

In Search of Destiny



Etienne de L'Amour

In Search of Destiny
By Etienne de L'Amour

Book 2 in the Shadowlands series.

This is a standalone book, and can be read first.

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Front cover painting: Detail from *The Fates Spinning Marie's Destiny* by Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640).

Dedication

*Dedicated with heartfelt thanks to my family,
and to Idries and Tahir Shah for their inspiration.*

~~~O~~~

*Here we are, all of us: in a dream-caravan,  
A caravan, but a dream – a dream, but a caravan.  
And we know which are the dreams.  
Therein lies the hope.*

~ Bahaudin, El Shah  
in *Caravan of Dreams* by Idries Shah.



# 1. Out of the blue

Life was not easy for young Conrad Harper in Hodweir, or the Outlands as most foreigners called the country. On the one hand, his mother was a simple woman and all she wanted was for him to grow up a decent man; to find a regular job and work hard and reliably to put food on the table; to marry an equally decent and caring woman, and to be a good and strong father to his own children. And on the other hand, his father wanted him to break free of the daily grind and poverty and make a better life for himself in the wider world, and he pushed Conrad to succeed. Father had served in the army during the last war and he assured Conrad that there was life not only beyond the narrow cobbled streets and dark mills of Margate but also a whole bright new world beyond the borders of Hodweir.

As a consequence of this, Conrad found himself in a kind of no man's land or wilderness between the two; dissatisfied by the mundane life he led and yet not being in a position to break free and to make that better life for himself. He was torn inside between these two world views; and he would periodically oscillate between earthy domesticity and star-spangled adventure. He'd grow tired of the daily grind and try something new, in an effort to break free, and when that failed – as it almost inevitably did – or he began to feel pangs of guilt, then he'd make an effort to lead a normal life again, beaver away with his head down, until the next time he again felt ground down by life. On and on this went, day after day and week after week; and Conrad was unable to see any light at the end of the long, dark tunnel – if, indeed, there actually was any light or an end to the tunnel.

Yet, having said that, perhaps it was this abrasive element

in his life that actually helped to gradually build and shape his character? And maybe all the bumping up against one or the other bank of the river – painful as that might be, at times – helped teach him how to steer a moderate, middle course, so that he became neither institutionalized nor hedonistic?

There was one major consolation, certainly. For as long as he could remember, and longer than dear old Mother and Father would care to remember, Conrad's life had been soaked in stories and song. Poor and ill-educated as they were, there was always this rich vein flowing through their lives which defied the fickleness of Fate that otherwise dogged their threadbare lives.

It was part of an oral tradition that stretched back through countless generations, like a threaded necklace of pearls passed on from mother to daughter and father to son. This storytelling and music weren't merely for the sake of entertainment, though admittedly they did bring a warm glow to their lives, nor even art for the sake of art. Above that, the tradition helped preserve and pass down a system of subtle knowledge largely lacking in the lives of the impoverished Outlanders; a knowledge which provided both direction, like a compass, and also an attunement to higher things, of which the masses were pretty much oblivious. *The Secret protects itself*, his father had once remarked, though this lofty notion had flown straight over the top of Conrad's head at the time, perfectly illustrating that very maxim – at least to those few who were “in the know”.

Speaking of this knowledge one evening as they enjoyed some time together after work, his father had told him: “You might liken it to the yeast which we mix into the dough to make bread; under-rated and taken for granted as it is, the knowledge is an essential leaven in the community.

“People will indirectly take in nutrition and lessons in the form of stories, poetry and song, even works of art and architecture, that they wouldn't accept were you to tell them

straight out or force it down their gullets.”

To illustrate his point, Father had gone on to tell *The Legend of the Design*. Conrad had heard it before, of course, but there was a special joy in hearing these stories again and again, learning more and more from their hidden layers of deep meaning over the years. Father said that you could liken the process to planting seeds, tending them, and their eventual germination and growth out of the darkness of the earth into the sunshine and air:

*Once upon a time, not so very long ago nor in a land much different from our own, a man was convicted of a crime that he did not commit and he was sentenced to life imprisonment.*

*For months, the man languished on his own in a cold, dark dungeon, and he had to make a great effort to keep his spirits up and to retain his sanity, when faced with such stark and unyielding deprivation.*

*After a time, however, through his exemplary behaviour, he came to be regarded by his gaolers as a model prisoner, and they allowed him to make his cell a little more comfortable. His wife sent him an exquisitely woven rug and each day he would pray for his wife and family and also for those who had gaoled him, that they might see the error of their ways.*

*The man was itching to find work to alleviate his boredom, and he made an appeal to them. “I realize how poorly paid you are and I have a suggestion which might be to our mutual advantage. I am a master tinsmith and if you can allow me a few tools and some pieces of tin to work with, then I will be able to fashion some small decorative items which you will be able to sell, and we will share the proceeds.”*

*Thinking that no harm could come of this and that they stood to gain, the gaolers readily agreed and they took the items to the local market where they sold for a high price.*

*And then one day, when one of the gaolers went to the cell to take the man his breakfast, he was greatly shocked to find*

*the cell empty. The gaolers thought about this, but they could find no rational explanation, and so they decided that the man must have been a magician.*

*Years later, when the original error had been discovered and the man had been pardoned, he came out of hiding. The king sent for him and he dutifully presented himself at the royal court.*

*"I'm intrigued by your story, and you have nothing to fear from revealing it now," the king said. "Tell me: how on earth did you manage to escape from prison?"*

*The man smiled. "It was a concurrence of factors, Your Majesty. My wife cultivated the friendship of the smith who had designed the locks in the prison and he was flattered that she should take an interest in his work. She wove a fine rug for me and, since I had been a model prisoner, she was allowed to give the rug to me. My wife relied on me registering that the design at the point where my head touches the rug in prayer was a diagram of the internal wards of the locks. I am a master tinsmith by trade and, seeing how poorly the gaolers were paid, I played on their greed and their need and adopted a subterfuge, so that my real intention would not be suspected, in order to acquire tools with which I might fashion keys to fit those locks. And that is the story of my escape."*<sup>1</sup>

~~~O~~~

One day, quite out of the blue, Conrad's kid brother Harry had come dashing down the steep cobbled street, chasing after the heavily laden horse-drawn coal wagon.

"Whoa there, Neddy!" called Jed, his coal merchant boss, as he spied the lad, pulling hard on the reins to bring the wagon to a standstill.

Harry pulled up beside the rumbling cart and stood there, bent over and clutching his heaving sides for a few moments

¹ Adapted from a version by Idries Shah in *The Magic Monastery*, Octagon Press.

struggling to catch his breath. "You have to come quick!" he spat out finally.

"Whatever is the matter, Harry?" he asked, his own heart lurching at the urgency and insistence in Harry's voice.

"Mother says you have to come home, at once."

He looked toward Jed.

"Best run along, lad," Jed nodded gravely. He had his moments over quite trivial matters, but he wasn't such a bad old stick to work for. He could always be counted on when it really mattered.

Conrad didn't know what to do. "But we've only just started the round, boss."

"I'll manage, lad. Sounds like your mother's needs are greater than mine. Best run along."

"Thanks, boss." He clambered down from the wagon and set out after Harry, who was already away back up the street as fast as his little legs would carry him. "I'll be in early to help you bag the coal, to make up."

"Just come whenever you can," the man called back, flicking the reins to set the cart in motion. "Now bugger off. And pass on my best wishes to your folk."

As soon as they arrived home, stopping only briefly as Conrad slipped out of his overalls and washed his coal-blackened hands in the stone kitchen sink, Harry clattered up the bare wooden stairs toward the bedrooms, with Conrad in hot pursuit. Pausing for just a moment to knock and without waiting for an affirmative reply, they dashed into their parents' room.

Mother was there, sitting on the edge of the bed, worry starkly etched across her pallid face, and there were two other figures hovering over Father as he lay there unmoving: Aunt Mildred and Doctor Hughes. If he was there, things had to be bad, because you only called a doctor in the most dire emergencies. It was far cheaper to seek out the old healer,

Millicent Drew, who lived up the hill on the way out of town towards Hurley.

“Mind your manners, Conrad,” prompted Aunt Mildred, pointing a finger toward her head. He hastily removed his flat cap and nervously clutched it in his hands before him.

Just then, there came a loud tap on the bedroom window, and his eyes darted across the room to see a black bird that had collided with the window caught momentarily against the pane of glass before flapping away. “Oh, my giddy aunts,” gasped Mother at this dark omen.

The doctor moved around to Mother’s side of the bed and gently squeezed her hand. “I’m sorry, Mrs Harper, but your husband will be lucky if he lasts out the day.” And with that, he picked up his case and headed for the door, pausing for a moment to pat Conrad and Harry on the shoulder as he passed.

“How much do we owe you, Doctor?” asked Mother, in a daze, fishing in her pocket for her purse.

“Oh, don’t worry yourself now, my dear,” the doctor replied gently. “I’ll leave it a few days, then send you the bill, and I’d be quite happy for you to pay it in manageable instalments,” he called as he left. “Take comfort from the fact that your husband will go to meet his Maker at peace with himself.”

Well, we all have to earn our living in one way or another.

Conrad’s heart was thundering in his chest and he rudely pushed past Aunt Mildred to sit on the edge of the bed beside Father. The flicker of a smile crossed Father’s face as he saw Conrad and he managed to raise his arm a fraction before it flopped back onto the bed. Conrad took the old man’s hand in his.

“Father was most insistent he saw you straight away,” Mother informed him.

Father was trying to speak, but his words were barely a whisper and Conrad bent down to place his ear close to

Father's face. He seemed to have suddenly aged and looked so frail and grey.

"The tradition ..." the old man said, his breathing forced.

"Yes, Father?"

"The stories, the song ..."

"Yes."

"My time has come, Conrad."

With a lump rising in his throat, Conrad nodded sadly and peered deep into Father's eyes.

"Now ... now it's up to you."

"What's up to me?"

"The tradition ... you have to pass it on."

He clutched his father's hand tightly. Of course, Conrad was all too aware that as yet he knew so little of the tradition and that it was madness to talk in such terms, but that was not what his father needed to hear right now, in what might be his dying breath. "Don't worry, Father. I promise. I'll pass it on."

For a moment, Father's eyes lit up and the flicker of a smile crossed his careworn face. And then, his breathing slowing and finally stopping, and his eyes closing, he was gone. Conrad felt a wave of shock hit him right then and he pulled away his hand and staggered to his feet, clutching hold of the wooden bed end to steady himself.

When Mother realized what had happened, she began to wail and clutched at Father, frantically caressing him.

Aunt Mildred tugged at Conrad's sleeve and ushered him and Harry out of the room. "Let's make a pot of tea and leave your poor old mother to say her goodbyes for a while. And then we'll have to make arrangements. I don't think your mother will be up to it, poor dear. It's all come as such a sudden and terrible shock."

Harry had started sobbing by now, and Aunt Mildred lent him a frilly handkerchief. "Pull yourselves together. You need to be strong for your mother now, in her hour of need."



Now that Father was gone, it was all the more important for Conrad to bring home his weekly wage to keep the family's heads about water, for in those dark days they lived, by and large, from hand to mouth. He'd suddenly been thrust into the role of male head of the family, even though – as ever – it was his mother who wielded the real power behind the throne in the household. Young as he was and in view of their struggles, even his kid brother, Harry, was soon sent out to work as an apprentice to a local hat maker, and Mother was taking in laundry, mending and ironing to help make ends meet. And as for the singing and the storytelling, hitherto the very heart blood of the family, alas that jollity seemed to have ended quite abruptly when Father died. Another year on and, despite the fact that they had never once buckled under the strain, it was as if the house was still in mourning at his passing, and that is the last thing that Father would have wished upon them.

More and more, though, Conrad was coming to see that there would be no end to the daily drudgery, at least not this side of the grave. And that bothered him considerably. From a very early age, he'd been coaxed by Father to set his sights high and expect more of life.

“Aim for the stars and you won't fall far short of heaven,” Father had told him one evening as they'd sat chatting by the glowing fireside. “You have to make more of yourself in life than your dear old Dad.”

Though many of the stories that Father had recounted warned of pitfalls and snares one might encounter in life, still more told of wondrous possibilities of breaking free of irksome fate and finding one's true destiny. Yet now, Conrad couldn't quite equate such possibilities with the dreary, careworn reality of life. Even the word ‘life’ was perhaps inappropriate for what could at best be called subsistence.

“Well, there's no point in bemoaning our fate,” Mother

would say from time to time. “Never mind, we’ll survive.” When he heard those words, Conrad would mentally shake his head, for it shouldn’t be a matter of soldiering on and surviving. Far from it. But he was blessed if he could figure out what he could do to make things better for the family. There was an upside, of course: though the family had been too poor to afford an education for him and Harry, his father had taught them how to read and write and do simple arithmetic, so every now and again he could earn a few extra iron shekels reading official correspondence and writing letters for those less fortunate than him. And now he had the ability to read, he could try to further educate himself. That had been something very important to Father: to have a diverse range of interests and knowledge in life. “Don’t put all your eggs in the one basket,” he’d advise from time to time. “Look what happened at Grimesley when they shut down the colliery. With the whole town dependent on that one commodity, coal, when the colliery went, thousands of folk were laid off and now the place is a ghost town. So remember, Conrad, diversity is one of the keys to continuing prosperity.”

2. The dream

One day in the late afternoon, the sky hung over with dark and foreboding clouds, and the white and grey gulls wheeling about and screeching above the houses, he was trudging home from the coal yard when he was accosted by an old woman in the long billowing floral skirt and headscarf of the Travelling People. “Buy a lucky charm?” she asked between rotting teeth, fluttering her eyelashes and thrusting a wicker basket in his face.

“No, thank you,” he retorted with a modicum of politeness. Money was in too short supply to go wasting it on cheap trinkets and superstition.

The woman followed him, not willing to let him off the hook that easily. And, to make matters worse, he was left feeling sorry for her plight, which she laid on thick for him, and he also remembered the old warning Grandmother had once given him about the dangers of having a curse put on you, should you turn a Traveller down.

He stopped in his tracks and had a look through the wares that the woman had on offer. Well, he didn’t see the point in buying a lucky duck, but Mother could probably do with some new wooden clothes pegs.

“Thanks, I’ll take these,” he told the woman, picking up a clutch of pegs.

“I can’t tempt you with a lucky charm?” the woman appealed to him.

“I’m sorry, no: I only have a little money. And if, as they say, coal is lucky, then I have more than enough of that, thank you very much. But how much are the pegs?”

“Five shekels, my love.”

He rubbed his coal-blackened hands down his dark blue

overall, fished in his pockets and counted out five iron shekels.

“A silver shekel would be better. Cross my palm with silver and I’ll tell your fortune, too.”

He shook his head. “I’m sure it would, but my mother would skin me alive,” he fibbed. Actually, that wasn’t that far removed from the truth, so it was only a little white lie.

Seeing that she wouldn’t get any more out of him, the woman took the iron shekels.

“Thank you, my love.” She turned to walk away and then she turned back, as if she’d suddenly had another idea.

He shook his head. “I’m sorry, but as I told you, that’s all I can afford.”

“Then what you need is a lucky charm, my love ...” she began.

He sighed.

“... Or a piece of advice. Since you’re such a nice young man, and clearly in need, I’ll give you this piece of advice for free.”

“Which is?”

The woman raised her eyebrows. Conrad caught a sudden sparkle in her big brown eyes and a smile crossed her careworn face.

“Which is: don’t allow fate to grind you down, my love. Be bold. It’s my sacred duty to tell you this thing.”

“How?” he asked her, growing a little more interested.

“Pack your bags, up sticks, and travel in search of your destiny.”

“Would that I could,” he sighed. “But I have a family to look after ...”

“Take it or leave it, my love,” she replied. “You won’t find better advice at any price.”

“Thanks,” he relented. “I’ll give your words some thought.”

“You’re welcome, my love. Remember: your destiny lies elsewhere. And if you find your destiny, then and only then

will you be able to truly look after your family's needs and find peace for yourself," she smiled between her rotting teeth as she turned to move on. "Think on, and remember these words."

"Thank you again – I will," he called after her.

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Though he quickly discounted the Traveller's words, the encounter that day must have had an effect on Conrad, because he had a dream that same night in which he'd left home and gone in search of his fortune.

He awoke with a fright and in a sweat as his kid brother came running down the cobbled road after him, gasping out an urgent message that he return home straight away. As soon as those words were out of Harry's mouth, he remembered that fateful day on which Father had suddenly died.

No, he could never leave his beloved family, at least not until Harry was fully grown. How on earth would they manage without his wage coming in, not to mention how much he would miss them? And yet there was another part of him that seemed to think that going in search of his destiny, though not the *obvious* thing to do, was nevertheless the *right* thing to do. He soon squashed that ludicrous idea, lay down in bed, turned over and went back to sleep.

Conrad was walking along a strangely familiar road, lined with grey-barked beech trees, for some time before he realized by the unmistakable tang of salt and seaweed in the cool breeze that he was at Wanstead-on-Sea. He remembered the family visiting the seaside on two or three occasions in happier times when Uncle Charlie and Aunt Maud had still been alive, years before the family escaped the mill town slums and moved to Margate. The tarmacked road ended quite abruptly a little way ahead, down a little slope, and the sands began. And as he walked down the fine golden sands toward the seashore, he could see a shadowy figure ahead of him, looking out over the bay.



As he approached, the figure turned and his heart leapt as he recognized his father. He quickened his pace and went to greet the man.

“What are you doing here, Father?!” he blurted. “It’s so good to see you.”

“Oh, Conrad, Conrad – it’s so good to see you, son,” his father beamed as they embraced.

“But Father, you’re dead,” he found himself pointing out.

“When they tell you there is no life after death, don’t believe them for a minute, Conrad,” his father replied. The man looked almost youthful again and he seemed so very much at peace with himself. “Truly, at that point, life has only really just begun.”

“Why are you here? I mean, why are you here, now?”

His father put his great spade of a hand gently on Conrad’s shoulder and waved the other arm around in an expansive arc. “Look around you, Conrad, at the vastness of the earth and the ocean. There is so much more to the world than the tiny little town of Margate. And far more to life than lugging coal sacks around for a living. You’ll never get any money saved up. How will you cope when you’re my age and no longer fit for manual work?”

“Tell me about it,” he sighed, meaning “I know, you don’t have to tell me.”

Then: “Earlier today, I bought some wooden pegs off one of the Travelling People and she gave me a piece of advice ...”

“What did she have to say?” Father asked him, pricking his ears up, as they strolled along the damp sand at the water’s edge.

“She advised me ‘Your destiny lies elsewhere. And if you find your destiny, then and only then will you be able to truly look after your family’s needs and find peace for yourself.’”

His father put his arm on Conrad’s shoulder as they walked back up the soft sand of the beach. “Yes, that advice is worth

considering,” he nodded.

“But Father, it’s plain daft,” he countered, holding his hands out, palm uppermost and shrugging his shoulders. “How can I? I can’t just up sticks and leave Mother and Harry behind. That would be utterly selfish.”

“You can, Conrad. Of course, whilst you’re away, life would be harder on them. But the woman was right: as it is, there is only so much you can do to help. And, having found your destiny, your heart’s true desire, or whatever you want to call it, trust me: there would be so much more you could do to help them.”

“But what *is* my destiny?”

“You will know that, without the shadow of a doubt, when you find it and start living it, son.”

“Then you think I should go?” he asked Father.

“It’s not a matter of what I think, Conrad. It’s a matter of what you feel in your heart.”

“But where should I go?”

“Again, you have to find the answer to that yourself, Conrad.”

And with that, Conrad was again rudely awoken by the sound of Mother kindly knocking on the bedroom door to ask if they were awake and to tell them it was time to get up for work.

### 3. Decision time

Conrad suddenly and rudely had his mind made up for him when he turned in for work the next day to find a note pinned to the rickety wooden gates of the coal yard. The gates were still shut and the rusty old iron padlock was still firmly in place.

The note read simply, succinctly and illiterately:

*"Clozed dew to deth in fammily."*

When he went round to the adjacent house, he was met by the once formidable figure of Jed Atkin's wife, now seemingly shrunken and wizened in an untimely fashion. The woman was clearly carrying a great burden on her shoulders, which sagged under the unseen weight. She told him that her husband had died of a massive heart attack in the night. And, not to put too fine a point on it, after the woman settled up with him, Conrad was now out of a job.

It did cross his mind that he might offer to carry on the coal delivery business for the woman, but something told Conrad to bite his tongue, and instead he simply offered his sincere condolences and walked away. He didn't know it at the time, but in that moment fate had intervened and this was to prove a major crossroads or juncture in his life.

When he got back home, he broke the news and Mother went into one of her "Oh, woe is me," routines. "Saints preserve us, whatever will we do now?"

"Don't worry, Mother," he reassured her, giving her a warm hug.

"Don't worry, you say? Don't worry? Bad things come in threes. First your father dies; then Mister Atkin. Saints preserve us, whatever next?"

"Now, I'm going to be away from home for a while," he told her, trying to sound as upbeat as he could. An idea hit him

suddenly and forcefully, and he was making it up as he went along. "I don't know for how long. I'll find alternative work. And when I do, I'll send money back to you. So don't fret."

Before Mother had time to remonstrate or coax him into a more sensible course of action, Conrad went upstairs to ferret his meagre savings from a tin at the bottom of his wardrobe and fill a backpack with clothes, reminding himself to pick up some food on his way past the baker's shop. After a few moments of hugs and reassurances, he left the house and walked hurriedly up the cobbled road toward town.

Once committed, there had to be no turning back, he realized, no matter how bugged he was by second thoughts and cold feet. "Destiny favours the original and the bold," as Father had once told him.

Remembering to stop off at the baker's, he bought a few things for the journey. The pretty, curly-haired girl behind the counter, who had always had a soft spot for him and Harry, threw in two or three misshapen biscuits for free.

He'd just left the baker's and was crossing the roughly-cobbled road when he caught sight of the Traveller coming towards him, still plying her trade, as ever. As she approached, he put his hands up before him, palms facing her and shook his head. "Not today, thank you."

"I see you've taken my advice, my love," she greeted him, a broad, toothless smile creasing her wind-reddened face. Clearly she remembered him.

"Fate intervened," he told the woman matter-of-factly as he continued to walk past her, without being consciously aware of the significance of these words.

"Truth works in mysterious ways," she called after him with equal mystery.

He stopped for a moment and turned back to face her.

"So, my love. Do you know where you're going?"

He shook his head. "Only that I'm going in search of my

destiny, wherever that may lead.”

She put her wrinkled fingertips to her temple for a moment and appeared to be staring out into space.

“Head south,” she advised at length.

“How far south?”

“As far as the Freelands,” the woman replied. “I don’t see you settling there as yet, but I’m told that it would be as good a place to begin as any.”

“Told? By whom?”

“By the inner voice of wisdom, my love,” she cackled, patting her chest. “The inner voice of wisdom.”

Then: “And another thing: I see a journey over moorland. Acres and acres of barren moorland.”

He again thanked the woman for her advice and continued to walk up town. If he was destined for the Freelands, then he’d best head for the coach station.

## 4. A working passage

“Are there any stage coaches to the Freelands today?” he enquired at the tiny ticket booth set into a wall by the waiting room, when a face eventually appeared at the grimy, seagull shit streaked window.

“Well, you’ve missed the express,” said the man in the official looking hat on the other side of the reinforced glass. The little man pushed his hat back and scratched his shiny bald head. “There’s the slow coach in about half an hour.”

“The slow coach?”

“The express goes there in pretty much a straight line; the slow coach zigzags this way and that, stopping at all manner of little towns and villages on the way.”

When Conrad enquired about the price of a one way ticket, however, getting his purse out to count out change, he realized to his dismay that he couldn’t afford the expense. And there was no way he could walk all that way: the Freelands were hundreds of miles to the south. If it took him two weeks, even allowing for fresh shoe leather and sleeping rough, he’d probably have run out of money for food on the way.

A polite cough came from behind him.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” he said. “I’ve been holding up the queue.”

“No, no, not at all,” smiled a middle-aged man in a thick blue woollen jersey and a matching beer belly. Conrad was ever so tempted to ask him when the baby was due. “I couldn’t help overhearing. If you can’t afford to go by coach, a strapping lad like you could always work your passage.”

“Work my passage? How do you mean?”

“Go down to the harbour and see if there’s a tramp steamer heading south. They may have jobs going in return for a bunk and grub.”

“Thanks,” Conrad beamed. “Yes, that’s a good idea. I hadn’t thought of that. I’ll go and ask.”

“You’re welcome, young ‘un,” nodded the man as he went up to the window to be served.

Six hours later, on the high tide, the *Iron Duke* set sail, heavily laden with coal destined for the port of Pendlebury, to the east of Sher Point in the Freelands. Well, “Duke” was perhaps a little lofty a name for the old rust bucket, but as Mother would say, “beggars can’t be choosers.”

As luck would have it, their cook had a dose of galloping gut rot, and had spent the last few days perched on the railings at the stern of the boat, hanging over the edge, he was told, so there was a temporary vacancy. Though unskilled, Conrad would have been happy to take on that role, but the Skipper decided instead that old Bill, one of the stokers, might welcome a break, a change being as good as a rest, as the saying has it, and so Conrad took over stoking the old steam boiler. Having spent so long lugging heavy sacks of coal around, it was a job that Conrad could easily handle after a little coaching; though he was less prepared for the exhaustion brought about by the sheer heat in the tiny boiler room. Even stripped down to his vest, the sweat literally poured off him. He was rather seasick during the first shift, but fortunately found his sea legs and regained his appetite before the day was out.

It took around seven days to reach port and the working hours seemed interminable, alternating shifts with Greg, a great hulk of a man who stank to high heaven of body odour, if that wasn’t a case of the kettle calling the pot black. But the grub and grog were welcome and he spent most of his idle hours asleep in his narrow and somewhat lumpy bunk. Space was at a premium below decks and they were all rather cramped and confined, so it was good to get out on deck every now and again and stretch the legs, albeit somewhat chilly out there. The bracing sea air certainly blew away the cobwebs and brought

one back to life.

“I’m told you’ve done a good job,” the skipper remarked, taking his long briar pipe from his mouth for a moment, as Conrad was getting ready to disembark. “Are you sure you wouldn’t like to stay on for a while?”

For a brief moment, Conrad did wonder whether he should work another couple of passages and he almost said yes; but something prompted him to decline the offer.

“I’m grateful for the passage, Captain. But, alas, I have to be moving on. Thanks again.”

Thinking about it some more he realized that one trip, he could handle, knowing that this was the price of the ticket south to the Freeland; but he certainly wouldn’t want to have made a career of it. The worst part was probably that the shovelling and raking out weren’t intrinsically rewarding or satisfying and that, for all the effort that he was putting in, he couldn’t actually *see* the benefit of that work.

The skipper fished in his pocket, turned Conrad’s hand over and pressed a handful of coins in his palm without counting them. “Well, it’s been good having you aboard. Here’s a little something to help you on your way.”

Conrad looked at the coins. “I don’t warrant paying as well. You gave me grub, grog, a bunk to sleep in and good company ...”

“I’m glad to hear that. But take it,” the skipper smiled, the pipe joggling up and down in his mouth as he spoke. “You did us a big favour.”

The man took the pipe from his mouth and raised it slightly, as you might offer a salute with your hand or raise your glass in a toast. “And have a safe journey, Conrad.”

Thanks returned, Conrad headed away from the port and took a long and arduous hike up the main metalled street to the town, which stood on the steep and sharp, granite-grey cliff top. Though he was now on firm land, as he walked he still felt as if



the ground was swaying this way and that beneath him, which was a most peculiar sensation, but gradually this feeling abated and he again found his land legs. Greg the other stoker had told him there was a stage post at the top of town where he could get a coach to Sher Point. Sher Point was the capital of the Freelands, reportedly pretty cosmopolitan (and plum full of gorgeous and desirous damsels, so Greg had informed him, smacking his lips and salivating), and this sounded like as good a place as any to set up base camp.

It was only when he got to the stage post that he realized that the Outlandish shekels in his pocket were not legal tender in the Freelands, so it was just as well that the skipper had paid him. At that time, not knowing the exchange rate between shekels and the local currency, nor how far money went in the Freelands, he had no idea how long the money would last. Only later did he realize that the one week passage had earned him as much as he'd have received for working two calendar months on the coal delivery back home.

Once he'd arrived in Sher Point and found lodgings for the next few days at a quaint little guest house thankfully tucked out of the way down one of the narrow side roads off a bustling shopping street, he went to look around the city. On his way he passed within the heavily fortified walls of the old city. By now the metropolis had outgrown the confines of those defensive walls and spread out in all directions.

One of the first things Conrad did was to buy some cheap envelopes and paper and write his first letter to his Mother and Harry, to let them know that he'd arrived safely in Sher Point. He begged a piece of cardboard and some sticky tape from Mrs Morrison who ran the guest house where he was staying, taped the useless shekels to a sandwich of cardboard, popped it in an envelope with his letter, and addressed it to the Outlands. Then he went back out to find the local post office to buy some stamps and drop the letter in the mail box. With luck, the letter

would arrive in the next couple of weeks. And the money should offer them a few weeks' respite, by which time, hopefully, he should have more money to send them. It had taken some finding, but there was a bank in the East End of the city that would turn the Freelands shillings and pennies into Outlandish shekels ... for a fee.

## 5. Three stumbling blocks

There were three things that Conrad hadn't counted on when he upped sticks and moved to the Freelands. And it was only by good fortune and people's good nature that he didn't find himself imprisoned.

The first was that he had little in the way of working experience and no qualifications, both of which were requirements for all but the most menial occupations in Sher Point. To crown it all, flicking through the local newspaper's adverts with singular lack of success in finding anything suitable, he even saw one vacancy for an experienced paper bag packer. Can you believe that: an *experienced* paper bag packer? So where were the folk willing to provide experience in such things in the first place, so that one could get one's foot on the first rung of the ladder?

The second was that he had been issued with no work permit, and employers were required by law to provide work only to those with a valid, current permit ... and to report those who applied for work without a permit. At his first job interview for the post of warehouse operative, the rather grubby looking manager in a crumpled grey suit drew him aside for a discreet word. Looking furtively about to be sure they were not overheard, and shifting nervously on his feet, the man quietly informed him of this requirement and suggested that the interview had not taken place; in other words that, fortunately for Conrad, he would not report the matter to the authorities.

And the third, about which this same manager thankfully informed him, was that all foreigners were required to have a visa in order to enter or reside in the Freelands. In short, he was an illegal alien, a crime punishable by six months'

imprisonment prior to forced repatriation.

“Is there no way around this?” he asked, in all innocence.

The manager thought for a moment, then scribbled the name of three local taverns on a sheet of paper and furtively handed it over. “You might make discreet enquiries in these, um, nefarious haunts. There are some who are willing to take on illegal workers for a pittance of a wage; or provide false papers for a fee of substantially more. But for heaven’s sake – well, for my sake – don’t let on that I sent you there. We have never met, you understand.”

“Yes, I understand and it’s agreed. Thank you.”

On the first day, over a glass of cloudy ale, Conrad met with a haggard looking man by the name of Grimshaw, and was offered a place as a fettler in a foundry.

“What’s fettling?”

“The foundry casts metal into moulds,” the man said. “They make all sorts of metal widgets – it doesn’t really matter what – and when the mould is sluiced away from the casting and the castings are sawn from the sprues joining them to one-another, it’s still very rough. It’s the fettler’s job to file off this extraneous material.”

“And what’s the pay?”

The man mentioned a figure. It was a ludicrously small amount, no more than he’d have earned in the Outlands and a fraction of what he should have been able to earn – and needed to live on – in Sher Point.

“And you understand that if my brother-in-law takes you on, you’ll have to live on the premises. We can’t have you coming and going. If the law caught on that we were employing illegal immigrants ... well, it goes without saying.”

“Thank you. I’ll think about it.” Conrad left the rest of his cloudy ale, made haste to leave and moved on to the next tavern on the list.

In the second equally seedy tavern, he again managed to

find another shady looking and nicotine-stained character in tinted spectacles who would be willing to provide him with false papers, providing he was willing to carry out certain tasks. When he'd successfully completed sufficient tasks, then he'd be given papers allowing him permanent residence and permission to work. Until that point, there would be no point in doing a runner as the papers were of only temporary duration.

"And the task?"

"You could liken your task to that of a mule," the man told him. "We have certain goods that we would like you to surreptitiously take over the border into the Outlands on your person, and valuables in return which we would like you to bring back."

"Ah, you mean smuggle across the border," he nodded.

"You're quick, I'll give you that, Conrad."

"So how would I hide these items on my person?"

"For now, I think we might leave that to your imagination, Conrad."

"Ah, yes I think I get your drift. The mind boggles."

Again, he thanked the man and hastily moved on to the last tavern on the list. And again, when he asked around, he was pointed in the direction of a rather effeminate man in a white suit and loud pink tie.

"So, what do you have to offer in the way of work?" Conrad asked.

The man peered round the edge of the table and looked him up and down, then asked Conrad to stand up. "And can we do a little twirl?" the man requested.

Conrad wasn't sure why, but complied.

"Mmm, very good, dearie. I'm sure your muscular physique would go down very nicely with some of our clients. They like a bit of rough for a good rodgering."

Then: "So tell me, dearie, are you a virgin?"

"A virgin? Of course not," he lied, as youths tend to do.

“But what the hell has that got to do with anything. And what’s ‘a good rodgering’ when it’s at home?”

“Dearie, the fact that you have to ask such a naïve question speaks volumes and tells me that in this lark, you really are a virgin. Though that’s not necessarily a stumbling block. I’m sure the other lads will show you the ropes and, um, break you in, as it were.”

“What? You have to be kidding, right?” It suddenly hit Conrad what the man was talking about and he immediately rose from his seat and looked around for the nearest door.

“No, of course I’m not kidding, dearie. What vacancy did you think I was offering: a bouncer for Babycare?”

“No way.” Exit stage right, pronto.

A week later, however, as his money was beginning to run out and with no other sane options open to him, Conrad went back to the first tavern, found the haggard man sitting in the same seat and signed on to work in the foundry.

The man scribbled an address down on the back of a beer mat and tossed it across the table. “Be there at nine this evening and bring all your things with you. Tell nobody about the meeting or the deal’s off and you’re a dead man.” The man drew a finger across his throat. “Understood?”

Conrad nodded nervously. “Loud and clear.”

When Conrad saw the cramped quarters in a wooden barrack room beside the main brick building of the foundry, and the sorry and emaciated state of his fellow inmates, he realized he’d just made an enormous mistake. But by that time, it was too late, as the heavy, studded, graffiti-scratched door was firmly bolted behind him. And beyond that, as he’d noticed on the way in, was a fifteen foot brick wall, topped by strands of razor wire.

If this was the road to his destiny, then clearly he’d taken the wrong turn and still had far to go. If anything, in these first tentative steps, he’d been heading in the opposite direction.

## 6. The latter day workhouse

One of the others in the barrack came forward and held out a hand for Conrad to shake. “Daz Watkins, old chap,” he introduced himself in a rather posh and lilting tone. Daz was a tall, thin chap with a mop of unruly ginger hair and he wore a pair of black rimmed spectacles. The lenses were thick and exaggerated the size of his eyes, so that it looked like they were popping out of his head.

“Conrad Harper.” Conrad couldn’t help but notice that the tips of two of his fingers were missing.

“Ah, you’ve noticed. I work in the saw room,” he said by way of explanation, examining the stubs. “I made the mistake of not concentrating on my work. The band saw took the tips off in a trice.”

“Did they pay you compensation?” Conrad asked.

“Don’t make me laugh, Conrad. Compensation? No, not a farthing.<sup>2</sup> They told me I’d ‘better be more bloody careful next time’”, the man said in perfect mimicry of the rough working class dialect.

Daz scanned his eyes around the bunk house. “Anyhow, let’s find you a bunk, shall we? Good to have another sentient human being around here, by the way. You’ll find a pillow and blankets in the cupboard over there.” The man waited for Conrad to retrieve the bedclothes, then led him to a spare bunk. “You can have this berth. Old Fred won’t be needing it anymore.”

“What happened to ‘Old Fred’?” he asked in all innocence.

“Well, I was quite lucky, really. Old Fred worked in the sluice room, blasting the mould away from around the castings

<sup>2</sup>A quarter of a penny.

with a jet of water. He missed the sink, showered the nearby electrics and ended up fried on the spot.”

Conrad looked at the stained mattress with disdain and went to turn it over. Clearly, someone had already thought of that, for the underside looked even more evil, so he turned it back over again and hurriedly covered it with a blanket.

“Are there any sheets?” he asked.

Daz shook his head and laughed out loud. “This isn’t the Grand Hotel, you’ll have gathered by now. Only blankets, I’m sad to say. Lovely and warm in winter – and believe me, it gets so damn cold your breath’s like steam. But, being wool, they itch like hell. Almost as much as the ruddy chilblains folk get in winter.”

“Hmm. This is certainly no holiday camp,” Conrad mused.

“Holiday camp, Conrad? More like the Dread Lord Develin’s labour camps, old chap. There should be a plaque over the ruddy door which reads ‘Abandon hope, all ye who enter here’ or ‘Welcome to my nightmare.’

“Anyhow, where do you hail from? Not from around these parts, clearly.”

“Margate, Daz. It’s a market town to the north of the Outlands. What about you?”

“Oh, I come from a village nearby. Once upon a time I was the Sales Director here, would you credit it? That was before the place changed hands and they started taking on illegal aliens. Sorry, no offence meant.”

“None taken, Daz.”

“Anyhow, to cut a long and torrid story short, had a bit of nervous breakdown and lost my job, old chap. Well, the debts were mounting up and I couldn’t find any way of paying them ... other than to sell my soul and take manual work here. So when they sold out, I came with the furniture, as it were.

“There are a lot of unfortunate folk. Jim over there used to be a violin teacher. Now his hands are half wrecked fettling all



day. Carl was found guilty of smuggling drugs up his backside, escaped from custody and ended up taking refuge here. Silly bugger: if he'd taken his spell in prison, he'd have been out and free long ago, instead of being locked up here. Nothing wrong with Randy other than hearing the voice of angels in his head."

Daz sighed deeply. "The list, like the work, goes on and on. Ours not to reason why ..."

"... Ours but to do and die?" asked Conrad.

Daz nodded gravely and walked off to flop down on his own bunk with his hands clasped behind his head, staring into space.

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Conrad's mind was racing that night and almost as soon as he eventually did get off to sleep, a loud siren sounded throughout the foundry complex and he was rudely awakened.

"What's going on?" he asked one of the guys in the bunk next to his, rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

"Time to get up, Sonny Jim," the man told him, already out of bed and pulling on his trousers.

"What's the routine?"

"Grab a quick wash at the sinks, then breakfast in the dining room, and off to work at 7.30 on the dot. Best put your skates on and get in line."

"Skates?"

"Shift yer arse," called the man, heading for the sinks.

Presumably that was the vernacular for "hurry up."

By the time Conrad made it to the sinks, he was the last in line. And the last in line at the sinks was the last in line for breakfast, a fact that did not go unnoticed by the sour-faced charge hand, a supervisor, who hovered over them near the serving hatch.

"You there," the man called out, coming across. "What's your name?"

"Who, me?"

“Yes, you, Fresh Meat.”

“Conrad Harper,” he told the man, who by this time had come close and almost had his face pressed to Conrad’s.

“Well, you’ll have to look sharper than that if you know what’s good for you, Fresh Meat. Folk don’t take kindly to slackers around here. Gotta pull your weight, or else you’ll be for it.”

A pasty-faced, tousle-haired youth at the other side of the serving hatch dipped his ladle in a large simmering pot, slopped a mass that looked like lumpy porridge into a tin and thrust the tin and a matching tin cup in Conrad’s direction. He took the breakfast and looked around to see if there was a seat at one of the trestle tables. To his dismay, they were all occupied.

Across the cold room, Daz Watkins caught his eye and beckoned him over.

“Sorry, old chap: Barnham, the charge hand, has the chairs counted. Last one to breakfast gets to stand.” He pointed to a vacant space at the head of the table and, feeling rather abashed, Conrad went over and stood there to eat his porridge and drink his lukewarm tea. The tea was thin and watery, as if the water had merely been shown the tea-leaves and taken a quick sniff. As for milk and sugar, there was none. That was not an auspicious start to the day. Well, as the saying goes, he certainly wouldn’t die of boredom, though judging by the state of those assembled at the tables, dying of neglect was a distinct possibility.

By late afternoon after the first seven days of work, seeing no end to the crates of widgets to painstakingly fettle (and not having a clue as to what use these anonymous metal parts might eventually be put), Conrad decided that he’d had enough, and on his way out, he went across to speak to Barnham.

“This job isn’t what I’m looking for,” he told the man straight out. “I’ve had enough and I want to quit.”

The man shook his head and sneered out loud. “Hear that, men? Fresh Meat’s had enough and he wants out.”

Conrad caught Daz’s eye and the man just shook his head and walked out of the fettling room, heading for the barrack to freshen up before dinner.

Barnham tapped his cane against the palm of his other spade-like hand. “It doesn’t work like that,” the man told him. “You’re new here, so I’ll pretend I didn’t hear that. But if you know what’s good for you, you’ll forget that nonsense. You’re here to work, and work you will, until told to do otherwise or you’re carried out in a pine box – whichever comes sooner. Now fuck off and get to dinner before I change my mind.”

Again, Conrad was lucky to grab one of the last remaining places at the tables. One dose of having to stand had been more than enough for him.

“Didn’t let the bastards grind you down,” Daz commiserated over dinner that day.

“Oh, don’t worry, Daz. I have no intention of allowing that.”

Daz raised his eyebrows. “You’re cooking something up, aren’t you, Conrad? I can always tell, you know; and so can the charge hands. It’s written all over you in large red letters. For your own sake, if not for God’s, be careful, man. You’ll keep your nose to the grindstone and not make waves – if you know what’s good for you.”

But Conrad didn’t waver in his resolve, and for the next three weeks he was on the lookout for any opportunity to escape the soul-destroying toil at the foundry. One day, having been put onto one of the grindstones to fettle a batch of heavy widgets, one of the drilling machines broke down and Ernie, a little, bald-headed mechanic, came to fix it. Half way through the job, he had to answer the call of nature and, whilst Barnham was otherwise occupied checking through a couple of batches of widgets that had been rejected and sent back from

inspection, he snuck over and rummaged through the mechanic's toolbox. There in the bottom of the box were a pair of heavy-duty bolt cutters, which was exactly what Conrad had in mind, and he thrust the cutters inside his overalls and crept back to the grindstone.

Later that evening, just before Barnham came round to switch off the lights and bolt the door to lock them in for the night, Conrad walked out and crept behind the wooden barrack. He waited there, hiding in the long, uncut wet grass for perhaps an hour, crouching low to avoid being seen, until he was sure that the way was clear. Then, keeping to the shadows, he went round the back of the foundry building to where he'd seen a tall wooden ladder, chained to the outside wall. With an effort, he managed to cut the chain with his bolt cutters. Then, struggling with the weight and bulk of the heavy ladders, he heaved the ladder up against the brick wall around the perimeter of the complex and dashed up the rungs. The ladder wasn't quite long enough to clear the razor wire at the top, but he flung a folded blanket over it and managed to climb atop the wall and lower himself down the other side without getting cut to ribbons. Bracing himself, he let go of the top of the wall and dropped down the far side. It was a long drop, but as fortune would have it, he fell into a bush and staggered to his feet.

Not wasting a moment, he fled off down the winding lane, keeping under the protective, shadowy canopies of the majestic chestnut trees as much as possible, and hoping that he could find his way back to Sher Point. If memory served him correctly, it had been about forty five minutes' drive from the city to the foundry, so it looked like he had a thirty mile walk ahead, which would probably take him the best part of the night.

Hopefully, they wouldn't discover the escape until the following morning, but to be on the safe side he kept looking back and ducked down away from the road each time a vehicle

approached.

The sun was just coming up as Conrad reached the tree-lined outskirts of the city, and not only was he dog-tired in spite of the cold fresh air, he was footsore. He still had just enough money tucked into his socks to pay for a couple of nights' bed and breakfast at the guest house he'd originally stayed in, and a little food to last him through the day, but when that ran out, Lord knows what he would do. Still, he'd managed to escape from the dark, Develinian foundry, and he was thankful for such mercies.

Those two days passed all too soon and Conrad sat there at the table in the dining room at the guest house, making the most of the last breakfast that he could afford and feeling decidedly dejected, in spite of the welcome sun streaming in through the large, airy bay windows. The other guests had already eaten and were off about their business, leaving him alone there with only the steady tick-tick-tick of the ornate clock on the mantelshelf to keep him company. On the three quarters of the hour it would give a little ding and now, at the top of the hour it began to chime out the hours.

There was no more postponing the inevitable: it was time to leave and – reluctant as he was and much as he'd tried to cast his worries aside – it hit him forcefully that he was now officially and undeniably homeless, and his heart sank into the pit of his stomach.

“Are you all right, duckie?” asked the pleasantly plump and cheerful landlady as she began to clear away the plates. “I hope you're not going down with the flu, too. Roderick, my better half, caught it yesterday, so I've had to leave him tucked up in bed. That's why breakfast was a little late today, begging your pardon.”

He drew a deep breath. “No, I'm well, thank you, Mrs Morrison, and grateful for your hospitality. But ...” He hesitated, not sure what to say next.

“But ...?” Mrs Morrison drew up a dining chair and sat beside him. “Down on your luck, are you, duckie?”

“Does it show?”

She nodded knowingly, then got to her feet. “I’ll just go and freshen the teapot for us, and then we’ll sit down for a nice little chat, eh? A problem shared is a problem halved, I’ve always found.”

She went away to the kitchen and returned a minute or two later with a fresh pot of tea and some more milk.

“I’m not sure where to start,” he admitted at length as Mrs Morrison poured the tea.

“Start anywhere you like, duckie: there’s no rush.”

“Well, then, I’ll start at the beginning,” he decided. “I come from a little market town called Margate.”

She frowned. “I can’t say as I’ve heard of that.”

“It’s way up north in the Outlands.”

“Ah ...” Already it was beginning to dawn on her.

“I used to work helping a coal merchant with his deliveries, but he died suddenly and I decided to leave home and travel south to seek my fortune: well, to search for my destiny.”

“I see,” the lady nodded, offering him another biscuit to go with his tea.

“Anyhow, I found a tramp steamer laden with coal and destined for Pendlebury and by good fortune they were in need of a stoker, so I worked my passage down here. Then ...

“Then I found out that getting a job down here isn’t quite as easy as I had assumed it would be. You see I have no qualifications ...”

At this point, Conrad had to fight back the tears that welled-up in his eyes, and he could feel a lump stuck in his throat. Of course, he cast his mind back to his poor family back home, and he cursed his foolishness and gross stupidity.

“Oh, dear.” Mrs Morrison gently patted the back of his hand.

“There’s more.” He had a sip of his tea and drew a deep breath.

“What’s more, I hadn’t realized that you need a visa to enter the country and to stay, nor that you need a permit to work. I asked around and found illicit work in a foundry, and discovered only later that it was tantamount to slave labour. But fortunately I managed to escape.”

“Oh, you poor dear, you *have* been in the wars.” Mrs Morrison shook her head sadly and patted him on the shoulder.

“Can you go another?” she asked, holding up the teapot and raising her eyebrows expectantly.

“Thank you, yes.”

She poured the tea out and topped it up with milk and appeared to be lost in thought.

“I’ve had an idea,” she told him at last.

He peered into her chubby and ever-cheerful face.

“With Roderick sick, I could do with another pair of hands. I can give you two or three days work with a bed and free meals, until he’s better.”

Conrad’s eyes lit up. “Oh, that would be a great help, Mrs Morrison. Thank you.” Then: “But I don’t want to get you into trouble.”

She smiled and patted his shoulder again. “Don’t worry: it’ll be no trouble at all, duckie.”

“So where would you like me to start?” He rose to his feet and began to clear the table.

“How’s about you make a start on the dishes, then, duckie, and I’ll go see if his Lordship is up to eating any breakfast?”

“Right you are,” he gladly agreed.

All too soon, however, Mister Morrison was out of his sick bed, though for the first day he was still quite unsteady on his feet and, at least as far as his wife was concerned, neither use nor ornament.

7. The Network

Again Conrad found himself sitting, this time at a table in the kitchen, eating his last breakfast.

At this point, a tiny bell above the kitchen door began to tinkle. Someone was at the front door and Mrs Morrison went off to answer it. She came back through a minute or two later.

“There’s a gentleman in the lounge to see you,” she announced as she headed for the kitchen sink to finish off the dishes.

For a moment, Conrad thought she was talking to her husband, then suddenly realized she meant him, and his heart lurched. He got up from the table and, with some trepidation, he went through to the front lounge.

As he entered, an old and slightly hunch-shouldered man in a thick tweed suit pushed himself up on his walking stick and held out a hand in greeting. “John Cartwright at your service, sir. You must be Mister Harper.”

“Conrad Harper, yes. Pleased to meet you, sir. What can I do for you?”

“You’re trembling, Conrad. Well, there’s no call for that. I promise I won’t bite.”

That was reassuring to know.

The man shuffled back toward the chair and with bit of a struggle sat himself down again.

“Mrs Morrison told a friend of a friend about your, um, plight,” the man told him.

“I see.”

“Well, you’ll be happy to know that we may be in a position to help you. Now, this is strictly between you, me and these four walls, but I represent an organization known simply as *The Network*. We’re aware of the fact that it’s almost

impossible for our Outlandish neighbours to obtain travel visas and work permits in these alleged Freelands, and of the Draconian measures which the State takes in the event of violations. So, wherever we are able to assist in such matters, we do.”

“In what way?”

“If we deem the candidate suitable and in genuine need, then we provide false papers ...”

“Ah. I’ve heard of such people, but I gather that there is a fat fee to pay. Perhaps Mrs Morrison didn’t make it clear that I have little more than loose change. I can’t possibly afford your fee.”

“Did I mention a fee?” the man enquired.

“Well, no. But there must be a catch, if you’ll forgive me saying so.”

The man smiled. “I think you’re mistaking *The Network*, which is a philanthropic – if clandestine – operation, with the criminal sharks who provide similar services.”

Conrad bit his tongue. “Oh, I’m sorry: I had the two confused. Please, tell me more.”

“There will be no fee, though folk sometimes repay the service with donations, should they come into money, or volunteer their services to help. Having said that, as we have to operate secretly and with great care and discretion, we allow only certain candidates to volunteer themselves in this way.”

Conrad nodded to signify that he understood.

“So, are you up for it, Mister Harper? Would you like us to help you?”

He nodded again. “Absolutely. What more have I got to lose? That’s kind of you. Thank you indeed.”

“Good, good. I was hoping you’d say ‘yes’. Well, I’ll leave you to say your goodbyes and get your bags, and by that time I’ll be waiting outside in my car. The old legs don’t work as well or move as quickly as they once did,” the man grimaced

as he pushed himself to his feet once more.

“You mean now?”

The man shrugged his shoulders. “It seems as good a time as any, Mister Harper. Unless you have made prior arrangements?”

“No, no. Thank you. It’s just that this is all so sudden, and it’s rather caught me on the hop. Just give me a minute and I’ll be with you.”

They drove for around half an hour until they were across the old iron suspension bridge over the river Dee, well out of the city, past the leafy suburbs and out into the country. Then John Cartwright slowed the car and turned off down a long tree-lined driveway. He pulled the car up on a scrunchy gravel stretch close to the front doors of a large mansion and, again with an effort, managed to extricate himself from the driving seat and into the crisp autumn air.

Once up the steep marble steps and inside, they were met by a footman who took their coats and ushered Conrad into a bay-windowed reception room overlooking the drive, whilst John Cartwright begged leave for a few moments and went off down the hall to answer the call of nature and make the necessary arrangements.

Shortly afterwards, a young lady popped her head around the door of the reception room with a rather official looking clipboard in her hand, her long blond hair tied neatly back, and a pair of round framed spectacles perched on the end of her pointy nose. “Mister Harper?”

“You can call me Conrad.”

“Okay, Conrad. I’m Sarah. If you follow me, I’ll show you to your room. You’ll be staying here for a few weeks while we get your papers sorted out and give you a bit of an acclimatization and orientation course.”

A few weeks? He’d expected to be in and out of the place in a matter of days, at most. But that was still fine by him.

“Thanks.” He followed her out as she walked briskly off down the plushly-carpeted hall and up a wide, gracefully curved flight of marble stairs leading to the upper floor.

Sarah showed him into the room and quickly went through the facilities. When it came to the television and the *en-suite* shower, Conrad had to plead his ignorance and ask for instructions, as though he’d heard of such new-fangled gizmos, he had no idea of how to use them. Even with her patient explanation, the knowledge went in one ear and straight out of the other. The Draconian sanctions imposed on the Outlands following the First War had left the country decades behind the Freelands and such luxury and technology was virtually unknown to the average Outlander.

The nearest he’d been to a shower was when he and a friend abseiled down a waterfall on a rare adventure holiday in the Peaks during his early teens. That had certainly been a near death experience. The rope had been just a fraction too short, so that when he banged up against the knot at the bottom, he was left dangling a few inches off the ground with the full force of the icy cold waterfall on him, chilling him to the bone. He’d desperately struggled to free himself, but had been unable to put his feet down to take the tension off the rope.

And the nearest he’d been to a television was huddling around an old valve wireless set with his family on an evening, having been bequeathed the monstrous contraption by an elderly uncle when he’d died.

“Anyhow, I’ll see what clothes I can find for you, Conrad,” Sarah told him. “Those togs of yours have Outlander written all over them and are bound to attract undesirable attention. Then you can freshen up in the shower. When you’re done, head downstairs and ask for my whereabouts and I’ll give you the guided tour. Okay? Well, I’ll love you and leave you. See you soon.”

She turned to leave, then turned back again and examined

his long and tangled locks and his increasingly bushy beard. “Oh, and remind me to book you in for a haircut and a shave, too. Beards have been out of fashion here for a couple of decades. Don’t worry; we’ll soon have you looking like a real city gent.”

Conrad had to laugh. It reminded him of the hawk that landed on a man’s window sill. Seeing the pitiful state it was in, the man had caught the bird, clipped its hooked beak so that it was straight, and trimmed its long curved talons. “There,” smiled the man with satisfaction as he let the hawk go. “Now you look more like a bird.”

After the guided tour and a spot of lunch in the communal dining room, Conrad was assigned his first task, clearing away the dishes and then helping wash them as another of their number, a petite and chattery young girl from the East with long, flowing raven black hair and big, bright hazel eyes, by the name of Dzoldzaya, dried them. Everyone seemed to pull together to help grease and run the household.

“One for the reject pile,” the girl noted, waving a large saucepan under his nose. “It still has a sticky ring around it, see.”

Conrad blushed and took back the pan to give it a good scrubbing.

“Sorry, miss.”

“Keep your mind on your work and not on my cleavage, young man,” she gently chided him, and again he flushed with embarrassment.

“The orientation course will help you a lot,” Dzoldzaya told him as they were sponging down and drying the work surfaces, “but if anything, you’ll actually find yourself learning more by just taking part in the communal tasks, without even realizing that you’re learning anything.”

As his name had been added to the roster to help prepare breakfast early the next day, Conrad retired to his room quite

early that evening and got himself ready for bed. His head was still full of jumbled thoughts, though, and he couldn't settle down, so he got back out of bed and scanned the row of paperback books tucked in the polished rosewood cabinet by his bedside. Most were either romance or crime fiction, but one, a leather-bound volume entitled *The Way It Is*, took his interest, as it appeared to be a little out of the ordinary. And how he loved the pleasant and comforting smell of old books.

So engrossed was he by the rich tapestry and patchwork of content that the next time he looked at the bedside clock, it was gone one o'clock in the morning. There were so many stories and threads nested in the work that were interwoven, leaving loose ends that seemed to goad him along and unable to put the book down for want of finding out how these things were finally resolved. This Rinchen fellah who'd written the book was clearly a man who really did know his onions,³ and he rather put Conrad to shame.⁴ In the end, though, realizing that all too soon he'd have to be up to do his chores, he reluctantly put the book down, lay back down in bed and slept a deep and contented, if relatively brief, sleep.

Once breakfast and washing up were out of the way, Dzoldzaya and he went off toward the drawing room where a number of chairs had been arranged in a loose circle. And then began the first in a series of orientation classes. Being a newcomer to the group, Conrad was asked to introduce himself and fill in the others and their mentor with some background information about his life before the Freelands and what brought him here.

The prospect of public speaking alarmed him at first, and he had difficulty finding the right words, and faltered at times, but with their gentle coaxing and encouragement, he eventually and thankfully completed this task and sat down, mopping his

³He was knowledgeable and experienced in the subject.

⁴Made Conrad realize his own lack of knowledge and his unworthiness.

brow with a handkerchief, to a quick burst of warm applause.

“Thank you, Conrad,” their mentor, Mister Flint, nodded in appreciation. “And I’m particularly intrigued that you should have set off here searching for your destiny. Many of us here have done the same in our own time.

“Remember two things, Conrad,” advised their tutor, twirling the end of his thin moustache as he spoke. “The first is that just as you are searching for your destiny, so your destiny is searching for you. In a sense, we could say that it is already here” – the man patted his chest – “like a tiny voice deep down inside us and striving to be heard above the clamour and noise of our everyday consciousness. And in another sense, we could say that rather than being a destination, destiny is a way of being on the journey of life.”

Conrad nodded, vaguely aware of the meaning of his mentor’s words.

“Don’t worry,” the mentor added. “You may not be able to follow everything that’s said and happens here, Conrad. But the essence will permeate your being, and you’ll hear the same things expressed in several different ways, so that eventually the penny will drop and you’ll see the bigger picture.”

Again Conrad thanked him and, having calmed himself down, he put away his damp handkerchief.

They broke for lunch at around noon that day and Dzoldzaya, he and the others in the group took some time out to stroll around the extensive gardens surrounding the mansion, before heading off for their afternoon session. Much to Conrad’s dread, that was to be a practical workshop, acting out many scenes of human interaction, such as simple conversation and job interviews, that they’d encounter in everyday life in Sher Point. It was important that they gave the impression of being well established, well versed and above all fluent in the local culture, rather than awkward and evasive immigrants. By the end of the course, they’d be expected to handle routine

police and border inspections, though whether they'd be able to hold up under intense interrogation was, of course, another matter.

That evening, Conrad went up to his room and retrieved the book, which he was intent on finishing. He took it downstairs and sat in the lounge with the others, most of whom were more intent on watching television (the goggle box, as Father and others of his generation had called this new-fangled contraption), to continue his reading.

Seeing him so engrossed, Dzoldzaya had a cheeky peek at the cover and remarked: "It's good to see you reading, Conrad. There are some worthwhile things on the television from time to time, but it makes us passive consumers, and the art of storytelling – which is an altogether more engaging process – is in danger of being lost. Engagement is important, because it involves the heart rather than the head."

He nodded and put the book down for a few moments, to tell her of the way in which his mother and father had brought him up to respect what they knew as the Tradition, with a capital "T". Until that time, Conrad had thought of the tradition as simply a family thing, but now he was beginning to see that maybe there was a whole lot more to it than that, and he was feeling rather tiny and insignificant in comparison.

"Wonderful, Conrad," she smiled as she turned to leave. "It's so good that you should have been brought up to treasure these things. Anyhow, I'll leave you to read in peace."

Conrad was just about to say "You don't have to leave on my account", but Dzoldzaya was already out of earshot. Oh well, maybe next time?

The Way It Is was quite a substantial volume, and it wasn't until the following evening that he finally finished reading it, put it back amongst the other books and settled down to sleep. For the first time, it actually occurred to Conrad that the book wasn't simply something to read or consume, but something

that was actually designed to change you for the better – providing that you approached the study in the right way. The author was at pains to point this out, illustrating concepts and arguments from many different angles, as if he were building up a solid, interactive three dimension image in the reader's mind. Years later, had he considered this matter, he might instead have been tempted to use the term “organic life form” or “sentient being”, but of course these were as yet early days for young Conrad and he was only just starting out along the long and winding path.

This and other events over the past few days must have been working away inside him, for he seemed to spend most of that night experiencing particularly vivid dreams.

There was one tale in particular that had given him a delightful moment of shimmering ecstasy when he read it and made the hairs on his scalp stand on end. It was the story of a young man who'd left home and set out to find his destiny. Over the years, zigzagging through life this way and that, he stopped from time to time and took whatever work was offered to him; then when the prompting came, he moved on once more without regret, neither for having stopped for a time, nor at the prospect of moving on once more. There seemed to be no clear cut pattern in the things he was learning. And yet at the end of the day he found himself in a situation in which each of the skills and characteristics that he had acquired along the way was called upon, as a result of which he succeeded in this final task. Suddenly he heard a rushing sound, like the wind, sweeping through him and he found that he had Arrived, a complete man as the mystics called such, in the Land of Truth. He realized that at last he had found his heart's desire and his destiny, and he also realized that this destiny had been by his side every step of the way, when he had thought himself isolated and alone.

Conrad woke up to find himself sitting on the low stone

ledge of an octagonal ornamental fountain, set in an expanse of fragrant flower and herb gardens. In the centre of the fountain, atop a podium stood a figure with a bow and arrow wearing a shimmering, golden winged helmet and winged sandals, with the water erupting from atop his head and trickling down in the centre of a wide pond dotted with the pink and white blossoms and lush green leaves of lotus flowers.

"It's a wonderfully peaceful place here, isn't it?" called a voice from behind him. He turned around to see a tall, broad shouldered man with quite closely cropped hair and a little goatee beard standing there and realized immediately that it must be Tenzing Jangbu Rinchen, from the photo, with the mountains as a monumental backdrop, on the front cover of his book, *The Way It Is*.

"I come here often when I'm looking to calm my mind and recharge my batteries," he smiled. "And you must be Conrad Harper. So, tell me, Conrad: what brings you here?"

"I'm searching for my destiny," he told the man. "Of course, as I'm just beginning to discover, Mister Rinchen, that's more easily said than done."

"That reminds me of a story," Tenzing smiled. "You may have heard it, but please bear with me and hear it once again:"

There was once a man called Hodja crawling about outside a house beneath a street lamp. A neighbour, passing by, asked him what he was doing.

"I've lost my key," Hodja told him, so the neighbour got down on his knees and joined in the search.

After a time, not having found the key, the neighbour got back on his feet and asked: "Where did you lose your key, Hodja?"

"In my house."

The neighbour shook his head in disbelief: "Then why on Earth are you looking outside?"

"Because there's more light out here."

“And that’s precisely what you’re doing, Conrad. You’ve left your home and moved south to live in the Freelands, and you are searching the land because there’s more light here, rather than looking deep in your own self. And then you wonder why you can’t find what you’re looking for.”

Conrad could feel his jaw drop as Tenzing spoke those words. It all seemed so much clearer when he heard the man say it.

“But I don’t know how to search inside my own self,” he admitted. “I haven’t got a clue.”

Tenzing smiled and stroked his beard. “In saying that, Conrad, you are one step closer to finding your destiny, your heart’s true desire. Humility is always a good place to start, indeed what we call ‘beginner’s mind’ is a good place to be, however far down the path one may have travelled. Now you know a question that you may ask of others who may be able to assist you in your difficulties. You see, it’s not all about finding the right answers (not that there really is such a thing as right answers); it’s at least as important to be able to ask the right kind of questions. One such question being, perhaps: ‘How do I search inside myself to find my destiny, my heart’s true desire?’ or, coupled with an admission: ‘I don’t know how to do this thing.’”

And with that, Tenzing turned away and walked off through the gardens, and Conrad awoke to find the sun streaming in through his bedroom window. It was morning and time to get ready for an early shift in the kitchens.

Dzoldzaya was down for work in the kitchen again that morning. The cook was busy baking and it was already hot and steamy in there, even with the windows wide open. It seemed they were destined to spend time together, Conrad mused, and one of the first things he did was tell her of his dream and ask that question of her:

“I don’t know how to search inside myself to find my

destiny.”

Dzoldzaya’s eyes lit up as she heard his story and she raised her eyebrows when he asked the question. She thought for a minute and then suggested that he wait until their next session with the mentor, report the dream to him and ask that same question of him.

Conrad drew in his breath, for he was not used to broaching such personal subjects in public and he was daunted by the prospect.

“And in the meantime, on a more mundane level, you can set-to peeling that stack of vegetables and potatoes ready for soup at lunch,” quipped the redoubtable Mrs Morgan, the head cook, overhearing their conversation.

“Yes, Mrs Morgan,” they replied in perfect unison and smiled at one another at their synchrony.

“Right away, Mrs Morgan. Three bags full, Mrs Morgan,” hissed one of the others, Thomas, under his breath when she was out of hearing.

Mrs Morgan spun on her heel as she left the kitchen and cast the lad a sharp and withering glare. “And behave yourselves whilst I’m away. I’ll be back in a few minutes and woe betide you if the work’s not done and up to scratch, so mark you well.”

“Anything to report, chaps and chapesses?” asked the mentor, toying with his moustache, as they settled down for the start of their orientation session.

“Go on,” Dzoldzaya prompted Conrad, nudging him in the ribs.

He shook his head, feeling suddenly a little foolish talking of dreams and such whimsical things as destiny. It seemed so out of place in this levelheaded gathering.

“Go on,” she insisted.

Shush.

“Yes, Dzoldzaya? Is there something you wish to say?”

“Not me, Mister Flint, but I think Conrad wanted to tell you something.”

Oh, for heaven’s sake.

“Is that right, Conrad?”

“It’s nothing,” he fibbed. “At least nothing that can’t wait until after the session.”

“Tell the group about the dream,” Dzoldzaya prompted. Clearly, she wasn’t going to take “no” for an answer.

“That sounds interesting, Conrad. Stand up and you can tell the whole group about it.”

Conrad flushed.

“Go on,” Dzoldzaya insisted. She was quite independent minded and could be rather pushy at times.

“I know you feel awkward, Conrad,” their mentor nodded. “And that’s something else that we can deal with here and now. Catch two birds with the same net, eh? Don’t worry, many people feel a bit awkward at first in groups such as this.”

Conrad rose to his feet and began to recount the dream, concluding with the throwaway line: “Of course, it was probably prompted by spending the previous three evenings reading one of Mister Rinchen’s books.”

“My word, that’s interesting, Conrad,” nodded Mister Flint: “and rather well recounted. Well done.”

One of the others was whispering something to her neighbour and they both sniggered behind their hands.

“Now, now. Don’t belittle Conrad or his experience, ladies. This is important.”

The pair cast their eyes down.

“So that leaves me with the admission, Mister Flint,” Conrad concluded: “I don’t know how to search inside myself to find my destiny.”

Mister Flint stroked his chin thoughtfully. “Well, that certainly is as good a place as any to start, Conrad. Thank you again. Come and see me at the end of the session and we’ll

have a chat.”

“Right oh.” Relieved that his ordeal was over, Conrad sat back down and pretended to be occupied with the notes he was taking, nervously shuffling his papers into some kind of order.

“Now, have any of you others anything to report since our last session, or shall we move on?” The mentor cast his eyes around the circle, but there were no takers.

“Very well. Pens and paper out, then, my lovelies. Today we’re going to have a look at some more recent events in the history of the Freelands. And this afternoon we’ll have another practical. Oh, and Mrs Harrington asked me to remind you not to forget that tomorrow you’ll be going on the naturalists’ field trip to the woods.

“No, please don’t titter, Julie. That’s *naturalists*, not *naturists*, so do put on a pair of good strong boots or walking shoes with sensible heels and dress warmly for the occasion. Please be downstairs for an early breakfast, then assemble at the side entrance near the kitchens at seven forty five for an eight o’clock start. Any stragglers left behind are to report to Matron who will assign alternative chores.”

Well, that was a sure fire way to ensure one hundred percent attendance, Conrad mused.

Mister Flint clapped his hands together, breaking the students’ reverie. “Right then, back to business. Who can tell me when the First Great War began and why it was fought? Anyone? Yes, Jill”

The session finally over, they broke the circle and began to file out. There were still a few minutes before lunch, so Conrad asked Dzoldzaya if she’d save him a place in the dining room and stayed behind to speak privately with Mister Flint.

The man rummaged around amongst the huge heaps of documents and books on his desk, then in his drawers, and eventually produced a sheet of printed paper, handing it to Conrad. “On Thursday evenings, I run a development group,”

he said. "It may help you quieten your thoughts and get back in contact with your heart. Are you interested?"

Conrad nodded vigorously.

"Good. Though the details of each meeting will vary, as you'll see on the sheet, there are a couple of basic exercises: one we use to open us up at the beginning of the meeting and the other we use to close the session. I'll see you this Thursday evening, then, in here at seven thirty for an eight o'clock start. And in the meantime, if you can familiarize yourself with those basic exercises, that would be a great help."

Conrad was about to leave, when Mister Flint spoke again. "One thing you could do is practise these meditation exercises each day: the first when you wake up and the other just before you retire."

"Okay, thanks."

"Of course, this would require you to get up a few minutes earlier each day and take an extra few minutes before you settle down on a night ..."

"That's no problem," he fibbed, though in truth he didn't relish that prospect.

"Good. And make sure you keep me posted about how the exercises are affecting your day or your sleep, and any questions or issues you might have. If you're in the slightest doubt, don't hesitate to ask. That's what we're here for."

Mister Flint glanced at his watch. "Well, we'd better dash if we're to grab some lunch before they stop serving."

As they left the room, the tutor paused briefly: "Oh, and Dzoldzaya will be with us in the development group, Conrad, and I'm sure that will help you settle in," he added with a nod and a knowing smile.

8. Learning how to learn

The next week, the group met for three days on the trot in another, larger room with seats arranged in rows facing televisions and sets of keys like they had on typewriters. That's how blissfully unaware many of them, not least Conrad, were to that wonder of modern technology, the computer.

Their first task was to switch their machines on and boot them up, each action carefully demonstrated and choreographed by Mrs Philips, their new tutor. She looked quite staid in her tweed jacket and skirt, with her spectacles attached to a long gold chain, and yet she was clearly well-versed in all the new technology. Appearances and first impressions could indeed be deceptive. Needless to say, at this early stage in the proceedings everything was carried out in a very ponderous fashion, in the same way that learning to play a musical instrument, each change in the position and arrangement of one's fingers and each stroke of the bow was made quite mechanically, by rote – learning by repetition – and with little to no understanding of what one was doing, with predictably cacophonous results.

And their second task was to start up a program that Mrs Philips called a word processor and to type out a letter to a potential employer that they'd prepared earlier by hand in Mister Flint's group. His was quite a long letter and with each and every character he had to laboriously search the keyboard for the matching key.

For all his unfamiliarity with the new-fangled gizmo, however, as the weeks went by, Conrad's confidence in his abilities grew and, noticing this natural gift, Mrs Philips suggested that it might be an idea for him to learn how to actually program – to instruct the machine what to do, just as,

so he was told, other programmers had written the software for the word processor they'd used to write their letters on.

To that end, she persuaded him to enrol on a course she ran on a Wednesday evening and in the first session he was delighted at his success in producing his first working program, which displayed the title "Hello World!" and went on to allow the user to type in a series of numbers and display a grand total.

"But isn't this all very 'left brain'?" he asked Mrs Philips, remembering what Mister Flint had told them about the way the left hemisphere of the brain dealt with details in a logical, calculating, differentiating and sequential manner, whilst the right hemisphere was more aware of context and connections, more intuitive, holistic, integrating and processed things – such as patterns – in a simultaneous fashion.

She got his drift straight away and took off her spectacles, which now dangled in front of her on the gold chain. "You may think so at first, Conrad," she told him. "The same thing could be said about the early stages in learning to play strategic games such as chess. And yet to the chess Grandmaster, it's more like building up a vast repertoire of arrangements of pieces and knowing the eventual outcome of each of those arrangements; for the master programmer, it's like having a vast array of prefabricated routines or building blocks and again juggling whole patterns, in that case patterns of symbols, and also coming up with quite intuitive solutions, often drawn from other fields of expertise. Of course, it might not seem like that to you now, but it will all make sense and click into place at the end of the day."

At a later session with Mrs Philips, the lady had been watching him for some time and came over again and again to see how he was progressing. Things were still at the planning stage using pen and ink, however, flipping this way and that through the user manual, and he still had yet to actually commit any of the work to the computer.

“I see what you’re doing, Conrad,” she told him. “You certainly have a meticulous eye for detail and a desire to get things right by planning it all out in a very logical, methodical and structured fashion beforehand.”

“Is that a bad thing?” he asked her.

“Well, how can I put it?” the lady replied, taking off her spectacles and sucking the end of one of the arms. “During one of the tasks Mister Flint set your group in the library, he noticed how you planned things out in a very similar fashion, surrounding yourself with reference books and not committing anything to ink before you’d mapped it out in pencil first.”

“It’s not that this is a bad thing, Conrad,” she continued, “especially in the early stages of learning a skill. But you need to know that there’s another way of going about things.”

“Really?”

“Really. And this is another of those things where the penny will eventually drop and things will magically click into place and make a whole new sense to you.”

“Can you expand on that?”

“Certainly, Conrad. One of the things that life conditions you into is not to believe it when thoughts occur as if spontaneously to you. Folk get into the habit of mulling these thoughts over, conversing about these thoughts in their heads and vetting them before deciding whether they’re acceptable, often whether they’re acceptable to others, then accepting or rejecting them. But the truth of the matter is that there really is no need for this kind of defensive editing and censorship. The truth is, this unthought-out thought that arises spontaneously from our hearts or from our Higher Self or what you might call the beyond, is perfectly capable of rationality and common sense. We don’t have to do this kind of thinking’s thinking for it. That’s been done already by a far more capable, pre-verbal mechanism. All our subsequent chatter does is to create a commotion in which this still-small voice gets drowned out and

more and more marginalized and ignored.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“Let’s say when you’re writing – which is another skill it may be worth your while developing ... when you’re writing, you don’t have to plan everything out meticulously beforehand. I’m not saying don’t plan at all, because that lends some structure to a composition, but don’t overcook it. What that does is straitjacket and stifle real inspiration. What you can do instead is simply type the words as they occur to you. Straight past the editors and the censors, through your fingers and onto the paper or the computer screen. Sure, you’ll make typing mistakes and there’ll be better turns of phrase you could have used, but leave most of the editing and the organizing and the embellishment until after that initial outpouring. And if other ideas pop up to be dealt with later, just jot down a short note and get straight back to the current task. The key thing is to write fluently and get it down in print whilst the inspiration is flowing, before you forget what was on your mind. Editing as you write will only scupper that creative process.”

“I see!” This was quite a revelation. Then: “But how do I know which voice to listen to? There’s a constant chatter going on in my head that doesn’t bear writing down,” he laughed, though it was quite a serious matter, worthy of consideration.

“Now that’s where our Mister Flint comes back into the picture with his development classes, Conrad. We don’t teach things at random here, you know: all these things are tailored to the needs of the individual student and are neatly tied-in together.

“In this case, the developmental classes will help you to quieten your ego and harness some of your wayward energies for the Good Cause. They’ll allow your true voice to be heard more and more; and after a time you’ll be able to tell which is which. You’ll find that at times your true voice of your inner-tuition will be quite direct with you, but it won’t be abusive or

spiteful; you may find it supportive and reassuring, but not pandering and not ego-massaging. Don't worry, you'll get to sense the difference and make a better and better contact with your friend over time."

"I see. Wow, you learn something new every day."

Mrs Philips smiled, putting her spectacles on once more and peering at him over the top of the lenses. "*Au contraire*,⁵ Conrad: especially in the early stages of this – which we call learning how to learn – you'll find yourself unlearning far more than you appear to learn. As the wise saying goes: you can't put anything into a full pot. You have to empty it of dross, and sometimes repair it, first before you can fill it with something altogether more wholesome and useful. So if we appear to be hard on you from time to time, rest assured that it's all in a good cause."

That latter assurance was severely tested over the next few weeks as the powers that be at the centre had him down on the rota for not one task but multiple consecutive and often conflicting tasks. Though Mrs Philips words were still firmly lodged in his mind and he did his best to perform well under the new regime, at the same time another part of him – his ego? – balked at the idea and was bucking and refusing to move like a stubborn mule.

He'd been given a temporary post in the centre's office, tasked with taking on any typing and photocopying that the staff or his fellows might require. But that wasn't all: he was also required to answer the telephone – which constantly put him on the spot for lack of knowledge. And he had to run odd errands through the building, such as delivering mail and messages.

After two months of frantic and sometimes frenetic activity, despite the fact that he was developing the ability to work under pressure for sustained periods and with less and less

⁵On the contrary; quite the opposite.

supervision, he reached boiling point, threw his pen down, asked one of the other staff if she'd take over for a few minutes, and made a beeline for the Director's office. He'd not as yet met or even seen the Director, but this nonsense ultimately had to be his responsibility.

Mister Flint must have got wind that things had reached a crisis point and he came dashing down the corridor after Conrad just as he entered the Secretary's office and demanded to see the Director.

"I'm sorry, Conrad," the secretary began, and was obviously about to make some excuse, so Conrad pushed past her and burst into the Director's office. It was empty.

"As I was saying, Conrad," the Secretary continued unabashed: "The Director isn't here this week."

"It's okay, Doris," said Mister Flint, gently taking hold of Conrad's arm. "I'll sort Conrad out. Let's take a walk up to the village and we'll have a chat over a pie and a pint."

It was well into winter now and so the pair pulled their coats and hats on before wandering off down the scrunchy gravel drive. Mister Flint talked about anything and everything on the road up the hill to the village, but not about the cause of the crisis. Only when they were settled with their lunch and a few sips into their pints in a quaint old tavern with low ceilings, blackened oak beams and whitewashed walls, did the man respond to Conrad broaching the subject.

"Are you unhappy with my work?" Conrad wanted to know.

"Is that what you think?" asked Mister Flint, looking quite concerned. "Not at all, Conrad. Banish that thought from your mind. Mrs Philips tells me you're already becoming quite a whizz on the keyboard – 'taken to it like a fish to water', she said – and that's just one of your recent accomplishments. You've coped admirably and, if I might say so, you certainly have staying power, which is a good thing."

That still didn't really answer his questions. "So what's it all about?"

"You want an explanation, of course, Conrad. That's quite natural. And yes, I agree that you certainly deserve one at this point.

"You remember the conversation you had with Mrs Philips?"

Conrad thought for a brief moment, and the words sprang to his lips of their own accord. "About not having to think thinking's thoughts for it and all that jazz, yes."

The man beamed and lightly cuffed him on the shoulder. "Spot on, Conrad." Then: "Clearly you need training and sometimes nudging in the right direction, but you're a natural.

"Well, what we've put you through recently, Conrad, is also linked to the ability to think on your feet to spontaneously meet the needs of the moment, rather than rigorously planning everything out beforehand."

"Ah ..." That made a little more sense now.

"So, we deprived you of the time and opportunity to ponder, plan and plod along," Mister Flint explained.

"What we also noticed, you see, is that left alone to work on one specific task, you'd pour your all and everything into that task; put your heart and soul in it, which of course is no bad thing in moderation and as long as it is not habitual or compulsive."

"However?"

Mister Flint took a sip of his drink before continuing.

"However Conrad, at one level, that's still what we'd call sequential processing. That effort, mammoth as it might at times be, would be to the exclusion of all else. And that's not the way the world works, nor the most efficient way of handling tasks in the real world."

The way he stressed the phrase "real world", it was as if he'd capitalized the words, hinting at some realm beyond the

mundane world of steel and concrete – advanced as it was in certain ways – and beyond linear thinking.

“Yes, that’s precisely what I mean, Conrad,” the man said, as if he had plucked the thoughts out of his head. Assuming, perhaps incorrectly, that this is where they resided.

“You know, there’s another way of looking at that,” Mister Flint continued, idly toying with the end of his moustache. “The commonplace explanation is that mind resides in the head and that thoughts arise in the brain due to things like the firing of neurons ...”

Conrad drew in his breath and raised his eyebrows. “And the other?”

“The other, more controversial and also traditional, notion is that mind is a property of something beyond the bounds of individual bodies, and that the brain detects and receives – and transmits – these things, like a radio transceiver, so that they only *appear* to originate and reside in the brain.”

Now there was a thought, if ever there was.

“But I digress. As I was saying, there is the total dedication to one task to the exclusion of all else, followed by total dedication to the next task, and so on in a linear fashion (even if the content is at times non-linear). To bring us back to Mrs Philips’ work, we might liken this to what she would term sequential processing or single tasking. But again there is another way and this she would call parallel processing or multitasking.”

“I see. Yes, I can certainly recognize myself mirrored in the former.”

“Now this, in turn, requires that one develops skills in prioritizing tasks and switching between them, putting some on hold and activating or re-activating others at the drop of a hat; and in gradually increasing your capacity to work under pressure. Not in a pedantic, pre-planned fashion but actually thinking on the hoof; making decisions on the spot; acting with

a natural spontaneity, an effortless skill that tends to become lost as we grow up. And this, in turn, may require one to develop skills in communication, negotiation and teamwork, so that you can dovetail your own work with that of others. We're not so much interested in teaching you specific skills, since these are only of limited use. What we're more committed to teaching are what are called transferable skills. That is skill which you can transfer to and apply in many other situations.

"Is this beginning to make a new kind of sense to you now, Conrad?"

Conrad nodded enthusiastically and took a large bite of his pork pie. "Absolutely. I had no idea that something like this could be behind the tasks I've been set recently."

"Good, good, good," the man smiled. "As Mrs Philips suggested, it's all been in a good cause."

Like "real world", here was another phrase that the man stressed as if to capitalize.

"There are certain subtle organs of higher perception," Mister Flint explained. "And these are activated by Necessity. Therefore the aim is to increase that Necessity. We call this conscious evolution.

"Anyhow, fancy another half before we head back?" asked the man, standing there twiddling his moustache.

"Go on then, you've twisted my arm, sir – meaning, yes, thank you. That would go down very well indeed."

As he returned from the bar, Mister Flint admitted: "I'm sorry, I can see that I threw you in the deep end, Conrad. It was meant to be a crash course in crisis management. Of course, we could take some of the pressure off you and ..."

Conrad shook his head. "No, thank you, Mister Flint, but I can see your intention more clearly now and the value of such tasks. I'd much rather you carried on as before and I'll do my best to bear in mind all you've said."

"If you're sure that's what you'd like."

Conrad nodded. "Absolutely. I'm sure. And I'm more than grateful for all the help I've received."

A thought dawned on him at that moment and he nearly choked on his ale: "This isn't really about orientation for life in the Freelands, is it, Mister Flint?"

It was Mister Flint's turn to raise his eyebrows. "No, Conrad: it's infinitely more and better, more useful and less transient than that."

Mister Flint took a sip of his drink and put his tankard back down. "Before my time with the Director, a mentor of mine once said to me: 'In this work, change is one of the most important things. If a change occurs and you perceive its connection with essential facts – so much the better. But if there is a change, and you are incapable of grasping its connection with the totality, this is inherent in your situation. If you were really able to understand the pattern of it all, you would not be where you are now. Let understanding develop. Beyond a certain point, you cannot struggle to try to understand without, at least, receiving some help.'"

"I see. And does it have a link to my destiny?"

"Absolutely. Your destiny, your heart's true desire ... you've nailed it in one. It is the destiny of the caterpillar to emerge from its chrysalis transformed into a butterfly ... though it should be noted that the chrysalis can, and all too often does, become a prison for the caterpillar."

"And what is this prison, Mister Flint?"

"It's made up of a great many largely invisible components, Conrad. The fossilized remnants of religion, institutions and groups; conditioning; indoctrination; the after-effects of trauma; the very way in which we are taught to think and to approach learning; what some call human vices and which we refer to in a more technical and descriptive sense as barriers to learning or limiting factors. The list goes on. Consider this akin to that of a hidden gem of inestimable worth, buried in the heart of a

mountain of accretions; the noble and ancient task being to dig out this gem, though fortunately for us, this process being simultaneously assisted by a reciprocal digging out from within. That task is, of course, more easily described than done, and requires a great deal of careful preparation and appropriate guidance.

“And there are certain prerequisites in this line of work,” Mister Flint added.

Conrad let out his breath. It was not quite a whistle of admiration, more of a sigh. “I thought there might be, and I just hope that I’m up to the challenge.”

“Have you heard about the pearl, Conrad?”

Conrad shook his head.

“A raindrop, dripping from a cloud, was ashamed when it saw the sea. ‘Who am I where there is a sea?’ it said. When it saw itself with the eye of humility, a shell nurtured it in its embrace.”

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After a time, Conrad was reassigned to other less taxing tasks, though the learning curve was still pretty steep. He was learning about so many diverse subjects and he did wonder about the relevance of some and how they could possibly fit into the bigger picture. Some, such as psychology were clearly of value, not least in relationships and in sensitizing him to these elements in his life; but others such as calligraphy and weaving left him wondering.

When he asked Mister Flint about this, the man thought for a moment. “Well, Conrad, the first point is that it’s often not so much what you do as how you do it, and there’s also the interpersonal dimension when working with others. What we’re teaching here is not so much ‘Know What’, which is ten-a-penny in this world, but ‘Know How.’”

“The second point – which I mentioned to you some time back – is that many of these things you’re learning are what we

call transferable skills. In other words, what you learn in one subject may work – with different details but the same basic patterns – in other fields.”

Conrad cast his eyes down. “Sorry, I really should have been paying more attention, Mister Flint.”

“Oh, don’t worry about that, Conrad,” Mister Flint reassured him. “We don’t expect our students to take in all of these things first time. We very often have to repeat ourselves or rephrase our words. Slowly and surely you’ll learn, though, even though at the time you might not think you are. Another thing that we’re doing, of course, is working the ground and casting seeds. These are early days, Conrad. It will take time for these seeds to germinate, and still longer before the crop has grown and is ready for harvesting, so you’ll have to be patient with us and – more importantly – patient with yourself.

“Now, the third point is that when you’re working in one area, you can get blinkered into looking for solutions from within that field. Often solutions may dawn on you that come from work you’ve done and things you’ve learnt in all manner of other, diverse fields.

“And the fourth point is that it’s simply good and healthy for you to be stimulated, have a wide range of interests and knowledge and the ability to converse easily with people from many diverse walks of life, Conrad. Who knows where some interest may develop into a favoured hobby and may lead you?”

“Yes, thank you. I thought there had to be some reasonable explanation, though I couldn’t quite see it,” Conrad admitted.

## 9. The pointing finger

The next day, neither Conrad nor Dzoldzaya had any lessons to go to, nor were they down on the rota for any chores – strangely, but perhaps by design – so they decided to make the most of this break. Conrad was becoming quite fond of Dee and he very much enjoyed her company.

Since it was pleasant, sunny day, they took a stroll across the grounds and through the woods where they'd been on the naturalists' field trip, pretty much following their feet rather than planning their route.

Every so often, Dzoldzaya would put her hand to her ear and inform him that she'd heard the chirping of this, that or some other bird; or she'd point out a plant and not only tell him the name, but also the culinary or medicinal qualities. She was so educated, and he was as yet so ignorant of all these things, and largely oblivious to the wonders of his natural surroundings. When he mentioned this, Dzoldzaya smiled and told him that little-by-little they'd get these things out of his head and into his heart. She likened this noble task to smuggling.

They came to a narrow stream, walking along its grassy bank for some time until they chanced upon a small bridge. It was simply made out of two stout planks of wood and a third length of wood at about hand height which acted as a safety rail, not that there was much risk even if you did step off the bridge. The worst that could really happen would be that you'd get your feet wet, for the water couldn't have been more than six inches to a foot deep and the stream bed was largely composed of loose shingle, rather than mud.

They had no idea where the bridge might lead, but clearly it had been built there for a purpose, so they decided to cross

over the stream and find out. Beyond the bridge there was a path, or at least the remnants of a path, for it had become somewhat overgrown with weeds and grass, and quite clearly the path was not in regular use.

They followed the path as it wound its way through the trees and a few hundred yards further into the wood they came across a wide open clearing. The first thing that they noticed was that here and there amongst the trees, they could see what looked like the remains of arched pillars and there were also a great number of moss covered boulders. They realized now that at some point in time there must actually have been a rather large and probably impressive building here; and, judging by the depth at which many of the boulders were buried in the ground, the building must surely be centuries old.

And the second thing they noticed as they crossed the clearing, was a tall marble statue standing on a plinth. It was the figure of a man in a long, flowing robe and he had his finger outstretched, pointing into the distance.

"I wonder what the statue symbolizes, Dee," Conrad remarked, as they went closer and walked around the statue to examine it from all perspectives.

She sat down on the marble plinth and patted her hand on the place beside her, inviting him to join her. "In our tradition, there's an ancient legend or re-enactment about a statue such as this.

"There was a statue of a man with arm outstretched, his finger pointing into the distance. And on the plinth beneath the statue there was a plaque on which were inscribed the words: *Dig here for treasure.*

"All the seekers but one dug either around the base of the statue or in the direction in which they thought that the statue was pointing, and they found nothing of value, while this one seeker simply sat back and watched to see what might unfold. And then, when he was ready, he took up his spade and dug at

the point where the shadow of the pointing finger fell when the sun was at its zenith:<sup>6</sup> the highest point it reached in the sky, at noon. And this seeker successfully unearthed the fabulous treasure.”

“And what was the meaning of that?” he asked Dzoldzaya.

“Well, if I remember correctly, the sun refers to the Source; the statue represents the teacher; and the pointing finger represents what he is apparently or outwardly teaching. This is how he teaches in the early stages.

“Looking at the shadow rather than the statue is a skill that the teacher wishes to develop in the student. This provokes a capacity in the student, the shadow, through which understanding develops and realization, the treasure, occurs.”

“I’m impressed,” Conrad beamed, affectionately stroking Dzoldzaya’s arm – then quickly pulling his hand away when he realized what he had been inadvertently doing.

“And something tells me that we didn’t simply happen upon this by chance,” he added, when he’d hastily regained his composure.

“I wholeheartedly agree with you, Conrad,” Dee smiled at him, taking his arm as they walked back across the clearing toward the bridge over the stream. “But if you’re looking at me and think this is some kind of put up job on my part, then you can think again. I’m as much in the dark about this as you are – except that in my case, were it not for the fact that this kind of thing has happened so many times before, I’d think it quite extraordinary.”

“Is that a good thing?” he enquired.

“Oh yes,” she nodded enthusiastically. “It’s a sign that we were in alignment and attunement, and a foretaste of what’s to come. So yes, enjoy this strange phenomenon and make the most of it while it lasts.”

<sup>6</sup>Directly above a point; at its peak. The point directly below is called the nadir.

They retraced their steps for some time after re-crossing the bridge, then took a dirt path to the left, leaving the woodland behind and heading up toward the village at the top of the hill overlooking *Foxholes*. The inn was just this side of the village, nestling in amongst a group of trees, but they carried on through the village instead and ate lunch together in a quaint roadside teahouse.

When they'd eaten their fill and their meal had settled a little, they slowly wended their back down the hill to the school and sat in the lounge chatting together and relaxing for a time. Then Dzoldzaya happened to see Mister Flint passing by along the corridor and, grabbing hold of Conrad's hand, she led him out of the lounge in pursuit.

"Excuse me, Mister Flint," Dzoldzaya called and the man turned and came back to stand beside them. Dzoldzaya told Mister Flint about the statue they'd found in the woods and he appeared quite fascinated, and hoped that they might lead him to the statue one day when they had some more free time. Of course, he asked them what they thought the statue meant, and Dzoldzaya related what she knew.

Mister Flint smiled. "Yes, that's about right, Dzoldzaya; but allow me to add one more piece of information that will cast further light on this matter.

"There's an old saying in a sister tradition, my friends, which dovetails beautifully with what you've told me already, and it is this," Mister Flint informed them: "*Do not mistake the pointing finger for the moon.*"

Conrad was puzzled by that. "What's it mean? I was hoping you might be able to give us some pointers."

He laughed at the unintentional pun.

Mister Flint smiled and patted him on the shoulder. "Conrad, it means that we awaken by realizing our true nature and not by solving such riddles as this with our mind. Words are merely symbols through which we can express something

of the truth, and they can point toward truth. But one should not become attached to or fixated by those words and symbols. Truth must be experienced and lived directly, in and of itself.” Begging leave of them, Mister Flint went on his way, while those words gradually sank in.

The man stopped abruptly in his tracks and turned back briefly. “Here’s a question for you both to quietly mull over, and perhaps we’ll have a look at it the next time we meet in our developmental class, before our exercises, and it is this: *Does life have meaning?*”

And with that, the man was gone.

My God, thought Conrad, after he’d been mulling that question over in his mind for a time. It was only four words, and yet it had such a big question mark hanging over it. He could just imagine himself posing that question to Mister Flint and the man replying enigmatically: *Why is the sound of a rose?*

Looking back over the many years he’d spent in Hodweir, Conrad could remember thinking that there must be more to life than the daily grind and perhaps more to life than met the casual or untutored eye. But that had simply been based on hope and ignorance and superficiality, rather than real knowledge. Having come this far, however, and being a little more awake than he once was, he had come to believe that life was simply pulsating with deep meaning and that a perceived lack of meaning in one’s life was actually a terrible disease that blighted the world. So now, were he to discover that life had no inherent meaning after all, other than that which we projected upon it or embroidered on the bare fabric, that blow would really knock the stuffing out of him.

After their lunch had fully settled, they went to see if one of the exercise rooms was vacant, as Dee wanted to help Conrad out with a meditation that he’d recently been given in an evening development class. And finally to round off the day, in the early evening they went back up the hill to *The*

*Wayfarer's Rest* with a group of the other students to eat dinner and to generally socialize.

So all in all, Conrad had really enjoyed that day, and Dee appeared to have genuinely enjoyed herself in his company, too, which rather pleased him. Well, he was tickled pink, to be honest.



## 10. Arrivals and departures

Dzoldzaya was in high spirits when Conrad sat down with her for breakfast the next day in a quiet corner of the school's cafeteria. She was usually quite bubbly, but today something special had clearly touched her. Conrad was a little distracted because Dee only had a white silk blouse on and he could quite clearly make out the outline of her pert breasts and pink nipples through the thin material, and a tantalizing glimpse of cleavage. For the first time, albeit in a rather crude and clumsy, adolescent fashion, Conrad realized that he was actually rather attracted to Dzoldzaya. He quickly banished the thoughts, pulled himself together and looked attentive.

"My younger brother, Yangchen, is coming here," she gleefully told him. "We lived in a town called Nanja in Narayana and shared a house there, and the plan was that I should come here first, get settled in and then he would follow once he'd managed to sell the house."

Narayana was many days' journey away. Unless you could afford to take the more direct route by sea, first you had to travel to the south of the Freelands; then turn east through the great forest and beyond that cross the vast open moorland, before heading north once more into Narayana and across the wide central plateau. That was something he'd learnt in geography only recently.

"So the idea is to use the money from the sale of the house to find us a place to stay near Sher Point and I move in there and find a job whilst he goes through the orientation course here. And once that's out of the way, he'll move in with me and find work."

"That's great. I'm happy for you," Conrad beamed. "So you'll be off to meet him, then?"

“Yes, Mister Cartwright is going to drive me to the coach station later this morning. If all has gone to plan, the stage coach should arrive around noon. Yangchen phoned yesterday to say that he’d made it safely across the border.”

“It sounds like you’ve got it all figured out.”

“Oh yes. We’ve had weeks of planning, down to the smallest detail. Of course, there’ve been hiccups, but nothing we couldn’t handle.”

“So you must be excited?”

“Absolutely. I hardly slept a wink last night,” she replied eagerly.

Dzoldzaya’s good news was tinged with a little sadness for Conrad and he also detected an element of possessiveness in him, regarding their friendship. “You’ll be leaving us, then, Dzoldzaya?”

She nodded. “Yes, tomorrow is my last day here.”

Conrad felt that, and it actually hurt.

“I’ll be stopping a few nights at a guest house in Sher Point whilst I look around for a place to live. Nothing fancy, just a small place to rent that will give us a roof over our heads until we get financially established. Then, once we’re working and have an income coming in, then we’ll look around for a place to buy.”

Dzoldzaya really did have life all mapped out, and Conrad wondered, given how close she and her brother seemed to be, whether there would be any room left in her life for him.

“I’ll miss your happy, smiling face and good company around here,” Conrad told her, forcing a smile, which said it all, really. “And I think I can speak for a lot of folk here on that account.”

She sighed. “Yes, and I shall miss you. You must visit, of course. And you won’t be here that much longer yourself, Conrad. I hope we’ll see more of one-another.”

He smiled, feeling a little relieved by her kind reply. “Yes,

I hope so, too, Dzoldzaya. You've been a good friend."

Dzoldzaya raised her eyebrows, as if something had just dawned on her, and she smiled at him. "I still am – and hope to be so for a long time to come."

That was reassuring. He squeezed Dzoldzaya's hand affectionately as they rose to leave the dining hall. "Me, too."

## 11. Many unhappy returns

The days passed and with the days lengthening and spring returned, it was Conrad's turn to leave the centre and embark on his new life in Sher Point. He'd had a look round the city and found himself a little bed sitting room above a butcher's on a shopping street not far from the city centre. He couldn't drive a car, let alone afford one, and he liked walking, but he'd rather be near the shops and not have to traipse in and out of the city every time he wanted something from the shops.

Once he'd moved in and filled the larder, Conrad scouted around the second-hand shops nearby and bought himself a few sticks of furniture. The sofa was a little grubby and moth-eaten, but it would have to do for now. He was just grateful to have a roof over his head and to be out in the community at long last. For the first few days, he found the sporadic chop-chop-chop from the shop downstairs something of a distraction and an annoyance, but he soon became used to it, as you do the ticking of a clock.

One of the first things he did, once the dust had settled, was to pay a call on Dzoldzaya and Yangchen. For some reason, his own induction had been more lengthy than that of the others, and when it was complete, he'd taken up Mister Flint's offer of a few weeks' work assisting with some office work and in typing up a manuscript, and the pay he earned had helped set him up in his flat. Mister Flint would have saved himself a whole lot of time and effort had he taken advantage of the centre's word processors, but in some ways he was an old-fashioned kind of a guy and he'd written out his long manuscript in pen and ink, liberally strewn with annotations in the page margins and correction upon correction in green and red ink.

So by the time Conrad was settled in his flat, Yangchen had joined, been through and left his short orientation course and was, according to his sister, Dzoldzaya, already looking around for work. Alas, however, whilst she had found work in an office, Yangchen had not been as successful thus far (though not for want of trying), the result being that, despite living quite frugal lives, their money was rather tight.

As soon as Conrad arrived at the terraced house and Dzoldzaya answered his knock at the door, Conrad knew something was not right.

“What’s the matter, Dzoldzaya?” he asked, reaching for her hand. “Where’s the happy, smiling face? You look like you found a penny and lost a pound.”

Dzoldzaya pulled out a lace handkerchief that had been tucked up her sleeve and wiped a tear from her eye. And she appeared quite agitated.

“Come in, Conrad,” she sighed, turning away and walking down the hallway.

“If it’s not convenient, I can always come back another day ...”

“No, I’m glad to see you, Conrad. Really I am. I’ll put the kettle on and I’ll tell you all about it over a cup of tea.”

“Where’s Yangchen?” he asked as Dzoldzaya gave the pot a final stir and held the strainer over one of the cups as she poured out the tea.

“That’s the thing,” she groaned, passing a cup to Conrad and taking a sip of her own.

She sighed deeply.

“He went out yesterday morning, assuring me that he’d met some guy in a tavern and been promised work. He had to go and meet the guy and have a look around the place, to see if he liked it. It’s my fault, of course: I should have been more laid back about money and instead I made him feel bad for not bringing in an income. I realize that one of my faults is being

too pushy. So for him it became a great matter of honour.”

“And he hasn’t come back?”

Dzoldzaya shook her head and chewed her nails. “I haven’t heard a word from him.”

“He must have *Foxholes*’ number,” he offered. They were all given a number to memorize and to call in the event of an emergency.

“Of course.”

“Well, I’m hoping that there’ll be a simple explanation for this, Dzoldzaya. Maybe we should go out and search for him?”

“I’ve already checked the hospital,” Dzoldzaya told him. She waved her hands in the air beseechingly. “That was the first thing that sprung into my head. As awful as it sounds, I even checked the city morgue.”

“What about the tavern?”

“Yangchen did say, but I couldn’t remember the name for the life of me.”

He ran through a few names of local haunts, but she shook her head as she heard each one. “I think it began with an ‘S’, or maybe a ‘W’. Oh, I don’t know,” she sighed.

Conrad had a terrible thought and he stood up and fished about in his pocket. Yes, there it was: a crumbling scrap of paper on which were written, in fading ink, the names of the three taverns to which he himself had been sent when he’d first arrived, looking for work.

“*The Shepherd’s Purse*?” he enquired.

She shook her head.

“*The Traveller’s Rest*?”

“No, not that one either.”

He came to the name at the top of the list, which he’d held back, hoping that it wouldn’t be that one. “*The Last Chance*?”

Dzoldzaya looked up sharply, clutching hold of his knee as she peered across to see the name written down on the paper in faded ink. “Yes, yes. That’s it: *The Last Chance*. And the man

he met there said his name was Grimshaw.”

“Did Yangchen say what the work involved, by any chance?”

She nodded. “He said something about a foundry.”

He’d have put money on her saying that, though he had been hoping and praying that she wouldn’t.

Conrad rose to his feet. “Put your coat on, Dzoldzaya: that’s where we’ll ...” He broke off in mid-sentence and sat down again.

Now Dzoldzaya grew even more alarmed. “What’s the matter, Conrad?”

“I can’t go there, I’ll be recognized. And I don’t think it would help if we did.”

He paused, running his hand over his sweating brow. “I should have told you this before, Dzoldzaya. If only I’d told you, then this would probably never have happened.” He went on to relate the whole story to her about the first interview he’d been to, his finding out that he wouldn’t be able to take legitimate work and being given the names of three taverns including *The Last Chance* where he might find rather more shady employment.

Then he went on to tell her about accepting work at the foundry, of being locked in, and of his eventual escape before finding his way to the Network. Of course, he glossed over the grim nature of the work there and the abuse.

“Oh my God,” she gasped. “That’s slave labour.”

Wide-eyed, he nodded vigorously.

“Then what are we to do, Conrad? We can’t go to the police.”

Again Conrad reached for Dzoldzaya’s hand, which was warm and damp with perspiration from the great strain she must be under. “I know. But don’t worry: we’ll figure something out, Dee.”

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Late that evening, Dzoldzaya arrived at the door in a battered old van she'd borrowed from another of the old boys who'd graduated from the Network's study centre at *Foxholes*. Conrad got in and, following his faltering directions, they drove out to the foundry and parked, in a cloud of fumes, off the road down a narrow dirt track not far from the perimeter wall. The van was old and poorly maintained, and it seemed to burn as much oil as petrol, hence the billowing fumes they left in their wake everywhere they went. Dzoldzaya laughed as she recounted the tale she'd been told, of this old bone-shaker. It had actually been stolen once and used as a getaway car, finally being abandoned over fifty miles further north. That must have been a picture.

They waited there a while, hearts pounding. Then when it was dark enough, Conrad got out and unstrapped the ladders from the roof rack. He leant one up against the wall and slowly climbed up. At the top, he threw an old blanket over the razor wire, then came back down to pick up the second ladder, to re-ascend and lower the second ladder down the far side of the wall. It took some time before he had finally managed to manoeuvre this ladder into position so that he could safely climb down, the task made all the more difficult by the fear and adrenaline which flooded his system.

Keeping to the shadows, he made it round to the dilapidated wooden barrack, eased the huge bolt on the outside and – with growing trepidation – stepped inside, fearfully aware for the first time of how the old floorboards creaked. He looked around the beds, trying to picture Yangchen as Dzoldzaya had described him. Yes, there he was, in the bottom bunk down the far end of the barrack, on the right; his mouth wide open and snoring loudly. As he stepped forward, he momentarily caught sight of a small long tailed rat in the aisle between the beds, eking out a meagre existence on stale breadcrumbs and cockroaches, just as the inmates were. When

it saw him, the creature scurried away under one of the beds.

Just as he was creeping down the aisle between the beds on tiptoe, hoping that he wouldn't disturb the others, all hell broke loose. He could hear the sound of barking outside and the barrack windows were lit up as powerful arc lamps around the perimeter of the foundry complex suddenly blinked on.

The barking was getting louder now and coming closer.

He spun on his heel, ready to make a dash for it, and in that moment, the main lights in the barrack went on.

At the door, with the leash of a snapping, cruelly-crossbred hunting dog in one hand and his cattle prod in the other, stood Barnham. Instantly, the others were awake, bolt upright in bed and blearing around to see what all the commotion was about. But there was nothing they could do to help.

"Well, well: if it isn't Fresh Meat! Did you miss us?" the man leered. He came forward until the dog was straining at its leash to sink its sharp fangs deep in Conrad's flesh.

He sidled away as the man came closer.

"Outside!" Barnham demanded, lunging at him with the cattle prod and shepherding him toward the open door.

They marched across the open expanse of concrete toward the foundry building and stopped outside a pair of wooden doors set into the ground.

"Open it," the man demanded.

Conrad stooped down and opened one of the hinged wooden doors. As he flung the thing open, Barnham kicked him hard, sending him careering down a concrete chute to the bottom, to land painfully amidst a huge pile of coal. This must be the coal hole.

"Sweet dreams, see you in the morning!" the man bellowed down the chute.

With that, Barnham slammed the door-to behind him and securely bolted it from the outside. And that was just the beginning of his problems.



As soon as Dzoldzaya heard the commotion over the far side of the wall and saw the powerful lamps come on, she knew something bad had happened and feared the worst. She turned on the engine, put the old van into gear and reversed down the rutted track toward the road. Then, turning the van round in a slurry of loose chippings, she reversed back up the track to wait, engine still running and ready for a speedy getaway, beneath the ladder.

She waited and kept looking at the ladders, hoping and praying that Conrad and Yangchen would pop their heads over the wall, but nobody came. And then she started worrying that it was only a matter of time before she, too, was discovered. She waited still longer, her foot ready to hit the gas at a moment's notice, but nobody came. And then the lights around the perimeter of the foundry were extinguished and she feared the worse.

So, tears welling up in her eyes, she drove away as fast as she could, hoping to God that she would not be pursued.

She instinctively drove home, to her own flat, but just as she was parking the van, she had second thoughts; turned the van around and drove toward *Foxholes*, the Network's study centre. She could think of nowhere else to go.

Dzoldzaya lost count of how many times she'd rung the front doorbell before someone finally opened the door, poked their head out and let her in. It was Mrs Philips and she was distinctly bleary-eyed, for it was still the dead of night, and she had her hair in curlers, with a cotton nightcap pulled over the top. At least she had her false teeth in.

"I need your help," Dzoldzaya blurted out.

"Yes, you don't have to tell me for me to be able to see that with my own eyes," Mrs Philips nodded sleepily and guided her through to the kitchenette attached to the staff room. The woman asked her to turn the gas fire on and make herself

comfortable by the hearth whilst she made them a strong coffee.

“I think you’d better tell me all about it, my dear,” the woman suggested once they were settled with their coffee cradled in their hands. “And spare me no detail.”

12. The long arm of the law

The police constable strutted into the *The Last Chance* and straight up to the bar.

“Good aftable, Consternoon, how can I help you?” the heavily tattooed bar tender asked him, with apparent confidence. This was clearly bravado, for he was shifting around nervously from foot to foot. “Can I offer you a drink?”

The constable puffed out his chest. “No thank you, not whilst I’m hon hofficial duty, sir. I’m looking for a man. I’m told Grimshaw is his name.”

A man sitting in a bay-windowed snug across the bar suddenly jumped up and made a beeline for the back door. He walked straight into the arms of a hulk of a man who took hold of him by the scruff of the neck and half carried, half dragged him back to the snug.

“Ah, it looks like my colleague has already found him,” the constable nodded, marching over and taking a seat beside the cowering man.

The constable reached in his breast pocket and produced a notepad, licking the tip of his lead pencil as he prepared to write down any relevant facts.

“What’s this all about?” the man wanted to know.

“Mister Grimshaw?”

“Yes. Bertrand Grimshaw at your service, officer.”

“A little birdie tells me that you have a rather unsavoury relationship with the proprietors of a foundry some ways out of town near the pretty little village of Puntley ...”

“Then you’ve been told wrong,” the man insisted, beads of sweat already forming on his brow.

The hulk in plain clothes took hold of one of Grimshaw’s hands and began to crush it in his vice-like grip. It was a token

of what he might do, should he be provoked.

“Ah, *that* foundry. Well, yes, the boss is my brother-in-law. I help the family out every now and again.”

“My little birdie tells me it’s a little more than that, Mister Grimshaw. I’m told that you supply the firm with illegal immigrants.”

Again the man pleaded ignorance, and again a cuff round the ear from the hulk soon changed his mind.

“Now, I have a proposition to set before you, Mister Grimshaw,” said the constable, looking furtively around. “You see, quite by mistake, your brother-in-law recently took into his employ two very dear friends of mine. One of them goes by the name of Conrad Harper and the other by the name of Yangchen Khalili.”

“Well, the second name rings a bell, yes. But not the first.”

“Take my word for it, sir.” The constable jotted down a couple of names on the back of a bar mat and tossed it in the man’s direction. “And the proposition is this. If these two friends of mine are not returned here to this bar, shall we say, before the morning is out, then rest assured that my sergeant will descend upon said foundry, have your beloved brother-in-law thrown in the cells, and have the establishment closed down forthwith.

“Do I make myself clear?”

The man was getting more and more flustered by the minute, flinching as the hulk loomed over him, cracking his knuckles and looking ever more menacing. “How do you like crushed nuts?” the hulk whispered in Grimshaw’s ear.

“Do I make myself clear?”

“Er, um ... abundantly, Constable.”

“So? What are you waiting for? My colleague will travel with you to the h aforementioned foundry and you will arrange for my friends’ release.

“Now ...” He consulted his pocket watch. “It should take

you no longer than two hours to go there and return. And in the meantime, I will be waiting here and annoying the landlord, who is unlikely to take kindly to my continued presence here, frightening off his valued, if largely reprobate *clientèle*.

“And if you do not all return safely by the appointed hour, then rest assured that my sergeant will descend on you like a ton of elephant dung.

“Do I make myself clear?”

The man was already out of his seat and anxiously fishing about to find his car keys. “Yes, yes. All right. I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

“That’s the spirit, Mister Grimshaw. That’s the spirit. And if there’s any more trouble, rest assured that we will come knocking on your family’s front door.”

Shortly before one o’clock that day, Grimshaw came back in, looking as flustered as ever and praying he was not too late, and behind him came a rather relieved looking pair – Conrad and Yangchen – and the constable’s colleague.

As soon as he saw the man dressed in police uniform and recognized him, Conrad all but hollered out “Mister Flint!” but something in the man’s eyes caught Conrad’s attention and he thought better of it. Yangchen, too, had his mouth open to speak and Conrad nudged him in the ribs with his elbow and silently shook his head. Only when they were outside, safely in Mister Flint’s car and away from the scene, did the man take off his police helmet and drop his pretence.

“Borrowed my brother Jake’s spare uniform. Hector and I put the fear of God in Grimshaw,” the man informed them with a hearty laugh. “I’ve done a bit of amateur dramatics in my time, and Hector here doesn’t have to utter a word to inspire awe.” And he went on to explain how he’d managed to secure their freedom.

It turned out that Hector, a gentle giant whom Conrad and Yangchen were meeting for the first time, had been a

strongman with a travelling circus in his younger days and had just been taken on as the handyman at *Foxholes*. He was a quiet man, but turned out to be a good friend over the years.

13. Reunion

It was the high summer and the end of the year for the folk of *Foxholes*. In contrast to other schools, though there was no summer vacation, there was no formal teaching during this period, except for new arrivals. However, because the vast majority of the students had nowhere else to live, part time practical work placements were found for them either on the local farms (culminating in the autumn harvest, which was another cause for celebration and thanksgiving), the nearby village or in Sher Point itself. And the school also ran its own workshops where art and crafts and even home-made jam and wine might be made and put up for sale at the weekly markets. This practical work was an important part of the curriculum all year round as well as a source of some income, though clearly not enough to fully finance the place. The funding must come from somewhere and it certainly didn't come from paid fees, as there were none. Exactly where that finance was found was a mystery to Conrad, however, though the study centre did seem to have attracted many distinguished friends who came and went from time to time. And they were here in force on Reunion Day.

From ten o'clock in the morning until three in the afternoon, it was the fête, a kind of village fair open to the public, with all their arts, crafts and culinary delights on sale and numerous fun sideshows, including Hector the Strongman's amazing feats and, over the stream which ran through the grounds, a slippery log contest. Two contestants would straddle the polished log and try to knock one-another off with the aid of long padded cushions.

In the afternoon the staff, students and friends sat down for a feast and in the evening, when all had been tidied up, there

was a ball with music, dancing and merriment and the odd glass of sherry or non-alcoholic punch to lubricate the works. Conrad was in a smart black suit and Dzoldzaya had changed in a very fetching, long, black silk dress, looking every bit a lady.

“Is that a ferret in your pocket, or are you just pleased to see me?” she teased him, and he flushed bright crimson.

The presence of one of the distinguished friends didn’t escape Conrad’s attention, with the emphasis on the word presence. It was none other than Tenzing Jangbu Rinchen, whose seminal book had helped him to take his first faltering steps in the right direction in his quest to find his destiny.

“What’s *he* doing here?” he asked Dzoldzaya in all innocence, nodding his head in Mister Rinchen’s direction.

“Well, he *is* the Director of Studies, silly.”

“Really?” Well that came as a shock. “You mean you’ve known all this time and didn’t say?”

“You didn’t ask,” she laughed. “Would you like to meet him?”

“Rather.” That was his initial reaction. Then: “On second thoughts, maybe not. I wouldn’t know what to say to the man after I’d said ‘hello’ and ‘thanks’.”

“It’s alright, he won’t bite, you know,” Dzoldzaya retorted and, tucking her arm under his, she half guided him and half dragged him in the direction of the Director.

“Oh, my God ...” he said, slowly drawing out each word.

The Director saw them coming, broke off his conversation with another of the staff and met them halfway. “Well, hello again Dzoldzaya,” he greeted her warmly, giving her a friendly hug. “It’s good to see you. And who would this fine young gentleman be?”

The Director turned to Conrad, who was temporarily dumbstruck.

“This is Conrad,” Dzoldzaya told the man, coming to his

rescue. "Conrad, this is our Director of Studies, Tenzing Jangbu Rinchen."

"My full Thursday name, no less," he chided her. "My friends call me Tenzing and I'm pleased to meet you, Conrad."

Tenzing held out a hand and Conrad shook it. "Conrad Harper. Pleased to meet you, too, sir," he said, with a little bow.

Tenzing raised a finger in the air. "Ah, *that* Conrad. Well, I've heard a lot about you, Conrad."

Conrad momentarily flushed with embarrassment. "I think this is the point in the conversation where I come out with that old chestnut, 'Only good things, I hope.'"

Tenzing laughed. "Right at the beginning, when you dreamt of meeting me and told Mister Flint about your searching for your destiny, I knew that you had it in you," Tenzing told him. "And so I asked to be kept posted about your progress."

"And Dzoldzaya here has filled me in on a lot of the detail," the man said with an impish grin.

Conrad looked at Dzoldzaya, as if to say "How could you?" He felt used.

Dzoldzaya looked a little abashed. "Uncle ..." she begged. "Don't embarrass me."

Uncle?

"Uncle?" he asked quizzically. "You didn't say. What else have you been keeping back?"

"You didn't ask," she grinned.

Tenzing pointed to one, then the other and to their interlinked arms. "Are you ... um ..."

An item?

Dzoldzaya raised her eyebrows but said nothing.

As for Conrad, it suddenly dawned on him what Tenzing meant. Strangely enough, though he'd grown close to Dzoldzaya, until that moment, he hadn't thought of their relationship in terms of serious romance. And now he wouldn't

be able to get that idea out of his head.

Tenzing smiled.

Once upon a time, there was a powerful king who heard that there was a sage who possessed the Greatest Secret. And of course, being a powerful king, he had the old sage brought before him and threatened him with beheading unless he told the king this great secret.

So the old sage crept up to the throne and cupped his hand to the greedy king's ear and whispered the Greatest Secret.

He turned away to leave the throne, then turned back as if he'd had a second thought. "And above all, Sire, on no account are you to think of monkeys."

"And how could the king not immediately think of monkeys after being told such a thing? It's not easy, stilling the thoughts, is it, Conrad?"

Conrad shook his head and said nothing, though in truth the story raised a chilling thought, and he could picture it in his mind. What if the great secret that the sage had whispered to the king was this: *Life has no meaning.*

"Wayward thoughts have folk in their thrall. This is one of the essential pre-requisites to re-establishing contact with your heart on the road to enlightenment. Which is one of the reasons for the development sessions you've had with Mister Flint."

He'd figured out something along those lines by now, and it struck Conrad that perhaps though the words were apparently directed at him, they were as much for Dzoldzaya's benefit.

Tenzing merely smiled his enigmatic smile.

"Tell me, you two," said Tenzing out of the blue: "What are you doing this August?"

They looked at one-another and shrugged. "I don't know, why do you ask?" asked Dzoldzaya.

"I'm off to Narayana on the 2nd of August and will be arriving back here on the 28th. Just a flying visit this time. And you are welcome to accompany me."

“But what about Yangchen?”

“I heard that he’s been having difficulties finding work in Sher Point, so I’ve arranged something else for him to tide him over this slack spell, if that’s all right? Didn’t he tell you?”

Then: “There’s no need for an answer right now. Just think it over and talk with one-another about the possibility.”

“Anyhow, if you’ll excuse my rude departure, I must go and circulate amongst the friends. Good to meet you, Conrad, and to see you again, Dzoldzaya.”

And with that, Tenzing was away to mingle with the masses. The man seemed equally at ease in all manner of company.

“What do you think, Conrad?” Dzoldzaya asked as they walked off toward the trestle tables to fill their plates at the buffet.

“Well, if we had a day free at each end to get ready for the journey and to unwind after the return trip, that would be four weeks off work. Since I’ve only just started, I only have three weeks and we have to save a week for December when the business is closed down. So I’d have to take my two weeks paid leave and beg them for two week’s unpaid leave.”

Dzoldzaya nodded. “Same here.”

“But on the plus side, I notice that neither of us have said an outright ‘no’ to the idea,” he reflected.

“That’s true. I’m sure you’d enjoy the holiday, by the way, Conrad. For someone who’d never been to Narayana, it would be the trip of a lifetime. So when was the last time you had a holiday?”

He shrugged. “Well, in Margate I used to have Saturdays off. Sometimes we’d go for a walk in the country for a while if there weren’t any chores that needed doing at home.”

“Shall we say ‘yes’ and hang the consequences, then?” she asked, running a friendly hand down his arm.

“If we can wangle the time off work, then we’ll say ‘yes’.

Is it a deal?"

Dzoldzaya gave him a hug and kissed him on the cheek. "Yes, it's a deal ... even if we *can't* wangle the time off work. If they fire us, it will be their loss, more than ours.

"Come on. Are you a man or a mouse, Conrad Harper?" she asked, standing there with her hands on her hips.

"Are you sure?" he asked a second time, trying to appear unphased by her retort.

"Sure I'm sure, Connie. Wasn't it *you* who said that fortune favours the bold? Well, it's time to live those words, not merely mouth them."

"That would be my father, yes; though he also said something to the effect that fate shifts on the fool. He may have been a little drunk at the time, but I do believe that he meant those words."

14. The end of the road

Toward the end of the evening, Tenzing came back over to see them.

“Are you doing anything for the next two or three Tuesday evenings?” he asked them.

“Not that I know of,” Dzoldzaya replied. “What about you, Conrad?”

“I’m free. Why do you ask?”

“We have a newcomer in our midst. He’s quite a complex case and I’m devoting the next few Tuesday evenings to private sessions with him. I thought you might find it interesting and of no small benefit were you to sit in with us and provide some feedback.”

“Complex case?” prompted Dzoldzaya.

“It’s best I say no more than that, so that you do not come to prejudge the matter,” Tenzing replied. “Even saying that is perhaps a little much. Would you like to join us?”

“Sure, Tenzing. I can’t promise any great insights, but yes: I’ll pitch in in any way I can. When do we start?”

“This coming Tuesday at seven-ish. Each session will last between two and three hours. And when we’re done, we can perhaps have a little supper and a nightcap together?”

“Sounds good,” Dzoldzaya nodded. “Yes, we’ll be there, on the dot.”

He just looked at her.

She smiled. “‘At around seven-ish’, as you rightly suggest. Yes, I know: I have this thing about punctuality.”

“That’s the ticket,” Tenzing nodded approvingly, happy that she’d appreciated her issue and seen his point.

They assembled in Tenzing’s private study the following Tuesday evening; Conrad and Dzoldzaya arriving predictably

on the stroke of seven, with Tenzing arriving a minute or two later with a newcomer in tow.

The man was middle-aged, perhaps in his early forties and quite lean for his age, with a receding hairline and a forehead that looked as highly polished as the marble floor of *Foxholes'* hallway. He walked with a swagger and he was quite voluble: through the partly open door, they heard him coming down the corridor long before he arrived. And yet for all his apparent self-confidence, his haggard features betrayed something else: perhaps some deep, inner conflict.

"Hello," he greeted them, plonking himself down in Tenzing's favourite armchair by the fire and introducing himself. "I'm H. That's all you need to know."

So what did "H" stand for, Conrad mused? A thought sprang instantly to mind: Haughty?

"I suppose you're pupils here?" the man asked disdainfully.

First impressions can deceive, so it was said, but this case was perhaps an exception. Conrad could feel his hackles rising and rebuked himself for this slightly unwelcome reaction, all too aware that he was being judgemental rather than unconditionally accepting; and that this was equally not at all a good beginning on his part. Instead, he should be grateful to the man for allowing him to see his own faults reflected in the mirror.

"This is Dzoldzaya Khalili and I'm Conrad Harper," he responded politely and held out his hand. H made no move to shake it, so he retracted the invitation. Suit yourself.

"Perhaps you might tell us a little about yourself and what brings you here, H?" prompted Tenzing, once they were settled.

H pulled himself up straight in his chair and began:

"I've looked high and low for spirituality," he began. "I've searched the Outland, the Freelands, the East. I've lost count of the places I've visited on the way. And I've searched on-line, all to no avail. Everything seems to have disappeared. It's as if

the Powers That Be have said ‘bugger this for a game of soldiers’, shut up shop and gone home.”

“So why are you here, H?” asked Conrad.

The man paused, as if summoning up the courage, or perhaps for dramatic effect. “I’m in love. I have this deep, all-consuming yearning that I can’t satisfy. It never gives me any let up. On and on it goes, every moment of every day.” And the man rambled on and on in this vein, haphazardly and sometimes incoherently for the best part of twenty minutes.

“What is it you are in love with?” Dzoldzaya asked, picking up on what she took to be the most important thread. By now she was feeling utterly confused by the man’s ramblings, but fortunately she’d had the sense to make brief notes. As for Conrad, he was looking strangely exhausted and even a little shell shocked, perhaps because he had a certain ‘sensitivity’, and Tenzing appeared content at this stage to sit attentively and say nothing.

“I really don’t know, and nobody seems to understand. What makes it worse is that I’m so alone and isolated and I’m not a very social person. This has been going on for twenty years now and I’ve finally reached breaking point, and I desperately need your help.”

“I’m so sorry to hear that, H,” Dzoldzaya commiserated. “The fact that you realize you have an issue is half the battle, as I’m sure you know. Please, tell us more.”

H shrugged. “I’ve reached the end of the long and winding road, you see, and found that there’s nothing there, nor anywhere to go from there. Yet I don’t feel complete and I don’t know what to do next, and – as I said – I haven’t been able to find anyone to help me. I’m in uncharted territory now, and this is way beyond these people’s scope and competence. I have this terrible, unrelenting craving, which I cannot satisfy, and it’s tearing me up inside. So, I’m hoping that you might be able to help me out here.”

“Dzoldzaya?” Conrad appeared puzzled by this utterance, and he looked to her to gauge her reaction.

She decided to dive straight in the deep end. “H, there’s a teaching story that will help to illustrate such a state and we might entitle it *First Things First*.⁷ There’s a preamble which reads: ‘A person cannot learn until he or she is in a state in which he can perceive what he is learning, and what it means’.”

H sighed deeply and shook his head, but he allowed Dzoldzaya to continue.

Nasrudin went one day to a well, in order to teach this point to a disciple who wanted to know “the truth”. With him he took the disciple and a pitcher.

The Mulla drew a bucket of water, and poured it into his pitcher. Then he drew another, and poured it in. As he was pouring in the third, the disciple could not contain himself any longer.

“Mulla, the water is running out. There is no bottom in that pitcher.”

Nasrudin looked at him indignantly. “I am trying to fill the pitcher. In order to see when it is full, my eyes are fixed upon the neck, not the bottom. When I see the water rise to the neck, the pitcher will be full. What has the bottom got to do with it? When I am interested in the bottom of the pitcher, then only will I look at it.”

His disciple pondered this lesson, linking it with other absurd actions of the Mulla. A week later he went to Nasrudin and said: “Teach me about the pitcher. I am now ready to learn.”

“Oh, that old chestnut,” retorted H, dismissively. “I passed into the state of sunyata⁸ – emptiness – some years back.”

Conrad raised his eyebrows and came back with a response

⁷A tale recounted by Idries Shah in *The Exploits of the Incomparable Mulla Nasrudin*, Octagon Press.

⁸Emptiness, a very high state of spiritual being.

of his own, to defend Dzoldzaya's assessment. "If I may be so bold, H, in one and the same breath, you're saying that you are a guide, and also that you are lost and in need of a guide. You appear to be in two minds. Doesn't that strike you as a little odd? It seems to me that if you *had* reached such a lofty station, then – almost by definition – you would not be in the mess you now find yourself in, and you would have all the answers."

Again he looked to Dzoldzaya and to Tenzing, realizing that his response had been quite confrontational; hoping that he hadn't overstepped the mark and yet knowing full well inside that he indeed had.

"Well, yes," H agreed after a momentary pause. "In a sense, I *am* the Guide – with a capital *gee*. And yet I'm still unable to relieve the great anguish that I feel and move forward, and I haven't been able to find anyone with a knowledge of this uncharted territory who can help me.

"And believe me, over the last twenty years, I've travelled the world and have studied all the great Traditions. And I do mean *all*. You name it: I've been there, done it and got the bloodstained t-shirt. And I'm still looking for someone competent to help me."

"Some of the spiritual masters have warned against such a pick and mix approach, you know," Dzoldzaya remarked.

"It's not pick and mix," H replied. "And – don't tell me – I bet someone's written a bloody story about it."

Dzoldzaya laughed. "Yes, actually they have. It's about a man who visits one specialist who suggests a surgical operation. Dissatisfied with this, the man asks for a second opinion and is told that what he requires is a purgative. Again dissatisfied with this, he seeks a third opinion, and he is told that what he needs is a good massage. 'That's fine,' says he, 'I'll have a third of a cut, a third of a purge and a third of a massage and that should sort me out nicely.'"

H sighed. "Very droll, I'm sure. But as I've already told

you, my approach was not pick and mix. It's been a systematic search, leaving no stone unturned. I've scoured this planet from one end to the other, all to no avail. And most of the groups and the Masters seem to have called it a day, packed their bags and left."

"Ah, I see," she nodded. "I'm sorry if I misunderstood you."

"H," Conrad spoke, at length. "There is the traditional story that my mother once told me of the man who was suffering from appendicitis."

He went to see a doctor, who referred him to a surgeon. And the surgeon told him that he'd have to cut him open and take out the infected organ.

The man wasn't happy about this and demanded a second opinion, so the surgeon sent him to a colleague in a neighbouring town.

But by the time he got there, this consultant had gone home for the day, and all the receptionist could suggest, since the man was so insistent and in dire need, was that he went to see the local vet.

Again, the vet told him that he'd have to cut him open and take out the infected organ.

And again the man was not happy with this and demanded a third opinion, so the vet sent him to a colleague in the next town.

And again, by the time he got there, he was too early, for the consultant had not yet got out of bed to go to work, and since he couldn't wait any longer and his condition was growing more critical by the minute, the early morning cleaner at the surgery sent him off to see someone who worked down the road, whom she knew might be able to help.

And so it was that the man found himself laid out on the marble slab of the local butcher ...

"I'm really not interested in these damn fairy stories,"

retorted H, gripping the arms of the chair, leaning sharply forward, resolutely shaking his head from side to side and tut-tutting. "What is it with you people? You don't understand, do you? Nobody understands. I was a fool to think that you might be able to help. You're just like all the rest. Patronizing and dismissive and so lacking in any real sympathy or understanding. I pity you."

Conrad cast his eyes down, realizing that he'd made a botch of it, and turned what should have been a therapeutic session into an open confrontation. "I'm sorry, H," he said when he'd recovered his composure. "I was trying to help, and didn't mean to attack you."

Conrad sat up and made an effort to pull himself together.

"Two things tentatively strike me right now, H. The first is that you may find good company in Tenzing Jangbu Rinchen's book *The Search for the Miraculous*, in which he goes in search of the story in his heart, not knowing of course when he sets off what that story might be, where to find it, or even how to find it. All he knew was that the idea of this quest of his was playing on his mind, gnawing at him, as it were. That sounds a little like the deep yearning that you mentioned."

"A little. And this Tenzing? Can't say that I've heard of him," H frowned. Conrad looked toward Tenzing, who surreptitiously put his finger to his lips. Clearly he hadn't told the man who he really was, and apparently he wanted things to stay that way, at least for now.

Conrad carried on unabashed before the words slipped from his mind and he lost his chain of thought.

"And the second is that for similar reasons, for some time now I've been searching for my destiny, for my heart's true desire. At the moment I only have a relatively vague idea of how to find that destiny; together with the notion that at the same time, destiny is seeking us; that in one sense, it may be likened to a tiny voice already here inside us, trying to be heard

above the clamour; and that destiny is not a destination at the end of a journey but rather a way of being, with us along the way. I don't think we're ever truly alone.

"So, H," he concluded, "I wish you good fortune in your own quest."

"Not more books, please," H sighed. "Over the years I built up a library of thousands of books. And, believe me, they do not contain the answers to the sort of advanced questions that are facing me."

For a time there was silence.

Tenzing stroked his chin thoughtfully and took the brief interlude to express some thoughts. "You know, H, a great man once said: 'You have only a weak potential for the development of your "I". This potential can very quickly be spoiled. If you do not concentrate, you will waste your time. If you dabble in a variety of systems, you will only waste your potential and very probably you will give away to others an essential substance, without making any progress yourself. Learn that this is a loss or escape of energy that you cannot allow yourself. Decide, therefore, if you prefer to dabble, or if you wish to make this work your one and only effort. As you cannot afford to waste your substance, neither can the work allow itself to carry mere passengers. There is all the difference in the world between making this positive and consecrated work on one side and on the other side dabbling in metaphysics or associating with people whose aims are different from yours.'"

H looked like he was in two minds again, but rather than attack Tenzing's pointed remark, he settled for a simple and deliberately understated two syllable "Thank you" – a token gesture or a mere conversational device, really – immediately going on at great and breathless length to list all the approaches he'd made to spiritual schools and masters over the years, and all their perceived shortcomings. It appeared that nothing and nobody was good enough for H's impossibly exacting

requirements. H had put himself way beyond the pale of any mortal soul who might have been able to help him in some way, and Conrad assumed that this was a defensive strategy. However, at that moment Conrad was struck quite forcibly by the realization that his own unresolved issues were coming between him and H and preventing a full, open contact; and that he was going to have to deal with those issues first and foremost. *That's what I'm here for*, he seemed to hear Tenzing whisper in his head, and when he looked across the room, he did indeed see the Master looking in his direction, though the man said nothing and immediately turned his attention back to H and the matter at hand.

"I'm sorry to hear that," Dzoldzaya nodded. "You've been failed."

"For a time I even tried being a guru myself, you know," H concluded, ignoring this remark. "But I found that whilst I'd reached the end of the road and entered uncharted territory, most people were miles back at a very early stage, and that they weren't ready for advanced teachings. The whole world is thousands of miles back on the road; stuck in the Stone Age. And here I am in a quandary, both a neophyte knowing nothing and yet way ahead of anyone I have yet to meet. I'm in a different league altogether and I wonder if anyone will ever catch up."

As he finished his fifteen minute rant, Dzoldzaya rose to her feet as if to leave the room, clearly beginning to seethe inside, but Tenzing gently prompted her to stay. He looked at his pocket watch.

"Here's a story for you to mull over and inwardly digest, which you may not have heard before, H. It's called *The Divine Emanations*:"

For as long as he could remember, a man had been convinced that he was privy to divine emanations, but he could never quite pin down what they were or where they came from.

They just seemed to arise as if from nowhere or arrive on the wind. And so obsessed did this man become, that he left his family and his job and set out one day to find the source of the emanations, travelling far into the mystical East.

He went from one wise man to another and sat in their presence and enjoyed their rich hospitality for countless hours and from time to time he'd sense the divine emanations as they arose and say: "There you are! Did you, such a wise man, not notice that? That's what I was trying to explain to you: the Divine Emanations! That is what I seek." But time and time again, the wise men would merely shrug their shoulders and shake their heads, apologizing that they could not be of assistance to the man in this matter, and he would leave their company to carry on his noble quest, certain that they were useless and could be of no help to him.

And then one day, this man came to the door of a Master in the Tradition -- indeed the door of the Teacher of the Age. And no sooner had he finished the particularly rich and spicy meal that his host offered him and had begun to explain to him his great desire to sit in the presence of the source of the Divine Emanations, than he let out a whoop of joy. "There! That is what I mean! That is what I have dedicated my whole life to seeking. The Source of the Divine Emanations! Surely, you must sense it too? Could it be that after all these years of selfless devotion to my quest I have finally been rewarded by being allowed into the presence of the Source?"

The Teacher of the Age looked the man straight in the eye and shook his head. "Divine Emanations, my friend? Yes, there are indeed divine emanations, emanations so potent that merely spending time in the presence of the elect is sufficient to transform a man or woman."

"But, listen carefully to me ..."

"I knew it!" the man whooped with joy. "At long last! God be praised!"

“... But,” continued the Teacher of the Age. “This is not what you have been seeking all these years. You may find it hard to stomach, my friend, but the divine emanations of which you talk so much, and have dedicated your life to, are in fact nothing more mystical or divine than the smell of your own farts, drifting through the air. This is nothing more than a symptom of your own chronic flatulence. It is only through people’s good manners that this connection has not until now been pointed out to you.”

You could see that H was seething at that moment, and barely able to contain himself.

“Note that the term flatulence carries two main meanings: A state of excessive gas in the alimentary canal, and also an over-inflated sense of self-importance and pompously embellished language. What is actually an internal issue is often projected externally.”

At this point, H stormed out of the study without so much as a “goodbye”. Tenzing again looked at his pocket watch and rose to his feet. “Well, on that note, ladies and gentlemen, I think it’s time to bring this session to a close. Thank you, one and all. We’ll reconvene next Tuesday evening at the same time.”

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Conrad and Dzoldzaya were getting ready to go to the next session the following week, indeed Dzoldzaya already had her sleeves rolled up and her claws sharpened for some serious action, figuratively speaking. Deeply frustrated by the first session, she was determined not to allow “H” to ride roughshod over them a second time. Dzoldzaya felt quite disturbed by the man and chided herself for being fool enough to let him inside her head where he was still gnawing away at her. Beneath her confident and single-minded exterior, she was surprisingly vulnerable. And, sometimes needing to protect that vulnerability, she could be a little sharp.



Then they received a telephone call from Tenzing. He was very apologetic and told them that the session had been cancelled, because, having left a cursory note to say that he had decided to seek out assistance elsewhere, “H” had abruptly left *Foxholes*. His current whereabouts were as yet unknown.

“And bloody good riddance, too!” Dzoldzaya had growled at the time, though Conrad knew that deep down, of course, she didn’t mean this.

After a lengthy silence, Dzoldzaya apologized. “I’m sorry, that was a stupid outburst,” she said. “There’s nothing I’d like better than to be able to help the man, but he doesn’t make that an easy task, and alas I allowed my own issues to intrude, rather than simply and unconditionally being here for him. What I should really do is set my own house in order first.”

“That makes two of us,” he nodded.

“As for Uncle Tenzing,” Dzoldzaya added, “he certainly didn’t pull any punches with that parting shot, and yet he’s the last person to give way to crude emotion or cast insults. I can only assume that he was deliberately aiming to provoke a reaction, for his own good and sufficient reasons.”

## 15. Eastward bound

At last the day had dawned. Dzoldzaya had slept at her uncle's the previous night and they turned up at Conrad's door to pick him up not long after the sun had begun to rise.

"There'll be time for that later," Dzoldzaya chided him, taking the cigarette from his mouth and casting it aside, just as he was about to light it.

"Sorry," he replied. "I was just going to stoke the boilers."

"Hammer another nail in your coffin, more like," she countered. "You know damn well, deep inside, that smoking is suicide by instalments. Now hurry up, time's pressing and we have a long drive ahead of us."

"Yes, ma'am," he nodded sheepishly, surreptitiously picking up the dropped cigarette and palming it into his pocket. There was only one thing that he couldn't bear more than starting the day without a tea or coffee, and that was to go without nicotine. Well, if he couldn't smoke the thing, then he'd tease out some of the tobacco and damn well chew it.

Dzoldzaya paused for a moment and turned back. "I'm sorry, too," she smiled, reaching out to gently squeeze his hand. "I tend to get a little flustered when making travel arrangements."

Once out of the metropolis, they quickly passed through the sprawling shanty town that had grown up by the roadside and spread out from there in all directions, then they were heading across the lush rolling downs of Midsomer, the country's breadbasket. By late morning, they turned eastward and entered the vast and sheltered dark green and silver-grey expanse of the Great Forest, a myriad bright and colourful wild flowers carpeting the ground to either side of the road. At length they came to the Eastern border. Thankfully, their forged

papers were deemed in order and they left the Great Forest behind to cross open moorland which appeared to be devoid of vegetation other than coarse grass, heather and hardy gorse, growing ever more desolate, and the road more rough, as the journey went on.

The moorland seemed to stretch from horizon to horizon and it was early evening by the time they slowly came down off the moors and began to follow a surprisingly lush green valley snaking in a generally north easterly direction.

Shortly afterwards they came to a small hamlet nestling in a bend in the river amidst the trees and Tenzing pulled in beside a quaint looking inn. It had a black oak framework which, according to their tour guide, Tenzing, was filled in with wattle and daub. The wattle consisted of a woven lattice of thin wooden strips and as for the daub, that was a mixture of clay, sand, straw and animal dung. Primitive or not, it was effective, and it was attractively painted in white in contrast to the dark oak.

They'd be staying the night there and the pleasantly-plump and rosy-faced landlady had her son help them upstairs to their room and brought up a large basin of hot water for them to freshen up.

"If you come down at seven, I'll have a nice stew ready for you," she said as she left to go back downstairs.

It seemed they'd all be sleeping in the same room that night, with two single beds on one side of the room and a third bed over the other side, with a curtain rail going between that and the other beds, which would allow Dzoldzaya a modicum of privacy.

At seven, almost on the dot, they went downstairs and found the dining room. It was a little chilly out in the wilds that evening, despite the shelter offered by the valley and the trees, and the landlady had thoughtfully lit a log fire and set a table for them nearby.

“Are you travelling far?” the landlady asked, as she and her slim, auburn-haired daughter brought the stew and set out their plates.

“Up into the foothills,” Tenzing told her, without being more specific, as he took the lid off the tureen, gave the stew a stir and began to serve them. “I’m arranging a wedding for a relative.”

“Oh, I see. Well, I wish you a safe journey, and my best wishes to the happy couple,” the woman smiled as she walked away.

“You just told a little white lie, Uncle,” Dzoldzaya remarked, feigning disapproval.

“No, no,” he insisted, passing a plate to Dzoldzaya: “It was the truth, my dear, but I told it a little ahead of time.”

“Can you foretell the future?” Conrad wanted to know.

“There are a couple of answers to that, Conrad. The first, at a relatively low level, is that it may simply be nothing more than an ability to sense and see connections between apparently unrelated things that others have failed to spot or misinterpreted. Some things are connected in unfamiliar or non-linear ways, which can render that relationship invisible to the pedestrian mind.

“And at a higher level, or to be more accurate at a deeper level, things that are apparently individualities and unconnected are in fact connected, collective or pooled together in quite subtle ways. Even things that are apparently separated by time or space.

“So there are a couple of requirements for this kind of functioning: the first, to use one of those new-fangled buzz phrases, is to be able to ‘think outside the box’ and to be able to use holistic thinking, by which I mean both the linear thinking and differentiation of the left brain and also the lateral or simultaneous thinking of the right – both sides – together. And the second is to be able to descend into the deeper levels and

make contact from those depths. Go deep enough into your own mind, or your own self, and you will find your true nature; you will find me, you might say. These things overlap, but the first is concerned more with the mind; the second more with what we might loosely term the heart. For this kind of reason, a Master of the Tradition has sometimes been known as the ‘Spy of the Heart.’”

“And how do you achieve such abilities?” he wanted to know.

“Well, one method, with which you are becoming more familiar involves basic preparatory work on the commanding or depraved self. This first of all involves the activation of what you might call conscience, the self-accusing self, which should not become obsessive self-deprecation. There comes a stage when that has done its work as the primary mode of self-regulation and it in turn needs to step aside. We march to a fixed point, then – rested and gathered together – we choose another fixed point and march toward that instead.

“Beyond that, the inspired self will kick in, in a random and sporadic fashion at first, with inspiration and intuition coming as if from out of the pearly blue yonder. But you will find that it can be called on more and more and eventually inspiration will become readily available to you, like a spring delivering water. Unlike spurious imagination (delusion), which is to be discouraged, creative and active imagination is to be encouraged. Remember, though it may flower, inspiration only really yields fruit through the application of work and effort.

“Inspiration can give us a buzz and lead to craving more, rather than being serene and satisfied as these things come and go of their own volition (or God’s will, if you prefer). Still we focus our attention on the self as we preen ourselves at our accomplishments, rather than giving thanks to the unseen hand of the muse who works our pen. So again, this is a stage which

needs to be left behind. It doesn't mean abandoning works, but rather putting them in a greater context.

"Remember that there is a certain amount of ego involved, a pride in one's inspirational capacities which needs to be kept to reasonably acceptable levels.

"Beyond the inspired self is the serene self. And beyond that and involved with Love and duty, lay the satisfied, the satisfying and the completed selves, but we'll cross those bridges as and when we come to them.

"So basic work on the self is the first method. Another method with which you are already versed and which you can add to is through the traditional teaching stories, and we have published thousands of examples. Of course, poetry, music, song, humour and levity are also wonderful lubricants. Not that you would, do not dismiss this indirect and intuitive mode of learning lightly. Much can be smuggled past the border guards and the censors to reach the Princess locked in the tower, as it were, that would be rejected were it presented directly to you.

"One of the key elements that helps facilitate progress is to get to the stage where even those elements inside you that were initially opposed to your progress are converted to your side and willing to go along with your higher aims, or at the very least to turn a blind eye or not interfere. This is linked in with 'acceptance.'

"Thirdly, we have what most people would accept as being exercises, and you've already been practising some basic exercises that will help awaken your dormant subtle organs of higher perception, what we might loosely term the blossoming of the lotus or the opening of the heart, and assist in provoking and maintaining Remembrance. Remembrance of the Source and of your life's mission in service of the Source, of the planet, and of one's fellow human beings."

Tenzing paused for a moment and stroked his beard. "There's also a specific exercise I could teach you, if you

remind me, that enables one to come into affinity and work with an intermediate realm of being that we call the Imaginal – a very Real place not to be confused with the merely ‘imaginary’.

Conrad noticed Dzoldzaya prick up her ears at the mention of this exercise, and she’d be sure to remember and remind Tenzing about his kind offer.

“And then there are other things that can help facilitate progress, which do not rely on our own effort but rather come as gifts or grace from the Unseen World. Without that vital ingredient, we would be truly ‘up Shit Creek without a paddle’, if you’ll forgive the vernacular.”

Tenzing rose to his feet. “And with that, dear hearts, I’ll bid you a fond goodnight and see you bright, early and bushy-tailed in the morning.”

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They set out as soon as the glorious, golden orb of the sun was peeping over the far horizon next morning, setting the dawn sky aflame. The rest of the day was spent gradually climbing into the hills, which were a welcome change from the moorland, before finally thankfully arriving at another town where, once they’d walked about a bit to ease their cramped muscles, they were again to spend the night.

As they sat by the fireside of the inn, soaking in the welcome warmth and allowing their meal to settle, over a tankard of ale, Tenzing happened to mention something about Truth, in passing.

“Would you tell me more about Truth?” Conrad asked him.

“An accomplished playwright once said, in a famous speech: ‘There are no hard distinctions between what is real and what is unreal, nor between what is true and what is false. A thing is not necessarily either true or false; it can be both true and false.’”

Tenzing was clearly reciting this from memory, which was

no mean feat.

“Truth in drama is forever elusive. You never quite find it but the search for it is compulsive. The search is clearly what drives the endeavour. The search is your task. More often than not you stumble upon the truth in the dark, colliding with it or just glimpsing an image or a shape which seems to correspond to the truth, often without realising that you have done so. But the real truth is that there never is any such thing as one truth to be found in dramatic art. There are many. These truths challenge each other, recoil from each other, reflect each other, ignore each other, tease each other, are blind to each other. Sometimes you feel you have the truth of a moment in your hand, then it slips through your fingers and is lost.”

As Tenzing finished, Conrad and Dzoldzaya gave him a short, impromptu round of applause.

“Of course, that is from the perspective of a seeker after truth,” Tenzing added, “and the perspective seen through the eyes of one who has Arrived is somewhat different, of course, but it is no less worthy of Consideration, Appreciation, Respect and Note – C.A.R.N. – which is an altogether more wholesome and fulfilling form of carnal knowledge, if I may say so. Let this be your watchword and you won’t go far wrong.”

And that also gave Conrad and Dzoldzaya pause for thought as they lay down that night to sleep in separate beds, and a ubiquitous concept which would forever be etched in their consciousness.

~~~O~~~

Gradually climbing into the hills after leaving the Freelands had been a long and arduous enough journey, but Conrad was not prepared for the journey across the central plateau which took them a further five days with Dzoldzaya taking turns at the wheel, and Dzoldzaya did not “spare the horses”, as it were: she was a rather more aggressive driver than Tenzing, who might have been on a Thursday school



outing.

You could have dropped the Freelands into that incredibly expansive landscape and it would have looked no more substantial than an oasis in a vast desert (though rather the reverse, since the plains were so fertile). If Midsomer was the nation's breadbasket then this had to be Narayana's wholesale warehouse.

After a seemingly interminable week they arrived a few hours away from the northern edge of the plateau, with the foothills looming ahead of them and the vast snow-capped mountain ranges extending still further back like the spines and teeth of a great dragon. Ahead of them, atop a small hill lay the town of Shakra. This was the end of the road for the car, and time to take the bus up into the foothills.

Once Tenzing had left his car with a friend at the local bus depot, they found a place to stay the night, spending their evening telling stories to while away the time.

"I have a puzzle for you," Tenzing said as the evening drew to a close. "There's no need for an immediate answer, just mull it over from time to time and see what springs to mind. And the puzzle is this:"

*A little girl was warned by her guardian never to open the cellar door or she would see things that she was not meant to see. One day, while her guardian was out, she did open the cellar door.*

*And the question is: What did she see?*

Unsurprisingly, his riddle met with little verbal response, but the unresolved question did niggle Conrad for some time afterwards until it gradually slipped from his conscious mind. Again, he was reminded that he didn't like loose ends, and tended to seek the comfort of speedy closure.

They caught the first bus of the day and spent the next six hours being bounced up and down and swaying from side to side on the rough, rutted track, arriving feeling more than a

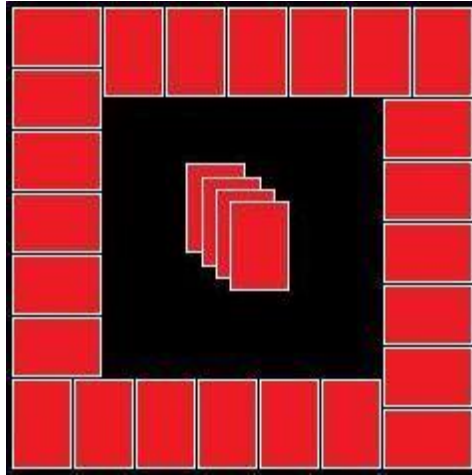
little nauseous at around noon.

They had arrived at a small town by the name of Renchok, nestling in the shelter of a deep and rocky valley, and stayed at a rather quaint, stone and timber-framed inn. As Tenzing pointed out to them, everything about the building was slightly out of alignment. True to his word, there wasn't a square window frame, nor a square room, nor a level shelf to be found in the building; hence it's nickname amongst locals and travellers: "The Crooked Inn".

Having eaten, the three of them spent the evening listening to the haunting melodies of a local folk group, who must have been playing more for the love of their art and the odd pint, rather than for the little money they made.

The entertainment over, they played a few rounds of cards and Tenzing showed them one or two tricks he'd learnt, and a puzzle that had them foxed for the best part of the evening.

He riffled through the deck and found four cards which he placed to one side of the table, face down. Then he carefully placed twenty four of the remaining cards face down in a square on the dark oak table, with six on each side. He passed the first four cards to Conrad and asked him to make the sign of a solar swastika, an ancient religious symbol, in the centre of the square using all four of those cards, and those cards alone, and without mutilating those cards in any way.



All he would tell them, when they pleaded for help was, “It’s easy when you know how.”

They met up later that evening with a pair of Tenzing’s students and left all-too-early the following morning, setting out through the foothills. The youths brought a string of horses and mules with them, the horses being for them to ride on and the mules to take back a vast array of provisions that the pair had bought in the town.

They climbed into the snowy mountains for two long days before descending slightly into the welcome lee of one of the mountains, and though Conrad had led an active life and was quite fit, he couldn’t recall ever having been so physically exhausted before. It was more exhausting even than the shifts he’d worked stoking the boilers on the *Iron Duke*. A mist had begun to descend over many of the peaks, though thankfully they were lower down and out of that freezing fog.

Ahead of them lay a deep blue lake, fed by a tall waterfall that cascaded down a cliff side from above. Conrad couldn’t see any way out of this place, as it seemed to be a *cul-de-sac*, and there were no dwellings to be seen. But for some reason their youthful guides led them down a narrow gravel track

which skirted the wide lake, toward the deafening roar of the waterfall and what was clearly an unclimbable cliff face.

Tenzing was taking it all in his stride, however, and he and Dzoldzaya seemed quite content and perfectly at ease following the youths. One of their guides had gone off ahead, saying that he'd let the others know of their imminent arrival. One minute the youth was there, then – momentarily distracted by a great eagle that soared down from the cliff and snatched up a fish from the lake before soaring back to its eyrie – the youth and his horse were gone.

As they went further, the great waterfall loomed closer and closer and it was only when Dzoldzaya and her horse slipped around the side of the vast curtain of water, taking a string of mules with her, that Conrad realized there must be a way through.

Indeed, hidden behind the waterfall was the gaping mouth of a cave. On one of the walls was a flaming torch which the first youth had perhaps left for them to help light the way. Following in Dzoldzaya's steps, Conrad walked the horse on and, as the cave narrowed and the roof became lower, he dismounted and led his horse through.

After a lengthy trek, the tunnel widened out again and he blinked in the glaring light as he emerged through the other side.

## 16. The Babs Chu retreat

Tenzing waited patiently as they emerged from the wide mouth at the far end of the long tunnel, squinting in the light whilst their eyes adjusted.

He cast his arm around the hidden valley, with its bright patchwork of fields, that ranged before them: “Welcome to the waterfall or *babs chu* retreat,” he told them.

Conrad was momentarily flabbergasted at the delightful spectacle, unable to say anything more coherent than “Wow!” and “That’s amazing!”

“I’ve been here several times now,” Dzoldzaya agreed, “and it’s still as wondrous a place as ever.”

From the cave mouth, they gradually descended down a narrow track that wound this way and that down to the valley floor. Then they took to a wider, newly gravelled path, flanked by many fields, that traced its way up the valley, following the banks of a river. Finally they arrived at the settlement, a collection of huts with steep roofs set amidst an array of fragrant flower and herbal gardens. Beyond that lay a paved square whose centrepiece was an octagonal lily-pond with a fountain in the centre.

“The lily pond, the fountain at the centre in the shape of a winged figure ... it’s just as I remember in my dream,” he informed Tenzing.

“That is good,” the man nodded in appreciation, leading them on across the square and up a set of wide marble steps toward a large building at the heart of the tiny hamlet. They went inside and Tenzing had one of the students there show Conrad and Dzoldzaya to the guest rooms.

“If you’ll forgive me, I’ll have to leave you to your own devices for a while whilst I sort out a few things, then I’ll see

you in my study for dinner.”

They thanked him and he went on his way.

Conrad was quite impressed with the architecture of the building. It wasn't opulent, nor monumental, but it was well designed and expertly crafted.

“Each one of those limestone blocks was painstakingly hand cut,” Dzoldzaya told him as he stroked his hand up the wall as they climbed the stairs to the upper floor. “It took ten years to build the first chalets and this communal building.”

“How long have they been here?”

Through a window, she pointed out a majestic-looking building in the distance over the other side of the river. “That's the original monastery,” she said, “though it's by now fallen into a state of disrepair. It's over a thousand years old.”

After dinner, Conrad and Dzoldzaya retired to bed quite early. It had been a long journey, made all the more tiring by the thin atmosphere at this altitude, and they wanted to be up relatively early the next day.

He'd just drawn the curtains, switched off the light, settled down and was already drifting off to sleep when a figure quietly entered the room and tiptoed across the floor. The figure slipped into bed beside him and cuddled up. Aware that something was happening by now, but unsure quite what, Conrad turned round in bed to see what was going on, to discover someone in bed beside him. It was Dzoldzaya, who was “not exactly backward in coming forward” as his mother would say.

“Dzoldzaya? What are you doing here?” he blurted out.

Dzoldzaya touched her index finger to his lips. She merely smiled and shuffled still closer, running her fingers delicately through his hair, then resting her arm over his chest and her hand on his shoulder. He could feel Dzoldzaya's hot breath on his arm and turned toward her, to find her already fast asleep. She had that uncanny ability to simply switch off, whilst he'd

be left running over the day's events for upwards of an hour before gradually slipping into sleep; and it would take him longer if he had any worries about something he'd done the previous day or might have to face the next morning.

By the time he awoke early the next morning, Dzoldzaya had sneaked back to her own room, got herself ready and was already downstairs with Tenzing awaiting his arrival.

Deeply conscious of what had gone on the previous night and also considering the possibility that Tenzing perhaps had the ability to read people's minds, Conrad was a little wary and bashful as he descended the stairs and made his way through to the dining room. But in the event this worry proved unnecessary and was quickly forgotten as Tenzing rose from his seat to greet him and generally made the pair welcome.

"The pair"? Well, that thought certainly had just crossed his mind. Maybe they were becoming "an item"?

"You slept well, I trust?" asked Tenzing as he passed the milk to Dzoldzaya.

"Yes, I was asleep almost as soon as my head hit the pillow," Conrad nodded, taking the milk from Dzoldzaya.

"That'll be the thinness of the air at this altitude. We're at over eight thousand feet here and it has that effect on people. But your body will soon adapt by making more red blood corpuscles to carry your blood gasses and you'll become acclimatized."

"Dzoldzaya tells me that the original monastery dates back over a thousand years," he observed. "It's a pity it's fallen into a state of disrepair."

"It's an impressive ruin, certainly, but don't confuse the container with the content, which moved on long ago," Tenzing nodded. "You can go over and have a look round later, if you want. I have some work to do, but I'll rejoin you later in the day." He turned to Dzoldzaya. "Where was I?"

"The ruin," Dzoldzaya prompted.

“Ah yes. It’s an impressive ruin, but remember that it’s only a container and now it’s just an empty shell. Both the content and the dynamic that energized it have since moved on, as is ever the case. So at that sort of level, it’s no real loss. We are here and the *baraka* is here. That is all that really matters.

“Dzoldzaya, be a dear and pass the jam.”

“What’s *baraka*?” he asked.

“Well, in some cultures, it means little more than ‘good luck’, but in our Tradition – and yes, it has a capital ‘T’ – we use it to mean a divine gift or blessing, or even a vital force. Just as bees collect pollen and produce, store and use honey, so this subtle substance or charge can be collected and accumulated and distributed in time of need. Spiritually developed people can carry the stuff, as can certain buildings and objects.”

“So what happened to the *baraka* at the old settlement?”

“Some still resides and is available there, but for the most part, you could say that it’s been transferred to a new vessel. It’s here and it’s all around you. Indeed, like the air around you, its goodness is permeating your being as we speak.”

“What do you do with it?”

“Do with it?” Tenzing smiled. “What do you do with fresh air or honey? A better question might be: ‘What does it do for us?’”

“What does it do for us?”

“The *baraka* can heal one and help prevent or transmute adversity,” Tenzing told him. “It helps to facilitate spiritual progress, and it assists in opening people to subtle influences, making contact and connections between folk on the Way, and elevating a humble meeting into a harmonized and powerful occasion.

“You might say, in a sense, that *baraka* is the genuine, original and most efficacious ‘snake oil.’

“You have to treat it with kindness and respect, however.



Like a bird, this subtle substance will fly away in the face of infidelity or rough handling.”

Then he added: “There are many people who think or feel – incorrectly – that they can find a similar effect which they call *kaif* in the intoxicating smoke of certain psychoactive substances, but of course that’s no such thing. Indulgence in such abuse is a rather pathetic and debilitating substitute. Dope is to *baraka* as masturbation is to true love.”

Tenzing rose to his feet, then momentarily sat down again, something having clearly occurred to him. “A wise thought for the day, from an ancient tome:”

*Knowing others is intelligence; knowing yourself is true wisdom. Mastering others is strength; mastering yourself is true power. If you realize that you have enough, you are truly rich.*

~~~O~~~

Later that morning, after helping out with some of the communal chores, Conrad and Dzoldzaya packed a few items for a picnic and went for a long walk across the valley. Once far enough away from the settlement not to be seen, Dzoldzaya linked her arm in his and they strolled side by side. The sun was warm, but there was still a chill in the air and the pair had wrapped up warmly for the trek.

They stopped for a while to search for the fish which were cleverly camouflaged in amongst the shingle and the rocks of the swift flowing water of the river, seemingly hovering in place despite the water rushing around them, and with little apparent effort. Every so often they’d dart off and then come to an abrupt halt once more, like aquatic humming birds.

Satisfied by this simple pleasure, they walked a little further down the river and crossed the arched wooden bridge over to the other side, heading for the ruins of the monastery. It was quite a stout construction, broad and strong enough to take a horse and rider or a laden mule.

As they got closer and closer, the old monastery loomed larger and larger in their sight, but it was only when the building stood before them that Conrad realized just how monumental it must have been and what a great feat of engineering, given the age, the circumstances and the remote location.

“That’s strange,” Conrad observed. “I just naturally assumed that the place would be a mound of rubble inside and out, but though what’s left of the walls are here, the site appears to have been picked clean.”

“I seem to recall my uncle saying that many of the slabs had been recycled for use in the new settlement,” Dzoldzaya explained.

“Yes, that would make sense – and save a good deal of effort. And to think that each of those limestone slabs would have to be hewn and shaped by hand, and even ornamented here and there. It must have been quite a mammoth task.” As he spoke, he was running his hand over one of the walls, taking in the texture and the coolness of the stone as well as the sight.

They wandered round to where the front doors of the monastery would have originally been and walked through the building to see what it looked like from inside, patches of marble floor and multicoloured mosaic still visible here and there, but long since largely taken over by mulch, long grass and the odd bush, even the odd patch of cereal presumably blown there on the wind or deposited by birds.

Once they were completely hidden from view, Dzoldzaya took a blanket out of her picnic basket and laid it out on the springy ground. She knelt down and pulled him down beside her. They knelt there for a few moments, staring into one-another’s eyes and all of a sudden their lips met and they embraced, for the very first time, in a long, lingering and increasingly passionate kiss. It was a sheer delight to gently explore one-another, if somewhat tentatively, with their

fingertips, though they were both careful not to let their hands stray too far. They hadn't spoken of boundaries, but there was nevertheless an unspoken respect and casual restraint. After all, they had all the time in the world ahead of them in which to become more intimately acquainted.

At length coming up for air and feeling a warm glow of mutual satisfaction and exhilaration permeating them and surrounding them like an invisible aura, they parted and set-about unpacking the picnic, to eat and drink their fill.

And to think that in a naïve moment, he had wondered what on earth they might do to occupy their time in this faraway place, away from the familiar trappings and so-called necessities and luxuries of modern society.

"Do you think that Tenzing knows about us?" he urgently needed to know. "It worries me."

She smiled. "Almost certainly. He's a very shrewd and observant man."

"And do you think he approves?"

Dee gently ran her hand through his hair. "I don't think he would have invited us both here and here together, and allowed us to spend time alone together, if he thought otherwise, Connie."

"I'd hate to go skulking about behind his back and not be able to look him in the eye, Dzoldzaya."

"Uncle Tenzing's not an ogre, you know. You should know him better than that by now. And, in any case, we're both adults: it's not as if we've done anything wrong."

"We've slept together," he pointed out. "In many cultures that would be a step too far."

"You worry too much, young man," Dzoldzaya smiled. "Now, 'be a dear and pass the jam', as Uncle would say."

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When evening came, they entertained one-another by telling stories.

“There’s one in particular that both reminds me of friend ‘H’'s inability to let certain things drop from his mind, such as the word ‘can’t’, and also my own reaction: not being able to get him and his issues out of my own head.’ Conrad laughed, but it was actually a rather serious topic.

*A Master of the Way went to visit a friend and was invited out to dinner, but as the friend saw that the Master had no suitable clothes to wear to the meal, he lent him a fine robe.*

*As soon as they got there, the friend introduced himself “... and this is my dear friend Khan. But the fine robe, that’s mine,” he felt compelled to relate.*

*As they left, Khan told him off and the friend promised not to do it again.*

*“Don’t mention it,” Khan reassured him, accepting his apology.*

*At the next house they came to on their round of social engagements, the friend introduced himself “... and this is my dear friend Khan,” he said.*

*Khan smiled approvingly.*

*“... But the expensive robe, that is his.”*

*As they left that house, again Khan expressed his disapproval and his friend promised not to do it again.*

*“Don’t mention it,” Khan reassured him, accepting his apology.*

*They came to a third house and the friend introduced himself.*

*A forgiving man, Khan smiled in approval.*

*“... But as for the costly robe,” the friend continued, unable to contain himself: “Well, um, well ... best not to mention it.”*

Tenzing smiled, and indicated that the words Conrad had used to preface the story had not been lost upon him, then he began to tell a tale himself.

*Nasrudin was sitting in a tea shop when a friend came*

*excitedly to speak with him. "I'm about to get married, Mulla," his friend said, "and I'm very excited. Mulla, have you ever thought of marriage yourself?"*

*Nasrudin replied, "I did think of getting married. In my youth in fact I very much wanted to do so. I waited to find for myself the perfect wife. I travelled looking for her, first to Damarkand. There I met a beautiful woman who was gracious, kind, and deeply spiritual, but she had no worldly knowledge. I travelled further to Izeldar. There I met a woman who was both spiritual and worldly, beautiful in many ways, but we did not communicate well. Finally I went to Condoria and there after much searching I found her. She was spiritually deep, graceful, and beautiful in every respect, at home in the world and at home in the realms beyond it. I felt I had found the perfect wife."*

*His friend questioned him further: "Then did you marry her, Mulla?"*

*"Alas," said Nasrudin as he shook his head sadly, "She was, unfortunately, waiting for the perfect husband."*

*"There's an interesting rider to that story, which I recently overheard between a young man and a counsellor," said Tenzing, "and the words of advice were these: 'She is not perfect. You are not perfect. The question is whether or not you are perfect for each other.'"*

*Tenzing waited a few moments, as if for the significance of what he'd just said to sink in. "And on that happy note, my dears, I will bid you a fond goodnight and go to get my beauty sleep. Go to bed whenever you feel ready."*

*"Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" he asked when Tenzing was out of earshot.*

*Dzoldzaya nodded. "It was about as close as you could get to stating that he approved of our blossoming relationship, without actually coming out and saying it: 'She is not perfect. You are not perfect. The question is whether or not you are perfect for each other.'"*

“Yes,” he said as Dzoldzaya snuggled closer to him on the sofa. “That’s precisely what I was thinking.”

“And do you approve, Conrad?”

He put his arm around her. “What do you think, Dzoldzaya? And as for perfection, I’m reminded of something my mother would say from time to time to my father, who found perfectionism both a boon and a bane: ‘good is good enough.’ And trust me: this feels *good*.”

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Again, late that evening, when everyone had settled down for the night, Dzoldzaya crept into Conrad’s room, slipped into bed and snuggled up beside him. They embraced and exchanged a long, lingering kiss. Dzoldzaya wore only a long, flowing silk nightdress and he could not help but become aroused when he felt her homely bosom rubbing up against his naked chest, and her slender waist beneath his hand. As for Dzoldzaya, she’d already fallen into a relaxed sleep in his arms, and that was more than good enough and sufficient for him.

When Conrad awoke the next morning, it was to find Dzoldzaya bending over the bed to kiss him tenderly, already fully dressed, still looking radiant, with a delightful smile etched across her face, and raring to make the most of the day.

That morning, as they headed downstairs for breakfast, Conrad was filled with trepidation, wondering if Tenzing would read his thoughts, and worrying. But Tenzing has risen early that morning and gone into his study to work, and the tension soon evaporated and was forgotten.

It was raining hard that day, with the water streaming off the edge of the steep slate roofs, so venturing out was not an option and instead they spent their time at the settlement. They volunteered their services in the busy kitchens in the morning, to help clear away the breakfast things, and after lunch they went to see Tenzing, to see if he needed a hand with any paperwork. As it happened, snowed under with work, he could

do with all the help he could get, and so whilst Dzoldzaya spent some time typing up a manuscript Tenzing had been working on, she had Conrad set about tackling the filing system.

Tenzing received a great deal of correspondence from the many books he'd published, and he'd write notes down on filing cards, often referring to these and tailoring the content of later works in accordance. But, on his own admission, he'd let things slip. A great many cards had been left unfiled and the rather haphazard filing system was in need of reorganization. With a tidy mind and an eye for detail, this task was right up Conrad's street. Of course, it would have been a whole lot easier to have committed the notes to a database on the computer, not least the fact that Tenzing would only have needed to carry a disk around with him on his journeys, rather than have to maintain duplicate sets of cards: one at Sher Point and one at the retreat, but that wasn't the way the man worked. Tenzing was, again on his own admission, an old-fashioned kind of guy.

By late afternoon, their tasks were complete and they wandered outside to find that the rain had stopped. It had drenched the valley, so Conrad and Dzoldzaya decided to have a quiet walk through the gardens where the gravel paths were well drained, rather than venturing further afield.

They stopped for a time in a tiny summerhouse which looked out onto the square and the lily pond.

"Conrad ..." Dzoldzaya began, speaking up after some moments' silent reflection.

"Yes, dearest?"

"I've been thinking ..."

"Ah. Really?" He raised his eyebrows, feigning surprise and trepidation.

For a moment, Dzoldzaya looked worried by this response. He laughed. "I was just kidding."

She playfully poked him in the ribs. "Don't *do* that. You had me worried, Conrad."

"Sorry. So what were you thinking, dearest?"

"Well, I was wondering, really ..."

He put his arm around her and she nestled up against him as they sat there. Dzoldzaya was obviously angling for something.

She drew a deep breath. "We get on pretty well together," she ventured, then waited, clearly looking for a response.

He nodded. "Very well, I'd say, yes."

"And I was wondering ..."

"Yes?" Clearly Dzoldzaya had something important to say and was worried about his response. She was often so forthright. "Don't worry, I won't bite your head off."

Dzoldzaya clutched his hand tightly in her own. "Will you marry me, Conrad?" she blurted out at length, turning round to peer into his eyes and gauge his reaction.

"Oh wow!"

He smiled and stroked his fingers through her long, raven hair. "I can think of nothing better," he nodded. "Yes, Dzoldzaya: I would be delighted to accept your gracious invitation."

Dzoldzaya hugged him tightly and they kissed for a time, and as they did, her hands began to wander from his waist down to his jeans and tantalisingly up between his thighs. Feeling himself becoming aroused, he slid his hand down from Dzoldzaya's waist and over her slender hips to gently and tentatively caress her and pull her still closer.

"I'm not sure of the protocol around these parts," he said as they eventually pulled apart and rose to their feet to walk back through the settlement. "But isn't it usual to ask the permission of the lady's parents?"

"I can't imagine my parents saying no," Dzoldzaya said. "And to be honest, I don't think that I would take 'no' for an answer. But I think the right and safest thing to do with be to

talk the matter over with my uncle, obtain his unofficial blessing and let him talk to my parents. Whilst I'm away from home at Sher Point, he's acting as my guardian on my parents' behalf. He's a seasoned diplomat and not without his influence."

"It'll take some planning," Conrad pondered: "I presume your parents would want a proper wedding for you, with both families in attendance. But how would your family get to the Freelands? I mean, it's such a long journey from Narayana. And I can't see the remotest possibility of my family being allowed in from the Outlands ..."

She thought for a moment as they stood at the foot of the marble steps leading into the community centre. "This doesn't at all solve the problem of your relatives attending, Conrad, but it would make more sense if the wedding were held in Narayana. We could always go and visit your mother and brother after the wedding and have a bit of celebration with them after the event.

"It'll be next summer before the weather's good enough again to make a return journey and until we can take more time off work. So there's no rush, Conrad. Don't worry unduly: we'll cross the necessary bridges as we come to them. And not worry ourselves in the meantime over hypothetical details or obstacles."

Yes, that made sense, though he wished they could simply get married there and then: he didn't like loose ends. Dzoldzaya was a lot more laid back about such things than he.

"And you'll get a chance to meet my parents on our way back. It's not far out of the way. They live at a town a little further west of the main road, on the central plateau. They're bound to lay on a feast with all the trimmings, so we'll warn them in advance, arrive there in the early morning and stay until the next day."

He feigned horror.

"Don't worry, they won't bite you. And the visit will give

my uncle a chance to broach the subject with them.”

It was raining again the next day and, pulling up the hoods of their coats and making a dash for it, they headed toward the crafts workshop. Uzwig, one of the master craftswomen there had promised to show them around. The woman sat down at one of the potter’s wheels, started it in motion with a foot pedal and slapped down a large dollop of wet clay on the wheel. Uzwig dug her thumbs in and almost immediately a vessel began to take shape. She gradually raised her hands as the pot grew, and occasionally sprinkled the clay with water. Then she brought the wheel to a gentle halt, took another small piece of clay, fashioned a handle and carefully stuck it in place. And before you could say “Tenzing’s your uncle”, she had the makings of a fine earthenware tankard before her.

Uzwig got up and had Conrad sit down at the wheel, coaching him every step of the way, but alas as soon as his tankard was no more than a half formed beaker, the clay began to flap wildly from side to side and the whole thing collapsed in a soggy heap in his hands. Three times he tried and on the third attempt, he finally managed to create the semblance of a pot.

“It’s a lot harder than you make it look, Uzwig, I’ll venture that much,” he laughed, rising to his feet to let Dzoldzaya take her place.

“That’s actually rather good for a first attempt,” the lady encouraged him. “Practice makes perfect.”

“And how long have you been perfecting your craft, Uzwig?” The woman was perhaps in her mid-twenties.

“Ever since I came here, and I’d have been about eight at the time,” she said.

Well, maybe there was hope for him yet.

As for Dzoldzaya, from the very start she was a natural: even he could see that. In her very first attempt, she produced an almost perfect pot. Uzwig helped her with the handle and

they stood back to examine the masterpiece. Dee was as pleased as Punch.

“Let’s make another one,” Uzwig requested, carefully taking away the first and slapping down a fresh dollop of clay. “Then, when I’m done here, I’ll fire and glaze them for you. And then you’ll have a matching pair of tankards to take back as keepsakes to remind you of your stay here.”

“You were clearly in your element there,” Conrad remarked as they left the workshop and got ready to dash back to the communal centre.

17. The return

All too soon, it came to the day of departure, and the heavens had opened again to cry in sympathy, though fortunately the dark clouds didn't stay with them for long. Although Conrad was looking forward to getting back home, he'd miss the retreat. They'd had a good time there and, as Dzoldzaya had suggested before they set out, it had indeed been the holiday of a lifetime.

It took them nearly two full days to climb down to the foothills, bivouacking overnight on the way in the lee of a cliff and a huge mound of tumbled rocks. They just made it down in time to find rooms at an inn on the second night. Then, bright and early the next day they were up and away by bus out of the foothills and onto the interminable central plains.

On the third day across the plains they were up long before the sun had risen and after a few miles, Tenzing turned off the main road and drove for some time down a heavily rutted dirt track until finally, by about nine in the morning, they reached the next town, Nanja. He drove through it before pulling the car off the road close to a rather splendid looking detached bungalow. They had arrived, with a gaggle of excited children who had probably seldom – if ever – seen an automobile, dashing up the road in their wake.

“My father built the cottage with his own hands,” Dzoldzaya proudly informed him as Conrad helped her out of the car. “Well, with more than a little help from his friends. Everyone helps one-another with such tasks around these parts. It's a very close-knit community, which is something you wouldn't see these days at Sher Point.”

No sooner had they arrived, curtains were twitching and they were noisily greeted at the gate by two small and rather

excited children, with a more elderly couple following along behind. Tenzing scooped up the little girl in his arms on the way in, whilst Dzoldzaya picked up the little boy and tried – unsuccessfully for all the clamour – to introduce them to Conrad. These were her parents and the children were her youngest brother and sister.

“Welcome, welcome!” the couple called, almost as excitedly as the children, going first to Tenzing to embrace him, then to Conrad and finally to their beloved daughter, Dzoldzaya.

Once they were inside they were formally introduced. “This is my good friend, Conrad,” she told them. “Conrad: this is my father, Dorjee, which means ‘thunderbolt’ and my mother, Llamu, named after a goddess.”

Llamu was like a little dumpling on legs, whilst Dorjee was built more like a garden rake. And the children were, well, little bundles of joyful and exuberant energy. They were all dressed in their finest that day, in the traditional and colourful costumes of the region.

“Here’s my little brother, Sangmu, the kind-hearted, and my sister Pema, a lotus.”

Conrad gave a little bow. “Hello, I’m Conrad, and I have no idea what that name means,” he laughed. “I’m very pleased to meet you all. Dzoldzaya has told me many good things about you.”

“It’s an honour and pleasure to meet you, Conrad,” said Dorjee, shaking his hand energetically whilst his wife gave him a friendly kiss on the cheek.

“Please, please sit down and make yourselves at home,” Llamu said, brushing a stray hair off the back of a sofa and beckoning them over. “Father, make yourself useful and prepare drinks for our guests. I’ll stay with you for a little while and then, if you’ll forgive me, I must be away to the kitchen to prepare some food for you.”

Dzoldzaya’s parents both spoke the Common Tongue quite

fluently, though they sometimes had to translate the words into Narayani for their children, whose understanding and speech was still quite faltering.

Though the pair of them sat there on the settee at a discreet distance, nevertheless amidst all the catching up on news and gossip between Dzoldzaya and her parents, Llamu would look first at one, then the other, and back again.

"She knows," Dzoldzaya whispered to him during a moment's lull when Dorjee was away answering the call of nature and Llamu was momentarily distracted.

"Well," said Llamu, looking at the clock on the whitewashed wall. "I must love you and leave you in Dorjee's company for a while, as I must put the meat in the oven and sort out the veg."

Conrad rose to his feet. "Can I offer you a hand?" he asked.

"Oh, no, no, no, young man: you're our honoured guest. Sit yourself down." Then: "Though if you have a minute, Dzoldzaya ...?"

"Certainly, Mother," she replied, giving Conrad a discreet wink as she followed Llamu into the kitchen. Women's talk most likely.

Half an hour later, Dzoldzaya slipped off her lacy pink pinafore, tossed it over the back of a chair near the kitchen and came back over to sit down beside Conrad, noticeably closing the distance between them. She had a broad grin on her face, though "why?" she didn't say and "why?" he could not as yet ask.

Llamu came back to momentarily join them shortly afterwards, still wearing her pinafore, and she too had an enigmatic smile on her face and kept looking first at one of them, then at the other. There was too much warmth in her face and eyes to make Conrad feel at all paranoid or under scrutiny, however.

"Dorjee, dear heart, would you mind coming into the

kitchen for a moment? I'm in need of your assistance."

The man hesitated for a moment. "I was just about to top up our guests' glasses, Mother ..." he told her.

"I'm sure Tenzing would be only too willing to tend to our guests," she said, beckoning him over insistently. "Though not for me, thank you, Tenzing: I'm feeling a little squiffy already and the celebrations have hardly begun."

Conrad sensed that something was afoot, though he didn't as yet know what. As soon as the pair were out of the room, he asked Dzoldzaya outright, but she seemed determined to remain tight-lipped.

"Don't worry, it's nothing untoward," she told him.

"Then what's going on?"

Dzoldzaya playfully tussled his hair, and all she would add was: "Patience is a virtue, Conrad. You'll just have to wait and see."

Little Pema and Sangmu had been sitting very patiently all this time and after replenishing everyone's glasses, Tenzing called them to him. "How would you two little angels like to come on a little walk with your uncle to the local shop? I'll buy you some sweets – though if I do, you must promise not to eat them before dinner, otherwise it will spoil your appetite, and I shall get into trouble with your dear Mama. Would you like to do that?"

Judging by the way the two of them bounced up and down by his feet, they were in full agreement. While Sangmu tugged at Tenzing's sleeve and guided him toward the door, Pema was scooting through to the hallway to fetch their coats.

Half an hour later, when they all once again assembled, Llamu came back in from the kitchen. "Well, I think the goose is well and truly cooked," she told them. "So if you'd like to make your way through to the dining room and sit yourselves down, Dorjee and I will bring the food through."

"Tenzing, there's a bottle of wine on the table, if you'd

care to pour everyone a glass.”

“I’m sorry it’s not much,” Llamu apologized as they settled at the table.

“Not much, Llamu?” Conrad queried: “It’s a veritable feast. It looks wonderful, thank you.”

Dorjee had already carved the bird and began to pass around the plates. “Help yourselves to veg,” he advised. “And tuck-in straight away, whilst it’s still hot. Don’t stand on ceremony.”

“My, that’s a lovely fruity wine,” Conrad enthused. “And it’s strong.”

“Oh, I’m glad, Conrad. Dorjee made it.” Llamu gave her husband a playful pat on the backside as he passed. “He’s a jack of all trades, my Dorjee, aren’t you, precious?”

“It’s been sitting in our cellar for three years now,” Dorjee told them. “Just waiting for the right occasion. Some home-made wines turn out more like dishwater than wine, so I fortified it with brandy.”

They were through the main course and taking a breather and allowing their dinner to settle before dessert, making polite conversation. Llamu seemed to be taking a particular interest in Conrad’s life history and Dorjee was equally attentive, though less talkative. He was the quiet and deep thinking type, though clearly a kind-hearted gentleman.

“You know, young Conrad here would make someone a good husband,” Llamu spoke up as Conrad was just taking his first mouthful of pudding. He nearly choked and reached for his glass of water to wash it down.

“Aye, he would that,” nodded Dorjee. “A fine, well-mannered, intelligent and personable young man.”

Dzoldzaya blushed and cast her eyes down, pretending to be digging into her dessert.

Once the minor shock had subsided, Conrad began to put two and two together and realized that his relationship with

Dzoldzaya and their plans had perhaps been the topic of conversation between mother and daughter and then wife and husband in the kitchen whilst dinner was being prepared. So that was what they'd been cooking up. Perhaps, therefore, Tenzing's diplomatic services might not need to be called upon after all? Of course, he might be barking up the wrong tree in thinking this, but something told him he was right.

"What think you, Tenzing?" asked Dorjee between mouthfuls.

Tenzing rose to his feet and went round the table refilling their glasses. "I think they'd both make someone very happy," he said at length.

Conrad looked to Dzoldzaya, wondering whether he should speak, and, if that were the case, not knowing quite what to say. He half rose from his seat and then thought better of it and sat down again.

Seeing this, Dorjee laughed and slapped his hand down on the table. "We're embarrassing the lad and he's a guest here," he smiled. "Conrad, let me say it for you and spare your blushes. Dzoldzaya told her mother that she'd asked you to marry her and that you'd said 'yes', providing we agreed. And in turn Llamu told me – and we all know who wears the trousers in this house. As for my brother Tenzing, it's clear that he likes and respects you, too, Conrad. He's spoken very highly of you.

"And with what we've seen of you today, and the love and joy in our daughter's heart, if you want to know whether it's all right with Llamu and me, the answer is a very definite 'yes'. Congratulations."

A hushed "Thank you" was all Conrad could manage in return, for a lump was welling up in his throat and this news had brought him close to tears.

"Then the next question is: 'So when's the happy day?'" Tenzing suggested, perfectly at ease with this arrangement.

Pulling herself together, Dzoldzaya explained the situation with work and holidays and tentatively proposed some mutually agreeable date in August the next year, here in Narayana. Conrad agreed and apologized that, alas, there was no way in which his own family could attend, given the restrictions at the border between the Outlands and Freelands, though they'd visit, celebrate and spend time with them after the event, now that they both had papers.

As Dzoldzaya tearfully waved goodbye to her family and they set off on the next leg of their return journey, Tenzing and Conrad exchanged a few stories to set them on their way. Dzoldzaya had by now recovered her composure and joined in.

Turning the car off the dirt track and back onto the main road across the plains, Tenzing posed them another puzzle, and Conrad was reminded that he hadn't as yet figured out the one they'd been set some time ago.

A man was walking downstairs in a building when he suddenly realised that his wife had just died. How?

The occupants of the car fell silent for a time as they strove in vain to find the correct answer.

Tenzing spoke up, at length. "A dear friend once advised me: 'Every time we choose safety, we reinforce fear' and another said 'I think that only daring speculation can lead us further and not accumulation of facts.'"

And so for the next few minutes, they came up with a whole multitude of scenarios, most of which were clearly implausible or a little too far-fetched; but two or three of Dzoldzaya's efforts they accepted as definite possibilities. It had become apparent that there was no single "right answer" to this riddle, but there was ample room for giving free-rein to creative thinking, so even the process involved in coming up with their more bizarre suggestions had some value.

"You have a vivid imagination, Dzoldzaya," Tenzing told her. "You might turn that to good use in time."

18. Back to work

A few days later, Conrad and Dzoldzaya were back in Sher Point, enjoying their last day on vacation before they had to return to work.

They went round town picking up provisions and when that was out of the way, Dzoldzaya suggested that they take a walk up Finkle Street and have a look in the shop windows. Almost every second shop they passed was a jeweller's and judging by the interest Dzoldzaya displayed, she was angling for something. Yet for Conrad's part, seeing the prices of the objects for sale and knowing just how hard up they both were, he was secretly hoping that they would be doing no more than window shopping. At the end of the street they began to retrace their steps, as Finkle Street was rather out of their way, when Dzoldzaya broached the subject.

"Well?" she asked, as she began to peruse the jewellers' all over again on their way back down. "Aren't you going to buy me a ring, now we're engaged?"

"Er, um, well ..." he stammered, caught on the hop.

"It doesn't have to be anything expensive, Conrad," she cooed in his ear. "Like that band there with the three little diamonds."

He saw the price tag and gently coaxed her toward something a little nearer their price range.

"I'd rather have something that's distinctive, beloved."

They moved on to the next shop and the next after that and eventually they found a ring that suited both her taste for the unusual and the depths of his pocket.

"Oh, you are a dear!" she lilted as the money was passed over the counter. He went to take the ring out of its box and slip it on her finger, but Dzoldzaya suggested they leave it until

later, when they were both settled at her apartment. “Trust me, you won’t regret this,” she said, giving him a sloppy kiss on the cheek.

Finally, they headed back to Dzoldzaya and her brother’s flat to cook a meal and celebrate their recent pledge of betrothal.

Their apartment was a palace compared to his own dank bedsit. Yangchen was very happy for them, though there was just a hint of sadness in the lad’s eyes, which Dzoldzaya had already anticipated. “Don’t worry, Yangchen: there will always be a place for you here, there’s more than enough room for the three of us.” That cheered Yangchen up instantly and he dashed through to the scullery attached to the kitchen to bring out a bottle of wine that he’d thoughtfully bought in especially for their safe return.

Still tired after their long journey and more than a little squiffy from the wine, after the three of them had got stuck into the washing up, the pair flaked out for a catnap on the couch for a time with the television still playing in the background. When they awoke, it was getting quite late and Conrad rose to leave.

Dzoldzaya tugged at his arm and he sat down again. “Why don’t you stay the night, Conrad?” she asked.

“We both have work. It’s bound to be mayhem on the first day back ...”

“Don’t worry, I’ll be up for both of us and make breakfast. You won’t be late. I promise.”

“Okay,” he agreed without the need for any arm twisting. “Thank you, Dzoldzaya, I’d like that very much.”

Conrad got a quick shower, which was quite a luxury as he only had a washbasin and a bath in his own flat, and climbed into bed whilst Dzoldzaya freshened up. It was quite warm in her flat, especially compared to the wilds of Narayana, and she slipped out of her fluffy white bathrobe to stand there naked

before him, doing a little twirl for his benefit, then clambered into bed beside him. He could not help but rise to the occasion. Her lightly scented skin felt as soft as velvet and wonderfully warm to the touch, and a thrill went through him as she pressed her pert breasts up against him, and he in turn pressed shamelessly up against her.

Dzoldzaya had a thought. "You know, beloved," she said, as she lay there gently stroking the hairs on his chest, with the other hand gently massaging between his warm thighs, much to his delight, "there's nothing stopping you from simply letting go of your own flat and moving in here full time. And what we don't spend on rent, we can save up and put to better use."

He'd be glad to see the back of that place. Since he'd moved in, the roof had sprung a leak, ruining his bedclothes as the water came through the ceiling; then he'd had one of his windows smashed by some local yob; and finally one of the neighbours had poured a pan full of fat down the sink and into the communal drain, blocking the sewers, which had then begun to back up, and he was required to pay his share of the clean-up operation. That was really the last straw.

He kissed Dzoldzaya tenderly on the cheek. "Thank you, that would be a great idea, sweetheart."

Conrad's sleep was filled with all manner of brightly coloured dreams that night and he slept well. It wasn't until the next morning, when Dzoldzaya woke them up that the euphoric bubble burst. It was time to get up for work, a prospect which he did not exactly relish.

"Just think, beloved," Dzoldzaya reassured him as they stood there by the bed, still naked. She took his hand in hers and, placing it on her heaving breast, she massaging and kneaded it until her reddened nipple stood erect. "The money we earn will go to a good cause: setting ourselves up in life. Better jobs, too, are sure to come along. And, no matter what a stinker of a day we have at work, at the end of the day we can

pack our worries away and be with one-another. They can't take that away from us. 'This, too, shall pass' as the ancient dictum goes."

"I'll tell you what you might consider," Conrad remarked, finishing the last sips from the bottom of one of the tankards that Dzoldzaya had made at the retreat: "You might consider taking up pottery as a hobby or second income. I'm sure we could get hold of a potter's wheel second-hand. And either find a friendly potter with kiln space to rent or save up and have a little one built. It's just a thought, since you seem such a natural at the craft, sweetheart. I could help you sell your wares at market and in the local craft shops ..."

"Mmm," she hummed, surreptitiously running her hand up his thigh and lingering over his growing manhood. "Now that's an idea, beloved. Yes, we could look into that. And it would be good for you to take up some kind of hobby, too. Who knows where our interests might lead?"

Had it not been for work that day, and their self-imposed restraint, they might easily have slipped back into bed and made wild and passionate love that very day.

19. The wanderer returns

Dzoldzaya had received a telephone call earlier that day. It was Tenzing, to say that “the Wanderer”, H, had suddenly returned to *Foxholes* after another abortive leg of his life’s quest. If they were free that evening, which was a Tuesday, Tenzing hoped to resume the sessions with the man.

She had mixed feelings about this, but nevertheless she had a word with Conrad and, both in agreement, she got back to Tenzing and confirmed that they could make the engagement.

Finally they were all settled in Tenzing’s study, this time with H relegated to an armchair at the other side of the flickering coal fire in the hearth, Tenzing having reclaimed his favourite chair. There was a bit of a preamble to the session in which Tenzing invited H to bring them “up to speed”, to use the current buzz phrase, on what had provoked him to leave *Foxholes* and what he’d been up to whilst away.

The man wasn’t very forthcoming and seemed preoccupied with other thoughts.

Quite out of the blue and without apparent provocation, he launched into an attack. It was perhaps some leftover business from the first session that had been churning around in his mind, working him up into a lather.

“You know, I’m sick and tired of your ego and your holier than thou attitude, Tenzing. And especially your self-proclaimed expertise in everything. If you were a truly spiritual being, you’d be far more humble. I’ve never claimed to know everything.”

Conrad was taken by surprise by this sudden outburst, of course, but Tenzing didn’t even flinch. Though truth might hurt, H was so very wide of the mark here, then were it not so tragic, it would have sounded quite comical.

“You know, I find it utterly sickening and also so sad to see Ego oozing from your every pore,” the man went on.

Then H abruptly switched and got down from his chair to grovel on the floor and prostrate himself in front of Tenzing, who sat there unmoved. “Oh, I’m sorry, I should bow before His Holiness, the Perfect and Complete One.

“I said before that you don’t understand me. Not a thing about me. That was an understatement. What I should have said is that you are so completely wrong, we’re not on other planets, we’re in different dimensions!” the man spat, clambering to his feet and puffing out his chest.

That was intensely and vehemently narcissistic, and it was presumably something that Tenzing wished to be summoned forth from the dark depths of the man’s psyche and brought out into the light for all to witness.

Tenzing thought for a moment, with his hands together and his fingertips touching his chin. Then quite abruptly, he rose to his feet to face H and he took a step forward, to stand two or three feet away from the man, eyeball to eyeball.

Tenzing raised his arm and gently placed his hand on H’s shoulder. A sudden look of abject terror crossed H’s already haggard features. He stood there as if transfixed for a few moments.

“What are you doing to me?” the man screamed, when he finally found his voice.

Tenzing merely smiled. “H, I’m just giving you a tiny taste – no more than one percent at the most – of the mammoth responsibility that a ‘Perfect and completed Being’ as you derisively call it has to shoulder on a daily basis.”

In spite of making a supreme effort, H was unable to break free, though Tenzing merely had his hand placed gently and loosely on the man’s shoulder. And finally, when Tenzing withdrew his hand, H fell to his knees, clutching his head. Gasping for breath, H struggled to his feet again and staggered

from the room, as if the very hounds of hell were hot on his trail.

And with that, Tenzing brought the session to an abrupt and early close. Conrad and Dzoldzaya stayed behind, meditating quietly with Tenzing for a time while they recovered their composure and shirked off the remnants of the fiery session; and later, feeling rejuvenated, they enjoyed a relaxed supper with Tenzing. The smoked salmon and caviar on toast was a delightful delicacy that Conrad had not experienced before, and Mrs Philips had baked them a delicious cake, especially for the occasion, filled with fresh whipped cream and lightly sprinkled with icing sugar. It went down a treat.

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That coming week, most of Conrad's evenings were spent hunting down suitable strong cardboard boxes at the local shops and gradually packing away his possessions, ready for the move. He hadn't been in the Freelands for long, but he'd been given many hand-me-downs and had accumulated all manner of knick-knacks that might come in useful someday. With the assistance of Yangchen, they carted most of his furniture down the road to a second-hand shop late one afternoon, receiving little more than a pittance in return, but at least saved the job of otherwise disposing of it.

Then Saturday came, Dzoldzaya arriving in the early morning in a battered old van she'd borrowed from a friend, and despite having weeded out many of his possessions, it still took three trips back and forth between Conrad's place and hers, a good two hours of spring cleaning and of course the return of his keys to the landlord, before the job was finally complete. Well, complete except for unpacking at the other end, but that was a task that could be postponed for another day.

Despite the upheaval, there was a certain satisfaction and a feeling of renewal in moving house, at least there was once the dreaded deed was done. It was a chance to cast out the old and

bring in the new; to make a whole new, fresh start in life. And that night there was cause for celebration – not that they needed much cause in those heady days.

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No sooner had they seated themselves to begin the next session, and before Tenzing had had a chance to summarize a little of what had gone before, before moving on, H leant forward in his chair and spoke up.

The man launched into yet another narcissistic and breathless tirade and they let him go on in this vein for almost half an hour. Dzoldzaya did her best to accommodate him, but you could see that, patient as she was, she was becoming exasperated. For every suggestion they made, the response was either “can’t” or “won’t”, followed by a long string of quite unnecessary reasons why not. This merely strung the proceedings out still further and made the issues they were facing ever more complex, labyrinthine and murky. Nothing he, she or Tenzing had to say had a hope in hell of getting through to the man, at least not at this stage.

“Very well. Thank you for being here, H,” Tenzing said quite abruptly, rising to his feet and motioning toward the door. “Please close the door behind you on your way out.”

H left in a huff, leaving the door ajar in one final defiant gesture.

Conrad was feeling a little abashed to have lost H and made his apologies for his part in the affair.

“Don’t worry about it, Conrad,” said Tenzing, heading toward the drinks cabinet while Dzoldzaya went into a cupboard and uncovered the sandwiches that had been prepared earlier. They had intended sharing them with H, had he not gone storming off.

“I had hoped that we might be able to bring this issue a few steps closer to resolution, of course. However, some people are what we might call ‘deep enders’. Alas, all too often we are

singularly unable to help them, because they would sometimes sooner spit in your face as look at you. But seeds have nevertheless been sown and – God willing – they may germinate some day in a quite unexpected way. So, if nothing else, we can live in ...”

“Hope?” Conrad suggested.

“Not hope, Conrad, but in trust, certainly.”

Something appeared to dawn on the man, as happened from time to time. It was as if he’d just received some silent communiqué and chose to pass it on: “Something you might find interesting (and make a written note of) is that according to some there are six main types of intervention we can make during these kind of sessions: the Supportive, the Catalytic, the Prescriptive; the Informative; the Cathartic and the Confronting. Three of these are Directive, whilst the other three are Facilitative (and I leave you to work out which is which, how they might be used and what potential pitfalls as well as benefits there might be). And in each of them there is another subtle and vital component which we might term the transpersonal. In crude terms this might involve what we could call ‘telepathic’ and ‘telekinetic’ skills; real communication and healing from the authentic core of one to another, ‘heart to heart.’”

“As for me, I would say that there is a seventh intervention – and that is to deliberately *not* intervene. One thing I’ve noticed is that intervention comes far more readily than abstention.”

Then Tenzing added: “Another possibility, when you sense that your efforts are futile and that all hope is lost, would be to openly admit to the client that you’re utterly flummoxed and that there is nothing you can do to help or save them – I’ve used that paradoxical intervention successfully on a couple of occasions, and it’s thankfully worked, provoking a real and spontaneous recovery, though it is one hell of a gamble, and so

not an option to be taken lightly.”

“Is this a put up job?” Conrad asked Tenzing.

“How do you mean?”

“I mean is H a stooge, maybe a paid actor? Is it some kind of psychological experiment staged for our benefit, to see how well or poorly we fare?”

“Alas, no,” Tenzing replied with a shake of his head. He gently tapped Conrad’s chest, near his heart. “There is a part of us that knows what is authentic and what is a fake. No amount of psychological knowledge or method acting could truly fool that part of us, our own authentic core. Well, I say not, but yes, admittedly you can fool all of the people some of the time, or some of the people all of the time, but no, you can’t fool all of the people all of the time, as the saying goes. Thank heavens for that small mercy.

“Believe me: your encounter with H is about as real as it gets. Having said that, I have come across people who were not only as twisted up inside as H, but with whom a rational discussion was next to impossible for all their manipulation and defence. Like trying to knit a squirming can of worms, and unbelievably and vexingly expert at being evasive and tight-arsed.

“In relation to those people, H is a bit of a softie, really. Even though he won’t take advice, he does leave a very good trail of breadcrumbs for us to follow. And at the end of the day, whilst those others will refuse to play by the rules, will play ‘mindfuck games’ with you, exploiting any weakness you might have, twisting everything round to their advantage (to the point of getting your own colleagues to have a go at you), and will leave you seriously questioning your own sanity and intent, at least with H you pretty much always know who’s the one in need and who’s there to help.”

“What about self-disclosure?” asked Dzoldzaya. “How much should we let people know, so that they come to feel

we're in the same boat and supportive of them, as it were?"

"With someone like H, I wouldn't reveal my flaws of character, shortcomings or personal details. He won't have much truck with any lesser being than the Teacher of the Age or the Good Lord. In any case, he's discounted the latter and already despises us and speaks of us as mere 'morons.' For all we've seen of him thus far, this is but the tip of the iceberg.

"I suspect this is not the last we will hear of the man. I fully expect him to return or perhaps send us missives from time to time, in an attempt to thoroughly demolish our help and our characters and fill us full of guilt, remorse and self-doubt."

Dzoldzaya had a thought. "Is he any different than us?" she asked. "I mean, we tend to reject those parts of ourselves which appear to be the most bothersome..."

Tenzing put an arm on her shoulder. "I appreciate what you are saying, and we can usefully look at ourselves and our own responses. Having said that, there is another factor involved here. That is, there is a danger of collusion; in providing a convenient rationale to latch onto in order to explain, validate and perpetuate certain errant attitudes and behaviour."

True to Tenzing's words, though H had left *Foxholes* the next day and that was the last they saw of the man, they did indeed receive a string of abusive letters from him.

"I'm sorry you have to endure this," Dzoldzaya commiserated.

Tenzing shrugged. "It comes with the territory, dear heart. Since I chose to stick my head over the parapet and pull funny faces, then I can fully expect and must accept that I will be shot at. Having made that decision and committed myself, I must live with the consequences."

These missives basically made out that H was a master psychologist with forty years' experience and his spiritual needs were now well taken care of, whilst whatever they thought they knew about themselves was false; whatever they

believed in was a delusion, and, categorically stated, that they should seek professional help.

Dzoldzaya shook her head sadly. "His answer is the scary part. What would become of the person on the receiving end?!"

"Yes, Dzoldzaya, I agree wholeheartedly," said Tenzing. "I have a feeling that they would slowly lose their individuality and be destroyed, to become little more than his shadow or glove puppet, if they could not break free from him.

"Never forget, in your darkest moments, that if he really were who he says he is, he would not be saying these things," Tenzing went on. "Though at times even this will not be enough, and your own issues will surface. So it's important that anyone who counsels others in this way themselves receive periodic supervision."

"And who supervises the supervisors at the top of the tree?" Conrad wondered out loud. "Who polices the police, as it were (other than government)?"

"I would say that it's more a case of being closer to the roots than to the top of the tree, actually Conrad: the world's hierarchies are rather topsy-turvy in this respect. And it's more to do with functionality than seniority," was Tenzing's reply. "In those cases, there is peer-to-peer review. None are exempt from this process. Having said that, as you progress you will find that it is also rather more of a heart to heart connection and doesn't solely rely on meeting face to face or head to head."

"Do you think that H will ever learn and change?" asked Dzoldzaya.

Tenzing pushed himself up in his chair. "A dear friend of mine once said, and I quote: 'We all think of ourselves as logical people: people who are capable of changing our minds, for instance, if we get superior information, more information which tells us that our former beliefs or prejudices were untrue. And yet this has been disproved in a most alarming manner. Studies have shown that one third of people are not able to

change their minds once they have made them up on the basis of inaccurate information, even if accurate information is subsequently given to them.'

"“I have no doubt at all that suppose the Dread Lord Develin had conquered the Freelands and Develin had then run all the public schools and all the secondary education, that perhaps seventy percent of the new generation in the Freelands could have been brought up with Develinian viewpoints.’ That certainly does give one pause for thought, does it not?

“On a brighter note, you will be pleased to hear, also in the words of my dear friend, that ‘the people who can be got at are the normal people. But although the normal people are get-at-able there are always in the population a group of people who are either mad, near-mad or what we call obsessive, are eccentric, unconventional or unorthodox, who can’t be got at by these techniques. It is these people who are not going to accept the conditioning and group indoctrination who are going to make the great advances.’”

Thankfully, even these missives from H eventually petered out, though Conrad couldn’t help but brood from time to time on the possibility that there might be other poor souls out there who had since fallen under the man’s influence.

20. The big day dawns

That year was a strange one. During the day, when Conrad was at work, though he tried to find and show an interest in the tasks before him and loved a challenge, Dzoldzaya was never far from his thoughts and feelings, and home time at five o'clock could not come quickly enough. When he was at home, and he and Dzoldzaya were together, how he wished that time would slow to a crawl, or even freeze for a while. But, alas, the cogs of the world ground on and on relentlessly and that time, for all its wonder, seemed to pass even more rapidly, whilst his time away from home seemed to crawl.

There were, of course, two possibilities, other than to merely “grin and bear it,” as his dutiful mother would advise. The first was to find more interesting work that actually did get his juices flowing, something into which he could put his heart and which he'd happily perform. And the other was to find some way in which the pair of them could actually spend time working together. But as yet, no opportunities presented themselves on either count, at least none had attracted his attention.

One thing he mustn't do, however – but, alas, to his chagrin, sometimes did – was to allow this discontent and frustration to spill over and contaminate his home life or place his relationship with Dzoldzaya under any kind of cloud. And, only naturally, this further increased the necessity of resolving the issue, and the tension of that need only made matters worse, in some kind of vicious circle. So, whilst he tried to allow himself to be laid back like Dzoldzaya, dealing with this issue sometimes required a concerted effort on his part. And, of course, it shouldn't have required this kind of effort, it should have simply flowed naturally, as it did with Dzoldzaya.

Fortunately, though of course this was only a postponement and offered no more than breathing space, August finally arrived, and one sunny day he, Dzoldzaya and Yangchen set out with Tenzing in the battered old estate car, heading for Narayana. They picked up another traveller on their way, whom they were meeting for the first time: Rosalie Muller, who worked as a literary agent in Sher Point and was, Conrad was to find out later, one of Tenzing's deputies, along with Harold Grainger, the vice principal at Sher Point.

Rosalie sat beside Tenzing in the front passenger seat and they spent much of the time on the journey south toward the Great Forest bringing each other up to speed and generally chatting. Like Tenzing, she was a mine of information and wisdom. Put the two together and it was like hearing a symphony orchestra. They seemed so familiar and so much at ease with one-another that it did make Conrad wonder if the two shared their own secret romance.

Since they'd only be journeying as far as the central plateau, albeit to the north, that knocked three days off the journey and their excitement and anticipation shaved quite a lot of perceived time off the journey, too. There was so much they all had to talk about and so many different, but in no way adversarial, viewpoints.

As soon as they got there, and before they'd had a chance to deposit their bags in the hallway, they were almost mobbed by relatives and not least by the children of relatives.

"Friends, friends!" Dzoldzaya's mother called, rolling up her sleeves and coming to the rescue. "Give our guests some room to move and breathe.

"Come, come," she beckoned, taking hold of Dzoldzaya's arm and guiding them away from the milling throng into the sanctuary of the kitchen. "First things first: sit yourselves down for a few minutes and I'll make you a nice hot cup of tea. And then we'll go and rejoin the others and you can tell us all your

news and of life in the Freelands.”

“Where on Earth is everyone staying, Mother?” Dzoldzaya asked, as they squeezed back into the living room. There was so little free space in there that Dorjee had pushed the table against the far wall of the dining room and half the guests were using that as an overflow area. “Do you have a tent city out in the garden?”

Llamu laughed. “No, no. As soon as we had the wedding day fixed, I went down to the local tavern and pre-booked rooms. Every one they have. And Dawa, our neighbour, offered us two of her bedrooms. You will be staying here, though for tonight you and Tenzing will stay with my niece, Nima. Yangchen and Rosalie will be staying next door and Conrad will stay at another friend’s house for tonight ... if that is all right by you: nothing is cast in concrete, of course. You’ll like Dawa, she’s a good friend to us.”

They were in full agreement and, as Llamu went on to explain the intricate arrangements, it became clear that these matters were in safe and eminently capable hands.

“But what about little Sangmu and Pema?” Dzoldzaya asked.

“Oh, we borrowed a folding bed. They’ll be sleeping in our room for now. Don’t worry: it’s all been thoroughly thought through.”

“Of course it has, Mother,” smiled Dzoldzaya, giving the lady a hug and a peck on the cheek. “How could I ever doubt you? Thank you so much.” Then to Conrad: “You can see from whom I’ve inherited my organizational abilities.”

Yes, that and the trousers, Conrad mused.

Llamu smiled, then added: “With Conrad not living nearby and not having his relatives with him, we have had to make adjustments to the wedding rituals, you understand.”

Dzoldzaya nodded. “Naturally. Yes, that had occurred to me, too. I’m sure everything will work out fine. Thank you

again.”

Eventually, all the latest news, gossip and points of interest exchanged, most of Dzoldzaya’s relatives made their way back to their lodgings and abodes and it was Conrad and Dzoldzaya’s time to leave, too. She went off with Nima, whilst he was escorted back down the road into town by Narwan, one of Dzoldzaya’s uncles. The man explained on the way that the bride and groom’s uncles played a pivotal role in the rituals. He’d be substituting for Conrad’s own uncle on the wedding day, going on to coach Conrad in the procedure, whilst Tenzing would play a similar and most important role for Conrad’s bride. Though he still didn’t fully understand, this made sense of the complicated sleeping arrangements prior to the wedding.

Another thing that he discovered was that strictly speaking it was the bride and groom’s uncles who normally negotiated and then approved the wedding, but they all seemed pretty laid back about the way things had come about and with the necessary changes.

Bright and early the next morning, Narwan woke Conrad and, after sharing a hearty breakfast together, Narwan had his wife run a bath and Conrad spent a few minutes freshening up, then put on the traditional set of clothes that had been laid out for him.

“Are you ready?” Narwan asked Conrad, checking him up and down and brushing some stray hairs off his suit.

Conrad let out a slow, deep breath to calm his growing nerves. “Yes, thanks. I’m beginning to get the jitters, but I think I’m as ready as I’ll ever be. Thanks, Narwan. And thanks to your wife, too.”

The man bowed. “You’re most welcome, Conrad. And don’t worry, we all get nervous on our wedding day. So, shall we go?”

Conrad nodded and followed the man out through the front door of the house.

There were two horses waiting for them outside. Narwan's was a chestnut mare, whilst his was an immaculate, white stallion.

At this point, Tenzing and Dzoldzaya had already made their own journey on horseback toward the house. Tenzing had gone ahead to announce that the bride was on her way. He was greeted with all due pomp and ceremony and after the exchange of gifts and blessings, he returned to escort the bride toward the house.

Having been herself properly received, his bride was led into the house and seated in a rather grand-looking upright chair, while three of the children toasted her and sang songs of blessing for her.

As Conrad prepared to set off, he saw that all along the way, the road was lined by the townsfolk. For him, they were singing happy songs, though he'd been told that for his bride, there would initially have been both those bewailing their losing her and also those happy for her in her life to come. And they also sang their blessings.

The time having come, Conrad and Narwan mounted and set out at a walking pace toward Dzoldzaya's parents' house. When they were getting quite close, following customs which were quite unique to this area of Narayana, Narwan went ahead to announce the groom's arrival.

Once they'd been received, toasted and blessed and small gifts had again been exchanged, Narwan led Conrad through into the house.

Conrad was momentarily taken back, for there before him, sitting in a pair of matching grand-looking chairs, there were two figures. Both wore long white woollen wedding dresses and both had thick red veils pulled down over the faces. He looked around to Narwan for an explanation, and, being unfamiliar with these local customs, Narwan quietly explained that he must choose his bride; that nobody but the groom may

solve the puzzle.

“This is a symbol of your intimacy and your heart to heart connection,” Narwan told him in suitably hushed tones.

Conrad looked from one to the other and for a moment he was panic-stricken, for he could discern no difference between the two would-be brides. And then, praying for divine inspiration and approaching the two women, though not allowed too close, he happened to notice a tiny, glinting band around the finger of the one on the right. It was the engagement ring that he had given to Dzoldzaya shortly after they had first returned from Narayana. The one they couldn’t really afford. Only then did it dawn on Conrad that there had been method in Dzoldzaya’s apparent madness, for without that distinctive ring, all might have been lost, and he smiled a knowing smile and nodded his head at the thought.

And yet what if that was just a ruse? His mind was racing.

His heart in his mouth, he chose the bride on the right, and – as she slowly lifted her red veil, to reveal herself to him – he breathed a deep sigh of relief to find Dzoldzaya smiling back at him.

“Oh, thank you God; thank you!” he whispered under his breath.

Tenzing escorted Dzoldzaya out of the house now, with Conrad following, escorted by Narwan. Outside, a bright, white sheepskin rug had been laid out on the ground in front of the door and grains of barley had been carefully arranged on it, a symbol of fertility.

Dzoldzaya went to stand on the white sheepskin rug, facing the house while, exchanging bows, he went to stand on the rug facing his bride; she with her uncle by her side and he with his substitute uncle beside him.

At this point, after they had again both been toasted and blessed, Tenzing made a signal, and a small boy approached, carrying a symbol of the divine, and the pair of them turned to

face Tenzing and knelt at his feet as he began the formal wedding ceremony. This was his most important role that day. A number of monks in long, flowing maroon and saffron robes, who were standing to one side and now behind Tenzing, began a quiet and quite melodic chanting. By this time, it was all a blur to Conrad, though he did remember them being anointed with holy water and, though not part of the traditional ceremony, their exchanging of gold rings. And how could he ever forget the joyful look on Dzoldzaya's face and that first kiss of married life.

The ceremony over, the festivities began. Since it was basically an open house for any of the townsfolk who wanted to attend, they all skipped down the road to the community hall where a buffet had been laid on, to which most of the guests had contributed in one way or another; with food, drink, gifts and offers of help. It was the early hours of the morning before Dzoldzaya and Conrad finally managed to get away, heading back to Llamu and Dorjee's home and to the bridal bed.

Fortunately for them, they did not have to follow the rather distasteful Outlandish custom of tossing a bloodied handkerchief downstairs to prove to the guests that the virgin's hymen had been broken and she successfully deflowered. That was as grotesque as the way novices had their faces bloodied after their first hunt with horse and hound.

Conrad was glad now that he hadn't given in to his earlier lustful urges – as he so easily might have, given the encouragement – and that he'd saved himself for his wedding night.

For them and the family, the celebrations would continue well into the next day. After that, they were off with Tenzing, Rosalie and Yangchen to spend a few days at the *babs chu* retreat, which would undoubtedly involve further celebration with the students and workers there, before the long journey home.

The prospect of going back to Sher Point was not one that Conrad particularly relished. Then, on the way back home and quite out of the blue, or perhaps sensing what was on his mind, Tenzing peered at him through the rear view mirror of the car and pulled into the side of the road.

“Let’s stretch our legs a little,” Tenzing suggested, clambering out of the car and going around the other side of the car to open the door for Rosalie.

The man put his hand on Conrad’s shoulder and led him aside. “I believe there’s something on your mind, Conrad. I feel that it’s been gnawing away inside you for some time, and I wonder if there’s any way in which I might be of help?”

Conrad drew a deep breath and poured out his story, telling Tenzing about work and how his heart was so not in the work.

Tenzing nodded sagely: “Yes, I had a feeling that was the case.”

“So what am I to do, Tenzing?” he asked, holding out his palms to signal that he was at a loss.

“Well, there are at least three options open to you, Conrad. The first would be to take night classes in some subject that *does* take your fancy, and obtain qualifications. The second is that you know that you, Dzoldzaya and Yangchen are always welcome to come and go at *babs chu*, or to stay for however long you might care. We could always find you work and studies there.”

Conrad nodded. “And the third?”

“Well, I appreciate that you’re actually quite a natural when it comes to dealing with technological gizmos such as computers, and it just so happens that Mrs Philips, whose first husband died four or five years back, is getting remarried and will be leaving us at the end of the Spring term ...”

The man paused for a moment to gauge Conrad’s reaction.

“... And there will be a vacancy for a tutor in computing. That would be right up your street.”

Conrad's eyes lit up.

"What you don't know now, I'm certain you would soon learn. Firstly, you would have work in which you could pour your heart, not only for computing's sake but also for the Cause; secondly, and as I said, you're always welcome at *babs chu*; thirdly, you and Dzoldzaya have a whole new life ahead of you."

Another thought seemed to spring to mind and Tenzing added: "And with some coaching, perhaps you might like to take on a counselling role at *Foxholes*? I know that work appeals to you, too. There's an ever-growing need, and in helping others you would also learn a lot about yourself and greatly help yourself ...

"So, how does that sound to you, Conrad? Are you interested?"

"I'll say," he enthused. "Thank you so much, Tenzing. I could think of nothing better. What more could I want for?"

"Good!" beamed Tenzing, clapping him gently on the back. "I'm so glad we've got that sorted. Welcome to the Company. Well, shall we be off? And perhaps we might discuss some of the details on the way."

21. Disaster strikes

Fate had one last trick up his sleeve for Conrad, however, as he found out to his cost. He'd just been across the border into the Outlands, running an errand for The Network, delivering false papers to a needy couple who were staying at a little hamlet in Upper Wyevale, a few hours north of the border with the Freelands.

He himself was travelling under doubly false papers, for there was always the risk that something might have gone wrong, and if it did, that the authorities might be able to trace the trail of breadcrumbs and discover his association with The Network.

When Conrad reached the border on his return to the Freelands, the rather gruff-looking border guard took his papers and carefully examined them for some time.

"Wait here," the man instructed him curtly before disappearing into a room behind the counter. Conrad's heart lurched as the guard returned a few moments later with another, an officer, judging by the brightly coloured epaulettes on his shoulders and his tall peaked hat.

"This way, please, sir," the officer encouraged him, lifting a flap on the counter to allow Conrad through and guiding him toward the office.

"Is anything wrong?" Conrad wanted to know, his heart pounding heavily in his chest and hoping to God that his face wasn't going to flush and give the game away.

The officer pointed to a hard backed chair in front of a neatly arranged desk. "Take a seat."

"I'd rather stand, if you don't mind," he replied, cursing himself for saying such a stupid thing even before the words were off the end of his tongue.

"I do mind. Take a seat," the officer responded and a firm hand on his shoulder from the guard standing behind him forced him down onto the chair.

"Your papers do not appear to be in order, Mister, um ..."
The officer consulted the documents.

"Carstairs," Conrad prompted.

"... Mister Carstairs."

He leant forward in his chair. "Surely not? What's wrong with them? A clerical error, perhaps? I'm sure it can be sorted out."

The officer looked up from perusing the documents, took off his reading spectacles and looked Conrad in the eye. "If it were only so simple a matter, Mister Carstairs, or whatever it is you call yourself, then I would be only too happy to oblige. But you see, it is alas, a far more serious matter than that."

Conrad gulped.

"You see, these papers are forgeries. They would have passed muster a month ago, but since that time, some trifling changes were made to the composition of the papers. And my sergeant has an eye for such discrepancies."

"But that's not possible," Conrad contended. "There has to be some mistake, a clerical error, perhaps?"

The officer shook his head. "There is no mistake, Mister Carstairs, other than your own and that of your accomplices. So, please, stop playing games with me. I have other work to do and do not have the time for these shenanigans."

"So what happens now?" he wanted to know.

"Now you will be taken to the cells, Mister Carstairs, and you will also be questioned," the man replied matter-of-factly, no doubt having been through this routine so many times before. "Then, perhaps on Monday morning you will be taken before the courts. If you are found guilty, you will be spending the next six months in confinement."

"And then?" As if that weren't enough.

“And then you will be repatriated to the Outlands where you and your kind belong.”

Conrad’s heart sank. His whole life, all his cherished hopes and dreams, suddenly came crashing down on top of him.

“We’ll speak further on the matter in the morning, Mister Carstairs, which should afford you ample time for sober reflection. Take him away, sergeant.”

Having been strip searched and had a full, embarrassing and painful bodily cavity examination, Conrad was allowed to keep his clothes, though he did have his pocket watch, his belt and his boot laces confiscated, presumably for fear he might harm himself.

There was no bed in the narrow cell, nor bedclothes, just a thin rubberised mattress flung down by the guard on the cold stone floor. And in place of a toilet, there was a battered old, zinc-plated bucket. There was a light set into the ceiling in the centre of the room which stayed on all night, and every half hour, on the dot, a little shutter would slide open in the doorway and a guard would peer in to make sure that all was in order.

So with that and the thousand and one urgent thoughts that raced around and around in his mind, Conrad hardly slept a wink that night. His chief concern, other than for his own desperate plight, was for his beloved Dzoldzaya. How would she cope when he failed to return? And next in line to that was the fact that a mistake had been made with the newly issued papers, which would put a good many others at risk. The Network had to be told before it was too late, and for the life of him, he could not see how that might be accomplished.

The questioning the next day went on for hours, though fortunately for him they didn’t bring out the rubber hosepipes, nor the rusty pliers to pull out his fingernails. He told them just enough and with sufficient reluctance to eventually convince them that he was just another would-be illegal immigrant, a

non-entity, who'd been offered false papers on the black market. Thank the Good Lord that what he told them had them convinced.

Sure enough on Monday morning, his hands and feet firmly manacled and clutching the heavy iron, chained ball before him, he was taken before the courts. He stood there cowering in the docks, overawed by the immensity of the courtroom and by the grandeur of the legal proceedings.

Found guilty by the judge, without being able to offer any defence, and sentenced to no less than six months imprisonment with hard labour, he was taken down from the dock, thrown bodily into the back of a heavily barred wagon and paraded through the streets like some caged animal, before being taken out of town to a grim looking prison out in the wilds, not far from the border.

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When Conrad failed to appear on the day of his planned return, Dzoldzaya began to worry. By nightfall, when he had still not returned, she went round to her uncle's, to see if he'd had word. She thought perhaps that there had been a delay, though another part of her was crying out to her that their plans had gone awry.

There was little they could do that evening, so Dzoldzaya spent an anxious night with her uncle, and the following morning, through his network of contacts, they made discreet enquiries, all to no avail.

And then came that fateful phone call. Conrad had been detained at the border post, tried for attempted illegal entry into the country and sent down for six months to Darrok, a notorious jail to the north.

"We have to get word to him that we know of his plight," Dzoldzaya wept, beside herself with worry.

Tenzing nodded gravely. "I'll see what I can do, Dzoldzaya." He said this, but she sensed some reservation in

his reply.

“But how could this have happened, Uncle? Surely his papers would have been in order.”

He thought for a moment and he explained that for the sake of safety, fresh papers had been issued to him for the purposes of his trip over the border. “Perhaps there was a discrepancy?”

“Again, I’ll look into the matter,” Tenzing assured her, reaching for the telephone and dialling a number.

“Oh, Lord help us! And what about the family due to arrive this week?” she asked. “What if the papers that Conrad gave them are out of order, too? What if they’ve forced Conrad to tell them about the Network? What if ...”

“I was thinking that self-same thing, dear heart,” her uncle agreed, then turned away to speak to the voice on the other end of the line when he had been connected. “Roger? You and the family well, I trust. Oh good. Now listen, Roger, we’ve encountered a spot of bother here, and I was hoping you might be able to offer us some assistance ...”

At length, Tenzing put the phone down. “Let’s go and make a pot of tea,” he suggested, taking Dzoldzaya’s arm and guiding her toward the kitchen. She was in a bit of a daze. “In fact, I think the gravity of the situation calls for something a little stronger.”

“It’s bad, isn’t it?” she sobbed, pulling her lace handkerchief from up her sleeve.

Her uncle sighed a deep sigh. “What can I say, other than ...”

“... other than ‘This, too, shall pass’?” she replied, completing his sentence. Those wise words were more easily said than lived through and they were cold comfort to her right now. Uncle Tenzing nodded sadly and she could see now that there were tears forming in his own eyes.

“Is there no way we can get Conrad out?”

Tenzing shook his head. "Even my influence doesn't extend that far, alas, my dear."

"But we must get word to him, to let him know that we know of his plight and that he is in our thoughts and in our hearts. I'm not so much worried about his physical health so much as his psychological and emotional health."

"Yes, we can at least do that much," her uncle nodded. "Leave the matter with me." He poured out two large tumblers of amber liquid and passed her a glass. "Now get that down your neck, Dzoldzaya. It'll do you good."

~~~O~~~

From the moment Conrad entered the stark, granite grey walls of Darrok and his head was shaved, Conrad and his fellow inmates were known to their jailers not by name, but simply by number. It was all part of the dehumanizing process. He was number 483. Over the years, the liberal reformers had called for more emphasis to be placed on rehabilitation, but to die-hard conservatives the key was punishment, and theirs was the philosophy that still prevailed in these supposedly enlightened times.

What the judge had not said, when sentencing Conrad to hard labour was that the work would not only be hard, but also bereft of meaning and real use to society. Each day they were led, in ball and chains, out of the prison gates and taken to a quarry, to toil into the late afternoon breaking up rocks with sledgehammers, a job that could easily and far more efficiently have been done by machine. The authorities could at least have taken away the remaining stones and perhaps used them for building roads, but even that minor motivational factor had deliberately been withheld, to make the work more demeaning. They were there not only as a punishment for themselves but also to send out a warning signal to the many other aliens who might break the law.

Though he'd thought long and hard about how he might

escape and always had his eyes peeled for any such opportunity, it eventually became apparent to Conrad that it was more likely that the fiery pits of Hell should freeze over than that he might escape. In the three hundred year old history of the prison, only one had escaped and he was caught on the barren moorland within the day and put into solitary confinement for twenty eight days, to emerge permanently unhinged by this experience. That had been just before the outbreak of the First War, and only a handful of abortive attempts had been made since.

There was no chance of remission for good behaviour, either. Six months here meant six long months; or even longer, should one be caught breaking any one of the many rules. One old fellow had originally been sentenced to just one month for theft; and twenty years later – simply because he bravely defended himself when attacked with deadly force by another inmate – the poor devil was still here. There was only one way that that man would get out of Darrok, and that was in a pine box.

Night times were the worst, at least in the beginning, for all the cat calling reverberating through the cell block, and for the sheer loneliness; though as the weeks went by, Conrad got used to even this and took some little comfort at this break from the routine and labour of the day. If nothing else, it afforded him time to himself and also an opportunity to continue with the exercises that Mister Flint had set him during the time he spent under his guidance at *Foxholes*.

There was a religious service each Thursday morning, which all the inmates were obliged to attend, but since it offered a brief respite from the grim work detail, few complained at this imposition.

It was at the end of one of these services that the priest caught Conrad's eye and discreetly beckoned him across. Making suitably ecclesiastic – and yet quite nonsensical – noises, the priest pressed something into Conrad's palm as he

went to shake hands, said his goodbyes and went off to chat with the prison governor and his wife.

In Conrad's palm was a tiny, folded piece of paper. Getting down on one knee and pretending to fasten up his boot, he hastily slipped the paper into one of his socks and walked out. It was lunchtime and after that he had another hard afternoon's work ahead of him, and it wasn't until evening came and the inmates were once again locked in their cells for the night, that he got a chance to take out the paper and see what it was.

His heart skipped a beat as he saw that on the paper was scribbled a note, and he was thrilled as he recognized the distinctive handwriting, signed with a flourish, "*With all my love forever, my darling, Dee.*"

The note offered no hope of early release, nor of escape, but it did offer him the promise that when he finally was released, Dzoldzaya would be waiting for him with open and loving arms.

Conrad should have followed protocol, of course, and destroyed that note, or swallowed it, but it was all he had to cling onto in those dreadful and irksome times. Every evening, just before he went to sleep, he'd take the note out of its hiding place and savour those wonderful words.

He thought that the note would be safe tucked inside a tiny tear in his mattress, but how wrong he was. He stood there against the cold, stone wall at attention as the warders carried out one of their frequent surprise inspections. They searched everywhere in the cell that day and, seeing the tear in the mattress, one of the warders ripped the mattress some more. And there, between the canvas cover and the horse hair interior, he found that precious note.

The warder read the note, then screwed it up and threw it in the old zinc plated bucket which served as a toilet in the cramped cell.

The warden had him questioned, of course, and yes, this

time they did bring out the rubber hosepipes and give him a right royal whipping. And when the warden finally realized that his lips were firmly sealed and he would not answer their questions, bruised and aching all over, they dragged him from the interrogation room and they threw him into a dark cell, to spend a month in solitary confinement.

That month being added to his existing sentence, he would now be serving seven months in that hell hole. Or – though perish the thought – even longer if he got into trouble again. The warders were always on the lookout for trouble, and if they couldn't find any trouble, then one or two of them would go out of their way to cook up trouble. There was another poor chap at the prison, Tyson, who'd originally been sent there for three months, again for petty theft. Two years on, and continually falling foul of a couple of guards who really had it in for him, he was still there. They'd taunt and taunt the man until, like any other sentient human being, he would finally snap. And he was not the only one. There was a third man they called Big Mac, whose only "offence" appeared to be that he had mental health issues, and in his case he had no parole date whatsoever. The authorities had simply incarcerated him for an indefinite period "at their pleasure" and thrown away the key. The list went on.

And then there were a whole host of petty villains who, rather than becoming reformed characters, had been slowly but surely turned into hardened career criminals. Some of the old lags held master classes and they taught these newbies all the tricks of the trade whilst they were banged up inside.

There was a little cold comfort in this, of course. How did that old saying go? "I complained about the state of my shoes, until I met a man who had no feet." Too right, too damn right.

It was a truly rotten and despotic regime that stank to high heaven, and what made it doubly frustrating was that there wasn't a damn thing that he, or indeed Tenzing, could do about

it. There was nothing that anyone could do about it, except the authorities themselves, and it was not in their own, vested interests to intervene.

22. Freedom

Finally, and not a moment too soon, came the end of Conrad's ordeal, the day of his release. He was given back the clothes he'd worn when he'd arrived at the prison, and for the first time in seven months he was referred to by the guards as "Mister," rather than by his number, "483".

Escorted under armed guard to the northern border where he was again photographed and fingerprinted, Conrad was officially cautioned that he was now barred from the Freelands and that he was never to attempt to return, a crime punishable by three years imprisonment on the next (his second) conviction. In case that was not a sufficient deterrent, he was further warned that should he be convicted for a third time, then he might expect nothing short of a long drop at the end of the hangman's noose.

That said, his escort fished in his pocket and pressed a few iron shekels into Conrad's hand, just sufficient money for him to catch a stage coach to the nearest town and buy himself a little food that day. And he was sent on his way.

There was a stage post not far away past the Outlands side of the border and Conrad sat there on a rock by the side of the road awaiting the next coach. He spent two long hours there, shivering in the cold, but having spent so long in confinement and toil, it was something he could easily bear, glad to be free at last. A thought that he could not bear, however, was that he would not be able to return to Sher Point and to his beloved Dzoldzaya. Dzoldzaya, Tenzing, his work at *Foxholes* ... all that was now lost to him, and he was desolate. The only thing he could think of was to somehow make it back to Margate, where he might stay with his mother and Harry. He wouldn't like to impose on them unduly, but this would at least offer a

few days respite.

As he saw the stage coach finally approaching, at first little more than a cloud of dust in the distance, Conrad pushed himself to his feet and waited.

“How much is it to Dunston?” he asked the driver’s mate, fishing in his pocket for his money. The man consulted the driver and mentioned a figure. But that would leave him with too little money to find a room for the night. Eventually he settled for Hornsby, the nearest town, and clambered on-board. The driver flicked the reins and they were off, lurching this way and that down the heavily rutted road.

There were others aboard the coach: a woman with a small and talkative child, and a rather well-to-do gentleman in a suit and a long, black coat, but after exchanging greetings and brief pleasantries, feeling quite numb, Conrad turned away to stare blankly out of the window as the countryside passed him by.

They were there soon enough and, collecting his sack of belongings and slinging it over his back, Conrad went off down town to find some cheap café. Eventually he found one that advertised “breakfast served all day” and he was just about to go inside when he heard a polite cough behind him. Turning, he saw that it was the same well-to-do gentleman who he’d seen earlier on the stage coach.

“You look rather down on your luck, young man,” the man observed.

“Does it show?” was the first thing that sprang into his head.

The man nodded. “I have some free time before my coach leaves for the coast,” the gentleman informed him. “Why don’t we try somewhere else. I know of a wonderful inn overlooking the river Lent. And perhaps over a decent meal and a tankard of ale, you might tell me your story?”

Conrad was reluctant to take up the man’s offer, though he did thank him, but the gentleman – who introduced himself as

Wilfred Owen – eventually persuaded him and he agreed.

When Wilfred had heard the sorry tale that Conrad had to tell (some of the details of course changed so as not to give a whiff of his involvement with The Network), the man went back to the bar to bring a fresh round of drinks.

“Conrad, your sad story reminds me so much of a tale I often tell my own children. It’s a long tale, but thoroughly worth sharing with others in need, and making one’s own. So please bear with me.”

“There’s a preamble to the story, and it is this ...”

When a number of people come together, and if these people are harmonised in a certain way, excluding some who make for disharmony – we have what we call an event ...”

When Conrad heard those opening words, he recognized it as an old tale that his father would often tell him and Harry, one that he seemed to have forgotten about over the years, and a delightful shiver went through him.

And the man did, indeed, go on to tell the story of Mushkil Gusha. Conrad had heard the tale so often that he almost, but not quite, knew it off by heart; and yet he had still to plumb its wonderful depths. He was eager to hear the tale once more, for at that moment, it was more poignant and fitting than ever.

The story was about an old woodcutter, a widower who lived in the forest with his young daughter, and who was – just like Conrad – down on his luck, and was saved by the timely intervention of a higher spiritual agency, Mushkil Gusha, remover of all difficulties.⁹

The gentleman peered into Conrad’s eyes as he brought the story to a close and Conrad could feel the hairs on his arms and the top of his neck stand up on end in that moment of contact.

A thought dawned on Conrad. “You know, something tells me that our meeting like this was no mere coincidence,” he told the man straight out.

⁹Retold by Idries shah in *The Magic Monastery*, Octagon Press.

Wilfred smiled. "Perhaps, if we only knew it, Conrad, 'mere coincidences' are few and far between."

The gentleman pulled his chair closer to the table and smiled, fishing in the inner pocket of his suit. He passed an envelope to Conrad. The red waxen seal on the back was still intact and on the front, the address simply read "F.A.O. Conrad Harper."

Conrad broke the seal, opened the envelope and took out the sheet of paper. It was a short note from Tenzing which first of all expressed their delight that he was to be finally freed, then went on to recommend him to the good company and able services of their associate ... Lord Rosedale. Well, would you credit it? What a small world.

For a moment, Conrad didn't know what to say.

"So, all this has been planned, your Lordship. It certainly is no mere coincidence," he whistled.

"Absolutely, old chap. Right down to the dotting of the 'I's and the crossing of the 'T's. As for the title, some people call me Lord Rosedale, but to be honest, I prefer to be called plain Wilfred."

"And you've come all this way for me, not even knowing me?"

Wilfred smiled. "That's what real friends are for, Conrad."

"But where do we go from here, Wilfred. Clearly we can't go back down south ... where on earth do we go from here?"

Wilfred placed his fingers to his temples and stared out into the distance, his eyes glazing over. At length he spoke, in perfect mimicry of some of the fortune tellers who travelled about the lands. "Oooh, young man, I see a long journey ahead of you. The spirits tell me that there will be a long sea voyage. A storm will blow up, threatening to capsize your vessel. But fear not, for you will reach land safely ..."

Wilfred suddenly dropped out of character and beamed at Conrad.

“A journey across the sea?”

The man nodded. “As far as the west coast.” That was across the other side of the sea.

“But I have no money for the passage ...”

“Oh ye of little faith.” Again the man rummaged in his inner pocket and slid a piece of card across the table toward him. Conrad picked up the card and saw that it was a second class ticket aboard the steamship *Griselda*, from Stainesport on the coast, all the way across the sea to Habratz in Narayana.

“And will you be coming along, too, Wilfred?” Conrad asked him.

“As far as Habratz. I have business there to conduct for The Network, so it’s no skin off my nose. And once there, I’ll introduce you to a man by the name of Flatterbury who’s to be your guide from there.”

“My guide from there to where?” he wanted to know.

Wilfred shrugged. “That’s on a ‘need to know’ basis, old chap, and clearly I don’t need to know. To a place of safety, that’s all I’ve been told.”

The man consulted his silver pocket watch, drained his tankard and rose to his feet. “Well, time to spend a shekel,” he concluded. “And then we have another coach to catch if we’re to make it to the coast today.”

From the start, it was an awful voyage, and Conrad was sick to the pit of his stomach almost as soon as they left harbour. But the worst was yet to come.

Half way through the passage, what had been quite moderate seas became heavy and the captain called on his crew to firmly batten down the hatches. Everything that wasn’t fastened down or securely stowed away slid about or came crashing to the floor, as a great storm blew up, and the kitchen was awash with the remnants of the meal that was being prepared. They were buffeted about from side to side as the waves came crashing down on them, and the whole ship

strained and groaned under the relentless pounding.

By this point, many of the guests, who had been gathered in the dining room ready to eat, were beside themselves with fear, and some others were down on their knees, confessing their sins and begging the Good Lord to save them. In danger of capsizing at any moment, the captain had his crew ready the lifeboats, and was on the point of calling upon the passengers to assemble and abandon ship, hoping against hope that they might still make it safely into port.

Suddenly there was an almighty crash that reverberated through the iron ship and an awful screeching, scraping sound. Blown off course, they had hit the rocks. Worse than that, they had been holed at the bows and were rapidly taking on water faster than the bilge pumps could remove it. Already down in the water at the bow, with breakers crashing over the ship, there was another almighty bang as one of the bulkhead doors suddenly gave way, flooding the aft compartments.

There was nothing for it but to abandon ship and no possibility of taking any of their possessions with them. Conrad and Wilfred did as the crew ordered and, clutching onto any of the fixtures that came to hand, and the railings, and numbed to the bone with the icy cold water, they lined up, awaiting their turn as the lifeboats were filled, swung out on booms and lowered one by one over the side. By the time they reached the head of the disorderly queue of panicked passengers, the women, the old and the infirm having gone before them, there was only the one boat still serviceable and the bow of the ship was fast disappearing into the crashing waves.

How they hung on as the ship lurched this way and that, heaven only knows, but they did. And, all pitching in and taking to the oars, they half rowed and were half blown toward the shore as the ship gave a last shudder and rolled over. Suddenly there was a deafening explosion as the boilers blew up, and the ship broke in two and sank.

The helmsman did his best to steer the lifeboat, keeping it turned toward the shore, aware that if a wave caught them side on, the frail craft would flip over and they would be scattered in the ferocious waves. Fortunately for them, the tide was on its way in and the strong wind was blowing off the sea, and in fits and starts they were brought closer and closer to land until, finally, not far from the water's edge they ran aground. Clambering over the boat, they jumped off into the water and waded to the shore.

For a few moments they stayed there, giving their thanks for having been spared that day, but realizing that there were so many others still out there, being tossed about in the lifeboats, they went back to the shoreline and did what they could to help.

Finally, as the storm finally blew overhead and began to subside, and with no more survivors coming ashore, some of the crew took one of the boats back out to see if there were any more to be saved, and to retrieve any bodies that had not as yet been blown to the shore. Not able to assist in any other way, Conrad and Wilfred helped the other passengers away from the shore toward the town, which lay perhaps a mile to the north, and when they arrived and word spread that there had been a shipwreck, some of the locals took to the sea in their own boats, looking for survivors and goods to salvage, whilst others opened up their homes and the community hall to take in the passengers. The bread, hot beef broth and tea offered to them were most welcome.

That done and the adrenaline rush finally subsided, Conrad and Wilfred headed for the port, where they had arranged to meet Flatterbury, who was to drive Conrad on the next leg of his journey.

They found the man waiting impatiently for them and less than happy at their late arrival, though his attitude softened somewhat when he heard of their misfortune and their lucky escape. So, sorry to have to say goodbye to Wilfred, and

thanking him for his good company and hospitality, Conrad walked off with Flatterbury to go find his truck.

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It was not the best time of the year to trek across the continent, even in Flatterbury's powerful, high wheeled pick-up truck, which was weighed down with some unspecified cargo of supplies under a tarpaulin in the back. It had been snowing recently and it was cold, even in the heated cab and with them thoroughly wrapped up. When they were out of the relatively clear roads near the coast, Flatterbury had stopped to fasten snow chains on the tyres and lowered a makeshift snowplough into place, cutting a path ahead as they went where the snow had drifted.

Flatterbury wasn't very well versed in the art of conversation and there was little he could tell Conrad about the travel arrangements, so the days dragged on and on. Fortunately, with two or three pints down his gullet, the man did loosen up in the evenings and this helped to pass a little of the time. At one particular inn, suitably lubricated, Flatterbury spent most of the evening chatting up one of the local damsels and the pair of them retired to Flatterbury's room for a little slap and tickle, leaving Conrad all alone in the bar, with only the roaring log fire and thoughts of Dzoldzaya to warm the cockles of his heart. He and Flatterbury shared a room that night, along with the damsel whose name was Delliga, and with the slap and tickle carrying on well into the night and the bed head occasionally thumping against the bedroom wall, Conrad didn't get much sleep until the next day when they'd set off once more. If nothing else, however, this encounter loosened the man up considerably.

Eventually they reached a town which looked vaguely familiar to Conrad, and Flatterbury informed Conrad that this was the end of the road. From here he was to go by bus. The man rummaged in his pocket and brought out a few coins,

sufficient for the journey.

“Where are we now?” Conrad asked, looking around him.

“This is Shakra,” the man replied. “You’ll find the bus depot down the road on the right.”

Shakra! Yes, that was the name of the place. Now he knew where he was. He thanked the man profusely, threw his sack over his shoulder and set off down the road through the snow toward the depot. Flatterbury’s timing could not have been more perfect, with a bus departing within half an hour, having been fortunately delayed by the snow. But for that fact, he’d have had to stay at Shakra overnight.

Eight hours later, their journey again slowed by the snow, despite the huge plough fitted to the front of the bus, he finally made it Renchok. Flatterbury hadn’t passed on any instructions about what to do when he arrived there, and all Conrad could do was guess that arrangements had been made to meet him there. But he needn’t have worried: almost as soon as he arrived at the inn, he was greeted by the same two youths who’d guided them to *babs chu* once before. They spent the evening together and they proved rather more amiable and talkative company than Flatterbury, even allowing for the facilitative action of the ale.

It was hard work climbing up into the mountains, though thankfully the snowstorms had subsided. Conrad had no suitable clothes of his own for the trek, but this detail had not been neglected. He had gorged himself on calories and had so many layers of clothes on, feeling blown up like a balloon, and yet even still, in the more exposed parts of the ascent, the icy wind nithered him to the bone.

Without warning, as Conrad was walking along a narrow ledge, one of the youths having walked on ahead, leading the horses, the ground gave way beneath him and he plunged downward, coming to an abrupt halt as the rope around his waist suddenly tautened. He was at the end of the rope,

swinging around this way and that and unable to get any purchase with hands or feet on the rock, with a thousand foot cliff face beneath him.

For a time, all the youth on the other end of the rope could do was to grit his teeth, dig his heels in and hang on, but fortunately for them the first youth, seeing that they did not follow him, came back to see what was holding them up, and – after a hellish struggle – between the two of them and the assistance of one of the horses, they finally managed to heave Conrad to safety, his heart galloping and on the verge of going into shock. He'd had a remarkably lucky escape. Well, it was more thanks to the youths' good management than luck, if the truth were told. To have come this far and to have fallen at the last hurdle would have been much too much to bear.

At last, however, they were there under the waterfall, with a thousand icy lances hanging ominously over them, and they emerged through the far end of the long tunnel into the hidden valley.

As they approached the settlement, tiny wisps of smoke emerging from the chimneys of the dwellings and forming a smoggy layer in the cold air above, he could see two figures standing in the doorway of the communal building. They, too, were wrapped up warmly, with scarves over their faces, so he couldn't make out who they were.

Climbing up the well-salted marble steps, he approached the pair, who stood there patiently. As one of the figures pushed aside her scarf to greet them, amidst a cloud of rapidly condensing breath, he recognized Rosalie Muller, Tenzing's deputy.

The other figure came forward now, and arms were suddenly flung around his neck. As the scarf fell from over her face, he saw that it was his beloved Dzoldzaya. Tears were already welling up in their eyes and in danger of freezing on their faces, so they dashed inside where it was warm, to

properly greet one-another; hugging and showering one-another with sloppy and passionate kisses. There was so much that each of them had to tell, though for a time the stream of tears really said it all.

“Welcome to our new home, Conrad,” Dzoldzaya beamed, casting her arms around here.

“You mean you’ve left your life in Sher Point behind, to come here?” he asked her, peering into her sparkling hazel eyes.

“Home is where the heart is,” she smiled. “And I have come here to be with you, beloved. That’s all that really matters.”

“And Tenzing? Please tell me his work has not been compromised ...”

“Don’t worry, Conrad,” replied Dzoldzaya, taking out a lacy handkerchief and gently drying his eyes. “The faulty documents have been rectified and the work goes on. Uncle Tenzing is safe and sends you his love, and he’ll visit in the spring,” she reassured him.

“Honestly?”

“Honestly,” she nodded.

“Phew.” He breathed a sigh of relief. “Thank the Good Lord for that. I was so worried for you all. I didn’t tell them a thing, you know ...”

“I know, beloved, I know.”

Needless to say, his safe arrival at the *babs chu* retreat was a cause for celebration, merriment and thanksgiving that went on well into the early hours, and it was gone ten the following morning when they finally emerged from their chalet to greet the new day.

## 23. A date with destiny

Once they'd settled in, Dzoldzaya and Conrad lay on the sheepskin rug in front of the fire, simply hugging one-another and catching up on all the news and gossip that had occurred since they'd been parted.

Conrad lay there, idly running his hand up and down Dzoldzaya's slender stockinged leg. Dzoldzaya took his hand in her own and guided it between her hot thighs inside her cheesecloth skirt and up beyond the lacy band, and she rubbed his hand against her tender beckoning flesh, both of them momentarily lost in thought.

He pushed himself up into a sitting position.

"You know, there's one thing I've never asked you, and for the life of me I don't know why, Dzoldzaya," he said, cupping her head in his hands and peering into her bright hazel eyes. "What does the name 'Dzoldzaya' actually mean?"

She smiled and kissed him tenderly on the lips, and as she spoke she idly began to unbutton his trousers and tugged his shirt tails out. "I thought that you'd never ask. What do you think, beloved?"

He shrugged.

"Take a guess."

"She who must be obeyed?"

"No, you're very cold," she laughed, tickling him in the ribs until he was squirming on the floor and begging her for mercy.

"No more! Please, no more! Beauty?"

"No, but you're getting a little warmer."

"Love?"

"No, but not that far away."

"Wisdom?"

She shook her head. "You're not going to get it, are you? It means *Light of Destiny*, beloved."

"What? You're kidding, right?"

A delicious tingle of ecstasy raced up and down Conrad's spine and the hairs on his arms and scalp stood up on end. "Well, would you believe it? After all these years, I've finally found my destiny, my heart's true desire. And to think that she's been walking with me and standing by my side all this time."

"And what does 'Conrad' mean?" she asked him in turn, running her hand down his stomach and tantalizingly under the hem of his pants.

"According to Rosalie, it means 'able in counsel.'"

"Mmm, that's perhaps quite appropriate."

"Well, I was hopeful, but after my *débâcle* with friend H, Dzoldzaya, now I'm not at all sure that I'd be cut out for that kind of job."

"Don't be so self-deprecating, Connie. We were rather thrown in at the deep end. Even Tenzing was at a loss as to how that man might be helped. And, of course, it's early days for you. Okay, so you have a lot to learn? As well as being an expert healer, Mair Freida is an excellent tutor and a very sweet and understanding lady all round."

"I suppose you're right," he conceded, though with a distinct lack of conviction.

"Cast these thoughts from your mind," Dzoldzaya advised, running her hand gently through his hair. "These are H's issues, not yours, so don't let him dump his burden on you or mess with your mind. Just let it go."

He sighed deeply. "I'm so sorry for all I've put you and Tenzing through. If only ..."

Dee slapped his thigh and cut him off mid-sentence, breaking his reverie: "Leave your sorry self and your sorry state behind you and move on."

“That’s easier said than done,” he reminded her.

“Remind me later this evening and I’ll show you a technique that Uncle Tenzing recently taught me,” Dzoldzaya offered. “It works a treat.”

“What’s that?”

“It involves visualizing a bond between you and some other person, a connection like an umbilical cord. You formulate an intention and then you take up a pair of golden shears, you say goodbye, you cut that cord and you walk away. As I say, it’s a highly effective technique.”

“Thank you, beloved. You’re a treasure,” he smiled, kissing her on the cheek.

“Oh, *and* I remembered to ask Uncle about that Imaginal exercise, too, by the way, so we have a lot to look forward to, Connie. Trust me, it is a wonderful technique leading to a truly phenomenal and life-changing experience, and I can’t wait to show you how.”

“Well done you!” he beamed.

“And ...”

He raised his eyebrows. “And? You mean there’s more?”

“Lots more! We Khalilis don’t do anything by half measures: you should know that by now,” Dzoldzaya laughed. “And we might visit the healer Mair Freida to get her to root out that awful nicotine habit of yours,” she added, quite matter of factly.

Dzoldzaya paused to gauge his reaction, and he bit his lip. “No answer, came the reply,” she noted. “What’s the matter? Cat got your tongue?”

“Sorry.”

“Don’t get me wrong, Conrad. It’s just that I don’t want to lose you in your early fifties. I want us to live together to a ripe old age. Yes, alright: that *is* disguised self-interest, but I do love you dearly, and we’ve come so far. I don’t want you to suffer and I don’t want to lose you again, Connie. I mean for both our



sakes: yours and mine.”

“Yes, you’re right of course, beloved,” he nodded sheepishly.

“Then there’s Uncle Tenzing to consider: he’s grown very fond of you. “And, not least, our love and duty to the Work ....”

“Okay, okay, Dee. There’s no need to rub it in.”

“Rub what in?” she enquired, scratching her head.

“It’s an Outlandish turn of phrase, Dee. It means that there’s no need to rub salt in old wounds. I’m sorry, yes I will make the effort to quit. I’m painfully aware that smoking is an awful and stupid habit.”

“Good,” Dzoldzaya smiled, gently squeezing his hand for a moment. She took her hand away and slid it down inside his bulging pants. “Then let’s strike while the iron’s hot. I’ll go and see Mair Freida bright and early tomorrow morning and make the necessary arrangements,” she concluded.

He quickly changed the subject. “Dzoldzaya, do you remember on the way to Narayana, when we stopped at an inn and the landlady served us stew? She asked Tenzing where he was going and he said that he was going into the foothills. He said ‘I’m arranging a wedding for a relative’, and when you questioned him about it, he said ...”

“Yes!” She nodded vigorously and completed his sentence: “He said that it was the truth but that he was telling it ahead of time.”

“So, do you think he knew, even then?”

Dzoldzaya thought for a moment. “I do, yes. I’m almost certain. I think my uncle probably put two and two together when he saw us together and linked that to what you’d said earlier about searching for your destiny. That may well have been one of the chief reasons he invited us both to the retreat. It’s almost unheard of for a stranger to be invited to *babs chu*.”

Conrad knelt there beside Dzoldzaya for a moment, peering into her bright hazel eyes, and in that moment he saw

her in a whole new light and was transported with delight. Transported with a capital “T”.

It suddenly dawned on him that in that moment, for all the twists and turns that his life had taken, and for all the trials and tribulations, he somehow found himself in exactly the right place, with the right people and at the right time, and he marvelled at the design.

~~~O~~~

It would be wrong to simply state “and they lived happily ever after.” As well as the highs, Conrad and Dzoldzaya went through some dark times and through serious crises and they were sometimes sorely tested. But they worked through these issues together, and each time they emerged stronger and became closer and closer to one-another. And at the end of the day, they could genuinely look back over their lives with quiet satisfaction, and smile.

~~~O~~~

**The End**

# Answers

*A little girl was warned by her guardian never to open the cellar door or she would see things that she was not meant to see. One day while her guardian was out she did open the cellar door. What did she see?*

Hint: Her guardian did not like her very much.

Answer: When the girl opened the cellar door she saw the living room and, through its windows, the garden. She had never seen these before because her parents had kept her all her life in the cellar.

~~~O~~~

A man was walking downstairs in a building when he suddenly realised that his wife had just died. How?

Answer: The man had visited his wife in hospital. She was on a life-support machine. As he was walking down the stairs all the lights went out. There had been a power cut and the emergency back-up systems had failed. He knew that she had died.

One of many alternatives: The man's wife was suffering from depression. She was also suicidal. As he was descending the stairs, she had jumped out of a window and he saw her falling.

~~~O~~~

*Can you make the ancient symbol of the solar swastika in the centre of the square, using the four playing cards?*

Hint: Have you looked beyond the red cards?

### *Other books by the same author*

As Etienne de L'Amour, in the Shadowlands series:

1. The Lost Treasure of Roth Nagor, historical prequel.
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6. Time and Time again.
7. The Gift.
8. The Host and the Guests.
9. Whisperings of Love.
10. The Insiders: Exploring the higher realms of possibility.

Other as Etienne de L'Amour:

1. Thank You, I Understand.

As H.M. Forester:

1. The Dissidents: A novella.
2. Game of Aeons: A short novel. \*

\* Republished for the Kindle.

***In Search of Destiny***  
By Etienne de L'Amour

***In Search of Destiny*** is set in the disparate realms of the Outlands; Sher Point, the metropolis of the Freelands, and the mystical kingdom of Narayana in the East.

It tells the story of Conrad Harper, who sets out one day to search for his destiny and heart's true desire; of the help offered him by a mysterious organization known simply as the Network; his journeys with the Master of the Tradition, Tenzing Jangbu Rinchen, and of his finding romance, ancient knowledge, unfettered awareness and wholeness of being.

And it shows how ordinary and everyday experiences, which we tend to take for granted and often do not value, can be brought into service and woven together into a rich tapestry with an altogether higher purpose.

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