispenser. So, he began to clean the other cupboards. At about 1.30 PM he stopped for lunch. A pasta ready meal, microwaved. After eating this he cut out the picture on the carton, and then scanned a pasta dish photograph from his mother's cookbook. He taped these to his diagram in the bedroom. By the evening, he had cleaned all the cupboards. The machine had completed the wash. He took out the clothes and eventually realised the balcony would be the best place to dry them. His evening meal was a pizza. Again, he cut out the picture and scanned a picture of a pizza from his mother's cookbook. As he went to bed, he noticed checking the end wall where the entrance door had been, there were pale lines of a door. This seemed significant, but he was very tired. He slept well.

The next morning, he noticed some of his clothes were dry, the T-shirts, but the jeans took longer. He noticed the outline of the entrance door was sharper, but his real attention that day was tidying the rooms. As before ready meals, and instant coffee. He had run out of cheap lager. He briefly attempted ironing a T-shirt but decided that would need some expert advice.

His third day was spent on floors. Which needed different cleaners, the parquet, wood, the bathroom, kitchen, and utility, the multi surface. He made a note of the difference between the wood blocks of the parquet and the vinyl of the other rooms. He was also amazed at the dust underneath his bed, and the sofa. This required the use of the vacuum cleaner, which then needed emptying. The food was much the same. The image of his outside door was now quite sharp. He toured his apartment, looking at the clean floors, he was very pleased.

Thursday morning, his alarm woke him at 8.00 AM. He put on his dressing gown and walked into the kitchen and decided to make coffee, then realised the alarm was working. He rushed down the hall, opened the glazed doors and there was his front door, he opened it, the lobby with lifts and stairs. Suddenly he thought, the dispenser! but first rushed into his bedroom, the diagrams and drawings were there, in the kitchen was the washing machine, he checked the soap draw, clean, spotless, and his clean washing.

He showered and dressed and now he had a front door he could leave his apartment, and so he walked to Edgbaston village. There he saw a shop with the sign “Edgbaston Village Deli”, it seemed they had a small cafe as well, so he went inside.

‘Coffee?’ he said to the guy behind the counter, who pointed to a long and baffling list, and Nigel pointed to the fourth down, “Latte” and something, and then he pointed to the food menu on the wall, “Eggs Benedict with Salmon”.

‘I’ll bring it to your table Dr Summers.’ the guy said, he was a 2nd year physics student. Nigel looked puzzled, ‘Peter Gibson, 2nd year.’ the student said.

‘Oh, sorry, no good at names, or faces for that matter,’ Nigel replied, asking ‘Orange juice?’
He was looking at a cold drinks cabinet.

‘It’s fresh!’ Peter said, operating a machine loaded with oranges which immediately he pressed a button, it peeled and squeezed three oranges into a glass. Peter passed the somewhat surprised professor the glass, he found a table and sat down. The orange juice

was very good, the coffee excellent but the Eggs Benedict fantastic. He paid and left.

‘Bye Doctor Summers.’ Peter said, ‘It’s Nigel,’ Nigel said, ‘and bye Peter, see you in October.’

It was about 9 o’clock, another fine day, he strolled along until he found a set of steps at Five Ways that took him onto the canal tow path. People were jogging, and there were cyclists. He strolled along to the mailbox, where he sat until 9.45 then walked up Bridge Street and into the hotel to tell his story. Katie Murkowski later that day updated the “Faces”.

“Xcclesia”.

Postscript:

Nigel continued only part time at the University, so he could spend more time on attempting to create his “Aesthetics”, giving up his head of department role. He bought a coffee machine and grinder for beans, and began to cook using fresh ingredients, though his morning routine remained as always, a visit to the Edgbaston Village Deli. He often ate at local restaurants and in the city centre. He also created a scale model layout in N gauge of New Street station, something that he always wanted to. He took down the blackboards, and had his living room decorated, and began using flip-charts for his work.

After about six months later he had a paper published in Nature solving a minor issue of the variance of decays in certain Quarks. He introduced a strange set of pseudo randomness which solved the problem. Subsequent papers in this journal and other notable peer

reviewed journals were on the subject of forming or using “expressive” randomness. Then a paper of “The possibility of an aesthetics in physics.” Culminating in his paper, “An Aesthetics of translation.” In which the article’s sponsor wrote, ‘If Dr Summer’s “Aesthetics of translation.” is true then it provides a method of translation between SR/GR, QM, and variances in empirical data.’ This was later picked up by an Australian team who showed by a reversal the output could be the production of new physical states. Thus, opening a new field of synthetic physics. In the meantime, he acquired a black and white cat called Einstein, not Schrödinger. New Scientist and the BBC had headlines, “Summer’s TOE, a final theory of everything?” And he gained a second Nobel Prize, the same year he was made an honorary life member of the Edgbaston Railway Modellers Club, his greatest achievement. That and the possibility of actually creating multiverses, but that is another story.

About this time the grounds of his apartment block had a new contract for maintenance. A girl and boy, late teens, were working in the gardens, they were planting two Rowan trees, a pick-up truck, pulled up and Ricki got out, asking, ‘How’s it going guys?’

‘Fine.’ the girl said, ‘but can I ask, why Rowans, and why two?’

‘Oh, it’s the boss, he always does it if he can on new sites.’

‘Why though, two Rowans every time?’ she asked.

‘I did ask him once, he said because they once saved his life. And that was it, weird, but he’s a great boss.’

Chapter 52: WEDNESDAY. Woden's day, Mercury. The 2nd chakra, Swadisthana, Sacral, The Font, Baptism into the spiritual.

Jane Smith walked from the meeting in the lounge at the Hyatt to her serviced apartment nearby and sat for a while thinking. She should not check out her status with Thames House, she didn't even try. She was faced with a very uncomfortable problem that the very agency she depended on couldn't help. If she dreamt tonight, it would be as likely as not this would result in a change in her life, if she helped the aeon or it helped her, a change in her plans. And she, a good English Surrey girl, had plans, very defined, she could not let this happen. The logic was simple, if she didn't sleep, she couldn't dream. And that solution for her was very simple, not caffeine, though at a push it could work, but she had as part of "the toolkit", tablets. Based on Ritalin, Adderall, Phenylpiracetam... with modifiers and slow-release additives. Blue would ensure full alertness for 24 hours. There were other colours each relating to the dosage and slow release, a maximum was the red tablet, a source of amusement as it would keep you wide awake in this world for a week. Longer periods had rather nasty side effects. She took a red tablet to be sure. They were smart how they worked, she had a walk, a meal, took in a film at the Everyman in the mailbox, she had a problem with boredom. The smart thing was how they gave no feeling of being high, and no tiredness. Back in her apartment she watched TV, and that too was boring. The tablets were meant to be used in highly stressful situations; this was not.

She looked out of the window, still clubbers around in the city centre. She decided a drive would be a good idea, her car back home in Surrey was a Porsche, here on assignment insignificance tailored to her back story, a rep for a PR company, not doing well, her car

was a 2012 Peugeot 1.6 Allure Coupé. ‘The sacrifices one makes...’ she thought. She drove out of the car park and soon found that the city’s road system had decided she needed to go down the Aston Expressway. ‘No way’, she thought, over that wretched interchange, but it looked like no option, other than the left slip road onto the M6 North, she took it. She kept driving, saw signs for Cannock, so not there, so before that junction saw a sign saying M54 Mid Wales, she checked her time, and thought why not ‘Mid Wales, Mid Nowhere’. The motorway, if you can call a dual carriageway a motorway she thought, went through meaningless places like Telford, then even the motorway gave up, became the A5, after skirting round Shrewsbury, she had an aunt who lived there.

She decided that the A5 was going somewhere, and as she wanted to go nowhere took the A458 to Welshpool or Y Trallwng. Welshpool sounded sufficiently nihilistic, but Y Trallwng? she knew they spoke Welsh in Wales, but was slightly shocked to see the reality. Not since the investiture of Charles as Prince of Wales, before she was born, was Wales any real concern of MI5. ‘Y Trallwng it is then.’ she thought. On and on the road ran, twisting and turning in the blackness, just what would be a B road in Surrey, but at night black, and empty so she could speed, this was almost enjoyable. At Mallwyd she took the right turn onto the A470. The sky behind her was growing lighter, and in front the hills, stone walls and farmhouses were becoming visible. She felt a sense of escape. The road was rising steeply now. The landscape became empty, the hills gave way to mountains. Around her they were starting to catch the sunrise and turning gold. She was no longer enjoying her driving but was getting lost mentally in this landscape which danced around her. She drove down the A 487, at one point she remembered a bend and a vision of Cader Idris in pure gold, ‘Pure Gold.’ she said to herself.

She continued to drive. She had plenty of time. At a place called Minffordd she turned off the A road and followed a track which rose steadily as it climbed into the mountain. It was narrow with the occasional building, deep in wooded slopes of birch and oak, at times blotting out the morning sky. Occasionally there was a view of the distant rise of hills. The track rose steeper until it branched to the left, but in front was a rising staircase of stone.

She stopped and got out of the car and began climbing. Grass and bracken each side of the steps, the trees were oak and some sycamores, their leaves sometimes catching the sunlight. The staircase was getting narrower and the trees closing in on the path. Now at times the stairs were random rocks, dissolving the path into the hill, or was it the mountain. The larger trees had gone, but she still had bracken and the smaller trees on both sides of the track. She turned to look back where she had come from and there was a shock, she saw the slopes of hills lying like ancient sleeping creatures in the July morning. The rock stair ran on, climbing through the thinning trees. There were now boulders of stone like smaller sleeping creatures, everything seemed alive. The staircase was now running through a v shaped valley, old, gnarled trees on her left, a stand of pines on her right. But in front of her was the gold tip of a peak. She was being pulled towards it, she was excited, walking as hard as she could, feeling her sinews push against the rock steps. The deciduous trees on her left had given up, save for a few short trees twisted back into tattered shapes by the winds.

The stand of tall pine trees continued on her right. Then she found herself by a stream which danced over bare rock. No longer any trees. The staircase which became flagstones was now a path of shale. The bracken had kept her company. She looked back to the pines which had bid her farewell, the mountain lay to her right, The

scree gave way to flag stones again, the mountain was now along her right in shimmering browns and golds. The path dancing between boulders. She passed three lone silver birches. Finally, the bracken departed and the mountain on her left seemed to begin to embrace her slowly as the path rose, her sinews straining. Behind her views of the bare hills, and still the path rose.

The path became shale, and the path now was no longer rising, she felt very strange, like she was actually on the horizon. The mountain on her right was a crag of rock, she turned and looked down at the lake. A black gem in the cradle of the mountain. Its watery daughter. As the path wove around the mountain's arms, she could occasionally see it holding its daughter. If she had once been on the horizon, she was now aware that she was above it, impossible, but she was. Now she looked down on the lake, looked down on everything. She was above the land, above the sea, above everything.

The moment was timeless.

She found herself back on the road in her car, she made good time on the roads until the M54 M6 junction but was at the Thursday meeting only 15 minutes late. The professionals, Cooper and Murkowski seemed bothered. She had worked out a story, her dream of days in the hills of Mid Wales, only like the others to wake finding it all a dream. And sadly, no insights or epiphany. So, she began to speak to the group, but soon she became lost in a story, not the one she had rehearsed on her drive back from the mountain.

Looking at her watch she suddenly realised it was around one thirty, and she had been talking for over three hours. Sarah Cooper poured some mineral water into a glass, and offered it to her, 'Drink.' she

said. She hadn't noticed as she talked what the others were doing, she had been looking mostly at the floor or out of the windows, and seeing rock screes, hills and peaks, pools of dark water, woods in deep valleys, streams and The Mountain.

'So.' said Ray, 'A nice story, what about you getting caught in the rain a few times?'

'Did I say that, I guess I dreamt that.'

'And the snow, and spring, the seasons all in a morning?' he asked.

Then Sarah spoke, 'Not a dream of days then? More like a year.'

'OK.' Jane said, 'I took a tablet, a stay awake pill, I've not slept, I drove to Wales, stayed an hour then drove back, no dream. The story,' she thought 'What was the story? I made it up, maybe the pills, a side effect, nothing happened, nothing.'

'Jane,' Billy said, 'but it did, didn't it, you were there for a year as you told us of the seasons day by day, changing light and shadow, you said, you lived in the mountain for a whole year.'

'OK, but not for real, not a dream, a stupid hallucination.' she replied.

'For real.' said Katie Murkowski.

'Stupid.' Jane said.

'Your hair?' Bibi said.

Jane said, 'Hair, what about my hair... a mess?'

‘No, it’s longer, at least a year’s growth longer, over six inches, by my guess.’ Bibi replied.

Jane was looking at her hair. She ran her fingers through it, and saw on her hand a tiny piece of bracken.

Silence.

Katie Murkowski later that day updated the “Faces”.

“Xharis”.

Postscript:

Six months later Jane Smith was walking down a track near Pant-y-llan, in front of her was a farmhouse. As she approached a man opened the door and took a few steps towards her, he looked like he was going to speak.

‘Dr Hughes?’ Jane asked.

‘Yes, Cledwyn Hughes.’ was the reply. A man perhaps in his 50s, with a neat beard, dressed in tweed trousers, blue open neck shirt, green cardigan, and brown brogue shoes.

‘My name is Jane Smith, I’m currently staying as the Ty’n y Cornel hotel, sorry about my pronunciation, it’s part of the reason I wish to speak with you.’ she said.

‘Oh, I’ve heard about you from my partner, you are the English girl who has been living at the hotel for the past four months and

walking on The Mountain every day.’

‘That’s me.’ she said.

‘And?’ he said.

‘I want you to teach me Welsh.’ she said.

This directness threw the retired Professor of Welsh literature from Aberystwyth University, it was intended, Jane had done her research.

The professor’s first reply was going to be ‘Impossible’, but what came out was, ‘Why?’

‘Because of that.’ she said, pointing to Cader Idris.

Again, the professor’s reply was going to be ‘Impossible’, but instead he looked at the mountain.

As he did, in a voice like, but not Jane’s, came,

‘Nid wyf erioed wedi dod o hyd i’r fenyw yr oeddwn eisiau plant ganddi, oni bai am y wraig hon yr wyf yn ei charu: canys yr wyf yn eich caru chwi, o dragwyddoldeb. Canys yr wyf yn dy garu di, o dragwyddoldeb !’

(Never yet have I found the woman from whom I wanted children, unless it were this woman whom I love: for I love you, oh eternity. For I love you, oh eternity!)

There was a long pause, the sound of the wind, sheep, distant rooks,

the sound again of the wind, a little stronger in the branches of the mountain ash tree by the farmhouse.

‘Just a minute,’ the professor said, and turned going into the hallway, there he was speaking to his partner, a man in his early thirties with wild blonde hair, jeans, bare feet, T-shirt. She of course recognised him from the hotel bar, he often called in, Bryn, and he was one of her sources.

The professor re appeared, looking at her, then at the mountain, then back at her, ‘Well you’d better come in.’ he said.

Chapter 53: THURSDAY Thor's day, Jupiter, the 4th chakra Anaata, The Heart, The Chancel, separate from the laity.

Sarah Cooper left her room in the Hyatt for a run around the canals, it was late, and she was about to get to bed, but a hard jog and shower would ensure sleep. She had a regular run down the Grand Union canal towards Snow Hill, which she could shorten at night or if tired. She ran hard as far as the Snow Hill railway bridge, a massive black arch in the night, she stood a moment gasping for breath, hands on knees, then turned to run back. As she ran underneath Newhall Street, another runner passed her, running harder, dressed similar, in smart jogging gear and Adidas Ultraboost Light running shoes, same fair hair in a ponytail. Sarah even noticed she was wearing a Samsung Galaxy smart watch, which looked like hers. She was also holding the same Precision Runners sports hand grip water bottle.

As she watched the other runner, she could see two girls walking towards her, or they were staggering, they were obviously drunk, and weaving along the tow path having a garbled conversation. This forced the runner who had passed her to stop. The drunk couple walked past the runner, but as they did, she noticed the arm of one of the girls move to the side of the runner, and then the other pushed her into the canal. Not much of a splash, and the figure was gone, disappeared underneath the black water. The two girls turned seemingly not seeing her and walked back under Farmers Bridge.

Popeye, the tag on this mission for a CIA agent, had a good view in his night scope from the roof of an apartment block which overlooked the canal, he saw the two girls get into a mini cab which had arrived just in time to pick the girls up, who were now obviously

not drunk. The hire car drove away.

Popeye: 'Langley, this is Popeye, splash Chelsea, Boxer and Snowball are away.'

Langley: 'Copy Popeye.'

There was a wait of two, or three minutes. Popeye was waiting for the call from the other agent. He scanned the tow path with binoculars, all was clear no lookers. The CCTV cameras had been looping for the last 10 minutes, he called up his helper to resume normal operation. He was waiting for the call from Nemo.

Nemo: 'This is Nemo, Chelsea is closed.'

A figure in a wet suit slipped out of the canal underneath the overhang of the apartment block opposite to the tow path. Out of sight it quickly changed from the wet suit for jeans and T-shirt, putting the wet suit into a shoulder bag. It exited the canal onto Fleet Street where a hire car was waiting.

Popeye: 'Langley, this is Popeye, all clear, a home run.'

There was a brief discussion in Langley about when the body might be found, but they had no data, it could be an hour or a week, or longer if floating still unseen in the overhang.

Meanwhile Sarah, after watching her Doppelgänger pushed into the canal was waiting for the figure to reappear in the water. It didn't, her Doppelgänger was being held under the water by the diver, Nemo. A perfect hit, no need for any drugs. But before she could take any of this in, she had found herself in a room, all white, an

intense white light. She was sitting in a steel frame leather chair. A figure stood in front of her, as she focused, the room was very bright, she saw that the figure was herself, or looked like herself, was identical.

It said, 'We have to wait here until Sunday.'

'Wait three days here?' thought Sarah, 'Here it will be three minutes.' her Doppelgänger continued, 'So Xnnoea was needed.' the figure said, and after three minutes a door opened and she rose and Sarah stepped into darkness, the door closed behind her. As her eyes grew accustomed, she saw it was her room in the Hyatt. It was a bright new day, a deep blue sky, and she could see in the far distance what she supposed was the surrounding countryside before the heat haze of the day would obscure it.

She sat on the bed to try to recover her senses. Then her alarm sounded, it was showing 7.30 AM Sunday 29th July. She was still wearing her running clothes, so she took a shower and changed into her now casual look, jeans, trainers, T-shirt, but a good jacket, a GUCCI GG jacquard textile and leather jacket she had picked up in Harvey Nicks in the Mailbox and also a Stella McCartney bag. Breakfast outside on the terrace of the Mailbox was just orange juice, strong black coffee, and a plain croissant. She looked at the bright sunlight on the canal and thought how she had helped Xnnoea. Realising that rather than her being the helper, she was the helped. For Sarah Cooper this was quite a radical thought. One that would save her having to break through all the glass ceilings, it would be somehow others would at times remove them for her.

Xnnoea was well despite someone trying to drown it. This could not be said of certain CIA agents. Somehow Katie Murkowski missed the

ride in the Lear Jet out of Lakenheath back to the states. The jet that never arrived.

Chapter 54: FRIDAY The Goddess Frigg's day, Venus, The 5th chakra, Vishudda, The Throat, The Choir.

At 10 o'clock all the members of the Lloyd Group were in the Clinton Suite except Sarah Cooper. After waiting until 10.30 it was decided, or rather Katie Murkowski decided and the others agreed, that they could break, and if contact with Sarah was made, she would get in touch. Ray looked at Billy,

Billy said, 'Want to walk?'

Ray said, 'No I'll be OK.'

That night by about 11.30 PM Ray decided he should try to sleep, he had a couple of cans of Speckled Hen, and a walk around the block. He went back into his flat and undressed for bed. As he turned off his bedroom light a black transit van pulled up in the service road behind the block of apartments in which he lived. They were on the Calthorpe estate, a neat five story modernist block, another of John Madin's designs. Ray couldn't sleep but was beginning to doze. The agents were good, very good. Three would be sufficient. With one still in the van, another stayed in Ray's living room. Two grabbed the half-asleep figure, whilst the other applied the fatal charge, no syringe to leave a mark, just a pressure pad near the neck, the initial paralysis was immediate, the following resulting fatality just two to three seconds away. Not long enough, the loss of consciousness before death was sufficient for the Aeon, Xythos to begin the dream. Xige was dying, but not yet dead, some force was stopping this, so the whole scenario was thrown into the "Dream", which in this case was Ray, and the "forms" of the five agents. Forms, as they were to all intent like filleted fish, only lacking any content, physical or otherwise. The five appeared under the interchange where the dying

Xige was, a massive bulk lying on the tow path with its legs in the canal. They had only to prevent any help for the dying Xige, help that could only come from the only other entity in this world, which was Ray.

Ray woke in his room. It was dawn. He had a vague memory of the struggle as he came round. He wrapped a dressing gown around himself and went to the window blind, jerked it hard, it rolled up, but odd, making no noise. He looked out onto the communal gardens, neat lawn, and cherry trees in bright sunlight. 'One thing wrong...' Ray thought to himself, 'It's all in Black and White.' He stared and blinked, and rubbed his eyes and sat on the bed, looked around the room 'All in Black and White.' The realization that this was so because this was the "Dream" cheered him up. He even smiled. He decided to skip any shower or breakfast and go for a drive and check out this new world. Though best to first walk out and look. The block was in a cul-de-sac, no people, or even birds, and no sound. Though there must be a slight breeze as the leaves on the cherry trees moved, but silently. On the main road he stood on the corner, still no people or cars, no one. He went back to his garage and opened the swing door. His own car, not the force Mondeo was a 1980s Jaguar XJS. It was maroon, but now looked a dark grey, Ray was a little disappointed, as he was when the engine started, silently. However the clear roads without any traffic were a delight, he drove fast around the ring road three times, before heading out on the A38(M). Spaghetti junction approached, he decided to try the trafficless M6 north and took the left-hand slip road, which was odd as it took him onto the M6 A38(M) slip road back towards the city centre. Performing what would normally be a suicide turn, and a very illegal U turn on the A38(M) he tried the M6 south, same occurrence. After 4 more attempts he gave up. The only way out of the junction was back into the city centre on the A38(M). He drove around the Middle

Way, a circular ring road running around the city centre, but every exit out of the city led him back onto the Middle Way. He briefly tried side streets, but the effect was the same. On his way back to his apartment he called in a convenience store, it was open, though no one serving. He helped himself to monochrome sandwiches and a beer or two, 'Why not.' he thought. Back at his apartment he parked in front of his block on the drive, in case he wanted a fast getaway, though just to where was a problem. He slept in the afternoon and decided to try and keep awake at night.

He sat on his sofa in darkness. Hours passed, he had become aware of the room in shadows, slowly the door from the hall opened, and two figures silently came in. They seemed not bothered that much about being seen. As they approached, Ray struck out kicking one in the groin and smashing his fist into the others throat. Apart from a slight pause, they moved nearer. Ray, thinking he now had one sensible option, to run. He dived into his bedroom, flung open the window and threw himself out onto the lawn. No sound again, but pain, plenty of pain. He raced to his car and started the engine, or tried, like in a dream he thought, and swore, he was in a dream, The Dream. Two figures appeared and stood either side of the car doors. No sound, but the engine was not starting. One of the figures produced what looked like a metal baseball bat, and smashed the car's window, and then, dropping the bat grabbed his neck. He struggled but the grip was fixed. Then after a few seconds, no doubt for amusement for his attacker, the grip grew stronger. He slowly passed out, only to wake lying on a grey lawn on another sunny but monochrome day.

His body hurt, he went back into his apartment, now a shambles. Why was he still alive, or was this a dream within a dream? He took a shower, then a hot bath to ease the pains. Then slept. He woke in the

afternoon and decided to get something to eat. He didn't like cooking, and certainly not inside a nightmare. He walked outside, there was his car, with its driver's window smashed. He opened the door; the keys were still in the ignition. He sat, painfully, and turned the key. The slight shudder, vibration, and lights, though no sound from the engine or colour from the ignition light, but the light showed him that the engine had started. He drove to the nearest convenience store and grabbed a heap of sandwiches and some beers. He got back into the Jaguar, but for some reason once again drove into the city centre and out to the junction. This time taking the M6 south slip but cutting off this to the service road down to the canal. There were now none of the fences and security guards that had been set up after the series of events which had taken place underneath the interchange. What there was, when he walked down towards the tow path, was some creature. A huge pale body, but not monochrome, a pale yellow. It was lying on the tow path with its feet in the canal, which were floating, gently bobbing in the water. The creature or thing, or demon as Ray thought, was over 6 feet ten. It seemed to be alive, not breathing but alive. He tried to pull it; it was far too heavy. He sat and thought.

'Think Ray, think'. 'What would Billy say.' he said aloud, with no reply, again 'think Ray think, think...' Then,

'Why do I want to move this creature...' he paused... 'I don't know, I just think I should. Maybe this is the move where I have to cheat, something has moved it here, so I should move it elsewhere.

OK let's describe this, I'm in a dream within a dream, underneath Spaghetti junction, with this devil creature or demon.'

He looked around, apart from the lack of colour it was a July

afternoon, everything was the same. The wall opposite, where they had found the writing, the two places behind him on this side where the other drawings were found, the “triangle”, the centre of which was where that poor girl’s head was found, and now at the same place this thing, this useless thing.

‘Xige!’ he shouted, everything was silent, but he could speak. The creature moved slightly. ‘Think, I’m here to save this thing, but how... get it out of the canal stupid.’

He tried, but couldn’t move it, he tried using a plank from a pallet as a lever, it was no good. So, he sat and rested and thought. What was it that Billy had said about the triangle in which now this creature was at the centre? To keep something in, to contain something.

Next, he thought, ‘What if you can’t get this monster out of the canal, why not push the fu.....r. in!’

He tried, nothing, he used the lever, and yes it moved. Again, and again centimetre by centimetre, then what would have been a splash but was silent, the creature was in the canal and despite its weight was floating. Unceremoniously he pushed it with the plank, slowly down the canal and clear of the “triangle”. He then grabbed into the canal for mud and smeared the pillar and wall behind him where the drawings were. He crossed the canal by the bridge and did the same to the wall where the first drawings were found. He didn’t know why he was doing what he did, his reasoning was that he should mess things up. ‘Cheating!’ he said to himself.

Exhausted and filthy he dragged himself back to his car and sat longing for a cigarette or a scotch. Eventually he started the car and drove back to his apartment. Apart from floating a monster down

the Fazeley canal, he thought driving the wrong way up the slip road was cool. Back in his apartment he showered and put on some clean clothes, the usual off duty shirt, and jeans. Then he sat on his sofa eating his sandwiches. He didn't drink the beer, he wanted to be awake when they came. He had a trail bike, it was now outside the back of the apartment, unchained.

When they came, he immediately sprang up, ran out of his back door, and got on his bike and peddled for fury down the drive onto the main road, he had no idea where he was going. He was not aware of the figures, he should have been, because now they moved with less confidence. Eventually they got back into the transit and set off in pursuit. The van caught up with him, and drew alongside, odd in the total silence. Ray now had a feeling that the canal underneath the interchange was very important and now he was determined to get there. That is when the van pulled across him, he hit the side of the van, there was a brief second before the road hit him, and blackness.

He woke again to a monochrome morning of silence. He ached all over, but managed to get upright, found the grass verge and lay on it for hours. When he got up, he found a convenience store, drank water, and ate more grey sandwiches. His bike was a wreck. He sat on a bench. Ray strangely never got angry. Like checkers, like this monochrome world, he shifted more into opposites. No bike, get bike. It was a half hour walk back to his apartment. He showered to get clean and had 20 minutes in a bath of hot water to ease the pains, which it did. He then put on clean clothes again, jeans, a T-shirt, and trainers. The jeans he guessed might be blue, he looked down at his T-shirt, a grey, but 'What colour was it really?' he thought.

'Stop this stupid thinking, you need a bike!' he said to himself. He

needed a new bike for his plan. So, he went out to his Jag, and fired it up, not that you could hear anything. Beforehand he had gone to his garage and grabbed some tools, and doing what he never would do in his Jag when awake, threw them on the leather passenger seat. Within 5 minutes he was outside the bike shop. That is “The Bike Shop”, it stocked the best. He ignored the door and tried to smash the window with a lump hammer. It was laminated glass, after 10 minutes he had made a small hole. He remembered scenes of the city riots years ago and afterwards the difficulty the rioters had in trying to get into well protected shops. He looked at the door, same toughened glass he thought and a wire grill. Then the obvious. He went back to the Jag and drove it into the door, the glass fractured, the wire grill came loose and the whole door and frame was pushed four feet into the shop. He reversed out. It was odd, not just odd for a policeman to do such a thing, or someone who loved his car, but that it all took place in silence. Even an alarm he thought was silently ringing, but for only him to hear it, maybe he should arrest himself. Inside he found the most robust off-roader, a Yeti SB160 T-Series T1 Carbon Mountain Bike, cut the security chain with his bolt cutters and returned to his car with the bike. He threw it on the back seat. A person watching this would note that as the 5 guys seemed to have become more hesitant, Ray seemed more composed, or was it resigned.

The bright white of what was probably a blue sky faded, he slept on his sofa. The new bike in some bushes at the back of his apartment. Around midnight he was watching through his kitchen window. The van pulled up and two agents got out, two would be enough they probably thought, he had hoped for three. He dashed out the front door, which surprised them, as he ran around the back, they decided to follow. Good so far. From his apartment in Kelton court, he carried the Bike through the trees, the two agents following him. He had

reconnoitred his route, the agents hadn't. He came out onto Church Road just by the canal bridge, the night air still, and no sound, a near full moon. There was no access to the canal tow path save down a steep slope, he broke through the fence, he had checked it prior and loosened some of the posts, half fell down the slope, but kept hold of the bike. He was now on the tow path. Above the transit van stopped on the bridge. The two agents made a worse job than Ray descending the slope, by the time they got upright Ray was on the bike and riding hard. Again, they hesitated before deciding to chase. But Ray was through the gears and away. The two agents stopped and hesitated, they tried to get back up the slope and failed, so began jogging to the next bridge at Five Ways where there was access from the street above.

Ray saw the transit arrive at the Five Ways bridge with its steps down to the tow path, and park on the bridge. He was peddling hard, the two other agents slid back the side doors, and were quickly on the stairs down to the canal. They reached the bottom step, Ray was only six feet away, but six feet in front of them, they made as if to chase, but again a hesitation. They didn't, realising it would be useless, looking back they had noticed the other two agents on the tow path, now running towards them. All four now ran up the stairs to the van, and jumped in. The driver put it into gear and soon they were driving looking for the next possible intercept. Ray guessed this would be Broad Street. He cycled on, to where the canal meets the back of the mailbox, and the plaza where he first saw Billy, underneath the BBC studios, there he left the tow path. Cycled over the foot bridge, down steps past Centenary Plaza, and up Bridge Street past the Hyatt hotel onto Broad Street, where 200 yards further down the road and on both sides of the canal were 5 agents waiting. He cycled through Centenary Square and found his way back onto the canal tow path at Farmers Bridge. He was now on the

Grand Union and knew his destination. It should take around 10 minutes. The agents waited 5 or 6 minutes on the canal tow path by the ICC before realizing he was not using this route. They had guessed his destination but tried a few bridges which crossed the canal to be sure. An intercept before the interchange at Gravelly Hill would be much better. They tried a few more access points, but the canal route was narrow, with high buildings, old offices on either side, so there were no clear views, not until the Fazeley canal did it widen and open up.

Ray now saw ahead was the interchange, he was on the tow path and flying. As the massive motorway pillars appeared he slowed. Then he stopped, there was someone there, or something, well he had expected so, but not what he saw. The pale figure days before was no longer pale, he could see, it was black, but it had a blue-black sheen, and it had coloured images all over its body, he guessed maybe like tattoos but of course not actual tattoos. The body of the beast, the demon, was covered in these patterns, images, pictures of creatures and faces, and even more astonishing they were in bright colours. Translucent reds, purples, and greens, and yet even more astonishing they were moving. He could see as he slowly approached the massive figure, it had the head of a boar, with tusks which gleamed white, and eyes which danced with red fire. And Ray, he thought, “Magnificent”.

It was Xige. He walked slowly towards it, as he did so the transit van came down the access road and stopped in a cloud of dust. The five agents got out of the van, the driver from the front door, the 4 others from the sliding side door. They were dressed in black, and all carrying batons. They split up as if still trained agents, only a 4 to 1 split, not 3 to 2. The normal tactics was for 2 to circle round back, but now only 1. Xige was watching, the Aeon then put its hand on Ray’s

shoulder and guided him behind with his back to the Aeon. Ray understood, 'Cover my back'. 'Well, yes he thought', against the servants of Xythos, though he had forgotten that name, but knew these were no CIA agents. So not an old-fashioned fight.

The four formed a semi-circle in front of Xige, it seemed now a good foot taller than the agents. They suddenly charged swinging their batons, or where they now swords. The demon simply used its left arm and swept them into a pillar. They hit it like they were made of rock. There was a sound, like a crack and they fell in shards like broken black glass.

Xige turned to see Ray facing the last agent that was now also holding a sword. Ray's training was good, but he didn't think his training was of any use. He ran at the agent, screaming, and you could hear it echo around the pillars, the only sound now in this dream, his Dream. This seemed to unnerve the agent, it raised the sword as Ray collided with its legs. The agent fell forwards, the sword slipped from its hand, as the agent hit the tow path face down. Ray recovered and belly flopped onto the agent's back. It was recovering. The demon Xige kicked the sword towards Ray, who grabbed it, levered himself up and swung at the agent's neck, the sword passing clean through and into the gravel of the tow path. The demon approached and side kicked the head into the canal. Xige looked at Ray, and Ray looked back, the coloured images moving, it was a beautiful beast he thought. Then it gave a slight bow of the head, which Ray replied in a similar fashion. The Aeon stood for a moment looking deep into Ray's eyes. It was a perfect moment. Then it walked away into the night.

Ray still had the sword in his hand. He walked back to his bike, or the one he had stolen, but how can you steel in your own dream he

thought. Picking up the bike and putting the sword across the handle bars he wheeled it up the slope onto the access road, mounted the bike and began the ride home, down the A38(M) . Illegally on a bike.

Chapter 55: SATURDAY Samtag's day, Saturn the 6th chakra, Ajna, The Third Eye, High Alter.

At 10 o'clock all of the group were gathered in the lounge, all except Sarah who was still missing. Ray was a few minutes late, the others were drinking coffee except Billy and Bibi who had sparkling water. He arrived looking different, no jeans but check trousers and a blue blazer, with a white shirt, and no trainers, but loafers.

Ray told his story, they listened. After he finished there was a silence, then Jane said,

'Ray, you might be interested to know that it seems some cracks have been discovered on the supports to the Gravelly Hill interchange, there are massive delays as it's been closed for inspection.'

There was another long silence, 'I wonder if that bike shop is missing one of its top of the range off-rovers?' Nigel said.

More silence. Perhaps a slight raised eyebrow from Ray. And Bibi said, 'I never saw my Aeon properly, it disappeared into flames.' To which Nigel said, 'I saw nothing at all.'

Jane said, 'I'm not sure, was the mountain Xharis, an Aeon, maybe I need to find out?'

The others slowly left the lounge one by one; Katie was still sitting down, Billy rose and had written something in his Moleskine note book. It read "FOLLOW ME". He showed it to Katie and walked towards the lifts, she followed, before he got into the lift he pointed

to the other one. She understood, 'Follow, and keep back.'
Leaving the Hyatt Billy walked onto Broad Street and then turned right towards Chamberlain Square, from there passed the entrance to the museum and art gallery, he crossed Victoria Square in front of the council building and walked down the top of Waterloo Street, 'Apt!' he thought and walked down Colmore Row. An impressive Victorian street with buildings reminiscent of the Parisian Belle Epoch. Then he turned right at Benetts Hill.

Langley: 'Popeye, any eyes on Bambi?'

Popeye: 'Victoria Square, might be following Dopey.'

Billy entered the Wellington real ale pub, it was early afternoon, but there was still a few customers. The cat gave him a knowing look. Billy waited just inside for Katie to enter and pointed to an empty table in the far corner, a good line of sight, he gestured to her to sit down as he went to the bar. Katie, in her casual dress, even to the fake worn shoes, and cuffs of her tweed jacket went and sat down. Her cutout for the week was that of a US lecturer on a tour of Europe. The cat followed her over, and sat looking at her, unconvinced. Billy joined her two minutes later with two pints of Fireside, at which Katie grimaced. The cat decided to leave the group.

'Drink it, it's very good.' Billy said.

She took a sip, and grimaced.

'These pictures?' Katie asked, looking at the black and white photographs of pubs and houses on the walls.

‘Are of old Birmingham,’ Billy replied, ‘the old pubs, and terraces of houses, all now demolished. And yes, they look grim, and in those days dark, polluted by the trains and houses burning coal. We had fogs, smogs each winter. Long cold hard winters, but lovely hot summers of endless days. Streets of brick houses and blue brick pavements. Men wearing caps and everyone smoking cigarettes. That’s what I remember.’

‘There are no trees?’ Katie said.

‘Not in the streets, and no private cars, or a few, and horses pulled the milk carts...’ said Billy.

‘But let me tell you a story.’ he began,

She fingered the skin underneath her left ear.

‘You can’t possibly feel that implant, it’s underneath your bone. And there is no communication in here with your friends.’ he said.

She took a sip of beer, and grimaced.

Popeye: ‘Langley, we have lost visual and no audio, audio is down.’

‘So, we can talk, there is no comms available in here,’ Billy said, ‘but my story. The CIA has had involvements with what is called Avant Garde Art since the 1950s. I won’t go into detail, you know, but Stockhausen, Cage and others, Darmstadt, Rothko, the ICA competition for the un-named political prisoner, you know. Art to symbolise the freedom of expression in the west, a contrast to the politically controlled social realism of the USSR, and China. And of course, an echo of the social realism in the totalitarianism of earlier

Nazi Germany. But let's imagine a greater partnership, Cage and Stockhausen were possibly unaware, but we might imagine a contemporary artist who was very aware, and one who was willing to act in order to represent or disrupt certain groups. Let's call this Artist who is secretly sponsored and supported by the CIA, Christian Mallek, and let's say a gambit was to create a spoof occult art show, a valid work of contemporary art, and free expression.

He paused and took a sip of beer.

And that reactionary groups would thus act against this freedom and being such groups and their anti-establishment ideals and lifestyles not merely an annoyance to tolerate, but now to be seen as terrorist groups. You see the logic, far from these "alternative" activist groups being a free voice they become fundamentalist occult terrorists, thus legitimating the authorities to deal with them. Use of lethal force if necessary. Free speech is one thing, freedom to indulge in human sacrifice is another.

It would alter the moral position of the authorities in having to act. But to push this further, what if it could be shown that there was some actual reality in the power of the occult, this might attract those who were critical of the power of the establishment to join such groups who seem to be a match for the authorities, those groups who seem to have tapped into a greater power. In short, a honey trap for social dissidents. How would the idea of supernatural powers be fabricated?

So, say, things like faked images underneath an interchange, timings on CCTV were wrong, that wouldn't be difficult for an organisation like the CIA. An operation to remove a body from a morgue by a special military unit, and 8 bodies, found mysteriously burnt. A van

with no driver, again CCTV which made no sense. And the bodies, of say already dead real “terrorists”. And two guys working under an interchange where strange signs appeared, guys who then mysteriously collapse. The whole thing a play within a play, beautifully choreographed,’ he paused, ‘I wonder if anyone else knew, FBI, NSA, MI5 or 6, no, I very much doubt it.’

Langley: ‘Popeye, we are sending in Olive Oil and Bluto.’

‘Only,’ Billy continued, ‘things started to go wrong right from the beginning, not all the signs underneath the interchange were fake, the false timings on CCTV were false, but not those of the agency, the timings were wrong but not of the agency’s making. Two guys working under the interchange were to mysteriously collapse, but the two guys didn’t just collapse, one died, and was resuscitated, the other’s coma was real. Not in the plan, the plan was going wrong, very wrong. The 8 dead guys were not terrorists but the real thing, the special CIA unit. And the plan to send 6 people to mysterious locations around the world to more “occult” occurrences never happened, that’s why I got the globe, that plan failed. And the collateral damage was there from the get-go. The whole plan at first far too big to stop even when a real girl was murdered. But murdered by who, not the CIA, by who, not Christian Mallek? And the plan to use the already dead in the art killings as innocent victims didn’t happen, real civilians were being slaughtered.

Obviously, such an original plan would be shielded from those higher up who only wanted outcomes, and so the team continued, taking over the investigation and planning the final moves. There would be 6 world sites where new atrocities at the hands of fake radicals would take place, maybe in LA, Tokyo, Hong Kong, Moscow, Paris, London. Six guesses.’

Katie Murkowski's look said, no not guesses, no maybe.

'And when it went wrong,' he continued, 'Langley, I guess it was Langley, decided to pull the plug. You missed the first two, Bibi and Nigel, the third, Jane Smith, didn't fall asleep here in Birmingham, maybe you didn't try, killing an MI5 agent might be politically embarrassing, but not so for Sarah Cooper, so next you went for Ray, I'm not pleased about that. And of course you would eventually target me.'

There was something in the tone of 'I'm not pleased about that,' that genuinely unnerved the experienced officer.

'But they had the dreams,' said Billy, 'or entered alternative and parallel realities. What you thought were your guys were not.'

A late teenage looking girl and boy, possibly students, with back packs entered the pub laughing, and the boy took a stool at a small cast iron table, the girl went to the bar, she came back with two pints of a black beer, she was still laughing. She sat on another stool. They drank the beer looking intently at each other.

'Do you think they are any good?' Billy asked, 'only I'm not into this covert spy kind of thing.'

Katie Murkowski looked quickly at the couple, which was more than odd, because in her training she had learnt how to fake curiosity, but this time she just looked, which was a shock to her, and then she had a far greater one. As she looked at the young couple laughing and as they were drinking, talking and laughing, they seemed to slowly change, even from this distance, their clothes grew pale and tatty,

worse their skin wrinkled and turned grey, skin stretched over their faces, lips receded showing teeth, finally they both fell from their stools in a heap on the floor. Olive Oil and Bluto were no longer, or rather they were a pile of bones and remains lying on the floor, the customers around them taking no notice as if they couldn't see them. The cat walked past the remains, gave a sniff, then walked on, it could see them.

'I'll get more beers.' Billy said. While he was at the bar Katie Murkowski had noticed the back door near where they were sitting was not locked. Customers had been using it, drifting in and out, as also had the cat. So, she had an escape route, and given her cover was blown it was time to use it. The two agents who she had just watched decay, it could, she reasoned, have just been a hallucination, maybe just that, and maybe it was something in the beer. Bail out now and plan what to do once safe at Lakenheath's special facility she thought.

She slid from the corner seat and opened the door. The service alley at the back of the pub with its empty barrels of what was once full of real ale was not there. What was, was a field of ploughed earth, and an empty landscape stretching to the horizon, and it was night, not a July afternoon, it was raining, and there was a pink glow across the horizon. The earth was a deep black, and the rain felt as if it had ice in it and stung her face. She stepped back, the door swung closed, then seconds later a customer came in through it. She sat back down. The pile of bones was still across the bar on the floor with no one noticing, and the field and landscape outside was there, no doubt, her arms and face were wet from the rain blown by a cold wind, her shoes now had black mud on them. The most rational conclusion was that she was in one of those dam dreams. But Billy was here, and that he was here seemed to be not good, and there was something

in the tone of 'I'm not pleased about that,' that genuinely unnerved the experienced officer.

Billy came back with the two new pints.

'Drink.' he said, 'you can't get drunk in a dream, your plan was to fake an Artist disturbing real, well CIA demons, and of course there are no such things as demons, feel free to leave.'

She finally spoke, 'And if I do leave, leave for where, and do what, and will I get back from this, in days, weeks, or years?'

'Well,' Billy said, 'where will you go, not to Lakenheath or Langley, I think you will go to your home, I guess in eastern Europe, that is what you just saw, it was your original family homeland. What will you do, I don't know, when will you get back, I don't know. And the girl that was dead, Eve Sharif, that original unexpected event, this is to help you, she will be OK.'

'When the project went down the whole thing was passed to a special unit to close and tidy.' she said, 'I'm not expecting any sympathy, sympathy is trained out of agents, it's fatal.'

'I've not had mine trained out,' Billy said, 'here look at this,' he handed her a large print of Jackson Pollock's painting number 1. An abstract of mainly black and white, with muted tones of dripped paint.

'Have a good look at the picture, I'll get another two pints, we seem to have finished these.' he said leaving for the bar, she looked at the print and saw chaos, oblivion, a totality of paint and nothing more.

He returned with the drinks. ‘Well,’ he said – ‘that is what you will confront.’

Katie Murkowski was silent.

‘Don’t worry, now I’m sure you will get back to something, but not that special unit, or any unit.’ Billy said.

Katie Murkowski took a sip of beer, rose and left through the exit.

She found herself in the field of muddy black soil, above her a dark cloud against a blue-black sky, and cold rain stinging her face and eyes. She started to walk for no reason other than she thought she should, the mud clinging to her shoes, soon she was in bare feet. Her thinking was confused, there was still the thought that this was all the agency, and recovering the failed plan, hallucinogenics, auto suggestion. After all there was no physical feeling in her feet of discomfort. Everything could be explained by the agency. Her mind was wandering, into something that looked like the painting, a chaos from which she thought she would be consumed. There was the sound of people talking in languages and accents, she did not understand. Dead being loaded into carts. Of fields and houses and people on fire, a black fire. Of people burning and freezing. She entered the earth and was terrified of becoming the black earth. She felt the landscape stretching endlessly in the dark blackness, crossed by unknown rivers flowing into unknown seas. Then vast and seemingly never-ending forests, and rains, snow, ice, and the heat of a thousand summers. Of the land like a dead corpse, her corpse. The swirling blizzard of black and grey was neither vision or sound, or both. Then it became clear, that this terrifying other, was herself.

Postscript:

In a part of Chicago that is becoming a fashionable district, in a red painted 5 story warehouse, now made over to artist studios, on the top floor stands Katie Murkowski, ex-CIA. She is wearing overalls, and her hair is tied back. On the floor is a large piece of cotton duck canvas roughly 10 feet by 18 feet. Around it various open cans of household paint, mostly very dark and pale colours, blacks, greys, blues, and tans. The painting is a whirl of drips and lines of paint, at the top right are clearly seen several handprints. Katie Murkowski is leaning on a wall looking at the canvas. She has a cigarette in her mouth, and it seems either an expression of a frown or a question. Her overalls are covered in paint, as are her arms, her sleeves being rolled up, the paint lines on her arms as on the canvas like writhing serpents. Her hair too is paint splattered; her hands also covered in paint. She slowly pulls on the cigarette, taking it from her lips, still looking at the painting, and exhales tobacco smoke through a broad smile, her eyes shining like diamonds over some vast dark landscape. Now her landscape.

Chapter 56: SUNDAY The 7th Chakra, Sahasrara, The Crown, The Lady Chapel.

The meeting on the Sunday in the Clinton lounge was strange. The room as before was set out with refreshments, and flowers. Through the glass the city spread itself out into the country, where rivers drained to the seas. The city lay on sandstone, of deserts from long ago whose winds had been frozen as the sand it sculpted turned to stone. It was cut with rivers and roads but waited now patiently again. In small corners in brown waters the fish swam, ignorant of the motorways. The sandstone churches still remained in the heat of July as the corn blazed a cadmium yellow. The soil was its bone, the streams were its blood. Where even now in the high walled lanes in the shadows of oak and ash the water dribbled from the rock, sprang from the unseen fossilized sediments. Now it could wait a million years.

All had arrived by 10.15. Sarah Cooper simply said she was fine, though her casual was still a very expensive casual, her demeanour had changed. It was difficult to say, other than there seemed a “completeness” in her. Katie Murkowski just said she had a story to tell, something to express but she hadn’t yet the language, maybe she would have to borrow it, and maybe it would be expressed in paint. She added, ‘so I quit the agency.’

Billy spoke. ‘Well, there is only one thing left to do, that will be tonight, and Ray you will help?’

‘Sure.’ Ray said.

‘Now what to say, oh!’ Billy continued, ‘Tonight we will get Eve Sharif

back to her parents, alive and well. You need to know this as not to worry.’

They all rose to leave, things were over, but the view was spectacular, so each looked across the horizon, the sky still blue. And slowly they left the room, took the lifts down to the noise and hot busy streets of Birmingham.

Around 2 o’clock in the early hours of Monday morning a couple walking past the entrance to Margaret Street School of Art noticed an object on the steps, they were students at the School of Art, they saw it was a head, and immediately thought it was an artwork or installation. The gates to the steps were open and also the doors to the school. Curious as to the nature of this work they took the steps and entered the building. The entrance hall is an impressive high Victorian affair, with tiles and tall marbled columns with a vaulted ceiling. This was often a space used for installations. Now the space had a figure hanging high above from its feet, a naked man’s body, headless, the floor covered with what looked like blood.

‘Cool!’ thought Chi, one of the students. Strange no one was around, ‘Were they being filmed?’ she thought. A blue light was flashing outside, and two police officers entered, one said ‘Can you explain what’s going on?’ The other student, Jay, said ‘We think it’s a performance work.’ which seemed reasonable, but no one was around. They called this into the station. Before long another patrol car had arrived. No one was touching anything. The University night duty staff knew nothing, they woke the head of the Art School who likewise didn’t know anything, but again this was not unusual, students often did this sort of “intervention” without notice or permission. So, such stunts were not new. Even so something had to be done, as now late goers were forming a group around the

entrance. Another police car arrived, and a cordon set up. Eventually an on call SOCO team arrived, glad of the break from doing nothing, but bemused why they were required at the scene of an artwork. A quick examination of the head on the steps though showed it was no fake, it was the head of a male human. Professor Jimi Silver arrived, she was local, so the Head of School had asked her to check out what was happening while he drove over from Lapworth. She was let through the cordon and immediately recognised the head of Christian Mallek.

Around one o'clock Monday morning Billy Taylor was walking around the side of St. Chad's Cathedral in Snow Hill. It was the first Catholic cathedral to be built in England after the reformation, designed by Pugin and completed in 1841, its full title being The Metropolitan Cathedral Church and Basilica of Saint Chad. He entered through a small side door. There was a dim light in the vast cavern of the Basilica. The candlelight illuminated the gold of the high altar, above which was the crucified Christ in shadow, framed by tall columns, which ran the length of the cathedral like the trees in a young forest, the aisle like pathways in this woodland at night. He passed the side chapels dedicated to the saints with dim figures in stone in front of windows of dark stained glass. He came to a narrow oak door which led down stone steps to the catacomb.

Here on a marble slab was Eve Sharif wrapped in a sheet, asleep. Billy called softly, 'Eve... wake up now.' The girl woke, wrapped herself tightly in the sheet and stood up. 'You can follow me?' Billy said, she did. Outside in the warm night air, Mahjoub and Rebecca Sharif were standing with Ray. In seeing the girl, Rebecca ran forwards to her and grabbed the child in her arms. Billy said to Ray, 'Ray, you take them home.' The family of three got into the back of Ray's car, his XJS. Ray spoke, 'Could we maybe meet to talk tomorrow?' Ray

asked, but Billy said, 'Not tomorrow, I'm off on a field trip with Professor Catherine Mulberry to the Amazon for a month, say we meet in late September and go fishing?' Ray's first thought was, 'The Professor Catherine Mulberry who committed suicide!' He skipped a beat, then looked at the three figures in the back of his XJS and smiled. He looked at Billy, 'See you in September then.' he said. Billy raised a hand, and turning walked away back to his hotel. The five figures watching from the shadows across the road also left, for their hotels and homes.

Chapter 57: Four Weeks earlier!

It was a hot and a bright summers day, the first day of July, not good for a funeral, though that would be tomorrow. Which accounted for why Billy was driving a nine year old Ford Fiesta, and was not on the train from Milton Keynes to Birmingham. The comedian Ken Dodd called Spaghetti junction “the eighth wonder of the world”, ‘Because you get on and wonder how to get off’. The slip road for the city centre seems at first to be taking its time, then suddenly one is prompted by a sign announcing the end of the hard shoulder for vehicle recovery and then that this is now the exit slip road, not only for the city centre, A38(M) but also for the A38 north, that is for locals, Sutton Coldfield, Lichfield and Staffordshire. Billy did not take the exit, he now kept on the M6, looking across to the city centre on his left. Soon another interchange of the M5 which would take you back southwest towards Bristol, and eventually Exeter 170 miles away where the motorway finished. The A30 continuing through Cornwall, now mostly dual carriageway skirting Dartmoor but running across Bodmin moor, another 120 plus miles to Lands End, and the end of Great Britain.

The traffic was now even heavier with more articulated lorries, this junction was neither as complex or as compact as the A38(M) M6 junction, the delays here caused typically by M5 traffic heading north on the M6, which was the same direction that Billy now took. First on his left were the rail yards of Bescot, still familiar territory from his days in the force. The new industrial estates and shops, or “Retail Parks” as they are called, not fully replacing the old factories, but still this was an industrial landscape. Called the “Black Country”, because in its heyday its industry was heavy, of iron and steel works, not the light industry of Birmingham, from pen nibs, whistles, small arms

motor bikes and cars, and during the war aircraft manufacture. The Black country was black from the black sky which had long gone and was today bright blue. Black from the early Industrial revolution up to the 1970s. The sky was black from the blast furnaces burning day and night. The towns of the black country each having its specialization, Walsall leather, Stourbridge glass, Tipton chains, and... Billy's remembered geography faltered, and the best beer he had ever tasted. Heading north with Walsall on his right and Wolverhampton on his left, towns with ring roads he thought, towns to go around. Of old Victorian splendour and now decay. Though he admitted not having been there since the force, save one trip to the New Art gallery in Walsall, to see some African art. He was heading for Cannock Chase, an area of woodland some 25 miles north of Birmingham and out of his "patch". His patch being Birmingham when he joined the Birmingham police force, which became the West Midlands Police from 1974. Out of his patch because the Chase was in Staffordshire, but certain investigations necessitated visiting the Chase. Leaving the M6 he picked up the A460 which would take him 4 or so miles through Cannock into the forest, a deep forest with deer, and strangely incongruous in the industrial wastes beyond and around. Cannock was established like so many towns in the Midlands when the industrial revolution turned a small rural community into a town, here it was coal, now long gone. As every Brumigum knew, this was not true of Birmingham, it having no coal, iron ore or limestone, the ingredients for iron, found in the Black Country. Why from a small hamlet Birmingham grew into the largest metropolis in the Midlands and a major driving force of the industrial revolution is a mystery, it simply had no reason to be. No doubt there was, but not for a Brummie. It was only in Birmingham could you find Needless Alley. And you needed to point out the significance or insignificance of the name, or the alley.

At Moor's Gorse Billy left the A460 and parked his Fiesta next to an old Wolseley in very good condition. It was a beautiful day, a deep blue sky, and the forest was of pine trees dotted with mountain ash. The air was fresh as the Chase rose above the surrounding fields and remains of old industry. A slight breeze moved the branches, and when still there was the low hum of insects, the occasional call of a magpie. Billy walked down the track which led to Rainbow Valley, disturbed a young adder as he passed, the bracken high on either side and now bright green, giving off its pungent aroma. Looking at him down the track, he shielded his eyes from the bright sunlight, he saw a figure, it was walking towards him, close by he recognised Catherine Mulberry, a professor at The University of Birmingham.

She had recently returned from a sabbatical in Holland. There she had been studying the use of ayahuasca, a plant used to brew a "tea" whose active ingredient is DMT, N-dimethyltryptamine a hallucinogenic tryptamine drug that naturally occurs in many plant species. Use of this tea is linked to the ayahuasca churches, and Santo Daime. A syncretic religion founded in the 1930s by Raimundo Irineu Serra in the Brazilian Amazonian state of Acre, whose sigil is a six-pointed star with eagle and crescent. She was writing a paper on this, but not until after a planned visit to the Amazon in August.

'I thought I might find you here.' said Billy, still shielding his eyes with a hand.

'Me too.' she replied smiling. 'Your talk on religion of the Muonyjang people you gave last year was very interesting, particularly in its lack of academic rigour in favour of the experience of the practices.'

'Beware of the academy,' said Billy, 'Greeks bearing gifts.'

‘Your old professor allowed you to explore the dimensions from the inside out, a radical perspective on how religions work in practice!’ she continued.

‘From our subsequent conversations, you know...’

‘How so?’ asked Billy.

‘Well, you know very well,’ she said, smiling more, ‘so I ditched my academic interest, became involved. Visited temples, mosques and gurdwaras, the Cathedral at Lichfield you so love, and now my cathedral, the Basilica of St Chad. And my trip to the Netherlands, I told you about that, I joined the Santo Daime church in all sincerity, and gained insights, though maybe not for publication, it would not be right and anyway who would believe them.’

‘I would.’ said Billy.

‘And so here we are, and going to embark on this rebalancing act, I even now know it will work.’ she said.

‘You will make it work.’ said Billy.

‘With some help from you.’ she said.

Epilogue.

Billy drove back towards Birmingham, the A38 junction appeared, there was no slip road going south, but the inside lane split from the main carriageway, and then divided, the right fork, which he took, the highest part of the junction, with views over the city, if one was foolish enough as a driver to gaze at. He was back to his original planned route, only now he had acquired some information from *the events of the next three days*. He didn't understand the physics of this, but had the experience and a means, a faith, or faiths, to accept the "impossible". So, he didn't leave the A38 after the first tunnel, but continued down a second tunnel, from which he could then make the lane change down to the "pagoda" island at the top of Smallbrook Queensway. The now familiar Betham tower to the left, round the island and back towards the A38 but cutting left then past the road closed signs, left again down Holliday Street, and not to the Hyatt, but turning right into its underground car park. Fetching his things out of the car and boarding the shuttle bus to reception.

The funeral went as before, the evening likewise. On his last full day, he took the tram to Snow Hill and walked slowly back past Lloyd House, seeing no one he knew or had known. Things were very quiet in the headquarters of the West Midlands Police Force. He walked down to the new Bullring, maybe the third incarnation that he could recall. The afternoon was sunny, so he sat at a table on the terrace of the Mailbox overlooking the canal, with a glass of red wine. Watching the people enjoying the sun, a family group appeared from the Mailbox, a Man and Woman with a young girl, the mother Asian, the father obviously he, or his parents, or grandparents? from East Africa, the blue-black sheen of his skin, he shared with his daughter. Beautiful in this sunlight. The woman glancing back at Billy, and was

mouthed silently, 'Bless you and thank you.' and then they were gone, down the steps.

He sipped more wine, the sunlight warm and somehow comforting. A large bulk of a man appeared, and pulled out a chair, putting down on the table a bottle of very good red wine and an empty glass. Ray topped up Billy's glass, filled his own and smiled. 'Nice day...Boss.' he said, you doing anything tonight?

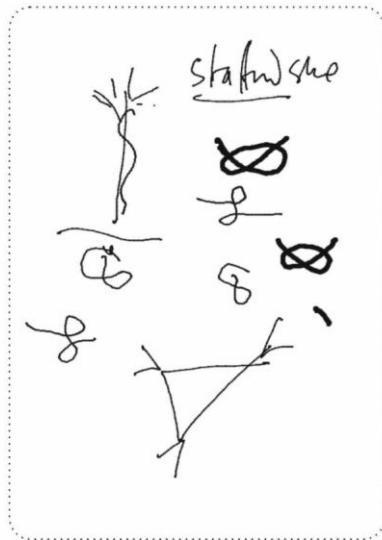
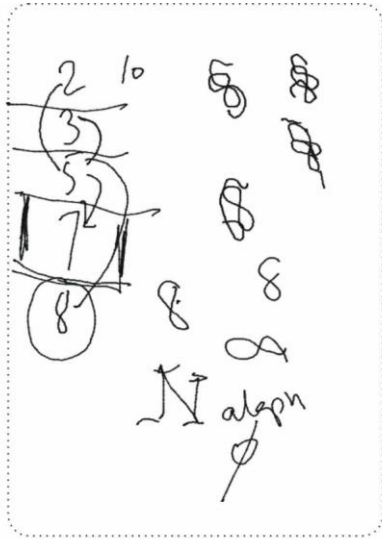
'Sorry, I'm having dinner with Professor Catherine Mulberry of The University of Birmingham. We are going on a field trip to the Amazon in August to meet with some people I know there.' Billy replied, 'but I can stay an extra night and be free tomorrow, I here there's a very good real ale pub, The Wellington, we could meet at eight?'

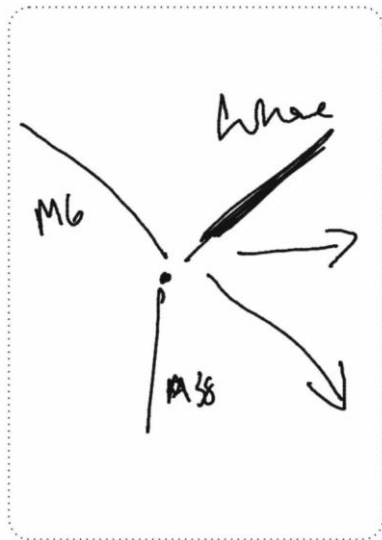
'Nice one – boss.' said Ray.

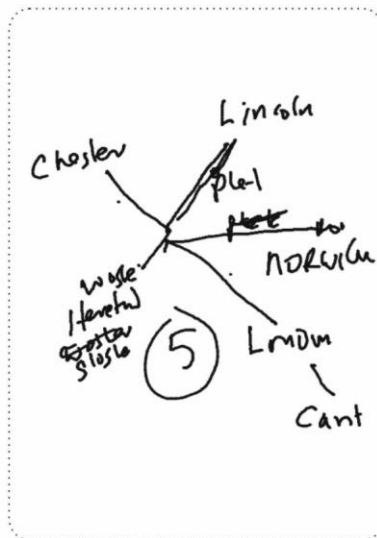
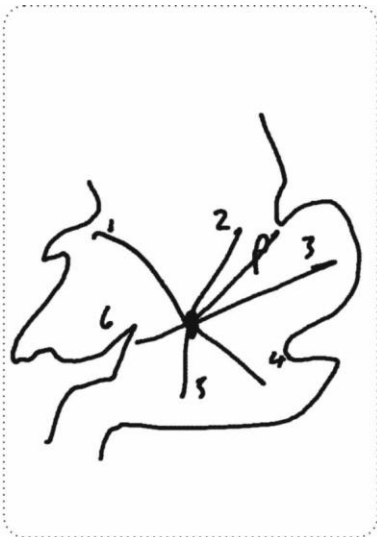
'And the ring?' asked Billy, looking at Ray's hand, there was a silver ring inset with a ceramic of what looked like a boar's head.

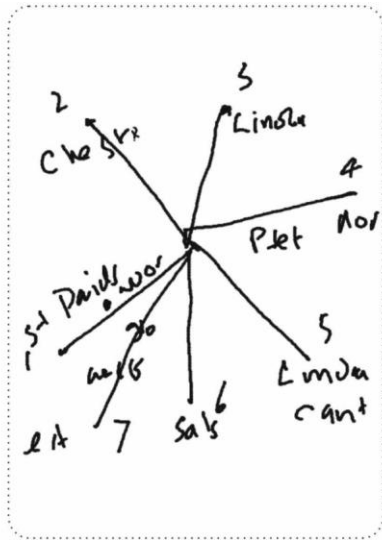
'Oh, it's an image of Xige, and don't forget the fishing trip in September.' Ray said, smiling even more.











~~arm~~

slags antlers



CERNUNO





H R: V X X
K 1 Y D



german



Serpent of the
Midgard



Siberia the
There world

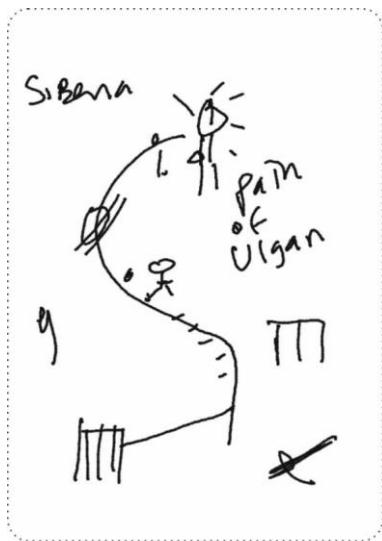


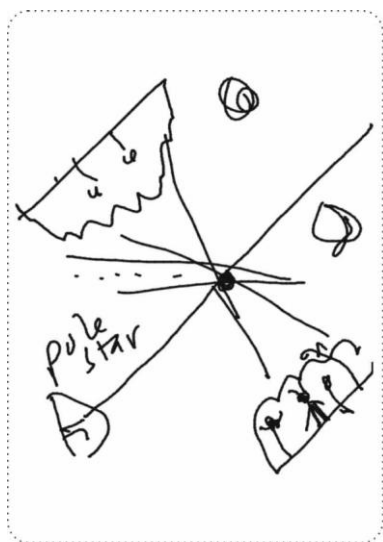
Birch
tree
golden
silk

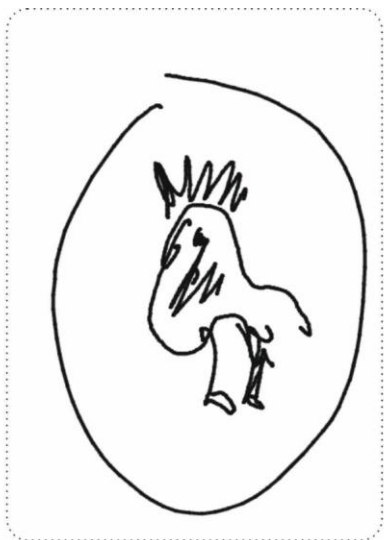
devising
creator
brother

ERLIK
god
wife





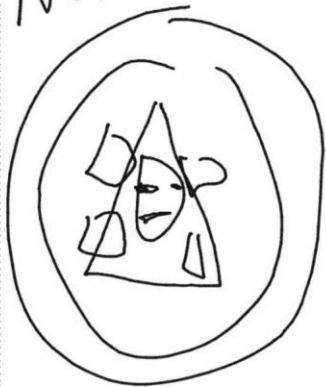




Aztec



Mexico

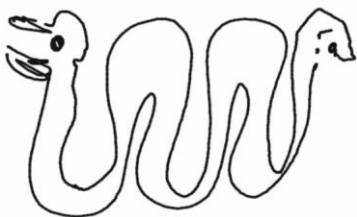




Axe
Xdot!
ass head

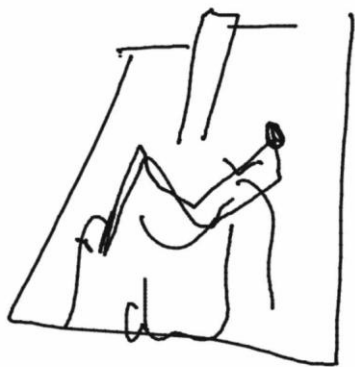


Xiuhcoatl



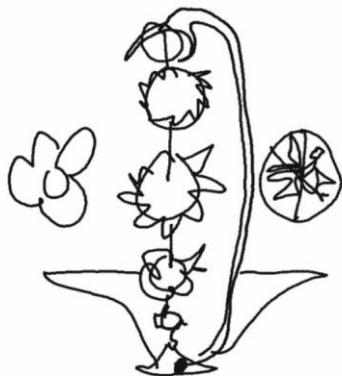
2 headed
serpent

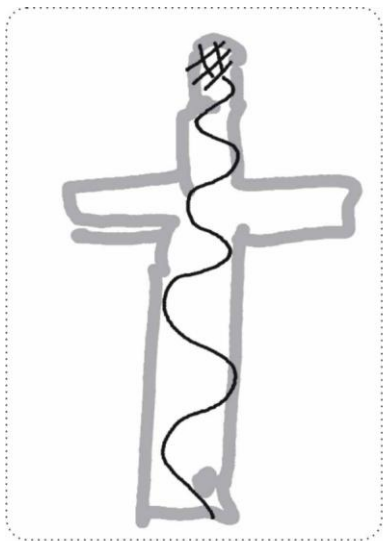
Mayas



NAZCA

Kundalini.





may or like

