

Egyptology for Beginners

By T R P Watson

"It's just along here on the right"

Thad turned the truck – he couldn't get used to calling it a van) into the driveway. The gravel began to kick up and spit as they moved along. The professor stirred in his sleep and somehow managed to get into posture of greater comfort. Thad should have been paying more attention to the winding road ahead but he was convinced that the professor had been awake for at least the past half hour and part of him want to catch the old rogue out. Old rogue? Where did he get that from maybe Meena had used it. He couldn't remember tiredness was beginning to take over and he had stopped concentrating now. The last fifty miles of twists and hills had had him gripping the steering wheel too tightly and staring so hard at the white circles of light illuminating the road ahead that his eyes were beginning to hurt.

Six hours ago he hadn't even known these people and now they were driving towards a secluded stately home in darkest Wales.

"Meena," he said looking at her illuminated reflection in the windscreen, "the pen light." She looked up from the documents registered how little to the drive she could see and turned off her torch.

"Sorry, Thaddeus." She said. She was still getting used to his name.

"Thad. Please. It's OK. And I'm not sure we need to be whispering."

He saw her glance over at her grandfather, snuggled against the far door of the cab.

"I'm sure he's awake" Thad said.

If there had still been light in the truck's cab Thad felt sure he would have caught a glance of protective anger from Meena, as it was he just felt brief sensation of her eyes burning into his neck.

"Since Conwy dear boy" said the professor brightly. Thad was still convinced that the professor put on the Omar Sharif act. Perhaps all old anglicised Egyptians ended up pretending to be Omar Sharif, maybe Omar Sharif based his persona on the Professor. There was an ease and smoothness about his voice that made Thad think that everything was alright, that there was nothing whatsoever to worry about. Most disturbing was the feeling that the professor knew what Thad was going to say before he said it. Also the professor seemed to revel in his apparent foreknowledge. As if it was all a game. Somebody was dead. No, Mitch was dead not just somebody. Mitch.

This afternoon had happened too fast, Meena and the professor had packed and left their house in London with Thad less than an hour after he had arrived. He had rung the entry phone and heard a voice saying "Are you Thaddeus?" almost immediately. He supposed that the professor had watched him as walked up the street looking for the correct address, but that was just a rationalisation and didn't stop it from being spooky.

The moment he was over the threshold, there seemed barely time for the firm double-handed vigorous handshake and the "how are you dear boy" before the professor had demanded, in the kindest possible way, the photograph that Thad had mentioned in their phone conversation. Thad tried, as he had over the phone, to explain how the photograph came into his possession but the professor now wanted to look at the sheets torn from some notebook or other that had arrived with the photograph. The sheets covered in writing that looked like shorthand with interspersed birds, seemed to delight the professor. He stood at the bottom of the stairs; they hadn't even left the hall, and

shouted up for “Meena”. Meena appeared with anxious haste at the top of the stairs looking ready to throw her self down them in order to help her grandfather.

“Meena, this is Thaddeus” the Professor said. “He has brought papers you’ll need to translate them. Here look.” This last, as she had slowly paced down the stairs until she was within reach of proffered pages.

“We must pack, granddaughter. We’ll need to go to see the Honourable Henry in Wales immediately.” And with almost no further acknowledgement he strode up stairs disappearing quickly from sight into a room.

“Meena Anwar” Meena had said offering Thad a free hand to shake. Thad had had to collect himself before he could properly acknowledge her. She had smiled the smile of someone who accepts that her grandfather is slightly loopy and that she’d have to drop everything and head off to Wales at a moment’s notice.

Once packed and in the truck the professor had appeared to drop off to sleep almost immediately, leaving Thad and Meena to engage in stilted conversation peppered with the occasional instruction as to which road to take.

He had a story he wanted somebody to listen. The police hadn’t listened when he’d tried to tell them that Mitch wouldn’t have committed suicide. He didn’t think it wise to let them know about the mysterious almost hysterical phone that Mitch had made to him a few days for he disappeared or the bundle of papers that had appeared in his pigeon-hole at the college with a note from Mitch telling him to contact a Professor Anwar. Perhaps this Honourable Henry would listen.

“There it is” said Meena with almost girlish excitement. Thad lifted his eyes slightly from the driveway and saw the bulk of the house loom up at them. He couldn’t help remembering Helena; the one that, he thought, treated him like a savage in need of culture. How she’d drag him to museums, art galleries and then that trip to Blenheim Palace. He had initially thought that her attempts to improve him were just the normal manipulations that women put upon men that they desire; honing the rough edges so that they were more companionable. But she was doing something else, wearing him like a badge of defiance, a black savage that she had tamed and would love whatever her parents said. Actually her parents, as he later found out, had thought Thad perfectly acceptable as he was. They had cared little about the colour of his skin or his family home in a rough part of Compton. To them he was a brilliant scientist and as scientists themselves that was enough.

Blenheim had been the final straw with Helena. She had dragged him round looking for all the examples of the Marlboroughs’ involvement in the slave trade that she could find on display. She showed each one to him as if she wanted to personally apologise for it. It was her own personal guilt trip and he had felt that he was only there to offer her absolution. Slavery had always been a quiet backbeat to his life, there like a forgotten skeleton in a rocking chair gathering cobwebs in the attic. You had a choice let it define you or rise above it. Momma always taught him to rise above it; show that he was better. He was who he was through hard work not skin colour. He didn’t give Helena absolution. In fact he barely spoke to her again. Eventually he let her waste fury on breaking up with him while he looked into the middle distance wondering how impolite it would be to start thinking about a math problem that had been teasing him a little.

This house was on a much smaller scale than Blenheim but it was still impressive. If he could cast his mind back to the feigned interest he took in architecture under Helena's regime he could probably have put a date on it but just now he preferred the more simplistic American term – old. Actually parts of it were old in rather crooked ways. He hoped he wouldn't have to go there he associated crookedness with bad building.

The professor had leapt out of the truck almost as soon as it had stopped. He was being greeted at the front door by a man Thad supposed to be the Honourable Henry. The greeting was a little too friendly to be intended for a butler. Thad was about to climb out of the cab when the Honourable Henry, who had just planted a kiss on each of Meena's cheeks, she had followed her grandfather to the front door, waved at him and walked quickly to the passenger side door of the cab.

"I understand you are Thad" he said as he climbed into the cab. He smiled a slightly crooked smile, his teeth were also a little crooked but not quite as terrible as he was used to thinking the aristocracy's teeth normally were.

"If we are going to need to unpack the van it might be best to park round the back. It's closer to where I reckon we can set up."

Thad changed gear a little wearily and followed the direction that the Honourable Henry had indicated.

"The Honourable Henry?" he said.

"Is that what they've been calling me?" Again the crooked smile. "Well technically I am the Honourable Henry William Pauncefort Llewellyn-Paget being the son of an Earl and all that. But most of my post gets addressed to Doctor Henry Llewellyn-Paget and most friends just call me Henry or occasionally Hal."

"So you don't think of yourself as Honourable then?"

"I didn't earn the title but I did earn both my PhDs. Right, stop here. We'll grab the bags and walk back round the front because I've just remembered that I don't have the back door keys."

Like other stately homes he'd visited, the house showed signs of being occasionally opened to the public but Henry didn't seem to want to give any kind of guided tour. Instead he led the three others up the main stairs at a pace that the professor failed to match and quickly led them into the private apartments. Thad hadn't been quite so prepared for the ordinariness of the apartments: While they were well put together and decorated the taste was almost suburban.

"Ostentation is for the public visitors" said Henry quietly, catching Thad's slightly puzzled expression. Thad smiled but again felt that he was surrounded by people that knew more about what was going on than he did. The professor and Meena had clearly stayed here before as they began to discuss the location of their respective rooms. Henry led Thad to a bedroom. "This one's got a bathroom with a strong shower. Freshen up and meet us in the kitchen it is just down the stairs over there. You'll be able to find it by the following the sound of the professor's laughter. He seems always to be laughing in my kitchen. I don't know why."

Thad spent what seemed an age under the shower alternating as hot and as cold as he could stand then finishing with cold water until he began to want to shiver. An accidental recommendation had led him to try cold showers as a method of ward off colds and, for all the associations in his mind of Spartan English public schools, it seemed to work.

When he had dressed again and found the kitchen he discovered that the professor wasn't laughing. They were standing round a table, a large rustic kitchen table which added to the general impression of a suburban fantasy of the country house kitchen that the rest of the kitchen was giving. They were in silent discussion about his papers that were spread across the table. The three of them looked up as he entered. Henry motioned him to help himself to Wine cheese and biscuits and join them at the table.

Thad took a long pull at the glass he'd rather overfilled with red wine. He supposed he could say something about the wine but reckoned that he should just enjoy the buzz it gave him.

"So can you tell me anything about them" Thad said motioning at the papers.

"Actually" said Meena "you might be able to help us"

"I thought you were the experts on squiggles and birds?"

"We are," said Henry, "well Meena is but..."

"The squiggles are hieratic" said Meena.

"Hieroglyphics are carved Egyptian writing" said Henry. He and Meena seemed to be having an interruption contest. "The way that carved writing on statues is different to handwriting"

"And hieratic is like handwriting?" said Thad

"Yes" said Meena, "the thing is what this appears to be saying. It doesn't really make a lot of sense"

"What's wrong with it" asked Thad.

"It reads a little like a mathematical treatise" Said Henry

"Really" Thad was intrigued he peered at the papers trying to see something familiar.

"Here" Meena handed him a reporter's notebook. "It's a translation. It just doesn't make a lot of sense."

Thad started to read soon a smile began to form on his face.

"You recognise it?" said Henry.

"It's just a fragment right?"

"Yes. I mean you could see that the pages are torn from something else" said Henry "They're your pages"

"You were right to say it was a mathematical treatise of some kind. It's an explanation of the concept of zero"

Henry began to smile in triumph clearly he had been right about interpreting something but any smile faded quickly.

"So the nothing symbol was zero after all which means this probably is what we think it is"

"And that is?" said Thad.

"When was zero invented?" said Henry.

Thad was a little taken a back and tried to remember his history of mathematics training.

"Fourth or fifth century AD, perhaps a little earlier. India"

“Not Egypt, fifteen hundred BC?”

“No of course not”

“And the effects of telling people about zero and presumably a whole lot of other stuff?” Henry was now almost deathly serious. It was as if the heating had switched itself or hours ago and they were suddenly realizing just how cold it was.

“What other knowledge?” said Thad?

“No idea. We don’t know how big the book the pages were torn from is, nor do we know how much detail or how many entries there are”

“Well they could change history” said Thad, “not that we’d notice” he trailed off best not get into discussions of timelines and paradoxes it didn’t seem an appropriate moment.

“I think” said the professor bringing a note of formality to the proceedings, “that we should sit down and compare notes. There are at least three stories that need telling and I seem to recall that your brother has rather a good brandy”

“Yes,” said Henry “very good for yarn spinning.”

They sat in deep armchairs. Henry had dimmed the light so almost all the light in the room was from the fireplace where Henry had lit a good fire. The chairs were arranged facing each other in pairs across the front of the fireplace, Henry and Thad on one side, the professor and Meena on the other. Meena had started translating some more of Thad's papers and was her head lit up by an angle poise lamp.

"I think you go first Thad" said Henry.

"I'll need to show you this DVD" said Thad looking up at a flat screen over the fireplace.

"Aha" said the professor, "it'll be the rabbits that you kept trying to talk about in your phone call"

"Rabbits?" said Henry returning from the DVD player and handing Thad a remote control.

"Yes rabbits" said Thad.

"Time travelling rabbits" added the professor.

Thad could help thinking that he would have preferred to disclose one of the greatest scientific discoveries in a more formal setting, perhaps with people likely to understand the physics.

"OK" where to begin? "I'll show you some of our rabbit footage. It is going to be rather dull unless you know what you are looking at"

"It looks a rabbit in a cage with a clock of some kind"

"Keep looking" said Thad

The rabbit on the screen suddenly changed position and Thad paused the DVD.

"The clock was counting smoothly so how come the rabbit did a jump cut?" said Henry.

Thad was pleased that Henry had picked up on what had happened so quickly. The rabbit footage was dull as he had said and he hadn't wanted to spend a lot of time showing it to them in spite of the professor's apparent enthusiasm.

"It didn't just jump cut, as you put it. We also painted one of its ears red" Thad stood up a pointed at the screen.

Meena looked up from her work; she hadn't entirely been paying attention.

"Ahh" she said with insincere pity.

"Hold it" said Henry "you painted its ear red, when?"

Thad smiled broadly, something he could really be proud of.

"About any hour after these pictures were taken" he said.

"Time travelling bunnies" said Henry "rather neat"

"Also rather horrific" said the professor. Again there was an imagined chill in the proceedings.

Thad was frustrated his triumph soured by Henry and the professor knowing something that he didn't again.

"Sorry Thad," said Henry, once more sensing Thad's mood. "We'll explain everything later. It's just we've come across one or two puzzles in our time which might just be explained by the presence of a time machine. Only nobody's ever invented a time machine before."

"The problem is Thaddeus," said the professor, "If we are right about who controls this one then there will be trouble."

"You're still convinced that he's really that evil?" said Henry. "I've never liked the guy, but a time machine might clear his name. Surely his ill-nature stems mainly from the incident, especially if he was wrongfully accused?"

"As you said we'll come to all that later. I still say he was always dodgy". Said the professor relishing the last word, as if exotic. "Thaddeus dear fellow, you must tell us everything. I can't guarantee that we won't interrupt but it is important that you tell us everything."

"I want to tell you about Mitch" said Thad

"Go on," said the professor. He and Henry seemed to understand that he'd been trying to tell someone this for an age.

"I first met him at Berkeley, when we were studying for our Doctorates. First of my three as it happens" This was aimed at Henry who grinned hand raised a hand slightly in a half-hearted salute.

"We shared an office in the research block, Theoretical physics. Lots of writing on chalk boards and white boards. Plenty of making deliberate mistakes, to throw each other off the track or catch our tutors out. Of course we'd then forget where we'd made the mistakes in the first place. We had an almost instant rapport. Have you ever had that? Being able to fall into immediate conversation, familiarity as if you'd known one another for years? And the making deliberate mistakes, thing never work between us, by the way. We could always see the flaws even when we missed our own. It wasn't vicious; ever; we liked the set of each other's mind. Almost like love at first sight but I don't want to think like that. It was a meeting of brains not emotions. We could work together but any time we socialised, double dates, movies, you know. The differences just seemed to be there. And the weird thing is we liked the same sort of stuff. We'd often find that we'd been to a concert or a movie at the same time without being aware the other. We could talk about those things in the lab or the office but we could never share the experience together. It was strange I guess but it wasn't a problem. I'm just thinking about it now and it feels odd saying it."

"What were you studying?" asked Henry. Thad could see that he might be drifting off the subject.

"I probably wouldn't understand anyway, but do tell" said Henry.

"It refinements of quantum mechanics there's all plenty of stuff going on there. It feels deadly important at the time but it is always difficult to explain later and it usually turns out to be wrong eventually. Well not wrong but a misunderstanding or incomplete information. Doctorates over, we went our separate ways, we kept in touch but he got a professorship over here in Cambridge so we hardly ever saw each other. I live on the West Coast and he was a red-headed red-neck – his term – from West Virginia so even when he was visiting his folks."

"Did you get your professorship" said the professor.

"I had offers but I'd got what Mitch used to call the learning bug. I always wanted to find out new things, I'm not a natural researcher concentrating for years on a single problem. I tend to pull in strands from all over the place. After my theoretical work in quantum mechanics I started doing more applied multi-disciplinary stuff, quantum computing, and electronics anything technical and practical."

"Like a magpie," said Henry.

"Yes or a leech. Somebody works for years on a little corner of science and then I came along combined it with another piece of work from another corner and we get something new. But had I done the work?"

“Like Watson and Crick with DNA. They pulled together research from all over. You could say they hardly did any work” said Henry.

“I wouldn’t say that about them but I was quite like that, though nowhere near as successful. I probably put a few noses out of joint and I began to get the impression that people weren’t quite so happy to see me anymore. I began to drift again and got interested in time, relativity, Einstein.”

“Doctorate three?” said Henry.

“Yes. I moved over to England to study for it. Mitch and I met up a few times but like I said it was never a social thing only work brought us together. I guess I drifted a bit of teaching consultancy, short research projects. I made myself useful. This was for four or five years, I did OK but I wasn’t going anywhere. Then Mitch called.” Thad paused, not for effect but to order his thoughts.

“He had left the university, Mitch that is. He was playing with quantum properties of organics materials. I’m not sure who was funding it I think it was pharmaceutical, government or both. He’d discovered some kind of quantum decay that allowed you to pinpoint the exact moment that a biological molecule ceased to be viable.”

“Sort of quantum carbon dating” said Henry.

“Exactly. Sort of. Sort of quantum carbon dating. You know that carbon dating works because the normal flow of Carbon Thirteen stops when an animal or plant dies.”

“At the moment it dies it has the normal background amount of carbon 13 which then starts to decay. So knowing the half-life of carbon thirteen and how much less of it there is in a former animal or plant than there should be you can estimate when it died” Interrupted Henry.

“See” said the professor. “You aren’t the only multidisciplinary magpie in the room.”

Thad and Henry shared a look of mutual recognition.

“So,” continued Thad “what Mitch seemed to be proposing sounded ridiculous. Molecules constantly change their quantum states there is no way that they should ever get frozen in a particular state. It didn’t make any sense he knew that as much as I did and I jumped at the chance to work with him again. Because his data was saying that under the right circumstances you could freeze the quantum state of a biological molecule.”

“A touch of the impossible. I like it” said Henry

“Inexplicable. At the time. Anyway we began to work on a method of maximising the freeze. If you can replicate it make it predictable it is obviously much easier to study. It took us a while but we began to piece together a method and we started getting stronger and stronger freeze-readings.”

“Tell me was radiation involved?” asked Henry.

“Yes. I won’t ask how you knew that but not much just above background well 10 or so percent above background radiation”

“The kind of radiation that the radon from a granite block would give off in an enclosed space, perhaps?” said the professor, showing Henry that they clearly had the same idea.

“I’d have to have dimensions but that’s possible. It’s really the fact that the air gets rather heavily ionised rather than the presence of radioactive particles or gamma rays. A nearby thunderstorm would have much the same effect. In fact we discovered that that was probably what caused the initial batch of data; a really vicious all-day thunderstorm over Grantchester. That’s where

the lab was. Anyway the other major environmental factor was an anaerobic atmosphere.”

“Isn’t that no oxygen?”

“In the particular molecules that we were interested in, haemoglobin and some others, reduced oxygen concentration tended to reduce the oxidation which caused the freeze effect to disappear.”

“Haemoglobin, Blood” said the Professor, for Henry’s benefit again.

“Yes blood, like I said the experiments started with a forensic investigation, or to help them anyway, so blood was always there to be tested. It wasn’t necessarily the best biological molecule to produce results. Mitochondrial RNA was particularly good but we had difficulty extracting it from real dead organisms without damaging it and wrecking the results. Pure samples, the stuff you grow or rather replicate in the lab was extremely good at producing results. So ionised air, low oxygen and a few relatively simple chemicals and haemoglobin and we get great results every time.”

“Saltpetre” said Meena.

“No we didn’t use that” said Thad, wondering where she had got that from.

“Oh crap” said Henry “It isn’t a recipe for that is it?”

Thad realised that they had switched to talking about his documents that Meena had been silently translating.

“Sorry Thaddeus” said Meena, “I’ve been trying to remember the common name for the substance they keep mentioning here and your saying chemicals reminded me what it was. Saltpetre, carbon and sulphur”

“That’s not good” said Thad distracted from his story.

“No,” said the professor, “but please carry on with your story it is very important.”

“Yeah. OK. So we we’re getting great results on the quantum freezing but we now have to find out why it is happening. And of course what is going on at a sub atomic level. So there’s a lot of improving detectors trying to see things better. And we discover that it isn’t really a quantum effect. Well we sort of knew that anyway. Quantum is just a shorthand way of saying much smaller than sub atomic. It keeps the funders happy; quantum is something that they think they understand. It took a while for the breakthrough but it was when we started wondering whether the quantum freeze effects were a symptom of something deeper rather than an end in themselves. Obvious really but it took us a time to see it. The freeze was triggered because we had managed to stop a temporal bubble from bursting. What we had been freezing was the moment that the molecule had been preserved. It was a time bubble that normally decays unnoticed but we’d found a way of keeping it from collapsing entirely by accident.”

“So you had a nanometre bubble of preserved time” said Henry.

“Yes. A bubble that I saw could, theoretically, be used as a gateway to the past. You see the bubble exists at a different time. It exists in the past; it is physically in the present but is really in the past. I know. I gave Mitch headaches when I tried to put it into words. Gateway to the past is much easier. We couldn’t tell the funding bodies about this, it was too weird, especially when we could barely put it into words ourselves. But we kept looking at it just the two of us much of the time we found that we could using some relatively simple particle beams, widen the bubble expand it. There was a lot of playing about with frequencies and phases we found that there was a correlation between the phase/frequency ratio and the elapsed time that passed since the sample was preserved. If we had a precise elapsed time or

even just an approximate one we could tune the equipment until the time bubble went through massive expansion.”

“How much?” asked the professor.

“Ten to the twenty four” said Thad.

“Hold it if we are talking subatomic that’s about ten to the minus twenty-four.”

Said Henry “You expanded a bubble until it was a metre, uh, big?”

“More or less”

“I always thought that you required lots of energy with sub atomic stuff and doesn’t it release lots of energy or something?” Said Henry. “Sorry, I’ve got strong reasons not to doubt that it works but I’ve just got questions.”

“It’s OK” said Thad, “it’s good for me to talk about it. For various reasons we didn’t get to publish on this. The large time bubble is built from lots of little ones, which combine as they grow. I should have said that there are a huge number of little bubbles that we expand if we have the pf – phase frequency – ratio right. They expand massively but not quite as enormously as it seemed at first. You are right about the energy release too. It is large but we are creating something called negative energy so things can be to cancel each other out.”

“And the particle beams and cyclotrons that they always seem to use?” asked Henry

“That’s when they are creating things out of thin air. Smashing beams of particles together at high energy to get other more exotic particles. We didn’t need to do the creation so we didn’t need the energy. That said we do have to charge up some pretty meaty inductors. It takes about five hours to bring them up to full charge off mains power or a generator, they then are discharged into the apparatus and that gives us the energy we need to expand the bubbles.”

“Then what?” said Henry.

“The bubble lasts for a second may be two in the old time frame and you can get things out of the bubble.”

“Surely the bubble exists in the lab?”

“No you can see into it, the bubble exists in the same time and space coordinates that it had when the biological sample was preserved.”

“See into it? Said the professor.

“Yes we kept seeing ourselves doing preservation tests wondering why we were getting strange glows around the test tubes.”

“A glow” said Henry. Clearly it was something that he and the professor had hoped to hear.

“But the glow didn’t appear in that jump cutting rabbits film you showed us” said the professor.

“The rabbits were returned an instant after they disappeared. We actually create a different reference frame for the camera” Thad hadn’t wanted to get into temporal mechanics but he suppose it was inevitable really. “We create a new timeline by sending the rabbit back. If we don’t send the rabbit back we see the glow but if we do send it back to a point just after it left we bring about a timeline in which the rabbit disappeared and reappeared without the glow ever being seen.”

Thad had confused himself as well as his audience.

“How did you get the rabbits in and out of the bubbles? Could you just go in and grab them?” asked Henry.

“No. The bubble is impermeable nothing can get in to it”

“But rabbits can get out”

"Yes. We trained the rabbits to move under certain stimuli. Actually that's not entirely true we timed the preservation process to take place in a chamber under the rabbit. We'd take a blood sample preserve it and when we guessed the preservation had taken place we gave the rabbits cage a sustained electric shock and the rabbit would leap of the floor of the cage and out of the bubble."

"Hope the animal rights people didn't hear about it" said Henry.

"I know it was cruel but we needed to see if the time bubble we could see was an image or something real. It wasn't too hard a shock but you are right about the animal rights people but I'll get to that"

"So the rabbit jumps out of the bubble how do you return it? We saw one come back didn't we" said the Professor.

"That was a problem for a while, we could get the rabbit to cross from its time to ours but it looked like a one way process. You couldn't take another blood sample or anything like that. No, in the end it was relatively simple. We discovered that the rabbits never really left the bubble or at least the bubble still coated them as they jumped out of it. It was weaker and permeable and decayed after about 10 days but we could expand it again, rebuild it and then shrink it. The rabbit would be squeezed back into its own time and space. We took the precaution of changing the pf ratio a little so that the rabbit going back wouldn't exist at exactly the same time and space that it left."

"What would have happened if it did?" Asked the professor.

"Doesn't the world blow up?" said Henry.

"Not exactly but we thought there might be an explosion or two rabbits, It was really just in case. In the end it didn't make much difference."

"How come" said Henry.

"You mentioned the animal rights people. They decided to attack the lab. All they did was, blow up the rabbit cages, and ironically kill most of the rabbits they wanted to rescue."

"Are you sure it was them?" said the professor.

"Well that's what the police said, they never caught anyone. We have it on video one moment we have a rabbit then an explosion, the camera cuts out and there's bits of mangled bunny over a hundred yard radius."

"We anyone else caught up in the explosion?" said the professor.

"No we'd automated the sampling process the rabbits were kept in an isolated area and the attack happened at night when there wasn't anyone about. Well I think some of the security guards were a bit shaken up a few cuts and bruises. And that was the end of that."

"How come?" said Henry

"Well, we'd got a little sidetracked from our original purpose. We were paid to come up with a forensic quantum dating method and we'd invented a time machine. We didn't tell them that of course, Mitch and I claimed that our research material had been damaged in the blast and we'd lost the last six months or so of data. We'd done much of the later work by ourselves. The lab assistants would be on hand for the setup but not for the main experiments so we reckoned we'd get away with it."

"Why did you want to get away with it?" said the professor

"The research was too valuable, we wanted to publish in the clear not have a time travel method owned by some pharmaceutical company or any government. The funders bought what we told them and allowed people to think that we'd pushed the limits of live animal experiments so that they would be happy to see the back of us."

“Then what happened” asked Henry

“Not a lot for good while. My mom fell ill; nothing too serious but I had to be with her. Mitch said he would try to find funding for further research somewhere else. When I got back things had changed.”

“I suspect” said the professor, “that this is where we get to meet our mister Maartens.”

“Well I never met him. Like I said things had changed when I got back. It had been several months I’d kept in touch with Mitch and he had said that he’d been approach by some eccentric millionaire. But over time I could tell that he was getting more and more nervous about the things that this guy Maartens wanted him to do. He’d been sucked into something he didn’t like. By the time I got back here he was genuinely scared of something, and he wouldn’t let me come back to work with him. In fact I found out from mutual friends that Mitch had been down playing my role in the whole thing.”

“Did you resent that?” asked Henry.

“Well I didn’t understand it. I mean, when we worked together anything we published was always co-authored even if, in fact, only one of us did most of the work. The other one was always there to check facts and catch mistakes. I told you that’s what we knew we could do for each other. I knew something wasn’t right it didn’t make sense. And Mitch didn’t seem to want to see me which was bizarre.”

Did you get to see him?”

“Yes, eventually. He made contact in a really round about way. Through friends of friends, met in a secret location make sure that you’re not followed. That sort of thing”

“Cloak and dagger”, said the Professor.

“So we meet up. I’m asking what’s going on and I can see that there’s something that’s really frightening him. He explained that this man Maartens had approached him soon after I’d gone back to the states. It seemed that one or two of our lab assistants had been gossiping and had started speculating about what we were really doing. I don’t think any of them believed that we’d made a time machine but some of them said that was the only conclusion to what they had seen going on – so even if it was ludicrous it might be true. Anyway their gossip was being whispered around the academic community. Mostly people were reporting it as ridiculous conspiracy theory style chatter rather than actually believing it but it made a good story so it started to get about. That’s how Maartens found out about it, Mitch later discovered that Maartens kept investigating any chatter of this kind just in case it happened to be true. It seems he has a lot of contacts.”

“Mr Maartens is a highly respected member of society as well as being extremely rich.” said Henry. “He has also done a great number of favours for various governments in the past – they owe him a lot of favours. Sounds almost like a Bond Villain doesn’t he?”

“I’m not so sure that he isn’t a Bond villain” said the professor.

“Well Maartens got in touch with Mitch. He’d looked into everything and he wasn’t buying the whole Animal Rights story, or that we’d lost six months of work. He was sure that something else was going on. Apparently he was very charming at first.”

“Bond villains are always charming.” Said Henry.

"The way Mitch told it, Maartens used batteries of charm and flattery and leading question to trick the truth out of him. I could see Mitch felt really guilty about it so I suspect there was something else going on, I 'm not sure. Drink, blackmail or something; Mitch had weaknesses like everyone. Anyway it didn't stay charming for long after Maartens had got him to admit what we'd really done. Maartens said that he could spin it so that it looked as if we were indulging in some kind of dangerous amateur nuclear work."

"Which is partly true" said Henry. "But I can see how the headlines could work in the media, amateur scientists bombarding atoms making sub atomic bubbles expand to massive degrees. Imagine the explosions. Then if you throw in time travel all you have to do is mention all the ways that you could go back in time a negatively meddle with it. Kill Churchill, Roosevelt, Tell Hitler we've cracked Enigma et cetera."

"Pretty much." Said Thad.

"If you think about it there is probably no positive way of meddling with time" said the professor.

"Yes". Said Henry "Save John Lennon from being assassinated in 1980 and people would only complain about the fact he never made another decent album, but kept producing them, that the Beatles reunion at Live Aid was so appalling that they got laughed of the stage and that he turned into such a obnoxious old man. Sorry we've got off the subject. Sorry Thad"

"It's OK. I think he had a few decent albums left in him. Anyway Mitch couldn't get out of it. He reckoned that Maartens was planning to do something exactly like what he'd have accused us of wanting to do if we hadn't helped him.

Mitch thought it best that I didn't get involved he told them I wouldn't be needed, that the work I'd done could be easily replicated and that I didn't have anything to add."

"How much of that was true?" asked Henry

"Well I've always kept good notes and we had separate copies of our and each other's work so not needing me for what I had done might have been true. But he admitted, when we met that my not being around had certainly slowed things down."

"Did he know what Maartens was up to?" said the professor.

"No they were keeping that quiet although there was one thing he described a sort of small sealed vase that they were using. They were taking samples from it."

"How well did describe it?" said the professor.

"Half a mo" said Henry and he got up and left the room through a double door opposite the fireplace. Thad noticed that through the open doors was a very short corridor before there was another set of doors. It wasn't really even a corridor it was only a door's width long. Henry pushed a panel in the wall of the corridor and a small door clicked open. Thad assumed it was a cupboard because Henry didn't move into it, he just seemed to be looking for something, after a while he drew out what looked like an old shoe box which he brought back to his chair.

"Got it?" asked the professor.

"Got it." Said Henry in that shared knowledge manner that Thad was getting used to and not disliking quite as much any more.

"So, how well did he describe it?" said the professor.

"Actually he sketched it" Thad pulled out his wallet and produced a photograph.

“That’s me and Mitch as students.” He said handing it over to the professor.

“It’s his copy he sketch the vase on the back of it.”

The Professor looked at the sketch on the back of the photograph then flipped it around so that Henry could see it. Henry craned forward without leaving his chair and shared a smile with the professor.

“How big?” said the professor.

“About eight, ten inches. Pale dirt colour, brown sandy. Light beige. It had writing on it. You know squiggles and birds.”

“Hieratic” said the professor.

“So on balance you’d reckon that it looked something like this” said Henry producing an old and slightly rolled up photograph from the shoebox.

Thad took the photograph and looked at it.

“It looks pretty much as Mitch described it. Only that wasn’t the only vase they had, there was a newer one, Mitch said, fresh writing not as old”

“Bought no doubt from a Cairo fake antiques bazaar” said Henry, with an emphasis odd enough for Thad to think he was impersonating someone.

“Is the vase important?” asked Thad.

“Could be,” said Henry drawing a small vase like object from the shoebox, “because we’ve got one too”

Thad picked it up, and examined it. It wasn’t like he had actually seen the others but he couldn’t help wondering what he had wandered into. But it was just an old vase, rough pottery, heavily sealed at the top. He put it back on the armrest next to Henry who then put it back in the shoebox.

“Don’t worry too much my dear fellow;” said the professor, “we are probably the good guys”

“I hope so,” said Henry “but continue.”

“It was the last time that I saw Mitch alive. The next time I saw him I barely recognised him; he’d been in the Cam for a week. At least we’d made our peace. But it wasn’t suicide; he wouldn’t. Sorry I’m skipping ahead. A couple of weeks after our meeting I got a note from Mitch. This was about two weeks ago. A note and a package, contain that old photograph that I showed you this morning professor and those documents”

“Any further theories my dear?” the professor asked Meena.

Meena had stopped reading and note taking a while back and had just been listening to Thad’s story.

“It’s a draft of something probably an encyclopaedia like we said.” She answered.

“The note,” Thad continued, “said that I should contact you in case anything happen to him and that I should show you the stuff in the package. He also told me to pack up the prototype in a truck.”

“What prototype?” said Henry.

“Well after the lab was closed we put all the most important bits of equipment into storage. They hadn’t been damaged. I thought that Mitch would have used it when he started to work for Maartens but it looks like he convinced Maartens that they’d have to build the apparatus from scratch”

“So you’ve got a working time machine in your truck?” Asked Henry. “We thought you might have the equipment to build one be not a working one. That changes things slightly”

“Does it?” said Thad

“A little” said the professor “but carry on.”

“Well a few days after I receive the package there’s a serious fire at the lab where Mitch was working and Mitch has disappeared.”

“How serious was the fire. Do you reckon?” said Henry, a little more seriously than he had been for a while.

“I checked it out through what contacts I thought it best to use. Mitch had scared me enough for me to be cautious. It seemed that pretty much everything had been destroyed; lab and office. It was a clear arson job and it looked like Mitch was in the frame for it.”

“Do you think he did it?” said Henry

“Almost definitely but he wouldn’t have run away; wouldn’t have disappeared.”

“The question then is did he do it before or after they used the machine on the jar.” Said Henry “or are we calling it a vase?”

“I think so, what bothered Mitch wasn’t the possibility that they were trying to bring something or someone back from the past. He was cool with that it would have been a culmination of a life’s work. No, what upset was the idea that they were going to send that something or someone back. And if Meena is right about the encyclopaedia then there’s nothing he wouldn’t have done to stop them. Anyway the first line of his note said ‘successful test but I don’t like what might happen next’ that indicates to me that they’d already done whatever they were planning to do – bring back the person or thing I mean and they were preparing to send them or it back.”

“And you don’t think that Mitch committed suicide?” said the professor.

“If he had died in the fire, then yeah that would probably have been suicide.

Taking everything out in one big conflagration. But he didn’t he even made the attempt to give himself an alibi. The arson was part of a plan to fight back but somebody got to him. He disappeared on the night of the fire but people saw him about, the alibi you see.”

“Of course with the fire it would be very easy to paint him as depressed over the failure of his life’s work.” Said Henry

“Which is exactly what they did” said Thad.

There was a pause; thoughts being collected.

“So what next?” asked Thad.

“What next indeed” said Henry “whose story should we tell next do you reckon professor”

“I think it would help Thaddeus to know a little about mister Maartens. As you can certainly tell from our rude interruptions he is rather well known to us. But who should tell it Henry you or me?” said the professor.

“I’ll be very happy to interrupt but you might as well start, after all, you were on the expedition and anyway I think I’ll do the cult. I’m good at the cult.”

“World authority” said the Professor with the slightest touch of irony.

“An expedition is that where the photograph is from?” asked Thad.

“Yes,” said the professor, “The Earl of Aberffraw’s ill-fated expedition to find the temple of the cult of Thoth in 1952”

“Cult of Thos, that’s your cult?” Thad asked Henry.

“Cult of Thoth, yes very few people can pronounce it properly that’s why I ‘m a world authority because I can.” Said Henry, “But you’ll have to wait for my story. Anyway professor you aren’t going to start with the expedition surely?”

“Of course not” said the Professor “I shall start with my father.”

“Aha” said Henry.

“Quite” said the professor. “My father was a digger then a grave robber and finally an archaeologist. But that is pretty much what all diggers claimed to be if they were a little bit ambitious. They usually left out the grave robber part, and you certainly didn’t do it when a white man was supervising. Not unless you were a fool and there were always plenty of those. No my father dug for Petrie as a boy and for Carter and Caernarvon as a young man.”

“Carter and Lord Caernarvon did the Tutankhamen dig, they discovered the tomb” said Henry by way of explanation.

“Yes, well he lived to fine old age as did most of the other diggers on that expedition just in case you were thinking about the so-called curse. By the time of the Tut dig he’d become a supervisor and had learned Hieroglyphics. He’d also developed a nice little forgery business to fleece tourists in Cairo. “

“Doesn’t seem to bother you.” said Thad, it came out more bitter than he intended it to sound.

“It wasn’t uncommon.” The professor didn’t seem offended. “Anyway only foolish tourists think that they are buying anything genuine in a Cairo bazaar. On a dig of course he was scrupulously honest. He had become fascinated by our people’s ancient history and you can’t make true discoveries with fakes getting mixed in. He learned while on digs and used that knowledge to make fakes. He also made sure that his fakes could be spotted by the experts.”

“The famous ‘this is a fake’ Cartouche” said Henry.

“Cartouche?” said Thad.

“It’s a set of Hieroglyphs bounded in an oval or rounded oblong. Normally the name of a pharaoh or in the professor’s father’s case, it said that he made it and it was a fake.” Said Henry.

“It was a bit of fun and oddly enough many Egyptologists working in Egypt seemed to trust him more knowing that he produced fakes. Perverse but true; as though his dishonest side made him capable of great honesty in other areas.”

“But that was mostly true. I can’t think of too many of his discoveries that were ever or have ever been questioned. And he exposed a good number sharp practices” said Henry.

“Well anyway he earned a good enough living that he could afford to send his sons and even his daughters to good schools and even some of us even to university. But the point about my father is that at the beginning of 1939, I must have been about three so I don’t remember anything except what he told me, he was tipped off about a rather interesting find. It was the normal story a shepherd had been digging in an old settlement to the east of Luxor and come across a jar. Fortunately this shepherd didn’t do the normal thing like open it or burn the contents; he was an old digger so he got in touch with his old supervisor, my father. The shepherd thought that he might have found a jar of papyri which would of course be very valuable. He asked my father if they should break up the collection and sell it piecemeal which would normally get them good money or sell it as one to a museum which would not pay anything like as well. My father thought that the best thing to do was to find a rich westerner with an interest in Egyptology and convince him to buy the collection for a high price to stop it from being sold separately.”

“It’s a sort of blackmail scam.” Said Henry

“Well yes but father was never ashamed of his like for making money and anyway most of it would go to the shepherd, the shepherd would be contented and tell his friends so that if any of them found anything they’d come to my father for the best deal.”

“That worked too” said Henry “The professor’s brother run an archaeological finds agency - ten per cent of any find. And they regularly fleece American museums I hear.”

“Of course and why not, the way things are going in Egypt it may be best for most things to be out of the country if the extreme Islamists get into power. They’ll destroy everything given half a chance.”

“Grandfather” said Meena. Clearly this had been a source for debate in the past and it would remain unresolved even after hours more wrangling between them.

“So I assume the mark,” Thad found himself amused by his own phrase, “this rich westerner was your ancestor the Earl of Aberffraw.”

“My grandfather” Henry corrected.

“Yes. Although at the time he was just plain Lord George Llewellyn-Paget”

“Eldest sons of Earls are called Lord rather than Honourable” said Henry

“His father, Henry’s great-grandfather, was still alive and being the Earl of Aberffraw. Lord George was a colonial administrator of some description but my father knew him from several digs they had been on together. My father was occasionally asked to look after some of the amateur British diggers on expeditions; he spoke good English and was knowledgeable enough to show them the ropes and keep them out of trouble. So when my father approached Lord George, he was fairly sure of getting a fair hearing. But I know what you thinking, or maybe, why am I in his house if my father ripped him off. Well Lord George wasn’t a fool, he insisted on being taken to the site and documenting it– there wasn’t a lot to see but he had to satisfy himself. Then he had the museum in Cairo check the jar and its contents. And it was papyri by the way. Finally he was happy about the authenticity of the jar and its content and bought them – for the good high price naturally. Then he had the shipped off to the British Museum for conservation and translation.”

“And then what? Said Thad.

"I reckon the war probably intervened" said Henry.

"Of course. Sorry." Thad was aware the Anglo-American mix-up over the start date of the Second World War.

"Yes pretty much the war did intervene. Lord George managed to get some transcriptions made fairly quickly, they weren't entirely accurate but they were useful for a first pass at translation. He sent a copy to my father because he had expressed an interest."

"So they spent the war translating?" asked Thad.

"Well they mostly had better things to do," said Henry "Half the top experts in Hieroglyphics and the ancient Egyptian language were packed off to break codes or like my grandfather packed off to the war."

"Is it true that Lord George used to spent bombardments in the western desert, translating the document in a foxhole." Asked the professor.

"I heard that story too, he certainly carried the transcriptions around with him throughout the war and by the end he'd made a decent fist of a translation." Said Henry.

"I didn't think aristocrats in England, sorry, Britain had to fight" said Thad

"They certainly were all expected to put on uniform but you are right if you think most got fairly cushy jobs on the staff somewhere. But my family have what's known as a fighting tradition. If there's a frontline the Earl or the heir is expected to be on it or near it..." said Henry

"So your brother's..." began Thad

"Afghanistan, yes. Actually he sent me a photograph a few weeks ago. He visited the supposed grave site of the third Earl who died in the retreat during the first Afghan war. Anyway professor we are getting off the subject."

"Of course," said the professor, "well my father also had a crack at translating the transcribed papyri. In fact that how I learned to read Hieroglyphs and hieratic - it was hieratic really, Hieroglyphs are carved but occasionally when they a written formally we still say hieroglyphs. Anyway he was more interested in the clues about the location of the temple that the text alluded to. A cursory look over the papyri had told everyone that these were written by the sole survivor of a rich and mighty cult. The author was a priest so it was assumed that there was a temple somewhere; perhaps undiscovered and perhaps unlooted. My father tended to look through the transcriptions looking for place names that he could recognise rather than concentrating on the story."

"I'll be telling you the story later" said Henry

"Exactly" said the professor "but shouldn't we talk about the cuckoo in the nest?"

"My father only referred to him like that as a joke" said Henry.

"Cuckoo?" said Thad "did your father meet Maartens during the war?"

"Young Joachim Maartens" said Henry "was sent over here in the spring of 1940. It was sort of an extended holiday for him, very extended as it turned out. His family were in the diamond business and had some business connections with the Llewellyn-Pagets. He was sent over in case the Germans did start to overrun the Netherlands and Belgium which they did about a month after he got here. He was sort of adopted by the family, and he picked up the Egyptology bug. We've got quite and interesting collection and my grandfather kept all his coursework books and study papers from when he was studying ancient Egypt at Oxford. By all accounts he took to it like a natural and would write long letters to my father in Hieratic which father would answer likewise. Must have given the censors a pain but they got away with it.

Fortunately there several people in my grandfather's unit who could read hieratic, Tutankhamen had made it quite fashionable, especially for bright young men hanging about the near east and the Levant. What we'd call the Middle East today."

"How old was Maartens at this time?" said Thad

"He was born in 1932 so he'd be about 8 when he came here." Said Henry.

"So" said the professor, "after the war, it took a while for things to settle down. But my father and Lord George started to correspond and compare notes. By this time my father thought he might have an inkling about the location of the temple and he was keen to get Lord George interested in funding an expedition. When did he become the Earl?"

"48" said Henry

"So Lord George was now the Earl of Aberffraw and he was keen to investigate the story in the papyri so he started the slightly tortuous business of getting permits."

"How come if Lord George, the Earl had made an almost complete translation that he didn't have just as good an idea where the temple might be?" asked Thad

"It's a question of being able to see the wood for the trees, I think," said Henry

"Yes the clues are scattered through the whole of quite a long document, Lord George and my father were looking for different things." Said the professor.

"Also my father had considerably more access to comparing ancient and modern place names, and relative leisure for studying maps and working out distances."

"I see what you mean detail being lost in the whole picture that sort of thing" said Thad

"Exactly." Said the professor "Well permission for the expedition was finally granted in 1951 and during the digging season of 1952, we began the hunt."

"Did you know what you were looking for exactly" asked Thad

"Sort of. The papyri indicated that the temple wasn't so much of a temple like those in Karnack or Abu Simbel but more a religious community with a small temple complex at its centre. This meant that we were looking for something between a large village and a small town. We knew that it was based in the eastern desert near a largish oasis so that cut it down to a few dozen potential sites before we started looking for clues in the papyri."

"You said we" said Thad

"I did" said the professor, "my father brought me along. He wasn't keen on me being a digger like him but I was sixteen and destined for university, so he thought a bit of hard work would do me any harm."

"And as you would expect Maartens was there, about twenty, taking time out from university." Said Henry

"How had his war been," asked Thad

"Fairly idyllic. This place is a good home. Of course most of his family were annihilated; too much Jewish blood and Nazis had a passion for collecting diamonds." Said Henry.

"You are forgetting that he also turned into something of a Zionist after the war." said the professor "I know that you'll say it wasn't too surprising given what happened to his family but he arrived in Egypt looking at Egyptians as the enemy for all their fascinating history."

"So how long did it take to find the right oasis?" said Thad?

"About a month and a half. It was our third oasis. The problem was that a well establish oasis or wadi, at least one with a good permanent aquifer will always

attract some kind of development or permanent settlement. The question was how much and when.”

“You were looking for development about three and a half thousand years ago?” said Thad

“According to the story three and a half to four thousand years ago and, as you might expect, the geography of an area can change considerably. Wells dry up and trade routes change. We were lucky the cult led a very isolated existence away from trade routes according to the story but they were in fact only a day or two’s march from a major settlement with a large garrison.”

“That got to be important” said Henry “as the cult became richer.”

“Yes, it is all very well keeping yourselves to yourselves but if you are rich, there is always the possibility of some marauding gang coming and raiding you. In fact it was this idea that helped my father pin-point the likely location. From the story we had the figure of a weeks walk from Luxor to the cult centre and as I said a days walk from a garrison town somewhere near the eastern bank of the Nile. That left us with several candidates for the garrison but one; Abu Edal was the most promising. My father had participated in a dig there in the thirties. An ordinary looking garrison town, but there was a sudden increase in wealth and prosperity that happened between about 2000 and 1500 BC. Then, pretty much, the town died. It appeared there was no particular trade or military reason for the increase in wealth, but it did match the dates that the cult flourished.”

“So you, sorry your father thought that the cult was paying for their own protection?” said Thad.

“It was a possibility” said the Professor.

“But I thought the Egyptians were always carving hieroglyphics saying what they were up.” Said Thad

“Exactly. That was what was strange about Abu Edal; very few inscriptions dating from what was clearly their wealthiest period.”

“It was a deliberate cover up” said Henry “outside the story there is very little evidence that the cult even existed.”

“Systematic destruction of all evidence of the cult. The priest in the story said it was happening even as he wrote. So it fitted; Abu Edal flourished while the cult funded it for, as you said, protection and then died back after the cult was destroyed.”

“But if the cult was destroyed” said Thad “wouldn’t they have destroyed the religious settlement as well?”

“That would actually be quite helpful” said Henry “destruction layers often afford better evidence in archaeological terms than continuous habitation where buildings are knocked down rebuilt robbed out and re-planned.”

“I think what Thad meant was that wouldn’t there be the possibility that if we found it all we would find was a layer of charcoal and debris and he’s right.”

“Of course” said Henry

“Well as I said we weren’t expecting a big temple, in fact, the sort of Holy of Holies that the storyteller mentioned appeared to have been very small and probably underground or built into a rock face. So we hoped that something of that survived. According to the account the cult, however rich and powerful, lived a rather ascetic life so hopefully there wasn’t much to destroy. Of course everyone secretly hoped for a secret treasure chamber that had remained undisturbed for thousands of years. The priest telling the story didn’t mention it but there was still a hope. Anyway by picking the oases within a day’s walk of Abu Edal gave us a choice of half a dozen and we thought we’d struck it

luck with the third we investigated. There's a granite escarpment that forms cliffs overlooking the old site of an oasis which looked promising. Also there was an old taboo in the area about that particular place."

"The boogiemans live there sort of thing" said Thad.

"Well more than that evil was done there a long time ago." Said the professor

"And we should forget" said Henry, "that somebody had taken care to poison the water supply"

"For centuries?" said Thad

"It was a form of algae; it is very pernicious and very difficult to get rid of. You can try to clear it out and you maybe alright for a while but it comes back bigger and better. They had obviously tried to keep people away deliberately, and then the aquifer supplying the oasis dried up or reemerged somewhere else so there was no point going to it or trying to resettle."

"It wasn't really a natural place to settle anyway" said Henry. "Life must have been terribly hard for them. How they ended up there, I guess we'll never know."

"We started digging and it wasn't long before we found the evidence of sudden catastrophic destruction; fire looting et cetera."

"The settlement?" said Thad

"It certainly looked like it. It took quite a few weeks of digging to begin to trace out the layout of the settlement. We assumed that the temple or religious centre would be, well, at the centre of the place or at least, buildings would radiate out from it. We were right about that but when they looked at the layout on the map or marked out on the ground it appeared to be spreading out from the cliff."

"Don't tell me," said Thad, "No caves."

There were some but not many and those that existed didn't go into the cliff very far show signs of human modification or look particularly deliberately damaged. So we went back to the idea of an underground structure beneath one of the larger buildings. Again no luck. Then somebody stumbled on a structure that had been built against the cliff surface. There were barely any traces of the building but without a structure being there it would have upset the symmetry of the place somehow. At least that was the major reason given for looking there. Archaeologists like symmetry but I don't recall any city that is perfectly symmetrical. All the same, there was a gap where there ought to have been a tower so we dug and hit rubble."

"Was that good?" asked Thad

"Brilliant. You have to realise that many of the buildings in the settlement were just mud brick which eventually turns back in mud given time. It is only the destruction that gave us clues to many of the buildings' existences. There were some stone buildings but their destruction was much more considered and complete, as if somebody wanted to destroy all traces. Of course they probably shouldn't have used the rubble from all the prominent buildings to fill in the hole where the cliff structure used to be. We knew we were on to something finds came out as we cleared away the rubble. It was the rubble; inscriptions, everything. We had found the cult centre and the hole we were excavating was beginning to look like a tunnel under the cliff."

"Man-made?" asked Thad

"That was an odd feature, because no, it was at least in part natural. A natural cleft in the rock that had been widened and roofed."

"Something just occurred to me." Said Thad. "You haven't told me the name of this place."

"That," said Henry, "is because it didn't have one. Well there was a sort of modern name for the place which means dried-up poisoned wadi but nothing else. The references to it in the papyri talk about it being the centre of the cult or the religious community but no actual name."

"It is supposed that without a name they could never appear on any maps, although they didn't really have maps as we would understand them."

"So if they were attacked how would people know where to send the army?" said Thad. "I think it's my turn to interrupt with strange questions"

"We don't know for sure," said Henry, "but in other cases they'd use techniques like waypoint markers, dead reckoning or even navigation by the stars. You can also in theory, with troops specially navigate using the sun. Troops can be trained to move at a constant speed, constant speed means constant time per pace so you can estimate where the sun should be after a set number of paces. I don't know that that was true but there are some sources that indicate it was tried and worked occasionally"

"Anyway" continued the professor, "it took a good month for us to clear the rubble from the tunnel. We broke through in early June 1952. There were a few ante rooms really just natural niches in the rock and a man made wall with a small opening at its base."

"That would have answered a few odd references in the papyri." Said Henry, "The priests were always crawling into the Holy of Holies. Most people thought that this was an act of obeisance but it wasn't actually written like that; the language was just too practical, too banal."

"Yes," said the professor, "and the Holy of Holies as you call it was a bit banal too. A simple square room with a single entrance; no decoration little adornment other than a few torch holders"

"Must have got very stuffy in there" said Thad

"That may have been the point." Said Henry "Their rituals had a certain muzzy hallucinogenic quality to them. Nothing like lack of oxygen to bring about strange visions."

"And of course in the centre of this small room a large granite altar. Actually it was just an unadorned solid block of granite about a metre high and two metres each side"

"That's about three foot by 6 foot by six foot in English money" said Henry.

"How high was the ceiling?" Asked Thad

"About three metres" said the professor

"That would be enough" said Thad

"Enough?" said the professor.

"With the granite block slowly putting out radon gas and low air circulation in the room to give the ionisation needed for a suitable sample to be taken." said Thad "I assume that's where we're going with this"

"Yes," said Henry "but I trust you'll let us finish our stories."

"Of course" said Thad.

"On the altar undisturbed for thousands of years was a vase" said the professor

"Like the one you showed me" said Thad

"Actually" said the professor "the one that Henry showed you"

"What about the one that Mitch described?" said Thad

"Well that is where the trouble starts. We'd been investigating the chamber for a couple of days. Nothing to show; it was just a fairly regularly side rock box and as you said very stuffy so it was unwise to spend a long time in there. Anyway the only part of the room that wasn't rock was the clay floor. It had

originally been covered in reed matting but that had been removed and here were only traces and markings, impressions in the floor to tell us what had been there. In one corner of the room there was a small smooth patch. It got missed several times but several days in, it was discovered. Closer inspection showed that it wasn't quite at the same level as the rest of the floor. It was slightly convex, you'd wouldn't have noticed if you'd been standing on it but there was a slightly bulge. Not only that the clay used was slightly different it was more dried mud than clay. You needed bright lights to see the colour differences. There was no question that the patch was of a similar age to the rest of the chamber but it was thought worth digging there. Just under the surface was a small granite box. This was excavated and taken to the main finds tent that we'd set up. Inside the box was, as you not doubt guessed, a vase similar to the one we'd found on the altar. Only this one had writing on it. Faded and weathered only parts of it legible. It was sealed just like the altar vase."

"Why was it buried?" asked Thad

"It was the central part of the ritual," said Henry. "It had probably been buried in a hurry when the religious centre was attacked. The priests must have scrapped a hole in the floor put the vase's box in it and covered it with the scraped out clay mixed with mud to bind it. It was almost certainly a rush job."

"This from the papyri" said Thad

"The papyri and Henry's vivid re-imagining of the scene, but it certainly fits the evidence." Said the professor. "Well Lord George didn't get to look at the vase until it had been carefully cleaned. When he did he almost exploded."

"Why" said Thad

"He recognised the writing" said Henry stealing the professor's punch line

"Sorry" said Thad.

"Well," said the professor, "all handwriting is unique and if you know the writer and have seen plenty of things that person has written then you can recognise their handwriting instantly."

"Maartens" said Thad

"Yes" said Henry "and if you want to see a sample of his writing in hieratic..." He pointed toward Meena who was holding up one of the sheets that she'd been translating.

"I told you" said the professor "that Maartens and Lord George had exchange letters in Hieratic during the war and after it. Maartens used to show off in the excavation camp. He could write fluidly and elegantly as if it was second nature. It was obvious to anybody looking at the vase that the hieratic writing was his. Even he admitted the similarity when challenged about it by Lord George."

"So how did he do it?" said Thad

"I never thought he did," said the professor, "He had never been out of anyone's sight and the chamber was guarded at all times. The vase was never left alone for a moment. It ought to have been impossible to paint on hieratic or substitute the vase for something else but it was Maartens' writing no question. Also when they re-examined to the vase, people thought it was too modern too well made"

"Bought from a cheap Cairo bazaar" said Thad

"Exactly" said the professor, "and that brought suspicion on my father. Nothing open, especially not from Lord George but the dig team began to break down and fracture. It was rather fortunate that there was a coup d'etat that week."

"There was?" Said Thad. "Why was that good?"

Well it stopped the dig in its tracks” said Henry

“It certainly stopped anything getting any worse on the dig; calmed things down. Also British nationals were advised to leave if their work was non-essential and archaeology certainly fell into that category. So things put back in a reasonable shape at the excavation. An administrator was brought in from Cairo museum to look into doing further work but the appearance of a fake vase had spoiled all the rest of the archaeological work we’d done over the months. When reports were written they tended to play down the discovery of the vases. In fact the museum wasn’t interested in the vases in spite of the fact that they were the only major artefacts.”

“That’s why you have them?” said Thad

“Well my grandfather took the ‘real one’” said Henry “and allowed Maartens to take the so-called fake vase.”

“Actually it was more of an order it was given to him to carry around like a mark of shame; like a ... which is it?”

“An albatross if you are thinking of the Rime of the Ancient Mariner” said Henry

“Yes that was it” said the professor “And Maartens took it with him. He was disgraced in the eyes of almost all archaeologists. I don’t think he worked in Egyptology ever again. He went back to his family’s diamond concern.”

“And became extremely rich” interrupted Henry “I mean his family was well off before but under Jacob Maartens they seemed to go from strength to strength. I remember my grandfather pointing out that his experience in Egypt had turned him into a much more driven person, more eager and more ambitious than he’d been before.”

“And fifty times as arrogant.” Said the professor. “You forget that we came into the same orbit, just about, when I became assistant professor at UCL, University College London in the sixties. He would write me letters demanding that I clear his name. I was polite at first but there was nothing I could say or do. I’d always told anyone who wanted to hear that I’d never seen any wrongdoing on his part but it seems that that wasn’t enough. He wanted me to dredge up evidence that he had been setup. I had nothing to give him. Then he started accusing my father of instigating a plot, of faking everything and with that I stopped any communication with him.”

“Sorry to ask this but couldn’t your father have faked it” said Thad.

“Yes. That’s what hurt the most. My father was disgusted by what he thought Maartens had done. There was no point, as he saw, behind it. It was a poor and obvious fake and it ruined all the hard work that he and Lord George had put into the expedition for over a decade. My father could have faked the vase but he simple wouldn’t have. It would have served nothing. If the vase had been real it would have vindicated the whole story that they a taken from the papyri. Why produce such a bad obvious fake to do that. I knew he wouldn’t but I also knew that I couldn’t prove it.”

“Fortunately nobody listened to Maartens” said Henry “ and the expedition faded from memory,; the last British led expedition to Egypt in a the old colonial manner, a footnote in history, nothing found worthy of note, just a few posh people haring after a weird tall-tale.”

“And what happened to your grandfather?” said Thad

“He developed other interests” said Henry, “Like this house for a start. Lots of country houses were going to rack and ruin in the fifties and sixties. He put the family back on an even keel. Ran this place very frugally, modernised fairly sensitively – although I doubt that Welsh Heritage would have allowed

any of the changes if they'd existed at the time. No strength and survival of the family became his goals for the rest of his life. And in case you were wondering how, he went into the City and learned his trade rather well. If we weren't quite so posh, he could have called himself a self made man. I remember he was rather proud when I showed an interest and aptitude in Egyptology. My father took after my grandfather in business but only I was promising in ancient stuff. It didn't mean that I didn't have to go to Harvard and get the MBA but I'm also allowed my hieroglyphics."

Is that what your other PhD is in; Business?" asked Thad

"No." said Henry "I always like to say it's in 'ologies my treatise took from sociology anthropology and psychology. I think the doctorate has the word sociology on it though."

"Well Doctor Llewellyn-Paget" said the professor, "I think I've finished my story now it is your turn"

“Okay” said Henry slowly. “If you enter the phrase the ‘Masters of Thoth’ into an internet search you will find a get deal of extremely weird stuff. Aliens, time travel, ancient secret knowledge and, of course buckets, of conspiracy theories. The story of the papyri and the discovery of the religious centre has been rearranged a reinterpreted in many different ways. The professor is occasionally bothered by internet strange people but he just ignores them.”

“That is not entirely true” said the professor “I set down an account of the expedition from my point of view and have since refused to elaborate on it or ask questions.”

“After a while these strange internet people, tend to lose interest in the professor his account is far too straight forward and doesn’t despite its central mystery have any juicy loose end for people to tug at. So they go to the next best thing one of the acknowledged world experts on the Masters of Thoth”

“Is that Maartens?” said Thad

“No” said Henry “it’s me.”

“They probably wouldn’t dare trying to get in touch with Maartens anyway” said the professor “he is a little too rich and powerful to pester”

“While I’m just poor enough to be pestered. Anyway I am the acknowledged expert et cetera; not that it means much. Study of the Masters of Thoth is akin to investigating the Loch Ness monster. You are unlikely to ever be taken seriously in your field again if you dare go near Nessie. Actually, I think that’s rather a shame. Obviously the Loch is pretty free from life so there can’t be anything big, let alone anythings big lurking in it. And any large visitor might easily be noticed as it swam through downtown Inverness, but there is an interesting psychological and possibly sociological phenomenon going on up there that might worthy of study.”

“Have you got an outcast wish, Henry?” said the professor.

“No but I am in a position where I can appreciate that there is often some value in research in fields otherwise populated by the weird and wacky.”

“Are you an outcast because of the Masters of Thoth?” said Thad

“Not quite.” Said Henry “I mean I’d never get invited to any academic institution to talk about the Masters of Thoth but I’ve written the odd rather dry account of everything that we currently know about the cult and they are carried by most libraries.”

“I think you do yourself a disservice” said the professor, “you don’t indulge in sensationalism; it’s a clear statement of the facts and, I’ve always thought, well-written”

Henry smiled in thanks

“No” he said “the reason that I’m seen as such an authority on the Masters of Thoth other than the scholarly volumes is that I am almost the only person resembling an Egyptologist prepared to go round and debunk some of the wilder claims about the cult, in detail. As I’ve said there’s plenty of supposition about the Masters of Thoth and little actual fact. I think I told you that they seem to have been wiped from history. Other than the papyri only the smallest incidental fragments exist. Nothing refers to them by name. Presumably anything that did was expunged from the record. What that means, is there exists a hole in the record of the five hundred year period when, we now know, the cult flourished and it is cult-shaped.”

“Why were they suppressed and by who” said Thad

"I'll get to that. We need to start at the beginning; the first high priest. This is the story in the papyri told by the last surviving priest of the cult. It seems he was a relatively junior priest. He knows the history of the cult but he doesn't have the deeper understanding that he claims for the successive high priests or their immediate acolytes."

"What was their knowledge?" said Thad

"The precise time and place of every pharaoh over a five hundred year period" said the professor.

"Please don't say how," said Henry "it is one of those mysteries that excite the internet crowd. Remember this is a story told by a priest of an order or cult that had been wiped from the face of the earth and from history, it is quite possible that he was overstating things. However the professor is right it seems the Masters of Thoth existed to serve one purpose, on the day of the Pharaoh's death they would arrive where the pharaoh was, wait until pharaoh died and then leave. That was pretty much it, the central core of the priesthood had to learn the days and places of a long list of the deaths of pharaohs both past and future, and close to the day of the pharaoh's death they or just the high priest would leave their religious centre and journey to where ever the Pharaoh was. If he was in a city then the priest or priests would wait outside the city until the time was right, only entering on the day he died."

"Why was that a bad thing?" said Thad

"You mean apart from the fact that nobody particularly wants to know exactly when they are going to die. You have to remember that while some of these pharaohs were sick old men, others were murdered or killed in battle. Think of the demoralising affect that that would have on an army."

"Couldn't it have worked like a self-fulfilling prophecy" said Thad. "You know, oh there's the priest let's kill the pharaoh like we've always wanted to but do it today. Or what's the point of fighting this battle if the priest is standing over there"

"Well quite." Said Henry "and some foolish academics have tried to rationalise it like that. They are foolish for getting involved with the Masters of Thoth, not for any other reason. There's no question that some deaths can be attributed to self-fulfilling prophecy, like you said, but that's only some of the deaths. Taken as a whole there aren't enough self-fulfilling deaths to account for and explain how the priests kept getting it right."

"You should also realise" said the professor "that throughout history the prediction of a king or queen's death was usually forbidden"

"Astrologers in medieval Europe and later, could be jailed or even executed for just doing a monarch's horoscope. The belief was that the astrologer could cause as well as predict the death of the monarch. As you said, a self-fulfilling prophecy"

"But how did it work, I mean how did they keep it secret" said Thad "because they would have had to"

"Yes and because they probably did keep it secret the cult shaped hole in the historical record isn't too big. As I said the story indicates that the senior priests would learn all the names of all the pharaohs for a period of five hundred years or so up until the death of Amenhotep the third."

"Who was he?" said Thad "was he special?"

"We are all special" said Henry almost automatically "but he wasn't quite as interesting as the man who succeeded him. Amenhotep the fourth, later to change his name to Akhenaton and incidentally the father of Tutankhamen

although with the interbreeding in the Egyptian royal family at the time, he may also have been his grandfather uncle and cousin.”

“Tutankhamen?” said Thad “Is he important to the story?”

“Unfortunately not” said the professor “The cult had been long suppressed before Tutankhamen was even born. There is regrettably not trace of the cult in any of the goods or documents found in Tutankhamen’s tomb”

“And believe me,” said Henry “people have looked and they still are looking. No the important pharaoh is Akhenaton. He is the man responsible for the destruction of the cult but do you mind if we get back to the beginning. Feel free to interrupt but the story has, I hope, a certain momentum when told in the right order.”

“Sorry” said Thad

“Don’t be. It is always good to ask questions, you must know that. Anyway the earliest record of the cult is a figure that our priest story teller, not surprisingly, called the first priest. The story goes that some time around 1839 BC a holy man entered the settlement of Abu Edal. The people of the area were kind enough to shelter him and feed him up with what little they had. They supposed as he had come out of the desert that he might be some holy man driven mad by sunstroke. He certainly appears to have babbled some strange things that our storyteller dutifully and unfortunately recorded.”

“Like what?” said Thad

“Well things that can easily be interpreted as cars, televisions and telephones, if you have a mind to interpret them that way.”

“Why wouldn’t you?” said Thad

“Well with what we now know you might well be right to interpret it that way, but as of a few hours or days ago, you could easily argue that as the priest story teller had not conception of telephones televisions or cars, or any cultural references to them he may well have been misinterpreting 500 years of hearsay. That’s the normal guff that we sceptics come up with; not very satisfying. Anyway the description of our half mad holy man was nothing out of the ordinary for holy men with sunstroke of that period, other than that he was holding a sacred vase tightly in one hand, while his other hand was almost a bloody stump and gangrene was developing. The villagers knew enough medicine to cut what was left of his hand off at the elbow probably saving his life. Over time the holy man, the first priest got better and his confusion lessened. He stopped with most of his wild stories but persisted in the repeated litany of the names of Pharaohs and their deaths. Some people were attracted to this strange man he developed a following not because of list of dead pharaohs but because he also talked of an ascetic studious lifestyle that many found contemplative and calming.”

“This list of Pharaohs” said Thad “I’m trying to work it out, it can’t have been that long. I mean five hundred years there aren’t usually that many kings and queens in that time are there?”

“Well” said Henry, “In the last 500 years there have been only twenty one kings and queens of England, slightly more if you include Scotland, but you are right that twenty one isn’t that clever to remember”

“So how many Pharaohs were there?” said Thad

“Somewhat less than two hundred” said the professor “the precise number is a matter of dispute”

Henry smiled “Two hundred is a much more impressive feat of memory or prophecy”

“Why so many?” said Thad

“The period that the cult flourished” said the professor “was during a rather chaotic period known as the middle kingdom”

“In the about 5 centuries the Masters of Thoth were around” said Henry “Egypt was broken up invaded several times by foreign tribes and generally had a miserable time of it.”

“It is considered either as a very confusing time or one ripe for study.” Said the professor.

“We tend to group pharaohs according to dynasties because there are list of groups of them in various inscriptions. Unfortunately because of the general break up of the country different dynasties could co-exist. Also because there was a state of civil war where cities and regions would frequently change hands over the decades, you can have inscriptions that mix the dynasties up recognising the legitimacy of which ever one was in the ascendancy and recording them.”

“And these Masters of Thoth predicted every single death?” said Thad “So the story goes” said Henry “The storyteller was not privy to the exact details of the list. We don’t really know how it worked but it is probable that it was just the pharaoh’s name, the date of his death and the place.”

“So you can’t verify the dates and places” said Thad

“The priest recorded some fragments of the list but only when they illustrated his story” said Henry “The major problems with trying to verify the list are firstly that we don’t have a definitive list of all the people that called themselves Pharaoh at the time and the exact chronology of any Pharaoh’s reign is a matter for extreme debate”

“No group of Egyptologists can ever agree on all the dates of all the rulers of Egypt. As well as the confusion of the different dynasties there is also the point that many pharaohs ruled with their successor for several years so you get overlap there.”

“If” said Henry “You want an example of a disagreement between Egyptologists over dates I’m surprised that the professor didn’t speak out when I mentioned 1839 BC just now.”

“Why not” said Thad

“Because I wouldn’t have said the Sensusret the third died that year” said the professor.

“This is thing everybody accepts a different chronology 1839 BC is only one of several dates that Sensusret the third could have died. Estimates very from a few years either side, to decades. Some people even put Sensusret the second in the dates of Sensusret the third.”

“I’m about to ask who this Sensusret guy was” said Thad. “But first if there’s all this confusion about dates how could the Masters of Thoth get it right?”

“The cult would have had it relatively easy” said the Professor “Egyptian society organised its calendar with reference to the year of the current pharaoh’s reign. So it is likely that the date that they cult remembered was something like on the third day of the eighth moon of the thirtieth year of Sensusret the Third’s reign he dies at Thebes.”

“And the reason that we keep mentioning this guy Sensusret the third is that his was the first name in the holy man’s litany and that pharaoh died less that a year after the holy man emerged from the desert. Of course you could dismiss it as a fluke, and it probably was dismissed like that at the time. After all Sensusret was a fairly old man by Egyptian standards of the time and he was sick for sometime before he died. The story teller suggests that it took the deaths of about ten pharaohs, with exact predictions of time and place, before

everybody accepted that the Masters of Thoth had something. Some people believed quicker than that and some believed from Senusret onwards. Those early believers are the ones that built the priesthood the cult of the Masters of Thoth.”

“Have I asked who Thoth was or is?” said Thad

“I don’t think so” said the Professor “he was the god of the Calendar and Wisdom he is depicted as either having the head of an ibis or a baboon. You know that ancient Egyptian gods are often depicted as having animal heads?”

“I think so” said Thad.

“I’ve always thought that Thoth was an odd choice” said Henry “although some people also claim him as the creator of time. This would make the Masters of Thoth the masters of time. Interesting that, don’t you think?”

“If he was a god” said Thad “then wouldn’t claiming to be his master be some kind of sacrilege?”

“Almost certainly” said Henry, “but by the time they started being generally known as the Masters of Thoth, they were probably too powerful for anybody to object.”

“You’ve talked about their wealth and power” said Thad “I’m not entirely clear how that came about.”

“It’s a question, really, of the advantages that knowing when something is going to happen and how it is going to happen, will give you. There’s always money to be made betting when you know the outcome of the race and there was way back then. As to power it wasn’t something that they seemed to manipulate that much but they were certainly feared. And people’s fear can be manipulated.”

“No wonder they needed to build up Abu Edal and put soldiers there” said Thad

“It is an interesting point actually, “said Henry “Egypt didn’t have a formal state army structure at this time; it was more followers of a powerful magnate and levies from the villages and farms. Abu Edal must have had one of the best organised and long standing small armies in Egypt at the time. The story teller makes the area around Abu Edal out to be a pocket of relative peace in the changes that swept Egypt at the time.”

“You make it sound almost idyllic” said Thad “so what went wrong”
 “Amenhotep the fourth went wrong. Well it is debatable whether what he did was wrong or not. It was certainly an upheaval after a period of relative stability”

“Stability? For all of Egypt?” said Thad

“More or less” said Henry “Country reunited; foreign invaders driven out or subsumed into the fabric of the nation. One Pharaoh and fewer debatable dates.”

“So what was the problem with Amenhotep?” said Thad

“Monotheism” said Henry

“Spoken like an atheist Henry.” Said the professor, “yes I know you are one and I know you despise monotheism and all its works with a Dawkinsian frenzy but I’m not sure that this is the time and place”

“Probably not” said Henry without bitterness. Again Thad detected another well aired argument.

“Anyway” continued Henry “Amenhotep the fourth took it into his head to worship the Sun disk or Aton, as the sole embodiment of the divine. He took the name of Akhenaton, which means the servant of Aton and built a new capital a place know to today as Amarna. There are many arguments about why he did this some just say that he was trying to break the power of the priests at Karnak. You could also claim that he created his own religion so that he could control and manipulate it. And the thing about a monotheistic religion is that if you control the access and interpretation of the one god you are better able to control the society that believe in that one god. If you have lots of gods then you have lots of interpretations of what the divine should be and lots of rules laid down by each group that controls each god. Sorry, the professor is right I’ll step back from lecturing about monotheism; it gets ugly pretty quickly. Anyway, Akhenaton suppresses other forms of worship. Nothing too stringent, so long as you acknowledge that the Aton is the chief god or symbol of god and everything else every other god is subservient to it, life would go on as normal. The priests of Karnack, these were the most powerful group of priests in Egypt and probably the most corrupt, they certainly didn’t like this but by and large they thought it sensible to keep quiet bide their time and plot in the background. They were probably right to do that: Akhenaton was forgotten, or memory of him was suppressed very quickly after his death. Only one priesthood stood out against Akhenaton.”

“The Masters of Thoth” said Thad.

“Exactly” said Henry

“Why” said Thad “I mean, what did they have to lose from obeying Akhenaton?”

“It is a bit of a puzzler on the face of it. There was nothing to be gained from opposing Akhenaton, in fact, it turned out that they lost everything.”

“So why?” said Thad

“Well the priest telling the story tries to make out that the High Priest of the cult just took against Akhenaton for some reason. However a possible real reason eventually comes out, they’d simply run out of predictions. Well that’s not the whole reason. It seemed that the holy man had said that the coming of Akhenaton was the end. Whether it was the end of the cult or the world nobody can be sure. All the story teller knew was that the last line of the list

said that everything comes to an end with the servant of the Sun disk in other words everything comes to an end with Akhenaton."

"You mean" said Thad "that they believed that they were going to be destroyed so they made it worse?"

"Possibly" said Henry "maybe it's like the Rapturist cults in the States and elsewhere. They believe that they are living in the End Times so they might as well either sit back and pray or help it along."

"Is this another of your pet obsessions?" said Thad

"Definitely" said Henry "but you are aware of them aren't you?"

"Of course" said Thad. Only too aware, Momma talked about the end-times and he knew he shouldn't be going here.

"Well" said Henry "I wonder if it was a situation similar to the modern day Rapturists: they can see that the world is going to hell and following their bizarre set of prophecies so why not ensure that the world really does come to an end; why not hasten the Last Judgment. The difference is that the Masters of That had almost five hundred years of highly accurate predictions to base their belief in this prophecy on. If the holy man said 'everything comes to an end with Akhenaton', then why fight it? Why fight the idea anyway? It was going to happen why not tell the world that Akhenaton was bringing things to an end. So they publicly denounced him."

"How?" said Thad

"Well it was certainly tricky. It is not like there were newspapers or media where they could express an opinion. There was certainly no concept of free speech. No, what they appeared to have done was to turn up in Amarna and disrupt ceremonies trying to stir the mob into anger with tales of what the apostate heretical Akhenaton would do. We can't be absolutely certain when the storyteller wrote his account. There are hints that Akhenaton is still alive and that the priest is waiting the world's destruction. It is interesting though (for me anyway) that many of the phrases and arguments that the priest storyteller uses against Akhenaton were used later by those who destroyed Akhenaton's memory. He and the Masters of Thoth were probably tapping into a public mood of dislike and distrust of what Akhenaton was doing. No public is the wrong word, like I said the ordinary people didn't really notice the difference. It was more likely reflecting the secret opinions of the elite in society."

"Did the protests work?" said Thad

"As I said there was no free speech in Egypt; protest was countered with violent force and repression. Under Akhenaton and his predecessors the armed forces in Egypt had become better organised. So it wasn't long before the Pharaoh responded to the provocation, as he presumably saw it by attacking the cult and its religious centre."

"Did anyone from Abu Edal try to help?" asked Thad

"The story teller is not too complimentary about the people of Abu Edal at this point. He talks a lot about their betrayal but he doesn't go into any detail. We should probably assume that Akhenaton sent any overwhelmingly large force to the religious centre and the forces at Abu Edal thought it best not to intervene. The priest certainly describes the army of thousands strong but that is only when he is describing his escape so he may have been exaggerating to self-aggrandise."

"Didn't they try to get away?" said Thad

"Some of them definitely. Again the priest talks about betrayal. However those people tended to be the equivalent of lay-brothers; not actually part of the

priesthood but support workers, helpers and their families. The priest doesn't care much about what happened to them but if there was any money knocking around, they may have made a good escape. That said none of them made a big splash afterwards which you might expect if they were fairly wealthy. No it's probable from complete nature of the destruction of the cult and the fact it disappeared from the historical record that if anyone did escape they didn't get very far."

"And the priests?" said Thad

They seem to have waited in there temple chamber conducting their ritual over and over again."

"I don't think you told me about their ritual" said Thad

"I think you are going to like it" said the professor

"And then some" said Henry. "Actually it was very simple, the high priest would cut himself and allow a few drops to fall in the vase covered in Hieratic."

"The holy man's vase?" said Thad

"The same" said Henry. "Certain herbs, unguents and chemicals were added, the vase was upended, a lit candle was placed in it until it dimmed and then it was quickly sealed. They would then wait for at least an hour chanting to themselves, expecting a glow and something from another world. This ritual had been performed at yearly intervals for centuries without anything happening. Now as the army of Akhenaton closed in on the religious centre the ritual was being performed about every two hours. Between rituals, after they'd waited the requisite hour the vase was unsealed emptied and ritually purified with boiling olive oil."

"I'm liking this" said Thad, "the olive oil is quite a good choice; water would have caused too many problems."

"The storyteller doesn't relate how many times the high priest carried out the ritual but he does talk about the feelings of light-headedness that they were suffering. Also that the high priests was becoming increasingly delusional, probably the blood loss. It wasn't until the army had entered the camp and a detachment was in the tunnel that anything happened."

"The glow" said Thad

"The glow." Said Henry "A halo of light emanating from nowhere but centred on the vase. As it grew to a maximum intensity blinding almost everybody, the high priest jumped onto the altar stone and ran at the vase, stooping as if to pick it up. Then he was gone and so was the light. As the priests recovered, getting used to the semi darkness again, they saw that soldiers had silently entered the chamber. At their head were a young officer and a sergeant."

"Sergeant?" said Thad

"Well it's a rough translation, but the original sense is certainly a senior ordinary soldier, in our terms a senior non commissioned officer. Both of them had seen the light and the disappearance of the high priest. They demanded to know what had happened. Of course the priests had no idea. It was their ritual; they didn't understand it, they just did it. The officer asked the priests what had happened to the vase and the priests said that the high priest must have taken it with him. The officer ordered a search but in the relatively low light conditions nothing was found. The officer then went out to fetch more light, taking one or two priests with him for questioning including our storyteller."

"What do think happened to the vase?" said Thad

"Well as far as the storyteller was concerned it disappeared along with the high priest." Said the professor "But it would have been possible for a quick

thinking priest to grab it from the altar stone without the soldiers seeing it. The high priest could also have knocked it over. That would presuppose that the vase that was apparently faked by Maartens was genuine and that the remaining priests in the chamber had enough time to pack and bury it.”

“Did they have enough time?” said Thad

“Oh yes” said Henry “the storyteller says that he was questioned for quite a time. They don’t seem to have tortured him, rather they shouted at him. He was relatively junior so couldn’t tell them anything really useful. The other priest was more experienced and more helpful but couldn’t tell the soldiers anything useful except to repeat the details of the ritual. The officer eventually demanded that they go back into the chamber and repeat the ritual. At first the priests said it was impossible without the vase, and the high priest had taken that.”

“They claimed that?” said Thad

“Yes” said Henry. “But the officer insisted that the vase wasn’t important in itself and that they should repeat the ritual with any convenient vase. So an unbroken one was found in one of the houses that hadn’t been quite so badly damaged yet and they used that.”

“Who gave the blood?” said Thad

“The officer, one of the priests was going to do it but the officer insisted. Does it make any difference?”

“I’m not absolutely sure” said Thad, “and it rather depends on the rather depends on the rest of the story”

“So the officer gives the blood and the vase is sealed in the ritual manner. The priests are then ordered out of the chamber with most of the soldiers, leaving only the officer and his sergeant inside. The priests and soldiers all see a glow coming from the chamber reaching intensity, a shout from the officer or the sergeant then silence and darkness. Soldiers go back into the chamber and it is empty”

“I see” said Thad

“Yes indeedy” said Henry holding up the shoebox and shaking it slightly.

“Anyway the storyteller hears the shouts of the soldiers in the chamber. The officer and the sergeant disappearing are not going to be good for the health of any of the priests. He ducks out into the tunnel and starts to run. Even as reaches the end of the tunnel and slips past two guards, he hears the sounds of a massacre starting behind him. Not much more to tell after that; he gets away of course, writes his account, buries it, it gets dug up, the religious centre is excavated and three and a half thousand years later you turn up. And may I say you are very welcome.”

“So what do we do next?” said Thad

“A good night’s sleep, I think” said the professor

“Yes” said Henry “the morning will be better for seeing if we can do the thing”

“The thing” said Thad “We are talking about bringing back two ancient Egyptian warriors”

“Only if it’s possible” Said Henry “I mean is it possible? It is your time machine after all”

“Oh I reckon so” said Thad “I’m just wondering if it is advisable”

“I think that is a discussion for the morning” said the professor “but my dear Thaddeus you’d better have a good reason for our not doing it.”

By the next morning Thad hadn't thought of a good reason for not bringing two soldiers forward in time some three and a half thousand years. There were of course plenty of reasons and good ones too but nothing, in the end overrode his and presumably the others' curiosity. Here was an opportunity to bring someone back, a person (or two) not some half electrocuted rabbit, shivering with shock, its heart racing as he held on to it.

He didn't kid himself that what he and Mitch had done hadn't been cruel. Blood tests and the simple inspection of the animals had shown how stressed the animals were. Of course as good scientists they had checked their results against a control animal which had gone through the blood extraction and the electric shock but not the time travel. They had glibly concluded that while there were significant physiological strains on the animals due to time travel as none of the test subjects had actually been killed, they could claim it as safe. But he knew and felt ridiculous for think of the phrase that humans aren't rabbits. Physiological distress was one thing but psychological distress was quite another. A floppy eared rodent can't feel culture shock at least not as profoundly as man. He tried to remember back to an early semester at college where he'd taken a few classes in anthropology. But her name had been Samantha and the anthropology hadn't made him less of a geek in her eyes. No, he later found out that she'd ever really bothered to give him a second glance.

Anyway hadn't the Honourable Henry said something the night before about his second doctorate being in anthropology or in some aspect of it? The point was that culture shock was for the anthropologists to worry about, he should be more worried about making sure that the apparatus still worked.

The professor and Henry were sitting at the kitchen table reading some of Meena's notes from the evening before when he entered. Henry looked up smiled and gestured to him to help himself to some of a selection of hot and cold food spread out on the counter. Thad wondered whether Henry had servants doing the cooking and clearing for him but they were fairly invisible if they were about. He grabbed a couple of slices of toast and stuck a few rashers of bacon between them. As ate leaning at a space on the counter carefully making sure that any crumbs or larger fragments dropped onto a plate, he took a good surreptitious look at Henry over his diminishing sandwich.

There was an order or fussiness about Henry, somebody clearly used to looking after himself. Rather well too. He looked almost well dressed enough to be homosexual. Obviously that was the American stereotype about the English upper-classes. The fruity accent, the ritualised cruelty of their private schools which they strangely called public schools. He'd been to a proper public school, US Grant High, poor and rough probably with the same degree of ritualised violence, if not the same kind. He hadn't heard of too many stabbings or shootings at English public schools.

If Henry wasn't gay, not, he said to himself repeating the trite phrase he'd once heard on an episode of Seinfeld, that there was anything wrong with it, what else could explain the behaviour. He looked around the kitchen it wasn't particularly masculine in spite of a rather obvious lack of anything feminine. It was more that it was too ordered, well thought out, a distinctly bachelor residence. A lonely bachelor's residence. Perhaps that's what it was. Henry's

passion for learning getting in the way of a regret of solitude, keeping it at bay. Nothing to do but rattle round a big house or nothing to do to avoid rattling around a big house except fill it with ideas and visitors that weren't friends. He was projecting there, he knew. Social situations weren't his forte either, he had better luck than Henry in looks but he could, he thought, still place himself in Henry's shoes and see what he reckoned was desolation of a kind. What Thad had to answer was did he prefer his own loneliness to returning to the one place that he knew he would always be welcome, always wanted always needed. Why wouldn't he go back?

"Thad" said Henry. Thad realised that he had drifted off somewhere.

"Come over and read Meena's notes" said Henry "I know that sounds odd but she really is something of a quiet artist when it comes to translation"

"Also we could do with an assessment of the scientific content," said the professor "My granddaughter may well be a great writer - but between you and me that's just Henry's habit of complimenting her when she's out of the room because he's too scared to compliment her to her face" The professor barked a quick laugh at Henry who seemed to be taking it all in good heart.

"But she doesn't have the scientific knowledge and neither do we."

"Oh well" said Henry in mock offence.

"Ologies are not real science. Astrology is an 'ology would you call that a real science"

"Actually I recall haranguing you for a good two hours once, as a student on my theory that astrology had to have started with a scientific basis. Like a folk wisdom which gradually obscures its common sense roots in the accreted guff of history. But anyway we do need your opinion Thad"

"It a fragment of an encyclopaedia, yes?" said Thad.

"Well, how to work zeros and how to make gunpowder seem to be there but there are one or two other bits which don't make absolute sense to us"

Thad picked up few pages and scanned them; it was the fragment about the zero. He had seen work like this before. In fact he supposed all fundamental theories must start out something like this. What he'd seen before were old textbooks trying to explain the rotation of the earth or the planets; extracts from Galileo that were trying to tell people things that were now common sense. Everyone knows what the zero is, it somehow gets mixed in to counting and decimals. It was tricky to imagine not knowing about it and having no sense of it; not needing it. It is so vital in mathematics because of the way that math is done. This was just a treatise on the zero, as they had grandly called it, was more like a do it yourself western arithmetic primer with all the extraneous talk that those old philosophers used to put in their work. Explaining it to themselves as they were going along. Once everybody has accepted that gravity is there then there is no need to explain it in detail. He smiled to himself as he remembered a quote about gravity from a favourite book "they even keep it on at weekends".

Henry was trying to hand him a piece of paper, one of the ones that they were finding difficult.

"It's an extraction, smelting process of some kind a bit complex for bronze"

said Henry "it's probably iron but there's something extra to the process.

We're not sure if it's just to turn it from one form of iron to another, annealing isn't it? Or if it really is steel. It keeps mentioning charcoal."

Thad looked at the paper. Henry had guessed right, definitely steel, but there was something else about the process which caught his eye.

"It is steel" he chuckled slightly.

Henry and the professor looked at him slightly questioningly.

"There was a bestselling book a while back. Chinese author. She mentioned that during the Cultural Revolution, Chairman Mao said every village should make steel. So every village had their own very primitive steel plant. Very inefficient of course but I remember being fascinated by it. That's really what is being described here how to make a Cultural Revolution style blast furnace. It's very clever."

"I'd be a little more interested in the beginning" said Henry. "Explain to ancient Egyptians where and how to find iron"

"You said they were Bronze Age didn't you?" said Thad

"Late bronze age" said the professor "basically everybody at the time of Akhenaton was using bronze implements, but iron artefacts were beginning to be used."

"At the time" said Henry "Iron was rarer and more valuable than gold, although Egyptians hadn't quite worked out how to use it. Am I right in thinking though that you are saying that this is a sort of non-industrialised steel making plant."

"Looks something like the ones I checked out, that they built in China" said Thad

Henry thought a moment then asked the professor.

"So it might not be the ability to make steel artefacts but the simple ability to make steel on a large scale."

"It's not exactly on industrial scale" said Thad

"It wouldn't need to be" said the professor "the process only needs to be more efficient than the existing methods they were using in Asia Minor at the time."

"Another thing" said Henry, "it could hide quite effectively"

"Hide?" said Thad

"Yes" said Henry "it isn't so different from the processes they were using at the time for iron. Imagine that somebody sends this book back in time. The knowledge that could potentially contain would make it obvious that some kind of interference took place. I'm not explaining myself properly. Imagine that you gave George Washington a detailed instruction booklet on how to make modern high explosive and rockets that worked well"

"That's a lot of chemistry" said Thad

"Exactly" said Henry "So imagine that we're archaeologists looking back from our alternate present at the stunning victories of George Washington, king of the world."

"President" said Thad

"Granted. President of the world then. Wouldn't we wonder how George Washington explorer and career soldier suddenly could do all the chemistry? And yes I know you could give it to Ben Franklin but it would only be marginally more believable."

"I see what you mean" said the professor. "They are only giving knowledge that doesn't look out of place"

"Not anachronistic" said Thad pleased that he had found an appropriate use for the word.

"Like the gunpowder" said Meena who had arrived in the room silently and still looked half asleep even if she was and looked fully washed and dressed. She put an arm round her grandfather and kissed him on the cheek in silent greeting. He laid his hand on hers across his chest in reply.

"The Egyptians used saltpetre or something very similar in the preservation of the dead." She continued. "They had a very sophisticated knowledge of

chemistry for the time. It's actually a bit surprising if you think about it that they didn't develop some kind of explosives at the time."

"But why would it be important to hide this stuff?" said Thad

"Maybe" said Henry "that somebody doesn't want to announce to the world that time machines are possible"

"But if you are going to create an alternate present" said Thad "where you don't exist and wouldn't know any of this if you did. There just wouldn't be any point to hiding"

"You may well be right" said Henry "but perhaps he's not thinking in those terms. Maybe there's enough of the archaeologist in Maartens not want to cause a stir. Cause apparent disjoints."

"It could be" said the professor "that he just doesn't like mess He wants things to fit even if the world is completely different."

"So what do we do today" said Meena.

"Prepare for our guests" said Henry

"Which ones?" said the professor

Thad was about to correct the professor's apparently absent-minded question when he realised that there might be something in it.

"Who are the other guests?" he asked

"Well to answer you, professor" said Henry "both sets. And Thad, how many working time machines do you know of? And how many other people want to use it? Sorry, me being patronising again."

"How long before they get here?" said Thad trying not to be annoyed.

"Good question." said Henry "We'll all have to think it out. Look Thad I realise myself and the professor knowing everything without needing to discuss it is very disconcerting. We have lived with whole Masters of Thoth and Maartens business for years. People that know parts of the story always want to know the rest whenever they meet us so the stories are always there at the back of our mind. Strangers on our doorsteps are always interested in the mystery. Added to that the professor and I used to share an office while I was his research student. We developed a shorthand way of talking to each other and other people find it weird almost like telepathy."

"Actually" said the professor "I spend most the time pretending to know and asking the occasional bizarre question to throw him off the track, while I catch up."

"Thanks" said Henry "we may need to discuss Maartens a little before we start setting up."

"So when do think he'll be here" asked Thad

"I was going to ask you the same thing." said Henry "However he has to use a time machine to carry out his dastardly scheme"

"I still don't really understand the point of it" said Thad

"If you are asking why is he doing it? I haven't the faintest idea. I was considering asking him when he got here. Seriously. All we have is evidence that he might be doing it not why"

"It is a way of imprinting himself on History" said Meena "even if he isn't around to enjoy the results."

"It's his not being around he changes history that bothers me" said Thad "but anyway, getting back to when he might be here."

"He'll probably already have started looking into you." said Henry. "If he bought the idea of you not being too heavily involved in the time machine before because of what Mitch told him, I don't think he'll believe it for long."

"I didn't have the sense of being followed or investigated" said Thad "but then I've never knowingly been secretly investigated before so how would I know. Then again no friends told me that someone was after me."

"That could mean" said Henry "that he hasn't been aware of your ability to help him for much more than a week. It's the photograph that bothers me that was an original. Even if Mitch torched Maartens files when he burned down the rest of the lab, Maartens could still eventually realise that it was taken. That would automatically put the professor and me into the picture and he'd be round here like a shot."

"What you are really saying" said Meena "is that we have no idea when if ever Maartens is going to turn up. It could be in the next five minutes so if we are going to do this then let's get on with it."

"Of course" said Henry "you know me, I like to chat"

"Yes." said Meena "are you still running conferences here?"

"Well only day conferences during the summer" said Henry "over in the east wing and the stable block. We don't run them, there's an outside company that uses the place, pays for the rewiring and stuff. Why"

"Flip charts, pens" said Meena. "Easels, white boards. We're going to need to be teaching a couple of foreigners to cope in our world aren't we?"

"I'll get the keys." said Henry "they've got a store cupboard somewhere around the back. Thad you're going to need somewhere to set up aren't you."

"I guess so" said Thad.

"I was thinking the Real Tennis court come it's along the way"

They started off, following Henry into the public areas of the house, through doors disguised as bookcases and out to the rear of the place. Henry muttered about needing to have a back door put nearer the private apartments. They crossed the gravel courtyard where Thad's truck was standing to another group of buildings slightly down a slope. The buildings were about two storeys high set around a small courtyard. Thad caught a glimpse of a taller building attached to these and Henry went to the wall that seemed to contain its entrance.

Henry unlocked a door with a small bunch of keys, tapped a code into an alarm and an unlocked another door. Thad, Meena and the professor followed Henry into a small office; writing on the door said Reception.

"This is the stable block" said Henry by way of explanation to Thad. The professor and Meena clearly knew where they were and were waiting for Henry to give them the keys that he was currently searching for.

"It looks a bit modern" said Thad

"Oh it is" said Henry "got them" waving the keys at Meena before throwing the bunch of them at her in a gentle arc. The professor and Meena headed off upstairs while Henry led Thad to down a corridor a little way. He stopped in front of a door marked 'court' but decided head off somewhere else.

"You might find this a bit of fun" he said "sorry for the diversion it won't take long. Anyway my father bulldozed and rebuilt the stable block about twenty years ago. It works as a self contained mini conference centre. Nowhere you can sleep, he didn't want people feeling too at home, but there's a canteen refectory around here and there's a dozen or so meeting and seminar rooms upstairs. We allow plenary meetings in the Ballroom in the main house, and delegates can wander round the public areas of the house. My father also decided to put a real tennis court in. Don't ask me why. But it does get used occasionally by actual players as well as the odd film maker. It's tricked out just like the one in Hampton Court so every 18 months or so we get visited by Henry the Eighth. The point is he had it built with the possibility of filming in mind, there are plenty of concealed places to hang lights and there's a hidden barn door in the blank wall of the court so equipment can easily be brought in. We'll get to that I just wanted to show you this"

Henry unlocked another and ushered Thad into a rather strange looking changing room. It appeared to be full of Ancient Roman military equipment: Armour, shields, swords there was even some kind of small catapult or ballista propped in one corner.

"There is a copse in the park" said Henry "it is the remnant of an ancient Oak forest. A number of years ago archaeologists discovered what they believed was a mass grave in the copse. They found first century AD mainly Celtic and druidic artefacts and plenty of bones. Anyway that's probably because this was one of the last battle sites of the druidic revolt in Anglesey that happened in the first century AD and was suppressed by Suetonius Paulinus. This means we have the Roman re-enactors coming here periodically to replay the battle. They camp out in the grounds occasionally put on displays. There's one in a week or so which is why their stuff is here. It beats them having to store it at home. We've also got a Celtic re-enactors changing room down the hall but that's mainly druidic stuff, long robes that sort of thing."

Henry led Thad back out and back to the door marked "Court"

“Just thought I’d show you that” he said “Anyway here we go”
He opened the door and they entered what appeared, at first to be a small room with a long set of netted windows. Beyond the nets there was a larger room with a wooden floor and seemingly no roof. Henry led Thad through a doorway in the small room in to the larger one. The opposite wall blanked a high. Thad looked up. The larger room, the actual real tennis court as he now realised, was a two storey empty hall. Along two sides were rooms or, as Henry pointed out, galleries each with a roof that sloped downwards into the court. Another side of the court also had a sloping roof but apparently no room beyond except for a small window in the far corner. There were lines and numbers on the floor and the walls. Henry began to take down the drooping net that divided the court in two.

“Seen one before?” he said.

“Yeah” said Thad going to the opposite net post and to help taking the net down. “On TV”

It occurred to Thad just how much stuff he’d learnt from television over the years. People sometimes congratulated him on his general knowledge; this was even before things like internet and the Wikipedia made general and trivial knowledge available to all. They usually attributed to his reading of lots of books when he actually read very few, other than textbooks and scientific journals. No, most of his general knowledge seemed to have come from watching television over the years. He sometimes wondered why that wasn’t the case for most people. Perhaps he watched too much of the Discovery channel and not enough MTV or maybe it was that he actually watched television unlike most people who had it on in the background or just switched off their minds even as they switched on the TV. He had to admit that his habit of looking things up when he saw them was odd but as far as he was concerned it was paying attention and if something wasn’t worthy of attention it wasn’t worth watching. He didn’t really believe that, he could think of plenty of occasions when he’d slumped in front of the TV like everybody else.

“You’ll need to see how well this is hidden” said Henry walking to the blank wall. He lifted a small flap which hid a lever a pulled on hard. A large section of the wall detached smoothly and opened outwards revealing another gravel area and the park beyond. The opening took up almost half the court and Thad reckoned that he’d be able to drive the truck in if he wanted.

“Eccentric, my father” said Henry “Brilliant at business this was certainly one of his stranger ideas. I mean, it pays for itself and everything but I never understood why he decided to do it in the first place. It isn’t like we’re on the beaten track here but then again the kind of people that play real tennis aren’t beaten track kind of people.”

“Can you play?” asked Thad

“I’m just about competent, I could show a beginner a thing or two but I wouldn’t want to go up against a pro or play it competitively.”

Meena and the professor came through the gallery entrance carrying an easel stacked with pens and flip charts, between them. Henry went off to help them but turned halfway and said.

“Do you need any help bringing the van round?”

“Do I go left or right?” Asked Thad

“Left” said Henry “you’ll see a driveway, it skirts round the building and will take you back to the back of the house and the van.”

Thad set off checking that he'd remember his keys as he went. From the outside the real tennis court looked like a British chapel or a small church without a tower or steeple. It had been dressed in the same grey stone that all the rest of the buildings seemed to be. He looked back as he turned the corner to get another brief look at the huge 'barn' door into the court he really hadn't noticed the join until the door was opened and it looked like it weighed a ton.

As he drove the truck back down towards the court Thad found himself looking back over the parkland to the main drive he had driven down the night before. He stopped a while and tried to see if he could spot anything moving along the drive towards the house. He turned off the engine and listened. It was a quiet, cool morning and there was nothing to hear except the odd bird call at a distance. He shivered slightly and started the engine again. Just how dangerous was Maartens? He almost certainly would have had to have other people, henchmen (he smiled to himself at that word) if he wanted to have Mitch killed and make it look like suicide. Henry and the professor didn't seem at all bothered by the prospect of Maartens turning up mob handed. At least one of them must have considered it. Perhaps they thought that he wouldn't want to harm them because they weren't really a threat to him. Maybe they'd call the police. He wasn't so sure he wanted the police around now he thought about it. Technically most of the stuff in the back of the truck was stolen, and he wasn't so sure that he didn't require a licence to operate some of the equipment. Thinking about the equipment made him wonder how exactly they were going to power it all. He'd heard stories about slightly intermittent power problems in the countryside and he was a little worried about connecting to the mains. He supposed that he might be able to rig something up. Henry was waiting for him outside the court and seemed to have read his mind.

"Power can be a bit flaky round here so we've got a back up generator which the film companies have started to use when they are up here. I reckon that that should be enough and I think they've left some cables."

It was almost as if things had all been lying in wait for his arrival. Thad backed the van towards the open doorway, hopped out opened the back and folded down the ramp.

"I've got the professor and Meena setting up at the Dedans ends" said Henry pointing to the small netted gallery at one end of the court. "If you go to the Hazard end we should be able to put the generator cables through the Grille" Henry indicated a small opening in the end wall next to the blank wall. Thad had remembered a piece of trivia.

"Doesn't somebody in Shakespeare knock something into the Hazard?" he said

"Yeah, it's Henry the fifth" said Henry. "Don't know the exact quote but it's suggested that he play tennis instead of invading France and he replies by saying that the tennis balls, he has just been given, will be returned as cannon balls and the king of France's crown will be knocked into the Hazard"

After Henry and Thad had unshipped most of the equipment from the truck and closed the 'barn' door, they headed off to the generator room to check that it could take the load.

"Can I ask you a trivial question?" said Henry

“Trivial or trivia?” said Thad
“Both possibly on the other hand it might be serious”
“Go ahead” said Thad
“Well I just wondered if you worried at all about the grandfather paradox.”
“You mean going back and killing your father or grandfather before they’ve met your mother or your grandmother?” said Thad
“That’s the one”
“Probably considered it. What’s your question?”
“Well so far we’ve sort of talked about changing time and when we’ve discussed it we’ve sort of said that we create a new timeline. We cease to exist but we’ve still had an effect on the universe”
“Yeah more or less” said Thad
“Well isn’t there an alternate way of looking at things where you can’t actually do it?”
“Well if there was only one timeline or timelines couldn’t branch off then by negating your own existence you would negate the effect you had on time. But what that would look like I have no idea. Not just because I don’t think that’s the way things happen”
“You’ve probably proved that that isn’t the way things happen, haven’t you” said Henry
“Yeah, sort of, probably. The other problem with the single timeline idea that I don’t like is that Time would have to know what you were going to do or the effect that you were going to have either before or at the moment you did it.” Henry went briefly cross-eyed but Thad could see that he’d really understood the idea however imperfectly he’d explained it. Thad was slightly grateful that he’d managed not to use the word causality.
“OK” said Henry “For our next experiment. Will the generator do the job?”
“Oh, yeah, looks fine” said Thad. Something about the phrase next experiment had reminded him of some figures that had bothered him. There had been an anomaly in the data which he and Mitch were going to investigate in their next experiment. Only they’d never gotten to do that next experiment because of the explosion at the lab.
He fixed the film company’s cables to the generator and walked them back towards the court. Once in the gallery they turned towards to hazard end without going into the court and went into a darkened area behind the hazard end wall. Henry then sent Thad back around into the court so that he could feed the cable through the grille.
Thad was looking at the disassembled time machine (he would rather have referred to it as ‘the equipment’ but the others’ term for it had begun to stick in his mind) wondering where to start.
“Do you think it will work?”
It was Meena. She had just sent the professor and Henry off to unscrew a couple of large white boards from the seminar rooms. Thad realised that although they’d spent a long time in each other company and had had some fractured conversations he hadn’t made any attempt to get to know Meena. He was suddenly struck by the fact that she was rather good-looking. That made him feel slightly uncomfortable, he reckoned that he was a good ten years older than her and she certainly wasn’t looking at him in that way anyhow.
“I hope so” he said
“Although it might already have worked in a way” She seemed rather interested by that thought.

"But of course it might not be us who succeed" said Thad "it might be somebody who recreates our work later. Are you ready?"

"I am much more excited than I thought I'd be. I must have spent almost eight or nine hours translating that stuff yesterday. I didn't understand what half of it meant. It's all very well the steel the gunpowder and the zero, I could get a handle on that but did you see the other stuff?"

"Only briefly" said Thad "it looked a bit like an explanation of calculus"

"You mean differentiation and integration that sort of thing?"

Thad nodded

"That makes a bit more sense of it." She said. "Knowing the words is all very well but if you don't understand the context it might as well be gibberish."

"Doesn't it put a dent Henry and your grandfather's theory about the encyclopaedia wanting to hide the knowledge or make it appear gradual?"

"The calculus?" said Meena "Probably, but it's only a theory. I mean the encyclopaedia is probably just taking things gently at first, before the heavy stuff."

"How big would this be, this encyclopaedia?"

"How do you mean?"

"Wouldn't they do it on rolls of papyrus or something?"

"Possibly, but if they aren't too worried about the anachronism of all that knowledge they aren't going to be too worried about the book it comes in."

"I thought" said Thad "that papyrus was the best thing for preserving old writing?"

"It certainly used to be but some modern papers have the same resilience. Anyway is there any thing to stop what they can take back with them?"

"Well when we added something on top of the rabbit it wouldn't go back. But if it was firmly attached and not too big relative to the creature then it would be pulled back with it"

"So a priest could hold on to a book" said Meena

"Possibly" said Thad

"We might have to witness it"

"You worried about that too?" said Thad

"The Maartens character turning up with a gang, yes"

"What about the other two?"

"They seem oblivious to it. I think right now all they are worried about is bringing back the soldiers."

"Yeah and I've got to work out where to start." Said Thad giving another look at the equipment.

The professor and Henry arrived back with a pair of large white boards, good naturedly bantering with one another to cover the awkwardness and difficulty in carrying their load. The whiteboards were leant against the gallery wall at the dedans end and Meena sat crossed legged in front of them while her grandfather stood over her and they discussed what should be written of the board as an opening message. Henry went over to help Thad but briefly looked over his shoulder and said.

"Should we just do a large Akhenaton cartouche?"

Meena turned round briefly with a look which expressed that they'd already thought of that.

"Well" said Henry to Thad "I dare say that they've also considered that they might not be able to read"

"Really" said Thad sounding more surprised than he thought he was.

“We’ll probably be OK with the simpler hieroglyphics, Akhenaton’s cartouche certainly, even the most illiterate person of there time should recognise that. No, really we should be alright with the officer, at least. They tended to be well educated nobility. Not that being well educated and of noble blood go hand in hand”

“You have personal experience?” said Thad with a smile

Henry smiled back.

“Where does this go” he said indicating a large parabolic mirror that he’d just finished fitting to a stand.

“Anywhere for now” said Thad “We’ll have to position it carefully opposite the other one when we’ve finished. The focus point of the mirrors has to be the same and the sample needs to go at the focus point. That’s where the soldiers will come from if this works”

“Cool” said Henry starting on the second parabolic mirror.

“What do you think the soldiers will do when they come through?” said Thad

“Well you said there wasn’t too much stress in time travel. I don’t suppose that psychological stress was too complicated when it came to rabbits, but it might be worse for humans. We’ve also got the culture shock to contend with but this is not so alien an environment that they freak out immediately. Of course real culture shock takes longer to show, so they have to be kept under observation if they are sticking around for more than a few days. All the same they presumably knew to expect something strange when they ran into that light. They might just be expecting the afterlife.”

“I was more thinking of the fact that they are disorientated soldiers” said Thad

“And you think they might strike out at us?” said Henry

“Yeah”

“It’s a worry. I was talking about it to the professor earlier; he seems to think a smile could be enough. I tend to agree; if we are unarmed and friendly looking Meena might be able to talk them round. Plan b is that we arm ourselves courtesy of the re-enactors. Plan c there’s a gun cabinet at the main house but I really don’t want to go there”

“I know it’s kind of an American stereotype but I’d be tempted to go for the guns first” Said Thad

“There are two basic problems with that approach. First we don’t want to offer them violence; we want them to be friendly. Second if we want to show that our guns mean business we’d have to fire them. Otherwise the soldiers will just think they are big clubs of some kind. My guns are shotguns, proving their efficacy to the soldiers may cause people injuries”

“Point taken” Said Thad

“A smiling face and the Akhenaton cartouche might be enough but perhaps we should look towards plan b”

“When we say soldiers” said Thad “how good are they likely to be?”

“As good at fighting in their way, as modern soldiers are in theirs. I mean we might be lucky and have a couple of relatively inexperienced guys but I doubt it. Our storyteller sort of suggests that they were part of Akhenaton’s elite guard but, again, that might be self-aggrandising. How much more do we have to do?”

“I have to test the circuits then we start the charging process” said Thad

“Once we start them charging it’ll take about four hours to reach full charge and then it has to be released almost immediately. The equipment is a little sensitive and it could short if it’s left at full charge for any length of time.

Shorting could easily cause some kind of damage. Blow a circuit and it would have to be rebuilt from scratch and I don't have spares. Could take weeks" "Fine." Said Henry "I'll go and fetch our vase do you want it in place while it's charging"

"Actually we'll need to do a little calibration on it before we start charging. And I'll need a date" said Thad

"Of course, a date" said Henry "I'll have to talk to the professor, how accurate does it need to be?"

"All the samples we used were about an hour in the past and we had to be very accurate. But there seemed to be a kind of logarithmic variation rather than a linear one. We were thinking of looking into that a bit more"

"Logarithmic?" said Henry

"Oh yeah sorry" said Thad "basically the sensitivity is more important and prone to error if the distance in time between the preservation of the sample and the experiment is small than if it is large. It's a logarithmic scale large number get compressed more than small ones."

"Oh right" said Henry "bits of school maths are coming back to me. Powers of ten and all that"

"Yeah" said Thad "though these are natural logs. So how accurate can you get the date"

"Reckon a year would do?" said Henry "Could probably come up with a month too."

"That should do." Said Thad "the computer will fine tune the settings to find the maximum response"

Henry went off to get the professor and Meena so that they could collect the vase and agree on a year. Thad reflected that a decade would probably have done but the computer would have taken longer to zero in on the maximum. He opened the laptop that controlled the equipment and began to run a diagnostic. Early on he could see that everything seemed to be connected properly, but the diagnostics were more thorough and would take a while yet. He decided to check over the anomaly figures again. They were odd; well that's what an anomaly was. He had tried to explain about defocusing the return beam slightly so that the rabbits where not returned at exactly the moment that they left. It was theoretically possible to make the rabbit return and occupy the same time and space as the rabbit before it left. They'd not worked out what would happen if they did that but it would almost certainly be messy. Fortunately they discovered that defocusing the return beam would introduce a delay. It topped off at around a millisecond, which was safe by ages.

The anomalous data was to do with variations in this delay period.

Theoretically it should always be the same for a given amount of defocusing. And it was but only when the difference in preservation time and experiment time was constant. It seemed that the longer the time between preservation and experiment the less the amount of delay period became. This was their planned final experiment: Preparing a sample and waiting a few days to see what effect that would have. The explosion had happened just after the sample had been taken. That thought bothered him and he couldn't quite get his mind round why. A voice in the back of his head was whispering that it knew why but every time he tried to interrogate the voice it wasn't there anymore. He hated it when that sort of thing happened. He recognised it as the prelude to a eureka moment but knew that his reaction wasn't so much jumping out of the bath and running joyfully down the street stark naked, it

was more slapping his head and wondering why he'd missed such an obvious discovery. He knew this needed a leap of the imagination that he would take before long he just wished he could hurry it up.

"One vase" Henry had returned "how's the time machine"

"Looks okay at the moment" said Thad "do you had have a date?"

Henry produce a piece of paper, it had a variety of different calculations in different hands (the professor's and Henry's Thad guessed) but one number had, eventually been agreed.

"And a month?" said Thad

"September" said Henry "about two moons after the height of the flood."

"I assume that's from the document" said Thad.

Thad placed the vase on a small stand placed between the parabolic mirrors and went back to the laptop to check the basic calibration. Once satisfied and pleased that the diagnostics had not reported any problems. There was a slight electrical disturbance or instability in one on the circuits possibly due to a dry solder joint, but it wasn't vital enough to need fixing. Anyhow it would just add delay and he could feel the excitement building in him. He started the main time travel program. He and Mitch had procrastinated over what to call the software, Thad had liked the idea of just referring to it as The Program, but Mitch rightly had pointed out that it might be confusing even if it had a definite ring to it - after all what other program would you bother with? In the end they had decided on Temporalis which had, they assumed, something to do with time and sounded like a non-prescription medication which gave it an air of spurious authority.

Thad entered the dates that Hen4ry had given him and the machine calculated the approximate number of seconds and a button marked 'Scan' became clickable. Thad click the button and graphic on the screen showed a sweeping dot moving side to side. It was mostly a straight line but after a while it could be seen that the line jumped up then down forming a tiny peak. The software was zooming in. Every time it did a sweep it calculated the maximum reading and zoomed into that area to do a more finely focussed sweep. What the machine was doing focussing a polarised molecular beam onto the vase and changing its phase and frequency according to the prompting of the computer program.

"I thought we'd have to open the vase" said Henry

"No" said Thad "the bubble is time not matter so it expands through extraneous stuff"

The peak on the computer screen was getting larger and larger; they were zeroing in on the perfect time.

Thad became aware that the others were watching the screen almost hypnotised by the dot's motion and breathing in time with each sweep.

The program started to beep, they were almost there. It had found the peak intensity and was making minor adjustments to figures to focus the beam better. As the response from the equipment was getting stronger the beep got louder. From experience Thad reckoned there would be about twenty beeps (a beep per sweep) until the machine had located the absolute maximum response. The others had jumped, startled by the first beep. With each succeeding one the shock was less, especially as Thad's stillness let them know that nothing was wrong. As the volume increased though they showed signs of discomfort, but they kept to their place and watched the peak on the screen grow.

The final beep was almost deafening Even if only coming from the laptop's internal speaker (Thad kept the volume at maximum any way). The others were relieved to see a small message box on the screen saying that a lock had been achieved (not that they knew what a lock was).

"What now" said Meena looking expectantly at the vase.

"I start building the charge, it will take about four hours" said Thad

"So the answer to Meena's question" said Henry "is probably lunch"

Any laugh from that was rather subdued. Henry went off to prepare something. The professor looked around as if hoping that they'd be something to do but finally headed off after Henry.

Meena went over to a flipchart on an easel and began to draw a Cartouche freehand without any notes or other drawings in front of her.

"Is this going to be the famous Akhenaton Cartouche that Henry keeps going on about?" said Thad approaching the easel.

"Yes," said Meena "I'm not sure it's going to work though"

"You think they might be illiterate?" said Thad

"No, I just think they'll have other things on their minds" said Meena

"Yes" said Thad. "I'll be interested to know why they did it. The storyteller's account made it sound as if the high priest almost did it by accident."

"Accident?" said Meena

"Well it sounded a little like he dashed across to pick up the vase when he saw the light around it and happened to pass through the light ball as it was at maximum intensity. It's about a half second window, it took us ages to work out the timings for shocking the rabbits and he does it by chance."

"And they're just following his lead" said Meena

"I get the impression that they must have really wanted to kill him."

"And they'll expect his friends at the other end." Said Meena

"Not the good guys" said Thad. "I think we ought to insist on plan b and c"

"Sorry" said Meena

"Nothing" said Thad "We'll talk over lunch, I dare say"

Back in the kitchen Henry and the professor had come to some agreement over something. At least the acquiescing silence seemed to suggest it. Almost as soon as they sat down to eat Meena continued with the subject of the soldiers' motivations but this time directed at her grandfather and Henry. "I'm not saying that I'm not going to be able to get them communicating" she said after ten minutes of evasive preliminaries. "What I am saying is that they could well need a heck of a lot of calming down before I can make any headway with them."

"But it's not culture shock you are worried about" said Henry

"No I think we buy the idea that culture shock isn't going to kick in for a while" said Thad "everyone is initially curious about a new place. It's sort of good strange. Culture shock as I understand it kicks in when the strange doesn't go away and you can't retreat to something familiar."

"We are worried that the soldiers are going to be after the High Priest and may well try to tear us apart to get to him." Said Meena

"We are working on the assumption that he'll be turning up at some point" said Henry unhelpfully.

"And until he gets here, how do we pacify them?" said Meena "You are in your own way a charming guy Henry but they could just stab you before they find out"

"Look" said the professor "we do realise that we will have to find a way of pacifying them before we convince them that we're the good guys"

"We've been talking over the account from the storyteller" said Henry "Now depending on how much you can believe him it appears that the officer was intelligent rather than brutal. He claims to have been tortured but fit enough to escape an hour or so later. He may just have been roughed up. And OK the other soldiers carried out a massacre but only as a result of his and the sergeant's disappearances. You can imagine what trouble they'd have thought they'd get into for losing an officer. Killing the priests would have seemed like the right thing to do."

"He wants to kill the high priest" said the professor "but he needs to work out how first"

"We think" said Henry "that his knee-jerk reaction will be strike out but so long as we show him that we don't want to kill him, or harm him, in fact we want to help him"

"Help him" said Thad

"Well obviously we don't want to kill the high priest on sight when and if he turns up." said Henry "but if the priest is with Maartens and then the soldiers at likely to side with us."

"Which means that we've got a couple of fit young men to help us out" said the professor

"Look" said Thad "we buy all the stuff about making them our friends once they've calmed down. It's getting them to calm down that bothers me. You keep skipping past that. Like Meena said, you are relying on your charm to carry the day but it's not going to be enough in the first ten seconds after they come out of the bubble"

"Okay" said Henry "think of it in these terms. We need, as far as possible to prevent them from having any grievance against us. That's why I don't want to use excessive force or get them to come out of the bubble straight into a

cage. We have to make it clear to them, if it comes to violence that we are doing no more than is necessary for our own preservation. We do not offer violence we always take a step back if we have them at our mercy. We defend we don't attack except to stop them attacking us."

"I guess we're talking plan b then" said Thad

"I think we are" said Henry "after lunch we convene in the tennis court and I'll take you through some battle manoeuvres."

"Battle manoeuvres?" said Thad

"Well I'm not the soldier my brother is" said Henry "but I am in the Territorials and I know a thing or two"

They were in the storeroom with Roman equipment again. The professor was fascinated both by the attention to detail in some of the equipment and the absurdity of re-enactment.

"I think we only need swords and shields" said Henry "helmets too if you insist but they will need to be worn and fastened properly which we won't have time to do if things turn nasty. And we can't have them on when they come out of the bubble"

Thad gripped a sword.

"Is all the equipment the same?" he asked

"It's better to use the stuff where the owner's name is in Latin. Said Henry The guys who use proper Roman names when they are re-enacting, take it really seriously and always have the best equipment."

The professor laughed.

"The long shields, yes?" he said "A touch of riot control"

"Exactly" said Henry

A sword swept above Thad's head. He had only said careful the first few times, now he was sure that Henry knew exactly where he was putting the blade. He wasn't so sure that Henry was teaching things he'd learnt from the Territorial Army so much as things he'd learnt from his friends, the re-enactors. Henry flung himself towards them again. Thad and the professor locked their shield together, crouched low and braced for the impact. Henry was not that big a man but the first few times he'd done this he'd broke through their shields. Not this time, not actually for the last half dozen times. It wasn't that Henry was getting tired; he was still much fresher than Thad and the professor. No they were actually getting better at it; knowing where to put their weight, making the force of the impact Henry's problem not theirs. Thad looked across at the professor, he was clearly out of breath and not in a good condition but he managed a panting smile.

Henry's sword swung across again, this time Thad raised his sword so that it touched Henry's as Henry was completing a backhand swing. He pushed hard in the same direction that the sword was travelling, so that Henry's arm was moving faster than Henry intended and it's momentum left him unguarded and slightly unbalanced. Thad and the professor pushed their shields hard and suddenly. Henry was thrown back by the shield thrust and he landed rather heavily.

It had taken almost two hours to learn that little manoeuvre, and everyone was feeling slightly ragged.

"Is that going to be enough?" said Thad

"This is an exercise in defence there aren't any guarantees of success" said Henry "but you may all now know enough to keep you alive if things get sticky."

Thad looked round at the professor he was lying on his back barely moving, Meena was kneeling over him, but not looking too concerned. Thad went over to them.

"Everything OK" he said

"Yes dear boy" said the professor without opening his eyes. "Hot work"

Meena and the professor had taken it in turns to team up with Thad against Henry in the practice. Meena hadn't shown quite the commitment to fight that the professor had and she didn't have his weight not that the professor was fat. Actually the professor was almost incredibly fit for a man approaching seventy. Not in a freakish way, he was just somebody that seemed to look after himself.

"You know" said the professor "There comes a time in an old person's life when their body says 'enough'. You can hold age at bay for so long but at some point normally in your eighties, it is as if the lights dim, your cheeks hollow and your face presages your mortality. You see it in movie stars, male ones. They are vital even if they look old and grey, there's a spark and a twinkle in the eye. The old magic is still there. Then one day it's gone and they begin to look decrepit and confused. Their clothes and glasses stop fitting, noses and ears seem to swell and they stop caring."

"What brought this on?" said Henry "It can't be the exertion you play squash twice a week"

"Just some horizontal musing" said the professor standing up and dusting himself down.

"I don't think Meena was impressed" said Henry
The professor put an arm round Meena and gave her a reassuring squeeze.
Thad went over and looked at the machine.
"We have less than fifteen minutes" he said
"Fifteen" said Henry walking briskly over "I thought you said that it would take longer to charge?"
"I think your generator is slightly higher rated than our one at the lab." Said Thad
"Then we'd better prepare for the arrival of our guests" said Henry, He began to scan around looking for something to do.
"You know" he said "I've just thought of something."
"What?" said the professor
"We've assumed that they will come this way out of the bubble when it forms" Henry indicated the problem with a hand gesture. The equipment had been setup near the hazard end of the court so that there was less than a yard from the vase to the court wall. Either side of the vase were the parabolic mirrors with their backs to the longer gallery and the blank wall respectively. They had cleared a space between the vase and the rest of the court assuming that that was where they would come out of the bubble. But of course given that they didn't know the orientation of the vase relative to where it was when they soldiers went through it was impossible to say where the soldiers would emerge.
Thad chuckled
"We worried about this for weeks" he said "we took great care about relative orientations at first. And then we discovered that it didn't actually matter. The equipment creates a tiny patch of instability in the bubble, on the front of it facing out into the court. How ever they enter the bubble at their end it they will always leave the bubble in one direction. Before you ask me why, I don't know we're just doing something that seems to work. I don't pretend to understand it. I mean we tried to understand it but we decided to be practical instead. We had a replicable way of ensuring the orientation of the rabbits as they heft the bubble so we just used it."
"Triumph of the experimental method" said the professor
"And without the patch of instability?" said Henry
"Then you'd probably be right" said Thad "and we'd have to take the curvature of the earth into account."
Henry smiled
"You mentioned a plan c" said Meena
"Well yes" said Thad
"What was it?"
"To have a shotgun at the ready just in case" said Henry
"Thought it might be something like that" said Meena "could I have the key to the gun cabinet"
Henry looked around at the professor and Thad. A little, thought Thad, as if he was peeved that this girl had spoiled his fun. Neither Thad nor the professor gave Henry visual permission to refuse Meena's request and he reluctantly handed the key over to her.
"Look" said Thad. He pointed at the vase, there seemed to be a glow coming from it.
"I think you'd better hurry" said Henry to Meena, who darted out of the court.
"Positions?" said Henry

“Not yet” said Thad appearing to tidy around the laptop. “You wouldn’t have a few cushions to hand. I just want to make sure that the equipment won’t get knocked around too much. Most of this is in these cages so that will be OK. I’m really worried about the computer.”

“Half a mo” said Henry and beckoning to the professor he disappeared into the gallery. After some noises of fiddling and untying they emerged with flat bolster cushions that had been tied to the long spectator seats in the gallery.

“These do” said Henry

“Yes” said Thad “They’ll have to anyway”

Thad hurried folded the cushions around the laptop.

“Positions?” said Henry looking at the glow around the vase

“Positions” said Thad

Henry walked over to his long Roman shield and propped it up facing the vase in an open area of the court about five yards from the vase. He walked back over to the gallery wall and picked up his short Roman sword, a gladius Thad remembered he’d called it. He walked back to the shield and slotted the sword through the arm loops of the shield.

Thad and the professor picked up their sword and shield and went through the opening into the gallery. They propped the shields either side of the opening and sat down on one of the long seats, positioning themselves so that they could see both Henry and the vase.

Henry stood leaning his elbows over the top of his shield as if he were watching cows over a fence. He seemed to be concentrating hard on the vase.

Thad and the professor watched as the glow grew around the vase. They didn’t seem to want to talk to each other. When Thad and Mitch had done this back in the lab they had often fell silent around this time; waiting.

The glow around the vase seemed to harden gradually. It was no longer just light but a clearly defined bubble of light slightly larger than the vase now and still growing.

Henry looked over at Thad, and grinned his crooked grin. He then reached into his pocket and took out a pair of tortoiseshell framed Ray-Bans. From a distance they looked battered and scratched probably a relic from the last time they were in fashion. He put the on and looked back at the vase tapping out the drumbeat from song (Thad couldn’t tell what song at this distance) on the shield.

The bubble had continued to grow now it was about six feet in diameter. Thad felt his knee begin to bounce slightly in involuntary excitement. He waited unable to look at the professor or Henry, all his focus was on the bubble. It now appeared to have stooped growing and was starting to become brighter. Thad became aware that the professor didn’t seem to be breathing, and then realised that he was only aware of that fact because he’d stopped breathing too.

The bubble’s brightness was getting rather painful and Thad and the professor had to shield their eyes. Henry was looking rather smug in his sunglasses although the light was becoming brighter than he found comfortable.

There was a sudden noise as if someone had just turned on a radio at full volume. The battle screams of two charging men. They were in the court running past Henry before anyone realised what was going on.

The bubble faded as did its light. Everyone took a moment to allow their eyes to adjust. Thad saw that Henry had managed to turn his shield so that it was

between him and the soldiers. He adopted the same arms folded across the top of the shield posture, that he had tried before. Thad also noticed that Henry had managed to remove his glasses too and that he was grinning broadly at the soldiers.

"So gentlemen," said Henry "how was the trip"

The soldiers had slowly turned to look at Henry and had begun to pace towards swords ready to strike.

Thad tried to remember whether the story teller had given descriptions of the soldiers. Just now he couldn't remember everything that Henry and the professor had told him the night before. Just that there was an officer and a sergeant, or senior NCO. Now here they were: heads shaved except for a long lock of hair on the side of the officer's head; some kind of folded skirt or dhoti arrangement about their middles, sandals, shiny breastplates made from some kind of greenish leather and swords, longer and thinner than the Roman ones that Thad and the others were using.

"Hey professor" said Henry, without taking his eyes off the soldiers. They were beginning to flank him the officer in front of the shield and the sergeant coming round the side.

"Looks like the swords are bronze which means that the iron dagger in Tut's tomb probably was for ceremonial purposes or a rich ornament rather than for use"

The professor sat frozen beside Thad in the gallery. Thad looked round at him a thought he saw the professor mouth the word fascinating inaudibly.

The soldiers stopped, the officer placed the point of his sword against Henry's neck and said something menacing in what Thad assumed was ancient Egyptian.

Still seemingly unperturbed and still with his best crooked smile, Henry said.

"I picked up a few words there. But I was expecting him to be looking for the priest. We may just have to rethink pronunciation slightly"

Thad felt like screaming out to Henry, that his life was in danger so that he should waste his time in one way conversations with the professor.

Henry smiled again at the officer and gently pushed the sword away from his throat. The sergeant took two quick steps towards him. Without taking his eyes off the officer Henry slipped his left arm through the arm loops of his shield allowing the gladius to drop into his right hand. The sergeant, who must, reckoned Thad, be several inches and taller and wider than Henry, stepped within striking range of Henry but was stopped from proceeding by Henry's sword pointing at his breast bone.

"This could be interesting" said Henry suddenly shoving the shield into the officer.

The officer stumbled backwards, clearly slightly surprised by Henry's change in mood. Henry manoeuvred himself back so that he could cover attacks from either the officer or sergeant.

Thad had already grabbed his sword and shield and was heading through the gallery opening followed by the professor.

"The sergeant if you will, gentlemen" said Henry with a still and disconcerting voice.

The sergeant had already seen them and was turning to face them. Thad and the professor held the shields together and ducked down while moving steadily towards the sergeant. Out of the corner of his eye Thad saw Henry and the officer beginning to circle one another.

Let them make the first move Henry had said. Thad heard the sergeant's heavy footsteps increase in speed as he came up to them. Through the gap between their shields he could see him raise his arm ready to bring his sword down on them.

"Now" Thad whispered urgently at the professor. They slammed their shields down on the court's wooden floor and braced themselves. As the sergeant hit them Thad allowed himself to be spun round by the impact. He controlled the turn and ended up facing the sergeant's back. The professor had slipped but was quickly at Thad's side again. They began to advance again, just as the sergeant was beginning to turn. Sensing their presence the sergeant swung his sword with tremendous force as he turned. The blade clattered into the professor's shield almost knocking him over. Thad braced the professor and they stepped forward until their shields were almost touching the sergeant. Thad shoved his sword through the gap between the shields and managed to catch the sergeant square on the knee. The sergeant grunted through gritted teeth and tried to swing his sword at them but couldn't get enough power into the blow get his sword round the curved edge of the shield. With his free hand the sergeant tried to pull at the top of the professor's shield but the professor lifted it and pushed the whole thing forward ramming the shield into the sergeant's bleeding knee. The sergeant let out another grunt releasing the shield which enabled Thad to push his shield into the sergeant's body and begin to turn him.

The sergeant staggered backwards and then took a couple of steps to the side, attempting to get round the professor's shield. The professor moved back and Thad moved forward which allowed them to wheel their shields round and keep them in contact at the same time. The sergeant threw another useless blow against their shields and again they advanced until the shields were touching his body. Thad looked again through the small slit between the shields and saw that they facing the blank wall of the court. He looked at the professor and indicated the wall with a flick of his head and mouthed words "against the wall". The professor exhaled wearily and nodded. They picked their shields up a few inches of the ground and shoved them hard against the sergeant. Thad poked his sword through the shield gap hoping to catch the sergeant's knee again. The sergeant jumped back and they advanced into him again keeping their shields in contact with his body. The sergeant wasn't properly balanced and retreated again trying to regain his posture. This enabled Thad and the professor to press forward again this time with more speed and force. The sergeant fell backwards his shoulders hitting the blank wall. As he staggered to get upright, Thad and the professor gave a final violent shove and pinned the sergeant against the wall. They kept their shields slightly high so that their weight was pushing into his shoulders. The sergeant hadn't managed to stand up properly and couldn't get a proper purchase on the floor or wall to push them away.

Thad saw the sergeant sword flailing to his left as the sergeant tried to land blows on his shield. He tucked his own sword under his arm, rolled himself slightly so that he was pushing the shield into the sergeant with his right shoulder, slipped his left arm out of the arm loops, took the sword in his left hand and put his right arm through the arm loops. He turned to the professor hoping for congratulations on this movement but noticed that the professor was engaged in stabbing at something with his sword. Thad realised that the sergeant was trying to grab at the shield with his freehand and the professor was beating him back with staccato jabs.

Thad started to beat at the sergeant's sword with his own. Once or twice he was able to push the sword far enough away and for long enough that he was able to attempt to hit the sergeant's hand with the flat of his blade. The sergeant seemed to sense what Thad was trying to do and held his arm well away so that it was against the blank wall. Thad rolled his weight slightly and managed to pin the sergeant's upper arm hard against the wall. The sergeant could now only move his sword arm at the wrist. Thad was now in a position where he could just see around the side of the shield. He carefully brought his sword up so that its point rested on the sergeant's wrist. The sergeant put a great sudden effort into wriggling and pushing Thad and the professor away from him but they managed to maintain position; just. Thad still had his sword pushing its point into the sergeant's wrist. He was right-handed but it was not something that he'd really thought about before. Now with his left hand bearing the weight of the sword and trying to hold it in place, he realised just how weak and unpractised that hand was.

Thad took a deep breath and began to push hard with his sword. The sergeant growled and struggled uselessly again. Thad watched his hand trying to stop it from shaking; trying to keep it pushing into the sergeant's flesh. He could see that the sword had broken the skin and that the sergeant was in considerable pain but he kept up the pressure, praying that the sergeant would just drop his damn sword.

Thad was startled by the clatter as the sergeant's sword fell to the ground. He immediately dropped his left arm away to his side and hooked the sergeant's sword with his foot, bringing it quickly back behind his shield. He turned himself again so that he had his back to the sergeant. He put his foot on the sergeant's sword and kicked it across the court. It hit the wall of the gallery and bounced back a little way.

Thad was now able to get a good look at the progress of Henry's battle with the officer. The sergeant was still giving the odd reminding shove but Thad and the professor were holding him down for now, it seemed. Thad supposed he had been aware of what Henry was doing during his and the professor's fight with the sergeant. There had been the occasional sound of sword being clashed against sword or shield and the occasional glimpse of the officer and Henry circling each other. Now Thad saw Henry's tactics. He would pace backwards defensively circling as the officer tried to manoeuvre himself round Henry's shield. Sometimes thinking he saw an advantage, the officer would strike at Henry but it was almost always a feint of some kind by Henry and the officer would find himself being buffeted by a blow from Henry's shield or have his sword almost struck from his hand by a glancing blow from Henry's sword. After the latest of the feints and defences Henry looked back at Thad and the professor, winked and smiled. Then he turned his attention back to the recovering officer, who seemed ready for another go.

Henry stood facing the officer allowing his shield to rest almost at his side exposing most of his body to attack.

"Look" he said calmly "I really think we need to call this little game to an end. It's been good exercise and all that but we need to stop."

Obviously the officer didn't understand Henry's words, but he looked slightly puzzled by Henry's demeanour. Somehow Henry had maintained his cool during the fight and had, in fact, made the officer do most of the fighting. Thad could see that it would have been disconcerting for the officer but it had seemed to make him angry rather than calming him.

In a sudden movement the officer sprang at Henry and knock Henry's arm away from its position guarding his body with a speedy blow to Henry's sword. The officer pulled his sword back ready to make a thrust into Henry's unprotected chest. As the he rammed his sword forward Henry turned to the side to that the officer's sword was stabbing space. Henry then managed to hook the edge of shield on to the hilt guard of the officer's sword. He flicked the shield in the direction of his turn causing the officer to be pulled stumbling forward. Henry jumped back allowing the officer to continue fall forward. Henry lifted his sword ready for a downward strike. Thad felt like calling out to him not to kill the officer, but clearly the sergeant was watching as well because he began another attempt to push Thad and the professor away. Thad was distracted back to the sergeant long enough to readjust his weight and pin him again. When he looked back at Henry, he saw Henry's sword descending towards the unbalanced officer at a tremendous rate. There was a clash of metal as Henry's sword struck the officer's sword breaking it cleanly in two and leaving the officer sprawled on the floor. Henry kicked away the broken sword's tip and took a couple of steps back away from the officer. "Welcome to the iron age" Henry said through his crooked grin.

The officer looked up at Henry for a while. Thad expected him to give up but then he noticed that something seemed to have attracted the officer's attention. It was the sergeant's sword lying about ten yards away. Barely bothering to stand upright the officer launched himself past Henry and leapt and rolled over to the sergeant's sword. At that moment the sergeant launched a huge push finally knocking Thad and the professor away from him. The professor was dazed and didn't look as if he would be able to fight anymore. Thad managed to right himself fairly quickly and was able to aim a blow at the sergeant that distracted his attention away taking from the professor's sword. Instead the sergeant grabbed the tip of Thad's sword and tried to pull it away. It quickly became a rather bloody tug of war as Thad's blade was digging into the sergeant's hands. The sergeant showed only anger; any pain was probably being swamped by a huge rush of adrenalin. He began to twist the blade and pushed the sword up so that Thad was having difficulty holding on. At that moment a shield was shoved into the back of the sergeant's legs. Thad immediately pushed forward against his instinct to pull away and the sergeant fell backwards onto the shield realising Thad's sword as he did. Before the sergeant had a chance to get up Thad picked up his own shield and dived across the sergeant's body. The sergeant was now trapped lying in a shield with Thad lying across the top of him in another shield. The sergeant tried to throw Thad off but the shield beneath him was resting on its boss and was rocking too much to be a stable platform. Thad's body weight and the boss of his shield digging into the sergeant's body seemed to be holding him down rather effectively.

Thad allowed himself a glance at Henry and the officer. From their positions it was clear that the officer had tried to get over and help the sergeant but Henry had managed to interpose himself and was forcing the officer back towards that blank wall. The professor had got up and was wearily standing just out reach of the sergeant pointing his sword at the sergeant's head.

"Where should I fire this thing?" It was Meena. She was holding a nickel plated pump-action shotgun in an upright position where she could aim and fire it simply by swinging it into her shoulder.

Henry smiled for the benefit of the officer and indicated Meena to him. The professor likewise stepped to once side allowing the sergeant to see her.

"Into the blank wall about halfway up if you would" said Henry

In a surprisingly (Thad thought) practised single motion Meena put the butt of the gun against her shoulder and fired at a point some way up the blank wall and midway between the soldiers. The noise and light made both soldiers flinch and the officer even briefly cowered before recovering his composure. As the noise of the gun's blast died down Thad could hear a brief rain of small lead pellets. Then he heard the sound of the officer dropping the sergeant's sword.

Henry had backed up to Meena, he indicated with a backward flick of the head that she should keep the officer covered while he propped his sword and shield against the gallery wall. This done he stepped up and took the gun from her without changing its aim.

"Will you tell them" said Henry "that we mean them no harm"

Meena stepped forward but then looked back.

"How come you didn't?" she asked

“Sorry” said Henry “but his vowel sounds are all other the place and he’s been trying to kill me.”

“Any clues about the vowel sounds” said Meena

“Middle kingdom standard pronunciation – no surprise, with a random mix of both Clarkson’s and Gottlieb’s proposed alternate schemes”

“Yuk” said Meena “nothing else?”

“He didn’t say much.” Said Henry, “He was a bit busy trying to kill me.”

“You’re not getting sympathy” said Meena walking over to her grandfather.

“Don’t fuss” said the professor as Meena tried to look at a small cut on his head. She hugged him her eyes closed against tears of relief.

“I think this man needs help” said the professor indicating the sergeant.

Meena pinched her eyes to stop them from watering then looked down at the sergeant. She said something soft and strange to him. The sergeant added confusion to his look of pain and fatigue. Then as if he caught her meaning he gave a terse reply.

“I think he said he’ll live” said Meena. She said something else to him briefly touching the professor’s arm as she spoke the final words.

The sergeant again needed to piece together what Meena had said then as he realised what she had meant he repeated what Thad took to be here last word with a different pronunciation. Meena smiled and repeated the word with the sergeant’s pronunciation and the sergeant gave a pained smile.

“I think you should get off him now, Thaddeus” said Meena

“Is it OK?” said Thaddeus

“I think” said the professor “this is where we start trying to trust one another”

He began to gather the roman swords that they had dropped, while Thad levered himself out of his shield and took the pressure off the sergeant who let out a relieved groan but didn’t make a move to get up.

“What did you say to him?” Thad asked Meena

“I asked him not to try to kill my grandfather anymore,” said Meena “and he said that he wasn’t aware that he’d been fighting my grandfather.”

Thad lifted his shield from the sergeant and found himself automatically offering his to help the sergeant get up. He froze, unsure what he was doing.

He’d been locked in mortal combat with this man two minutes ago, and now he was being polite. The sergeant hadn’t moved, he was looking between Thad and Meena, clearly, Thad realised, as confused as he was. Meena address the sergeant again. Thad assumed that she was talking about the sergeant’s injuries as her hand moved as if pointing out his bleeding knee and wrist as well as various other cuts and bruises. The sergeant said one word in reply and from his calmness Thad took it to be thank you.

The professor returned with a first-aid box, he met Thad’s slightly puzzled glance with a smile.

“I found this attached to a wall outside” he said “probably some kind of health and safety regulation means that it has to be here. Now who is the best first-aider round here.”

“I can do a bit” said Thad

“Good” said the professor opening the box, inspecting it then presenting it to Thad “everything seems to be in here. Remember to apply any ointments to yourself first; builds trust. Meena, my dear you need to talk to the officer, he seems in a bad way. I can help Thad and it will do me good to experiment with speaking ancient Egyptian.”

As Thad was beginning to tend to the sergeant’s wounds, he looked over at the officer. He’d been puzzled by the professor claiming that the officer was

not doing well. After all, he'd not been in quite the fight that the sergeant had been or at least not lost it so painfully. But as he looked over at the officer Thad saw him sitting huddled on the ground, his arms wrapped around his knees and staring at Henry with what Thad thought was a sullen expression almost like a naughty child.

"His plan has gone wrong." Said the professor following Thad's glance "He's used to giving orders, and acting on information and he's just blundered into a situation where he doesn't know what is going on. He's made a mistake and lost face; probably very proud"

The sergeant winced at the antiseptic that Thad was putting on his wrist but he didn't try to pull his arm away. The professor spoke a few unpractised words of ancient Egyptian to the sergeant. Thad couldn't tell whether the professor had worked out the new vowel sounds that they were supposed to be using yet, but the sergeant picked up what the professor had said fairly quickly as he replied after a brief pause with a word.

"Ramessenett" the professor repeated. Then addressing Thad "That's his name"

Thad tried to say it himself, it wasn't that difficult but he found himself saying "I hope there's a shorter version"

"Gamal" said the professor tapping his chest and then indicating Thad "Thad" The sergeant said something and the professor chuckled slightly after he'd had time to work out what it was.

"He's very pleased to meet us" the professor told Thad

"Professor, should we be worried about disease? I mean we might have something that they aren't immune to and vice versa."

"Maybe" said the professor "but we live in a relatively germ free environment compared to him don't we. It isn't like we are unwashed Spaniards meeting Carib Indians for the first time."

"You are probably right" said Thad "but I think we need to take care"

"Of course" the professor agreed.

Thad noticed that Meena had got the officer to stand up and had led him to a chair in her end of the court; the end with the flip charts and the whiteboards. Meena picked up an easel that had fallen down possibly in the fight or as the soldiers had come in. Once she had got the easel upright she set up the flipchart that had fallen off it too. The officer became quite animated he started to point at the picture of the cartouche on the flipchart and say Akhenaton, Akhenaton.

The sergeant propped himself up on his good elbow, looking over at the flipchart. The professor asked him something and got a one word reply.

"Our friend Ramassenett can read" the professor told Thad "I asked him if he could read the cartouche from here and he said yes. He might be lying of course but we'll see"

Thad had finished tending to the sergeant's leg and he and the professor lifted him up and supported him over to another chair next to the officer. The sergeant and the officer exchanged a few whispered words and seemed to reach an agreement.

"Does the officer have a name?" asked the professor

"Matessare" said Meena

Thad walked back towards Henry who was holding the shotgun rather casually now.

"That's a bit flash isn't it" said Thad pointing at the shotgun

Henry showed him a small inscription plate screwed into the stock of the gun.

"It was a gift from the commander of a detachment of US Rangers to my brother." Said Henry "They'd got themselves into a bit of difficulty in Afghanistan back in 2002. My brother's armoured section helped them out." Thad watched Meena and occasionally the professor talking to the soldiers and drawing hieroglyphs on the whiteboards.

"Are you following this?" said Thad

"Just about" said Henry "I hadn't realised that my spoken ancient Egyptian was quite so bad but I'm keeping up I think. Meena has basically explained when they are and approximately where. There's no point in explaining it exactly. Hopefully they are going to need to stay here for too long. We don't want them to get too much information from us, but there's a wealth of stuff that we can learn from them. They are currently running through the story of the attack on the religious centre."

"Just about the freshest thing in their minds" said Thad
Henry chuckled.

Thad noticed the sergeant's bronze sword lying beside the blank wall and went to pick it up. He returned to Henry examining the sword as he walked.

"How much do you think this is worth?" asked Thad holding out the sword so that Henry could appraise it.

"Unfortunately about the same as a replica" said Henry "In fact, quite a bit less probably. There's wear round the hilt, it isn't particularly pristine. I mean the sword is probably just a few years old and the blade was probably re-forged within in the last six months. The fact that those years and those six months were three and a half thousand years is relatively immaterial as it can't be proved. However to really answer the question, if it was really three and a half thousand years old in as good a condition as this then it would be worth millions."

"Time travel is a bitch isn't it" said Thad

While Meena, the professor and gradually Henry went on talking and questioning the soldiers Thad went back to his laptop and back to the problem of the anomalous data. He should perhaps worry a little more about the next stage of this whole experiment: the arrival of Maartens. It was another thing that the others seemed unfazed by. As far as Thad was concerned Maartens was a murderer not an eccentric millionaire. And what was it with this desire to change history, he still didn't understand that.

Still the numbers were more important to him right now. Not that he could make any sense out of them. If they'd just done that last experiment. He and Mitch had discussed it thoroughly. The anomaly didn't seem to be made

worse by how long they kept the rabbits after they'd brought them forward; it was more the length of time between the preservation of the sample and actually carrying out the experiment.

Perhaps that was why he was so bothered by the numbers. They had detected strange data when they changed the amount of time preservation to experiment time by just a few minutes. Wouldn't that effect get larger over a distance of three and a half thousand years?

He heard them all start to laugh over at the teaching end. They all had so much in common now and he was beginning to feel left out. Not that he could have contributed much to their discussions and he couldn't expect Henry, Meena or the professor to keep translating so that he could keep up. However he decided to move close to them so that he could at least overhear and catch the odd thing; Henry and the professor always seemed willing to keep him up to date. He found a chair in the gallery and brought it out so that he could sit down.

He had always found it easier to work when there was a bustle around him. It was odd but quiet and silence always distracted him more than people chattering around him. At university he had always preferred to study in the canteen or in a coffee shop rather than the library. It was as if he could block out the talk around him turning it into background noise that he could ignore. But with quiet places he was always being distracted by the faint noises -wondering what they could be.

He started to think more systematically about the numbers. The anomaly was that the longer the time between preservation and experiment the more they'd have to defocus the beam as they sent the rabbits back. The next experiment was due to be to test how far this defocusing could be taken. There was a theoretical limit to how much the various beams could be defocused and the last experiment would have gone up to that theoretical limit. That would have meant waiting an extra hour or so between the preservation and experiment. Actually somewhere in his notes he had the exact time that they were planning to use and he wondered why part of him was finding that significant. Back to the anomaly: they defocused the beam because, because... Because they didn't want to cause the rabbits to coexist at the same time and space. Why not? Because that would cause an explosion. An explosion, like the one that actually happened?

That part of his mind that had been telling him it knew the solution was now beginning to say "See!" If they had actually carried out the experiment and the experiment caused the explosion, then the experiment couldn't have happened. Except if he was now in a new timeline. In one timeline they had carried out the experiment but it had caused another one where only the disastrous results of the experiment were visible. It was theoretically possible or rather philosophically possible. The Grandfather paradox or something similar; an experiment that prevents itself from taking place. Neat.

Thad realised now that he was dealing with an extra time shift whenever they sent a rabbit back. It was as if the rabbit were on a piece of elastic; the longer the preservation experiment gap time the more the elastic got stretched.

When they sent the rabbits back, the tension in the elastic caused them to overshoot to move further back in time than when they started. That was why they had to defocus more and more, unknowingly counteracting the effect of the time shift. Obvious; now anyway.

"Need an update?" said Henry

“Sure” said Thad. He was feeling slightly elated by his discovery and wanted to share it with someone but he didn’t think the others would understand. It was easier to share in their good news. Certainly the air of good humour suggested that it would be good news.

“Well we thought we’d go back to the main house” said Henry “We can sit about in comfy chairs and continue the talk. Also I don’t think the guys are dressed for the weather.”

As they walked back to the house, Henry and the officer helping the sergeant limp along; Thad was impressed by the fluency that Meena seemed to have achieved with them. The early difficulties of pronunciation seemed to have vanished entirely. Thad also suspected that both the officer and the sergeant were attracted to her. He wasn’t that surprised she seemed to have come into her own in the past few hours. Being able to expend so much effort in the linguistic area that she was so clearly an expert in, had given her so much more confidence. She had been quiet and shy yesterday when they had first met. She had almost not spoken during their trip to the house, not had she taken much part in the discussions last night but now she was joking and even flirting with the soldiers and even Henry.

Once they got settled in and Henry and the professor had found the soldiers some clothes they all gathered again in Henry's sitting room. Meena maintained conversation with the soldiers, with the professor occasionally interjecting, while Henry began filling Thad in on some of the things that they'd learnt.

"Actually" said Henry "we've spent most of our time trying to fend off their questions. We don't want to spend too much time letting them see how the electricity works and stuff like that. I did think of letting them sleep on camp bed in the court but I thought it was actually easier to just put them in a room. I'll tell you something, the professor and I are not looking forward to showing the lavatory to them but we're going to have to soon"

Henry indicated the wine glasses that both of the soldier were drinking from. Henry had also prepared a meal; mainly salad with a simple dressing and some mildly spiced couscous. It had gone down quite well.

"When are we sending them back?" asked Thad

"As soon as we can, so long as you think it is safe" said Henry "the longer they are here the more they'll pickup. I would like to wait for the arrival of Maartens because they'll be useful. Or I hope they'll be useful. But we can't wait for ever."

"It's not so important how long their here." Said Thad "except, as I think I said, after sometime between ten days and two weeks the temporal field around them will degrade and they'll be stuck here. The problem could be how long it has been since they left"

Thad explained to Henry about his thoughts in the afternoon; his breakthrough with the anomalous data and the idea of the elastic time shift.

"Elastic Time-Shift sounds fun" said Henry "Have you any figures on it? I mean, how much further back we could be projecting them"

"It's difficult to say" said Thad "it's a change of thousandths of a second for hour, which would mean that they'd be projected back in time a day, if that"

"Which didn't happen" said Henry "otherwise we would have noticed it in the papyrus"

"I might also mean" said Thad "that for some reason we don't get them back to their own time."

"That's depressing" said Henry

"But the thing is" said Thad "That calculation is based on the idea that we are dealing with a strictly linear relationship – amount of time shift equals a something multiplied by the preparation/experiment time period. Science isn't always like that it could easily be non-linear so the time shift could be shorter or longer depending on the exact equation. I really don't have enough data and all of it is over very small time periods where it could appear to be a linear relationship. I really need another data point somewhere else on the graph to tell me what's going on"

"So do you think we should even try to send them back?" said Henry

"As an experiment yes, no question." Said Thad "but I'm tempted to wait. We don't know who the good guys are, do we? I mean you seem to be getting on quite well but even the worst people can be charming. What if the high priest is the good guy?"

“And of course we aren’t really sure what constitutes good or bad in this situation” said Henry “although I think we want to stop Maartens’ damned encyclopaedia if at all possible”

“Agreed” said Thad

“No, these guys are, like you say, quite charming when you get to know them” said Henry “but whether they are good guys is up for debate. It could depend on whether you thought that Akhenaton was a good guy for trying to switch over to Monotheism, which some people do. Or whether you think he was a religious nutter and everyone who did his bidding was likewise.”

“What do you think?” said Thad

“They are doing their job,” said Henry “but they are intensely loyal to the Pharaoh. These two are part of his bodyguard in fact. They seem reasonable people, if they are satisfied that the High Priest is no longer a threat then they aren’t going to bother anyone. I hope”

“You know” said Thad “something I picked up or maybe you said it. They are from different classes aren’t they, the officer and the sergeant but we don’t seem to be observing any hierarchy or class distinction here.”

“We were quite lucky there” said Henry “Matessare, the officer and Ramassenett have served together for years. They are good friends so although you are right, although Matessare’s a nobleman and Ramassenett is the son of a labourer, they tend not to let it bother them and so they aren’t too bothered when we treat them equally.”

“So anything interesting about them?” said Thad

“Plenty” said Henry “it’s dead difficult though. They know time and place they are in, and know that Akhenaton must be dead. They are a little confused that we aren’t part of some greater Egyptian empire. Not because they expect that out of a sense of pride but because they can’t quite accept the difference in time.”

“Culture shock?” said Thad

“Of a kind” said Henry “and it will get worse if they have to stay around. It does mean that they keep asking leading questions trying to find out what happened to Akhenaton and Egypt in the intervening period between then and now. We’ve been able to fob them off by comparing our lack of knowledge after three thousand odd years with their ignorance of the chaos just a few hundred years before their time but they still ask difficult stuff and they can see that we are not always being entirely honest with them”

“Have you told them that they are going back?” said Thad

“Yes” said Henry “that of course, causes other problems. They think they are here through supernatural means, which in a way they are, but it means that they want us to grant them some kind of supernatural gift or a sacred message.”

“Like the encyclopaedia” said Thad

“That would do” said Henry “Of course I’m not entirely sure that the professor wants them to go back. They are mines of information, fascinating insights into all aspects of ancient Egyptian life. Unfortunately we can’t prove any of it.”

“Like the sword” said Thad

“I’m sure there are ways and means” said Henry “we could dress up their truths as speculations and then look in the right place for the answers to confirm their apparent suppositions.”

“Dodgy ground” said Thad

“Deeply” said Henry “but I’m thinking that the professor rather likes it. Nobody alive to day could revitalise Egyptology like those two could. I realise the

notion of revitalising the studying of a dead civilisation is a bit silly, but it's attractive when you are steeped in it."

"So we wait for Maartens" said Thad

"Looks like it." said Henry "actually I have an idea, would you like to help?"

"Ok" said Thad "I guess"

Henry led Thad quietly out of the room and into another smaller one down a corridor. He had to unlock the door and asked Thad to lock it afterwards. They were in study of some kind judging by the desk, papers and the computer.

"One of the advantages that being part of a military family allows one or two rather good contacts" said Henry ferreting around for a slip of paper which he eventually withdrew from the wrong pile.

"I was given this telephone number a few months ago" he continued "friend of a friend. I was told that I'd be allowed to try it just once so I've got a one-off password. It's nothing that special or secret it's just a mobile phone tracking service. The only thing is that this one is run by a branch of the CIA in this country. The person on the other end of the phone will expect an American voice to give the password and your accent is probably better than mine."

"Ok" said Thad with some inkling of what might be coming next. "I guess that you've got Maartens mobile number"

"Yup" said Henry handing him another scrap of paper "and that also got my email address on it. Apparently you are sent a link to some kind of tracking website. Like I said it's a one off apparently I have to keep the page open because it won't work second time round and it only lasts for twenty four hours"

Thad picked up the phone and dialled the number. It was answered by a person (Thad had half expected a computer) who quickly took down and repeated Henry's details.

"Now we just wait for the email" said Henry "or a CIA death squad"

"How did you get it?" said Thad

"Remember the shotgun?" said Henry "well the guy who gave that gun to my brother came over for some shooting with some buddies a few months back. I was given that after some kind of drinking session or maybe it was a poker hand that I won. I didn't believe it would work, the guy that gave it to me was showing off, but I thought it was worth a try"

There was a quiet ding sound as something arrived in Henry's email inbox on the computer. Henry opened the email and clicked the link. It opened some kind of online mapping website and an icon was flashing on the M6 just north of Stafford.

"Looks like he's on the way" said Henry "no other reason for him to be round there I reckon"

"What have we got" said Thad trying to remember the last night's journey, "about two hours"

"Thereabouts" said Henry already heading back towards the sitting room.

"I'll be interested in how you tell the soldiers about this" said Thad

"We're a bit supernatural remember" said Henry

"Any thoughts" said the professor after Henry and Thad had explained the situation to him and the others.

"Well we could call the police" said Henry "but what do we tell them. We won't know how much trouble we are going to be in until we are in it. For my self I'd rather Maartens didn't trash the place. If he wants the time machine we'll take him to it"

“Really” said Thad

“I’m not asking you to let him use it” said Henry “but I think we need to get them into a controllable space and the court is fine for that”

“Yes, this place is a bit of a warren” said the professor “only you really know about how to get round it. We might be able to hide out here in the main house but they could be lurking around every corner. Best to get them out into the open where we can see what we are up against”

“We’ll need to find somewhere that Meena and the guys can hang out” said Henry

“I thought we were going to need their help?” said Thad

“We will” said Henry “but it’s best not to show our hand too early. There’s a viewing room overlooking the court upstairs that should do”

Meena nodded her head.

“You reckon that you can keep them calm” said Henry

“Probably” said Meena “but if the high priest is there they’ll want to go down”

“Try to restrain them as best you can” said Henry “I don’t know what will happen but it might help if we delay their entrance for a while any way”

“I’m gonna regret this” said Thad “but I thought I ought to mention guns”

“I can lend you a gun if you want one” said Henry “and Meena you might want the pump-action to hand when the time comes. The thing is Thad; if we are armed then they are armed. If we appear to offer minimum resistance then hopefully he’ll use minimum force. We need to gather as much information about this man and his people as possible. Of course anything we do after that will be purely ‘spur of the moment’.”

Thad nodded. He didn’t think that anyone was pleased with this but at least something was going to happen, whatever it was there’d be some kind of resolution.

“Should we tell the others about the time shift?” he asked Henry who just nodded in agreement.

After an explanation on the way down to the stable block the professor said.

“I think I may have a number to put on that time-shift graph.”

Henry looked round puzzled

“Really” he said

“Yes” said the professor “but I shall tell Thad not you it may come as a big surprise”

“How about the guys” said Meena. Thad was amused at the fact that they were all beginning to fall into the habit of referring to the soldiers as ‘the guys’.

“Tell them as much of the truth as you think they can handle” said Henry

“Nothing technical” said Henry “but tell them that we have no record of them returning and that there might be a time-shift of some description. I’ll be interested to see how you translate time-shift”

Meena said something in Ancient Egyptian which judging by the strange looks she got from the soldiers, may well have meant time shift. Meena began explaining the situation to them. The party reached the stable block and went through to the court by the time she had finished. The soldiers were subdued and took themselves a little way off to discuss things out of Meena and the other’s earshot. Whatever they talked about, it seemed full and frank but never overheated and it was conducted in whispers that sometimes broke out and echoed round the court.

Thad returned to his lap top and entered the figure that the professor had suggested. It represented quite a leap of the imagination on the professor’s part but it certainly fitted the evidence. He was a little concerned about

thinking about the implications too hard. If the professor was right then he and Thad now knew the future, something that was going to happen. He supposed that they already done something similar my bringing the soldiers back but this felt bigger. He would witness events that caused something to happen in the past. He supposed he'd call it a causality loop but he still didn't allow himself to think about it and he wasn't going to let anyone else other than the professor in on it.

It would take a while for his curve fit program to work things out. First it had to fit a series of curves to the available data then it had to check whether the polynomial number that would be produced fitted with any of the theoretical equations that might predict the behaviour. The last was run by a rather neat AI program that he'd designed some years ago, it was rather slow and never as good as a human but at least it was automatic and the results were pretty accurate. If the professor idea was true it could serve to confirm or disprove many of the fundamental time travel equations that he and Mitch had worked on.

"You're not going to tell me the professor's figure, are you" said Henry at Thad's shoulder

"I'm afraid not" said Thad

"Well he seems quietly pleased with himself" said Henry "and you appear to be suffering from some kind of nervous excitement so I reckon it's rather big and scary"

"It's that alright" said Thad then indicating the soldiers "have they come to a decision?"

"They want to return" said Henry "if it's possible. Or feasible and the time-shift isn't too large. What should I tell them?"

Thad could see that Henry couldn't resist fishing for the professor's number, so he chose to ignore part of Henry's question.

"It is certainly feasible" he said "but like we've said, we need to wait for Maartens"

"Thoughts are beginning to stir" said Henry "unlikely ones"

Henry went back to talk to Meena and the soldiers while Thad began setting up the equipment for at least one return trip. He wondered if he should have told Henry about the professor's figure. Henry would catch on pretty quick if he saw that the professor was right but certain things would have to happen in a certain order before Henry would see what the professor appeared to have seen. That kind of thought made him feel dizzy.

Another thing he had to decide was whether to keep the time machine going. It had already led to one death and might lead to more. Of course there was no point in destroying it really, he'd never forget how to rebuild it, he'd lived with it for too long and he knew it too well. He didn't want to think in those terms, he'd always avoided contemplating his own death, and even this afternoon he'd not really thought that he was facing it. He walked over to the rest of the group where Henry and the professor were deep in discussion yet again.

"Ok" said Henry "Maartens might think that we've brought the guys back but he won't know for certain. I mean we could pretend that we are about to try"

"But," said the Professor "then he is likely to expect us to carry out the experiment, before he sends the high priest back. If only to check that the equipment is working"

"So do you think that we should have the guys with us?" said Henry

"No." said the professor. "I was just worried and wondered what you thought"

"OK, I can see what you mean" said Henry. "All I can think of right now is that we don't lie but we don't tell him if he doesn't ask. Anyway are you sure we want to encourage him to send the High Priest back"

"Well..." said the professor realising that he might have revealed something. The professor's sudden silence clearly made Henry suspicious and he looked between Thad and the professor with narrowed eyes before giving a grin which might have indicated realisation, before changing the subject.

"There's a magic eye at the lodge; the beginning of the drive. It triggers when vehicles go past and can be set up to ring bells or mobile phones. I'll just go and set it up. It will give us a couple of minutes warning"

When Henry left the professor sidled up to Thad and said "Do you think he's guessed?"

"Looks like it" said Thad "do you think we can use it to our advantage"

"I suspect" said the professor "that Henry will be able to use it to his advantage and we might be included"

"Don't you trust him?" said Thad

"Implicitly" said the professor "but he likes the sound of his own voice. And we've seen today how theatrical he can be. That could be dangerous. Any way how go the calculations?"

"I think it has to run a few calculations yet" said Thad

"Grandfather" said Meena bringing the soldiers along with her

"Yes my dear" said the professor "have you made your choice of them yet?"

Meena tried to look with disdain at such a suggestion but she couldn't quite pull it off and Thad thought he detected a slight blush in her cheek.

"Grandfather" Meena began again "The guys have a few ideas"

"About?" said the professor

"I've told them quite a lot" said Meena "They know that the high priest is going to be coming and that things might get a bit difficult. They want to help but they also want you to question the high priest. They want answers from him. They were following orders and they never really understood why. They want to know how the cult worked. I could fill them in about the papyrus but I don't think that's such a good idea."

"Yes" said the professor "It's probably better that they hear everything from the priest. Not that it will help. What do they want to do?"

Meena indicated to the officer that the professor was prepared to listen and Matessare began speaking quickly, but calmly. He started to point to various structures such as the pitched roof and the dedans gallery. The sergeant spent much of the time nodding but occasionally added the odd apparently useful piece of information.

"Ok" said the professor who had only just managed to follow the officer's speech "Tell them that they are free to do what they like. They can explore up stairs for useful places to hide. You know not to let them into any rooms other than those that overlook the court. I left the Roman swords and shields propped up in the gallery over there. You have explained that they might be up against people with guns?"

"Yes" said Meena

"And they understood" said the professor. Meena nodded her head "They don't feel like using the shotgun then?"

"No" said Meena "They want me to use the shotgun"

"Good" said the professor "make sure you and it are out of sight unless it becomes absolutely necessary"

There was a silence that Meena eventually filled with a big hug of her grandfather. The other men present felt a little awkward and looked away. Thad realised in that moment something that Henry had intimated earlier in the day or even the night before. These soldiers were people, human beings just like him. It was obvious of course but there was something that up to now had stopped him thinking that they could possibly be just like him. Without all the trappings of their respective times there was little difference between them.

Looking again at their faces he was reminded of just how African they looked. Their skin was red-brown but the African features were there plainly. Of course they still resembled peoples of modern Egypt Sudan or even the Horn of Africa than they did West Africans or their descendants like him. There was a straightness and pointedness of the noses that really made them look more European than sub-Saharan African to most people but to him there was enough of Africa there. He couldn't think why these thoughts had popped into his head. He'd always found the afro-centrism amongst African-Americans rather dumb. He had certainly wanted to trace his roots, even if he did understand why some people would want to. He was an American, African American if you insisted but American first however unfashionable that might be.

Perhaps what had set him off on this train of thought was a memory of college days and the claiming of Egypt as an African civilisation and thereby in some way the birthright of all African Americans by some activist students. Of course it was useless trying to explain that because of the way that man evolved, the Egyptians were less related to West Africans than the Chinese were related to the Egyptians. Of course to convince people of this it was first necessary to demonstrate or prove evolution which was a tall order. If you still had any kind of audience after that chat you could then explain that humanity in all its diversity spread out from their earliest habitat, first filling the rest of Africa then almost spilling out into the rest of the world via the strip of land in the Sinai desert that joins Africa to Eurasia. The whole of the rest of humanity was evolved from a few hundred or even tens of early people that spread from the north eastern tip of Egypt. Thad had actually found himself like this theory the first time he heard it. Not because it gave him the opportunity to describe non-black people as spillage – he only did that a few times, only in jest and only to people that understood the joke. He liked the theory because of the things that it answered. Diversity had allowed the Africans brought to the Americas to survive, even flourish, while the real natives of that continent sickened and died out. A simplification of course but Thad thought that it had a ring to it. Diversity was also the reason that so many diseases seemed to come from Africa and why they could be much more devastating to Europeans than Africans.

Thad was still thinking about this when Henry returned.

"All set up" said Henry "it will ring my mobile when somebody drives through the main gate"

"Are there any other ways to drive in?" asked Thad

"Yes" said Henry "but they aren't connected to a main road for several miles, and they degenerate into dirt tracks at several places along the way."

"You know" said Thad "I was just thinking about Cleopatra"

"You mean the way she wasn't black" said Henry

"Not that she was or wasn't black" said Thad "I was really trying to remember the arguments"

"I've always put it down to wishful thinking" said Henry "Three of her grandparents were Ptolemy's an incestuously close dynasty of Greeks or maybe Macedonians that ruled the middle east after the death of Alexander the Great. One is unknown and that was sprung on by an academic who suggested or rather hoped that the anonymous grandmother, in this case, was black. There is no evidence for it, especially as Cleopatra wasn't exactly the flavour of the month among Roman writers of the time, they could and did make play of black people but there is no trace of it in the insults they throw out about her. To me, that sort of suggests that she can't have been black or noticeably so."

"I guess you are right" said Thad

"The academic who suggested it" said Henry "would have been on much firmer ground if she'd claimed Nefertiti as black. She was Akhenaton's queen, his main wife, we have coloured busts of her and she always reminds be of the model Iman."

At that moment Matessare dropped down from one of the sloped roofs almost silently and bared his fingers like the claws of a beast, holding his hands either side of his head. He let out a quiet roar of a gasp at Henry and headed back through the gap into the gallery.

"Professor" said Henry "why do we have Egyptian soldiers playing hide and seek in my Real Tennis court?"

The professor explained about the soldiers wanting to help and Henry seemed willing to let them.

"If they are going to play commandos though" said Henry "we had better train them properly. There's a starter pistol round here somewhere"

For the next half an hour the two soldiers practised creeping up behind either Thad or Henry, wrapping arms around necks and attempting to take the starter pistol from them. If they didn't do it right, then Henry or Thad would fire the pistol to give the soldiers an indication of the danger that they might be facing.

At first, when they were caught out by the blast from the starter pistol, the soldiers showed to some sort of shock that had attended Meena's firing of the shotgun. The shock, terror would have been too harsh a word, lessened after a while and it had to be explained that the gun being fired was a very bad thing and that they shouldn't get too relaxed about it going off.

One thing that Thad couldn't help noticing in this training session was that the soldiers did seem to be getting their own back for the defeat earlier in the day. It wasn't spite so much as letting things go a little too far. Thad certainly thought things had gone too far by the time that Ramassenett had flattened him for the sixth or seventh time.

It appeared that Henry was giving the soldiers a crash course in some kind of martial art. Thad couldn't tell which one it was but suspected that Henry probably had learned several during periods of boredom or loneliness. Fortunately, while the soldiers might not have been aware of the specific techniques of the Aki-Jud-ate, that Henry trying to teach, they were experienced enough fighters in their own rights to pick up useful new techniques quickly.

After the training had finished – Henry didn't want to tire everyone out- Thad asked him about where he'd learnt to fight.

"The traditional response from an aristo like me" he said "is supposed to be the playing fields of Eton. It's how Wellington explained the victory at Waterloo. No I don't understand it either. Anyway I went to a minor public school and they looked down on fighting."

"And that was a bad thing" said Thad

"No" said Henry "it's just that fighting and war have always fascinated me. Not that I'm some gung-ho idiot who wants to go to war and fight the world"

"What do they say" said Thad "violence never solves anything?"

"Well yes" said Henry "we should if we are good children not indulge in fighting and being nasty to one another but I never think that saying that violence doesn't solve anything isn't really helpful. If you get annoyed by somebody who goes round saying 'violence never solves anything' then if you beat them to death that would prove them wrong, because the problem of them annoying you would be solved by their demise"

Thad chuckled.

"I always prefer" continued Henry "to say that violence tends to cause more problems than it solves. But I would always add that sometimes violence is the lesser of two evils. Then again that's what warmongers say too. I don't think I can win. Any how I've really just always been fascinated by fighting, not so much the violence or the hurting of people but the techniques that people employ in attack or defence, individually or as whole armies."

"That's a wide field" said Thad

"I suppose it is" said Henry. "Actually one thing I'd like to bring back is proper sword fighting as a sport."

"Sport?"

“Well you’d have two basic styles of play: Formal and Courtly or Rough and Freestyle. The formal and courtly would be rather like fencing: real swords and shields or swords and daggers, proscribed moves, perhaps a little slow moving. The emphasis would be on out-thinking your opponent as much as out-fighting them. Rough and Freestyle on the other hand would be much more like a decent Errol Flynn sword fight. You’d build a big padded court with lots of levels and stuff to climb and grab on to. You’d have to use safety swords of some kind probably made out of stiff foam. Then the players could leap around the court in ‘parkour’ style and just lay into each other. Much more physical, probably much more fun.”

Thad smiled. He felt that Henry needed somebody to talk out his strange ideas with him. That said he could also see some attraction in Sword-fighting as a sport. It could be another British sporting gift to the world which the British would no longer be any good at, once everybody started doing it. Henry suddenly seemed to freeze. He pulled his mobile phone out of a pocket it was vibrating gently. He turned it off.

“Places Meena” he said nodding at her and the soldiers. Seriousness seemed to have taken him over. “Thad, professor shall we go and greet our guests.”

It wasn’t a warm night, particularly but despite not wearing overcoats none of the three showed any sign that they were cold as they walked round to the front of the big house. Thad checked that the front door was locked before joining the others to look down the drive. A single pair of lights could be seen sweeping along the roadway. Thad thought it was probably some kind of four by four. The dark wouldn’t let him see the car’s colour properly but it looked to be black anyhow.

The three men raised hands to shade themselves from the light as the car, a Range Rover, Thad could see now, bumped onto the courtyard in front of the house and pulled up along side them.

Thad noticed that Henry had his hands in his pockets and was doing his nonchalant act – it may not have been an act but Thad hoped somewhere deep down that Henry was taking this seriously.

The front passenger door opened, a man (probably in his seventies but still vital - as the professor might have said), stepped down.

“Professor Anwar” the man said “I’m glad to see you here. And of course the Honourable Henry, this could be quite an adventure and I know you like adventures.”

Neither the professor nor Henry replied they merely nodded their heads in greeting as their names were mentioned.

“And you must be Thaddeus” said the man walking up to Thad and trying to extend a hand for shaking. Thad simply stared at him as if at his worst enemy “Perhaps not” said the man withdrawing his hand and adding the excuse “it was regrettable”

The driver of the car had also got out of the car now and was busily getting something from the boot. From the inside of the car they could hear some kind of muffled struggle. The man, Thad assumed he was Maartens walked to the rear passenger door and opened it. Out stepped a man dressed identically to the driver long black overcoat, black suit, white shirt and black tie underneath. They looked alike, not like relatives but like standard issue henchmen. Toughs was a word that popped into Thad’s head, shaven headed, thick necked bully boys doing the old man’s every bidding.

“Hodges.” said the old man “Bring him out”

The tough reached back into the passenger compartment and started pulling something. The something was struggling and seemed to be resisting.

"Larkin" said the old man "round the other side, help him"

As Larkin walked to the other rear door it opened and somebody got out, in order to let him in. The 'somebody' walked round the back of the Range Rover. He was a small man in his fifties with an air of Peter Lorre about him. He carried a doctor's bag which was slightly too bulky for him. He stood sheepishly near the open boot. The old man looked at him disdainfully.

"Gentlemen" he said "This is Doctor Montfort and he is an example of how hard it is to get good competent people these days"

Doctor Montfort looked at the ground, clearly used to being insulted.

Hodges and the driver Larkin had managed to subdue their charge and carried him out of the passenger compartment. The person was wrapped in an oversized green parka and was still struggling listlessly. The toughs, Hodges and Larkin stood the person in the parka on his feet and gripped his arms. The old man approached their prisoner and pulled off the parka's hood. Beneath was a shaven-head middle aged Egyptian man with look of abject terror in his eyes.

"I trust" said the old man "That your specimens haven't been quite as troublesome as mine. No they won't have been. Montfort here tells me that it's a delayed stress reaction to culture shock. He was alright for the first few days but then the panicking and running away. Where to? I'm sure you'll find out if you keep your specimens for as long as I kept this one."

"Mister Maartens" said Henry in a cold voice that Thad hadn't heard before

"We've set everything up down at the stable block, if you will follow us"

Henry and the professor began walking towards the side of the house without waiting for Maartens or even Thad who almost had to sprint to catch up with them. Behind him he heard the old man, Maartens ordering Larkin to bring 'the case'.

"Do you think he's right?" said the professor

"Delayed stress reaction to culture shock, yes" said Henry "but it depends how you deal with it. I wasn't planning on putting the guys in the hands of an ineffectual doctor, and a couple of bully boys. The priest's clearly been brutalised and I wouldn't be surprised if he's been beaten. I'm fairly sure that I saw one of Maartens' men Hodges, wasn't it? Well when he was trying to drag the priest out, I'm fairly sure I saw Hodges lift his arm as if to strike the priest and that seemed to stop the priest struggling quite so much. I reckon that that threat would only really work if Hodges had hit the priest before."

"How dangerous do you think Maartens is?" asked Thad

"Highly" said Henry "at least his friends are. You are going to have to forgive me you two but I've got to find out more about this guy. Was he really like this when he was young?"

"I thought you'd met him before" said Thad

"Only on social occasions when he was being charming to the whole world"

said Henry "I never realised that the man was a psychopath"

"When I first knew him on the dig" said the professor "he was OK, I suppose. He didn't have much time for Egyptians for obvious reasons but you are right never disliked the world the way he seems to now"

"Referring to the guys as specimens" said Henry "I don't think being wrongly accused of faking a vase or even being rightly accused of faking a vase, would turn your mind like that"

"When he would pester me with letters" said the professor "it was annoying and sometimes frightening but I never thought he'd go too far."

"I have to say" said Thad "That he's pretty much as Mitch described him."

"I'm going to have to get him to monologue" said Henry

"Sorry?" said Thad

"You know" said Henry "In the movies the bad guy can't resist telling the hero about all his plans. He gives a big monologue on his motivations then the hero goes and thwarts him."

"Do you think you can get him to confess about Mitch?" said Thad

"I want him to tell everything" said Henry "Mitch will be a priority but we might just find he excuses himself on the grounds that Mitch betrayed him. Not satisfactory but probably true unfortunately.

Henry stopped and looked back. Maartens' group was well behind him, Henry waited just long enough to let them see where he was going before starting to walk quickly again.

"But you aren't worried about the guys" said the professor

"Well" said Henry they'll need some kind of psychiatric supervision – I know a couple of guys who could help. That is, if they stay and if they stay they'll also need passports and ID papers."

The professor chuckled.

"I have brothers for things like that" he said. The others laughed but quickly stopped as they had reached the stable block and had to wait for Maartens.

"I will want to talk to him" the professor told Maartens once they'd reached the court. Thad noticed how cold both the professor and Henry were in dealing with Maartens. He had become used to their volubility and humour but now they were almost too formal.

"Very well" said Maartens, looking around the court. Maartens was trying to be charming and disturbing at the same time, Thad thought. Just like the kind of movie villains that Henry had mentioned. It was almost as if Maartens was acting out the way he thought he should behave, rather than actually believing in it.

Thad tried to follow Maartens eye line as he looked up into the upper storey viewing gallery. Normally there would be a glass screen in front of that gallery so that stray balls would bounce off during a game. It appeared to have been removed. Perhaps, thought Thad it was designed that way so that when people came to film here they could get equipment through the opening.

Nothing was stirring in the upper story gallery and Maartens soon lost interest in it and paid more attention to what the professor was trying to do.

"You'll not get much out of him" said Maartens to the professor who was trying to get the high priest to sit calmly. "I'm sure that my men would be quite happy to help."

"That won't be necessary" said Henry. He walked and stood in front of the priest and said something in ancient Egyptian. Thad was impressed by Henry's tone of voice. It was a trick of the English aristocracy to have an accent and way of speaking that seem to convey absolute authority. And here was Henry pulling the same trick in a dead language. At least it that's what it sounded like he was doing, a precise, calm, measured voice. Oddly it seemed to work as the priest sat bolt upright and tried to give Henry his full attention. Henry didn't seem to say much else; he then introduced the professor properly and stepped away towards where Thad was watching.

"What did you do?" asked Thad

“Told him that we are going to send him home” said Henry “That he had nothing to fear but he must answer all the professor’s questions first”

“How come he paid attention to you?” said Thad

“You missed it” said Henry “thought you might. One of the advantages of being the world authority of a bizarre ancient Egyptian cult is that you know an awful lot about them, especially secret signs of recognition.”

“Like a Masonic handshake?” said Thad

“More or less” said Henry “but it’s more touching the face in a certain order at certain times after certain words.”

“And that was all in the papyri?” said Thad

“There are bits of the greeting scattered throughout the story teller’s account” said Henry, “very easy to miss. I certainly missed them when I read the papyri.”

“So how did you find out” said Thad

“I told you. The Masters of Thoth are a big thing on conspiracy websites. There are thousand’s of obsessives poring over those texts, looking for something special. They pieced it together I just saw that they were right.”

Thad looked over at the professor and noticed that he was standing a little further away from the priest than was necessary and the priest was speaking quite loudly. Thad could see that Henry had half his attention on the priest and the other part on Maartens who was hovering looking suspicious of something.

“What’s he saying” said Thad

“As far as I can make out” said Henry “I’m still not quite up to scratch with the spoken word, he’s telling the professor more or less what we know from the papyri. The professor is working his way round to asking about his motivation for his attacks on Akhenaton”

“I don’t know why he wastes his time” said Maartens. Thad was quite shaken both by Maartens’ sudden appearance at their side and by the bonhomie with which he opened the conversation. Henry wasn’t quite as cold as before, in his reply.

“I can’t think of any Egyptologist professional or amateur that would pass up the opportunity to talk to somebody from three and a half thousand years ago. Anyway mister Maartens didn’t you question our friend here?”

“Of course.” Said Maartens “he was not co-operative”

Thad exchanged a look with Henry

“He is not here to answer questions but to do my bidding” said Maartens

“The encyclopaedia” said Thad

“The? Oh yes. That’s a good word for it” said Maartens “That is just mischief an intellectual exercise. Did you like it?”

“No” said Henry “but if you manage to change history by inventing the zero two thousand years early then we’re all non-existent, so it doesn’t matter what I think”

“This is what I really want to send back” said Maartens ignoring Henry’s last sentence. Thad found that he was suddenly flushed with anger, hadn’t Mitch died trying to stop Maartens changing history? Now it was dismissed as an intellectual exercise. He looked pointedly at the professor and the priest ignoring what Maartens was unwrapping in front of Henry.

“Not the vase” said Henry. Thad looked back at Maartens and saw Henry holding a small vase covered in hieratic writing.

“That’s a new one isn’t it?” said Thad

"Brand new" said Maartens "I spent a great deal of time working out what had been written on the vase that I was accused to faking. Letters; entire passages were worn away from it but I made sense of it."

"A triumph" said Henry just quiet enough for Maartens to miss it. "So how did you work out what it said exactly?"

"Well" said Maartens with a sign of enthusiasm for his subject "I recognised the fragments as part of the instructions for the ceremony that they carried out to summon the light"

"The Ritual?" said Henry

"Yes" said Maartens "did you know it was called the summoning of the light. At least that's what was written on the vase. I could see that it was the detailed instructions on how to recreate the ritual, so I filled in the blanks with that."

"So you are sending it back with the priest" said Henry

"Yes, he will return to the chamber renewed with a message from the future."

"He's hardly renewed" said Henry "I doubt he will last the journey back"

Thad was surprised with the ease of that lie, unless he was wrong about Henry guessing the professor's theory.

"He is tough" said Maartens "anyway dying on the altar as he returns with a new sacred vessel will give my encyclopaedia more authority."

"I didn't think that that was important" said Thad "At least not to you"

"It is useful" said Maartens "but it didn't occupy my intellect or satisfy it as much as the vase"

"I suppose you have considered the effect of the encyclopaedia?" said Henry

"Even if the priest returned without it, everything will change."

"Not that we'll know anything about it" added Thad

"You know that as a certainty, do you?" said Maartens

"You can't think that changing history won't affect us." said Henry

"I think it will be interesting to see what happens" said Maartens "haven't you got any curiosity?"

"Plenty" said Henry abrasively "but it mostly is concerned with your motivation. I don't suppose you'd like to explain"

"I'm afraid you'll have to guess" said Maartens

"How is the professor doing?" said Thad hoping that a change of subject might help. Henry stopped glaring at Maartens and paid a little attention to the priest and the professor.

"Motivation" said Henry "He's telling the professor why he feared Akhenaton. Much as we guessed by the sound of it. At least the priest is prepared to talk."

"I'm prepared to talk" said Maartens "but like I said you have to guess"

Henry made a closed mouth chuckle.

"If I guess correctly" he said "I have a feeling that talking is the last thing you'll want to do. You wish to destroy all history, and possibly make everything and everyone in the last three and a half thousand years cease to exist or change beyond all recognition. Your reasons had better be big and I am very certain that they'll be personal. Too personal."

Thad saw a slight twitch at the side of Maartens mouth. It wasn't a smile, more likely a reaction to the threat that Henry might pose. Thad could see that there was a danger if Henry made a lucky guess but then again it was keeping Maartens occupied. He easily could have sent his thugs out to search the rest of the building but instead they were lounging on chairs in the lower gallery; impassive and probably very bored.

"Big and personal" said Henry "that'll be family then. Desire for money power or even vengeance doesn't begat nihilism on this scale."

"Nihilism" said Maartens "that's a good word. But tell me why I shouldn't be looking for vengeance. I am Jewish don't you think that the Jews desire vengeance"

"You mean to tell me that you are prosaic enough" said Henry "to be doing this as some kind of racial service. Helping the Chosen People out. Yes I can see that, after all you'll be going back to pre-Exodus times, if you believe the standard chronology. Re-write the story of your people entirely. No Joseph, no Moses, no Passover or forty years in the wilderness. A totally different history. I don't believe it for an instant."

"Why not?" said Maartens. Thad could see that he was toying with Henry or trying to anyway.

"Because" said Henry "if it was vengeance you would need to show the world that you were avenging or at least that the Jewish people were being avenged. Do this and no-one knows. The Jews are silently wiped from history and nobody sees the hole they leave because they didn't exist to make a hole."

"Perhaps I want to destroy the Jews" said Maartens. Still playing.

"Sorry I don't buy it" said Henry "nothing makes sense unless it is motivated by... By a desire, simply to destroy everything to wipe it all away, because you can't bear to see the world carry-on the way it is. I don't see you issuing ay manifesto, you haven't bought space in newspapers or television. You haven't spread it all over the web. No this is personal. This is for you. Just you against the world because there is something in it you no longer want to face."

"And what would that be" said Maartens, the playfulness draining from his demeanour.

"Personal" said Henry over-mouthing the word. "Family"

Henry stopped talking and just stared at Maartens. The professor and the priest had just stopped their conversation too and the room began to sink into a painful silence.

Unaware of Henry and Maartens' conversation, the professor launched into more talk with the priest. Henry glanced over at the professor and smiled.

"How is your son, mister Maartens" he said

Maartens reacted with immediate anger and delivered a swift punch into Henry's stomach. Henry bent over, winded then slowly stood upright again. It took a while for him to get his breath back. Hodges and Larkin had hurried over to see what all the fuss was about and were stood ready to beat somebody up. The professor and the priest had stopped talking and were looking at Maartens. Thad couldn't see the Doctor anywhere but then again with the thugs standing so close he didn't particularly want to move his head or anything else.

"Family" coughed Henry "You didn't think I'd know did you? Maybe it was a lucky guess. If it was it looked like I guessed right."

Maartens didn't say anything. Thad couldn't tell if his flushed appearance was just anger or whether he was embarrassed by his loss of composure as well.

"So" said Henry "spill. You said you'd tell if I guessed."

Maartens seemed to be counting to several hundred in his head. At last he motioned Hodges and Larkin to go back to their places.

"How are you my boy" said the professor. He had come over to see that Henry was alright.

"I'll live" said Henry "how is the interrogation?"

"He's told me many interesting things" said the professor. "I could talk to the man for months. He is quite deranged of course."

"How so" said Henry "anything to do with his trip here?"

"Actually no. Although the last few weeks can't have helped."

"Oxygen starvation" said Doctor Montfort sidling in from somewhere. "I told them the priest has brain damage from some kind of oxygen starvation. He gets confused easily and panics. It's compounded with the culture shock."

"Leave us Montfort" said Maartens. Montfort cowered slightly.

"Come doctor" said the professor "I want you to look the priest over before we send him on his way"

Doctor didn't quite understand what the professor had meant by "on his way" but he clearly wanted to avoid Maartens vicious scowl.

"So" said Henry when there were just the three of them again.

"My son" said Maartens "He betrayed me."

"And he died" said Henry "Of course he didn't use your name did he?"

"No" said Maartens "he took the name they gave him."

"Preferred it to the one his father had bestowed on him" said Henry

"Let me in on this will you" said Thad seeing the possibility of being left out of the picture yet again and forgetting that he was dealing with a powerful man who was deeply angry.

"Sorry Thad" said Henry "Mister Maartens here named his son the 'flower of Zion' that's the English translation anyway. The name struck me as rather strange when I saw it in a news report a year or so ago. I couldn't resist checking him out just to see what kind of person gave him that name. I was interested at the time to find out that it was Mister Maartens. His father."

"It is a perfectly acceptable name in Hebrew" said Maartens

"True." said Henry "but it's a hell of a burden to put on a child. It's a name that almost required the lad to serve Israel with all his might. Not that surprising that he couldn't take the expectation"

"You know nothing" said Maartens

"Then tell" said Henry "I can speculate wildly till the cows come home but it won't get us anywhere."

"I wanted him to be an example to others. Strong tolerant, a man to hold Israel together" said Maartens

"You mean you brought him up to be a leader?" said Thad

"The Best schools." said Henry "The right schools. And universities. He fast-tracked his son into politics. I wouldn't go so far as saying that he bought his son a seat in the Knesset but I wouldn't be surprised if he'd put pressure on in the right places."

"He was going to be a leader" said Maartens "he was going to enforce a peace and earn Israel recognition from its neighbours."

"Sorry" said Thad "It's an odd question but how old was he. I can't get a picture."

"When he died he was about thirty-five" said Henry

"Thirty-four eight months and seventeen days" intoned Maartens

"But" said Henry "He went to the bad about five years before, didn't he"

"His thirtieth birthday." Said Maartens "He said he wanted nothing more to do with me"

"You know I missed all this fuss at the time" said Henry "I only read about it after he died. But apparently he refused a large inheritance that was due to him, left his seat in Parliament and went to live in Ramallah"

"Ramallah?" said Thad "isn't that Palestinian territory"

"Let's say Palestinian controlled" said Henry "we don't want to get into arguments about what belongs to Palestine and Israel."

Ok" said Thad "My point was isn't that rather dangerous. An Israeli MP and all that?"

"Not if he marries a Palestinian woman and converts to Islam."

"Right" said Thad.

"It gets worse" said Henry "doesn't it"

"Yes" said Maartens

"He didn't become a suicide bomber.' Said Thad "Sorry, no of course not it just popped into my head"

"That would have been too simple" said Henry "Look I'm doing all the running here. It's your story"

Maartens looked into space silently not answering or trying to prevent Henry from continuing.

"Maartens son was a man of peace. Ibraim Islam was his Islamic name. Abraham Peace. He would never use violence. No, his death was a tragic accident. It's getting to be a familiar story a protest against a new settlement goes wrong and someone is killed. In this case his son. He was shoved aside by an over zealous contractor, slipped down a slope and was hit by a passing truck. The contractor had just pushed because he was being surrounded by a shouting crowd; he hadn't intended it to happen."

"Why is that worse?" Said Thad "I mean it's terrible but why worse"

"He worked for me" said Maartens, still looking into space, tears forming in his eyes.

"The firm given the contract to build part of the settlement belonged to Mister Maartens." said Henry

"Nobody will ever betray me again" said Maartens

"What happened to the contractor?" said Thad

Henry shrugged his shoulders.

"I didn't allow him to live" said Maartens with a vigour and viciousness. "And now I have this. And I will change everything. I will create a new world in my image. My identity is written on that vase and on every page of that encyclopaedia. I will be the mysterious force that gives knowledge to the civilised world. No one else will matter except me in this new world."

"Any chance I can see the encyclopaedia?" said the professor who had wandered over during Maartens' rant.

"Of course" said Maartens seemingly released by his speech.

Thad was curious about Henry's lack of emotion at Maartens' rant. For himself Thad could feel his blood boiling. Maartens would no doubt claim that Mitch had betrayed him and that that justified his murder. Perhaps Henry and the professor knew the value of Maartens getting things off his chest and not reacting to it with either pity or revulsion. Yet again they pulled their change the subject trick.

Maartens beckoned them to follow him to the case that he'd had Montfort bring from the car. As it was near the opening to the lower gallery Hodges and the driver emerged to stand guard. Maartens opened the case and pulled out a large bound book which he handed to the professor.

"I had it made with a very long life paper." Said Maartens "It will out live papyrus, It will last for ten thousand years. The ink won't fade or run even if it is immersed for years."

"Impressive" said Henry looking over the professor's shoulder as the professor turned the pages. "Hand written too. But this more than the work of a year or how ever long it is since you started planning it."

"I started the book years ago. It was an exercise to see if I could put myself into the minds of the ancients that came up with this knowledge."

"I wonder" said Henry "I wonder if it had another purpose."

"Go on" said Maartens as if sensing that Henry was going to be insulting again but unable to stop him.

"Well it's just a few thousand years from now it is unlikely that civilisation will exist as we know it. We may have plunged into a dark age again. Imagine how useful this would be if discovered in some far away but safe place. They would revere the memory of the man that wrote it. The fount of all knowledge, knowledge that brought them out of their intellectual wilderness."

"You can scoff" said Maartens

"Who is scoffing." said Henry "It's a genuinely good idea, if you want to be immortal, if you want to make sure that your side of events is the one that is remembered."

"And that doesn't interest you?" said Maartens

"Me" said Henry "I am just a blip in time. All I can do is have fun, hurt no-one and try to leave the world a better place. Of course what would make the world a better place is highly debatable but I've tried a few things. I don't need to be immortal; I'd just like to be a good memory for my friends to cherish."

"Pretty" said Maartens "but I think it is time that we sent our man back. Time for my memory to be cherished by all humanity"

Henry looked at Thad. Thad knew that he could refuse to help but he found that he believed in the professor's theory. He nodded at Henry and walked over to the machinery. As he opened the laptop he realised that he had been accompanied by Maartens and Hodges. He casually looked at the simulation results and closed the program hoping that it looked to his overseers that it wasn't significant. He opened up the time travel application.

"OK" he said "the priest will need to stand between the mirrors"

Maartens motioned to Hodges to fetch the priest, and then looked back at the apparatus. Thad could see some kind of realisation dawning in Maartens eyes. The vase that they'd used to bring back the soldiers was still positioned between the mirrors. Thad looked back towards Henry and the professor and then up to the upper floor viewing gallery. He saw a figure staring back at him. "So where are they?" said Maartens. Thad looked at Henry again. Henry was already walking over to him followed by the professor and Larkin, the driver. "I'm wondering if you did it deliberately" said Maartens to Henry as he came within earshot. "So co-operative, so helpful. Then the questioning all so I didn't think about the others. Did you really think I'd forget?"

"But you did forget" said Henry

Maartens motioned to Larkin who quickly grabbed Henry's left arm and twisted it into a painful hold that made Henry sink to his knees. Hodges who had been bring the priest over with the help of doctor Montfort, left them and ran to Maartens and the others, drawing a pistol as he did so. Larkin transferred the hold that he was maintaining on Henry's arm, into his left hand and pulled a pistol out of his jacket with his right.

Thad looked down at Henry; he was clearly in pain but wasn't making to much outward show or trying to struggle. Thad felt a metallic object on his cheek. Hodges was standing just behind him and was pressing his pistol into Thad's face.

"As I said" said Maartens "where are they?"

Nobody said anything but just then the priest caught sight of the guns and stopped in his tracks whimpering. The professor walked up to the priest without bothering to ask permission from Maartens or his thugs. He took the priest's arm away from Montfort who was struggling to drag the priest along. The professor whispered a few words to the priest and gently started to lead him toward the machinery.

Maartens signalled to Hodges and Larkin and they each took a step back releasing Thad and Henry from immediate threat or pain.

"I think we should proceed immediately" said Maartens "How long does it take"

"The equipment has to be calibrated to the priest" said Thad "it will take a couple of minutes. The transfer will start immediately after and that will also take a minute or so. You may need to hold him between the mirrors. I've only done this with rabbits before."

"Montfort and the professor will hold him" said Maartens "won't you"

The professor nodded briefly. He again whispered to the priest.

Maartens collected the vase and the encyclopaedia and returned holding them out for the priest to take. It took some re-assurance from the professor before the priest would take either object but in the end he took them and held them close to him.

Maartens walked to Thad who was already starting the calibration process.

"So we wait" said Maartens "and then nothing. Or nothingness anyway.

Another life and no memories perhaps."

As he finished Larkin was felled as the Matessare jumped on him from the sloped roof. Hodges raised his pistol to shoot Matessare but Thad dived into him, as he fired his shot.

Hodges rammed his right forearm into Thad's face and Thad crashed to the floor. Hodges aimed the pistol at his head but before he could fire his right arm had been grabbed from behind and an arm had been put round his thick neck. Hodges gun fired again the round lodging in the blank wall of the court.

Barely a second later there was an unpleasant crunching sound as Ramassenett the sergeant, broke Hodges' arm somewhere around the wrist. Hodges tried to fight back but his right arm had stopped working, he had dropped his gun and the sergeant was kicking his legs away from under him. Thad picked up Hodges' gun as the man crashed to the floor the sergeant's wait pinning him to the ground.

"If you try to get up" yelled Thad, pointing the pistol at Hodges head "I'll blow your mother-fucking head off!"

Thad couldn't quite believe that he'd just said that. It had the desired effect and the sergeant was able to position himself more comfortably for both himself and Hodges. Thad was still quite shocked; he'd never thought he'd say something like that. It was quite unlike him, but he realised that he had the accent and the tone of voice that made it entirely believable. He looked over at Henry and saw that he was covering Larkin in much the same way with Matessare positioned just like the sergeant. He also saw Maartens getting down onto his knees while holding his hands behind his head. Meena was pointing the shotgun at him as she moved cautiously to him.

The professor was struggling with the priest, saying something presumably to calm him down. He was just managing to hold the priest in place by himself; Montfort had retreated down towards the back of the court.

Thad caught Montfort's eye and beckoned him over to look at Hodges arm. Reluctantly he came forward and started an examination but it was clear that he terrified of the sergeant. Oddly the sergeant was beaming and sharing a laugh with the officer. Thad wondered why the soldiers had lost interest in the priest. Possibly they thought that if they were returned the priest would only have an hour's head start on them. And besides they'd left the religious centre full of soldiers so the priest wasn't going anywhere.

"Mister Maartens" said Henry "If you would be so kind as to help the professor hold the priest in place."

"You're sending him back" said Maartens slowly rising to his feet.

"Oh yes" said Henry "we know something you don't. I'll tell you when the priest has gone. I want the guys here to hear it but not the priest, for reasons that will become apparent."

A glow appeared around the priest and suddenly he was frozen to the spot.

"What's happening Thad" said Henry

"Transfer is starting" said Thad "The time field has become constricted around him. You'll find he can't move"

"Professor" said Henry in a sudden panic "the book!"

The professor started to try to wrench the book from the priest's grasp. Thad could see panic in the priest's eyes; they were the only thing that he could move voluntarily.

"What are you doing?" said Maartens and tried to pull the professor away from the priest. This had the effect of pulling the priests arm slightly away from his body but it stopped before it could go any further. The professor let go and fell backwards on top of Maartens. The glow around the priest grew brighter, he was starting to disappear.

"Meena!" shouted Henry "Shoot the book out of his hand!"

"What?" said Meena?

"Just do it!" shouted Henry

Thad saw Meena look at her grandfather who was nodding frantically. She took aim at the book now just visible as a small black blob in the glow around the priest and fired. There was a scream that cut out suddenly as the glow

faded. The encyclopaedia was flung against the rear wall by the force of the shot. There was a patch of blood on it and it had left a trail of drops along its path.

“Well” said Henry “let’s hope we were right. Tell me Thad, any thoughts on how long a change in history would take to travel?”

“If it’s an entangled quantum effect” said Thad “it would probably be instantaneous. If not then I’ve no idea. I wouldn’t even know where to start the calculations. We might be part of a redundant timeline that will just fizzle out one day or not. We may just keep going thinking that we succeeded only now there’s another timeline where we didn’t.”

“Can we assume that we did?” said Henry

“We wouldn’t be able to tell the difference” said Thad “so yes, why not”

“Explain” said Maartens who hadn’t yet bothered to get up and was still lying on the floor.

Henry put the pistol in the waist band at the back of his trousers and went to help the professor pick Maartens up.

“Meena you will need to translate this to the guys” said Henry “I hope they don’t take this the wrong way. OK Mister Maartens you see your book over here” Henry walked over and picked the book up

“Remarkably undamaged” he said “considering the firepower of that gun and the range it was fired from. But you will notice the blood on it. Presumably the several fingers he lost were sucked back in time with him?”

Thad nodded at this.

“So what we have is a holy man, with a damaged hand, a vase, a sketchy knowledge of twenty-first century things like cars, washing machines and television and a list in his head of the day and place of death of every pharaoh for almost a five hundred year period up to but not including the pharaoh Akhenaton. Congratulations Mister Maartens you’ve just made history.”

Maartens clutched the book to him.

“How?” he said

“Thaddeus could no doubt give you a detailed explanation” said Henry “It seems that the time field thing is like a stretched elastic band. Stretched between the time that the blood sample was preserved and when you carry out the experiment. Basically whatever comes through gets shot further back in time; in this case almost five hundred years. I wonder though, professor what would the room, the inner sanctum look like?”

The professor thought for a moment.

“It was certainly converted from an existing cavern” he said

“You know I feel sorry for the poor guy” said Henry “You might say that we were only fulfilling his destiny. But just think for a moment; he’s plunged into darkness and in agony because someone shot his fingers off”

“It wasn’t my fault” said Meena “you said...”

“Of course, of course” said Henry “Do you require some kind of proof Mister Maartens”

Maartens made no attempt to answer; he just clutched the encyclopaedia harder.

“Tell me Doctor Montfort” said Henry “do you know if there’s another vase in that bag”

“I’m not sure” said Montfort hesitantly “There were two boxes as well as the book. I didn’t see any vases”

“Very well” said Henry walking swiftly over to the bag and opening it. He rummaged for a few seconds then pulled out a wooden box about the size of

a shoebox. He walked back to Maartens with it and opened as he stood before him. Henry pulled out a vase with faded writing on it. The professor took one of Maartens hands and made him reach out for the vase. Henry placed the vase into Maartens' hand. Maartens stared at it as if he was looking straight through it at his hand.

"Look at it closely" said Henry "That vase is the same one that we sent back with the priest. Look at it. That's your writing, it always was. You have just created many of your problems. Just invented a cult that needn't ever have existed. You did it. You bought this vase new, you bought it to look identical to this vase but it was this vase all along."

Maartens looked up at Henry, tears running down his face. He then opened his hand and the vase dropped to the floor, smashing on contact.

"I get the feeling that my brother is going to complain about all the damage in here" said Henry

Henry left Maartens and walked towards Meena who had been dispassionately translating everything for the soldiers. Matessare and Ramassenett were looking at each other in a combination of, Thad supposed, disbelief and shock, possibly even grief.

"Thad we need to these two covered" said Henry indicating the Hodges and Larkin. "Meena, you'll need to go somewhere and talk to the guys. We'll send them back but..."

Meena said something to the two soldiers and they slowly rose from sitting on their respective captives watching that Henry and Thad had Hodges and Larkin covered.

"Please bear in mind gentlemen" said Henry addressing the thugs, "I am quite happy to kill either of you. And as I suspect that one or both of you were involved in the death of his best friend he'll be quite willing to kill you too. Understand?"

Hodges and Larkin nodded, they weren't really in a fit state to do anything just now but Thad reckoned they might try something especially if they were actually guilty.

"Mister Maartens" said Henry "I want you to come and sit between your two men here. Professor Do you think you can hunt around for something to tie these people up with?"

"I'll have a look" he said

"I think there might be some cable ties in the office, or one of the store rooms" said Henry

When the professor had left and the prisoners were in position Thad sidled up to Henry and began talking quietly.

"What now" he said

"Exactly" said Henry

"No plans?"

"Not a lot" said Henry "I wasn't sure that we'd live, or that we'd still be in existence now. Perhaps I should have got the guys to kill them."

Thad showed his disapproval with silence

"Of course not" said Henry "It's at times like this that I curse my good nature. They are down at the moment but a couple of good night's sleep and they'll be back to their vicious selves. I think we need some hold over them or worse"

"Worse?" said Thad

"Doctor Montfort" said Henry "please don't skulk in the shadows. If you'd be so good as to be somewhere that I can see you I'd be most grateful. I don't think that you are particularly on the side of your employer but I don't know you well enough to trust you entirely. I mean you seem harmless but that may just be a clever front"

Doctor Montfort scuttled round so that he could stand behind Maartens.

"Good" said Henry "Tell me about yourself Doctor. How did you come to be in such distinguished employment?"

Doctor Montfort stood and fidgeted for a while seeming to make up his mind whether or not to speak. At last he began spluttering.

"I was struck off" He said "At least I should have been. I won't make any excuses. I mean there was the drink and mistakes that others would cover up but no, I was a fool. Anyway I came to his attention; Mister Maartens. At first he seemed kind, he smoothed out the problems got me into rehab, helped me to clean up my act"

"But" said Henry

"I should have known that he'd want something in return. Nobody is that saintly, at least not in private."

"You mean" said Henry "that if he'd been acting as an altruistic benefactor then he would have been more public about it."

"Yes. I should have seen it. Things weren't resolved so much as hushed up. He had things on me. Even now he could put me in prison in a moment."

"Then why haven't you helped him recently?" said Thad

"I don't know. Maybe you're just the first decent people I've met in an age. Maybe I'm ready to go to prison now. I think I can take it."

"You were" said Henry "I hope, going to tell us what favours you had to do Maartens here; in return for all his generous help."

"No" said Montfort "It was bad that's all you need to know. Any dirty little task that required medical expertise and no questions asked, I was summoned. The things I've seen the things I've done for him."

"Sit down, doctor" said Henry "not too close to the others"

Henry walked up and down in front of his prisoners. Thad thought he must be trying to think what to do next. Maybe Henry was feeling as confused as he felt. Like several (it felt like many) times before Henry wasn't showing his true feelings –how did the British do that?

"In theory" said Henry "I could have you killed by the soldiers and get them to dump your bodies away from here. I could then send them back in time and nobody would be able to trace them. But if I do that, I really have to do it I can't just threaten. Once you are outside my immediate influence I've no hold over anybody. And I suspect a rich man's revenge could be deep and bloody. Makes it difficult Mister Maartens. Any thoughts?"

Maartens was silent. He just stared into space, rocking slightly.

"I suppose we could do the self defence thing, like in Shane."

"Shane?" said Thad

"Yes," said Henry "the movie. The bad guy puts a gun on the ground in front of his intended victim, then taunts and threatens him, until he picks up the gun in desperation at which point the bad guy shoots him dead. The bad guy then turns to the crowd and says 'you all saw – he had a gun'"

"Not going to work" said Thad

"No," said Henry "but let's clear one thing up."

Henry walked over to Hodges and trod on his broken arm. Hodges screamed in pain.

"His friend Mitch" said Henry "Tell me how he died?"

Henry kicked Hodges in the arm and this time he managed to stifle his cry.

"It could take me days to work out what to do with you" said Henry "Do you really want to waste my time?"

"Look, it was an accident OK" said Hodges "We were torturing him, right. Holding his head under water until he told us what he'd nicked. Well we went on too long and his heart gave out. He wasn't fit. I mean if he'd been another soldier he'd be able to take it but he was a civilian."

Henry looked at Thad as if to ask for further instructions. Thad didn't know what to do and he didn't think he was alone. Short of a full confession, rather than the excuse he'd just heard, there was no chance that they'd be convicted of Mitch's murder even second degree murder. If they felt that he might do something to endanger them, then they might take the fight to him. Maartens was a powerful man and as Henry said he might be in the dumps just now but given a few days to recover he might rediscover his anger against them. Somehow it had to be ended now; it had to be resolved but they had nothing unless Henry had been videoing everything secretly.

"We have to fix this now" Thad told Henry.

"Good" said Henry. "Ah professor, be good enough to bind messers Larkin and Hodges. Doctor Montfort I'd be grateful if you could pad the bindings so

that they don't leave marks. And both of you take some care that Mister Hodges is comfortable. He's in some pain at the moment."

Meena returned with the soldiers.

"They are not happy" she said 'but they'd prefer to stay"

"Good" said Henry "let them know that they can go back if they change their minds in the next couple of weeks. After that they're stuck here."

Henry looked at Thad for confirmation and Thad nodded his head at Meena.

"Well" said Henry after what felt like a considerable time staring at Maartens who was still sitting on the floor, rocking himself back and forth. "I don't know about anyone else but I've decided what to do. Unless anyone else has any suggestions? Because I'd really like some alternatives here."

Henry looked around but nobody seemed to have a good idea of what to do.

"I wouldn't say that this is a good idea" he said "but I can't think of anything else."

Henry stopped, waiting for somebody to butt in but nobody did. He took a deep breath and continued.

"Shane it is. Mister Maartens I'll make you an offer. If you give me the encyclopaedia I promise - I would swear but I can't think of a god worth swearing to. I promise that I and the professor, if he is willing, will bury the book somewhere safe; somewhere that it can lie undisturbed for centuries. I'm sure we can come up with somewhere?"

"Yes" said the professor, puzzled. "Almost certainly"

"So we'll hide the encyclopaedia, it will be hidden for a few millennia and then when it is rediscovered you will be everybody's teacher again."

Maartens looked up as if he had just woken up.

"What do I have to do in return?" he said

Henry bent down, took the pistol from his waistband and laid it on the floor in front of Maartens. Thad looked at Henry in panic, thinking he'd realised Henry's plan. Only Thad and Meena were armed. Was Henry expecting either of them to shoot Maartens if he picked up the gun? Thad caught Henry's eye and signalled that he needed confirmation of what he was expected to do.

Henry shook his head and went back to looking at Maartens.

Maartens laid the book to one side and reached for the pistol. He picked it up and weighed it in his hand. Then he looked up at Henry and lazily pointed the gun in his direction. Henry remained impassive. After a while Maartens allowed his arm to drop so that Henry was no longer a target.

"The changing room," said Henry "just across the hallway, there's a key in the door. It will be easier for us if you lock yourself in."

Thad began to tremble as he watched Maartens pick himself up and walk slowly to the gap in the lower gallery. Henry and the professor followed at a discrete distance stopping at the doorway into the court. They appear to be looking impassively at something. The people in the court had fallen silent which meant that they all heard a faint click as if a door was being locked.

Henry turned back and returned to the court. He motioned to Montfort, Thad and the soldiers to help Hodges and Larkin to stand and indicated that they should be sat on chairs at the other end of the court. As they were helping the prisoners into their seats there was the sound of a gunshot. Hodges muttered "Jesus" under his breath and looked up at Henry who hadn't even registered the sound of the shot.

The professor came back into the court and told everyone that he'd heard a body slump to the ground after the gunshot.

“So gentlemen,” said Henry addressing Hodges and Larkin “Any thoughts on what you are going to tell the police when I call them?”

Hodges looked at Henry with a mixture of spite and fear.

“You tell me” he said

“We’ll think of something.” Said Henry “Perhaps he was here trying to persuade Thad to finish Mitch’s work. Maybe he had an argument with me and the professor. Then possibly later in the evening you saw him try to take your gun from your jacket. Fearing for everybody’s safety you tried to stop him but in the struggle he made a lucky twist and broke your arm. By the time you managed to pick yourself up he had disappeared into the changing and as you and Larkin hammered on the door you heard a gunshot.”

“It will need some more detail” said Hodges

“It’ll take twenty minutes for the police to get here.” Said Henry “I think that will be enough time to come up with something close to the truth without too many awkward questions.”

“We’ll see” said Hodges

“Meena,” said Henry “Could you go to the main house and call the police. And take the guys. Put them in a spare bedroom and ask them to stay there. It is easier all round if there is no mention of time travel when the police come here. And Thad could you cover the white boards in some abstruse calculations, this is a maths place rather than an Egyptology experiment.”

As he wrote equations and solutions on the white boards Thad watched Henry and the professor talk over things with Hodges, Larkin and Montfort. He was staggered that they’d suddenly become so co-operative. Of course it could be an act for all their apparent helpfulness in concocting stories and alibis there was something in Hodges’ tone of voice that seemed to show a deep mistrust of the proceedings.

After he finished the calculations he went back to the machinery and set up the soldiers’ vase so that he could run innocent tests to forensically determine the age of its contents. All very innocent he thought, but he didn’t really think they’d get away with it. As they heard the police cars’ sirens coming up the drive Henry came over to him.

“Well” said Thad “Are we set?”

“We can but hope” said Henry “It seems that the three of them, have something to gain from their employer’s death. In their own way they’ve each planned some kind of escape route to get away. Files will be destroyed; money will be embezzled; not too much, just so the executors of Maartens estate don’t notice.”

“I can’t help feeling that there’s a trail of forensic evidence that could point in other directions.” Said Thad

“You’re right” said Henry “but it appears that there may well be some independent corroboration of Maartens’ depressed mental state. It seems that some members of his staff have expressed concern. Montfort has even got some correspondence with a leading psychiatrist which points that way. Meena was smart enough to ask the operator if we should break down the door and she was told not to. Illogical if you ask me, I mean he might not be dead, but apparently it’s a crime scene. With a bit of luck they won’t look for another explanation.”

They turned as they heard Meena leading the police into the court.

Thad found that he'd quite enjoyed learning to play Real Tennis; it had taken his mind off the amount of lying that seemed to fly around the house in the run up to the inquest. Henry had been able to convince the coroner of everything. Hodges, Larkin and Doctor Montfort played their parts admirably and nobody asked too many awkward questions. Mendacity came so easily to these people. Henry seemed to understand Thad's problems with lying and had kept him out of it as much as he could. He'd not been party to the argument that Maartens had had with Henry and was checking the generator when the fight in the court had kicked off and several shots had been fired. He'd returned to see Hodges and Larkin hammering on the changing room door but not understanding what was going on he'd gone straight through to the court and it was there that he'd heard the fatal gunshot. He'd found it easier than he had liked to tell these lies.

The verdict was suicide. Henry and the professor made some show of blaming themselves and Hodges even seemed on the verge of tears at his admission that he'd been unable to stop Maartens taking the gun.

And while all this was going on there was the guys, the soldiers, were sequestered at the main house while Henry Meena and the professor worked on bring their minds into the twenty-first century as gently as possible. Henry managed to send the few staff off on elongated holidays until the inquest was finished as the soldiers had to be kept hidden. Hiding the guys wasn't too difficult except when the homesickness got the better of them and they'd tried to escape. Not that they'd been any for them to escape to which they had quickly realised. Up until the two week deadline, when the time field around them would have dissipated, Thad kept the machinery set up in case they wanted to go back. They had come close to going back on several occasions but Meena and the professor had persuaded them against it.

While there was still a possibility that the machinery would be used, Thad filled the time writing up the experiments. Not that he'd ever be able to publish but it was important work and it was something to do. He was fairly sure that he had a handle on the theoretical basis of the experiments but he missed Mitch. Mitch could read and debug his calculations and formulas so easily. Thad felt moved to ask Henry about whether they should go after Hodges and Larkin for Mitch's death.

"We could" Henry had said. "But if we are seen to go after them. They could tell what they know and that could be sticky. I've not given them any guarantees. If there is any question mark over Mitch's death I said we'd make sure that the police look in their direction"

Nobody had asked questions about Mitch's death not even the remnants of his family. They'd accepted the verdict of Mitch's inquest without hesitation. They knew that he'd become stressed as a result of the first experiment's failure and then assumed that he'd not been able to hack it when he was working for Maartens. Thad found it difficult to believe that Mitch's family had agreed that Mitch had committed arson to cover his failure and then killed himself in remorse.

The press had lost any lingering interest in Mitch's death with the announcement of Maartens' presumed suicide. Lots of things started to come out of the woodwork about him. He had had a knack for sailing close to the

wind legally speaking and had harmed a lot of people who now felt able to damn him. Thad did wonder if Mitch's case might be re-opened as a result of all the allegations about Maartens; it hadn't happened yet but Thad felt hopeful that it would eventually.

Once Thad had packed away the machine Henry took it upon himself to teach Thad how to play Real Tennis. Once Thad got the hang of the strange rules and bouncing balls off rooftops, he had found it pleasurable although it was no substitute for racquet-ball or squash. Occasionally the soldiers were allowed back into the court so that they could learn it and more importantly to keep well exercised.

Once the inquest was finished it was time for the soldiers to be given their new identities so that they could move about openly. The professor's brothers arranged for a couple of look-a-likes to travel from Egypt to the UK ostensibly as research students studying with the professor. When the professor returned to Henry's house they accompanied him. The night of their arrival they took a boat out of Holyhead and got on board an Egyptian registered freighter out of Liverpool. They left behind identity papers, visas and passports for the soldiers to use. Again all done without any questions being asked. Of course the guys would have to return to Egypt at some point but in the meantime the professor had two of the greatest experts on ancient Egypt working for him. It also appeared that the professor had managed to write down the high priest's list of Pharaohs and he was quietly of the opinion that he could change the field of Egyptology forever by sweeping aside all previous chronologies and supposed dynastic family trees. Henry thought he'd have a hell of a time proving everything but that didn't stop him from being enthusiastic about the project.

By this time the soldiers seemed to be over the worst of the culture shock they'd suffered. They had been lucky that they'd had one another to lean on and possibly more fortunate that Meena had been around. Henry would joke that Meena really needed a sister because she was going to break Matessare or Ramassenett heart when she chose the other one. Whilst Meena didn't admit that she was attracted to either of the soldiers, she mysteriously started inviting the odd single female friend up to Henry's house to meet the guys which Henry took to be an attempt to pair one of the guys off.

One day after a rather strenuous game of doubles on the real tennis court Thad asked Henry about the night of Maartens' suicide.

"You said 'Shane it is'. Why was that?" he asked "It wasn't really like Shane. And these days it's such an obscure movie to pick"

"That's true" said Henry "but it was the only movie I could think of, that fitted what I needed to do. And I don't think that I've ever watched it all the way through. I had to put the gun in front of him and force him to make a choice."

"Make him try to shoot you," said Thad "so that Meena or I would shoot him?"

"Would you have shot him if he'd done that?"

"I don't know" said Thad "but I don't think so"

"That's what I reckoned" said Henry "Meena certainly wouldn't have shot Maartens before he shot me. I wanted to give him a choice: Shoot me or himself. If he had shot me then hopefully you Meena or the professor would have shot him or at least disarmed him. He wouldn't have got away with killing me. He couldn't hide it or duck out of it there were just too many witnesses.

He would have known that shooting me would have been the end for him. Prison, disgrace, a kind of living death that he'd not recover from"

"You'd calculated that he'd prefer death to that?" said Thad

"More or less" said Henry "when you look at it we really had nothing. No cards to play. Only his death would let us get out of the fix. I thought I needed to cut down his choices"

"Provoke him" said Thad

"Yes" said Henry "I realise exactly how cold blooded it seems. It's probably a good thing that I don't have many friends. That's why I gave him the opportunity to kill me if he chose."

"We both knew that he'd recover though" said Thad "I mean we said at the time, a few good nights sleep"

"And I pushed him over the edge" said Henry

"Yes" said Thad "but nobody stopped you. I didn't realise what you were doing, of course. Not at first, not until he stood up. I could have said something"

"I am much more to blame than you" said Henry "so don't beat yourself up about it. We could replay the scene over and over again in our heads and there wouldn't be a better solution for us."

"Maybe it bothers me that we seem to have got away with it" said Thad

"You never know" said Henry with a grim smile "in may all come out one day"

Thad smiled.

"What about the book?" he said "Are you going to keep your promise?"

"Definitely" said Henry "working out where to bury it is a nice intellectual problem and it will give me an excuse to travel the world."

"I hope they'll be able to read hieroglyphics or hieratic in ten thousand years" said Thad

"I was a bit worried about that when I made the promise. We might have to include an ancient Egyptian language primer. Or a conveniently carved stone with three languages."

"Nother game?" said Ramassenett from the other side of the net.

Henry nodded.

"That OK?" he said to Thad

"Sure" said Thad

"Want to swap partners?"

"No" said Thad "I think I'll stick with you"