

CANYON OF FORGETFULNESS

Pamela Jaye Smith

-- a KURULTAI story --

Excellent story! Could easily be a movie. I like the feel and texture of the characters and way they interacted over time.

Steven A. Finly - Novelist, Screenwriter / Author

"SINdication," "Wasted," "High Life" and "The Cocaine Diet"

The language of "Canyon of Forgetfulness", the portraits you draw with words, are beautiful. So literary, rich, emotionally evocative.

Reece Michaelson - Author, Editorial Consultant, co-author

"The Journals of Petra Volare"

Rich, dense and sophisticated. Intriguing. I would love to see this kind of fare more often.

Jennifer van Sijll, author of "Cinematic Storytelling"

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Cover by Geffrey von Gerlach and Brian Dyer.

DEDICATION

To Georgia Lambert
Esoteric Teacher Extraordinaire

And to

Bruce Logan, Monty Hayes McMillan,
Rick Gilligan, and Geffrey von Gerlach

For Inspiration and Informative Discussions

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KURULTAI

History keeps repeating itself so that everyone
has the opportunity to be and do everything.

Time and space recycle *ad infinitum*;
the boundaries of experience and age are not fixed.

A group of souls called the Kurultai
intertwine lives through time and place.

Their Mission is the enlightenment and evolution of humanity
from Tribal to Individual to Group Consciousness.
Maintain the uniqueness of each; collaborate for the good of all.
Lovers now, Warriors another time, Scientists, Magicians, Clergy.

Sometimes siblings, parents, rivals, compatriots,
sometimes total strangers.
Who kills whom, who is loyal, whence cometh betrayal?

And always -- the battle between the Darkness and the Light.
But how can you tell who's on which side when the players
in the Kurultai keep changing between lifetimes?

PROLOGUE

The Doors of Darkness loom. Labyrinthine hallways twisting off into other dimensions. Corners round which one cannot see. Sounds echoing light, light cast in by mirrors, some say, to illuminate the rooms in temple depths where the panoply of a Pharaoh's life plays out in vibrant colors. Light fading and brightening to ache the eyes. And the Doors. Always the damned Doors.

It is a gift, we are often told, not to be able to recall our other lives. We would be too bombarded, they say, with the overwhelming nostalgia and grief and anticipation and excitement and the great washes of love and joy.

But isn't that the point?

Some teach it is a respite to forget and that we should welcome the dimness behind the Doors of Darkness.

Yet all the teachings of the Kurultai, no matter the time or place, the continent or the culture, direct us to recall, to search out the past and the future, to integrate the various Selves into one united, balanced Self who can then call upon any aspect as needed in whatever time or place one finds one's self.

Yes, that is the Ideal. But sometimes, the between-lives, and sometimes the very lives, press down upon one with the weight of myriad whisperings, with a fierce nostalgia that pierces the heart, with a desire for surcease from that not yet grasped, or that held

and lost, from that not yet known but merely missed and desired in some vague ethereal imagining.

These are the things that drive ordinary mortals to drink, to excesses of substances and other indulgences.

The desire for oblivion is strong in us all.

Some say it is the yearning of the one-you-are-now to be again a part of the One-That-Always-Is. To be a wave that rises, rushes towards the shore, breaks, and is no more. The form is gone, a one-time-only occurrence. But the substance is part of the eternal whole. That oblivion, that *satori*, that *nirvana*, that paradise, is such an innate desire holding such a strong appeal; it is a wonder we do not all throw ourselves over the precipices of canyon rims to fall and disappear into the increasing shadows.

In our schooling in Egypt, Alcibiades would often ask what was the point of remembering everything? Why not just take the rides as they come? The battle seems eternal. One can't even be certain of one's own place in it all. Why bother.

And what does one get out of all this?

Out of all this is what one gets.

And isn't that what we're ultimately after?

Escape?

Release?

Surcease?

Rest?

THE CANYON OF FORGETFULNESS

Trooper Kat

Australia, 2163

The troop train was an hour and a half late.

"Damn," the old Sergeant spat a multi-purpose curse. They'd be in a hell of a hurry once they got here. He and the Woman'd be pushed and shoved and yelled at to get them re-supplied and out, trying to make up the time. Time. He cursed that, too. Minutes were minutes, hours were hours. That's all there was to it no matter how many Councils sat and how many rules were passed. Time by any other name.... Besides, what did it really matter anymore?

From across the thin dry miles to the west, beyond the crumpled metal-blue edges of the G'nantan Ridge, came the crisp faint pop of neutrino blasters, a cluster of dream-like sounds in a flattened landscape where nothing moved but ubiquitous heat waves heaving themselves up from parched ancient earth as dry and sterile as the Woman's flaccid, freckled skin.

"Damn again." Minutes were minutes and miles were miles and that alien sound had no place in the old Sergeant's repertoire of real war noises.

It was all her fault.

No, he knew it wasn't all her fault. And she knew it wasn't. But they'd both gotten so used to the haranguing dialogue that said it was, and it gave them something to talk about, which was important between two people who no longer had anything to say to each other, that both of them kept up the blame game.

If her mob hadn't owned this gods-forsaken sheep Station they never would've been transferred out here in the first place, ordered to turn the deserted family homestead into a supply stop, a way Station for troops on the way to the arbitrated battlefield at G'nantan Ridge.

But oh no, she insisted it be entered in the records when they married. It was her only source of pride, that she had inherited land, that she was one of the few private citizens to actually own a piece of her ancestral land, no matter that it was in the middle of the center of the vacuum of nowhere, bare and cracked as her own hind-end, barren and dry and wind-ravaged as her own heart and womb. It was hers. That damnable, misplaced pride of hers had gotten them assigned to "her heritage" years – yes, damn it, many years – ago.

Left to dry and cake and shrivel up in the sun and wind and dust and loneliness. Left with nothing to do between troop trains and supply trains but count boxes, check water supplies, rotate the casks, and pick over the bones of their failed marriage and his stifled military career.

The Sergeant stared at the dark brown stain at his feet and gave a snort that never could have passed for a laugh. Dried salted sea kelp. Sea kelp soaked in nuk-mam, foul-smelling rotten fish ferment, salted and dried and issued in abundance to the troops. He had whole sheds of the stuff back there. Thank the gods they didn't make it here; he couldn't have stood the smell. The taste was bad enough, but a man had to have something to keep his mouth wet. The Sergeant spat again, aiming slightly to the left of his first projectile. Tiny cloudlets of dust rose around the plopping ordnance.

The Woman chewed sage stubs. Said if it was good enough for the sheep and it was good enough for her father it was good enough for her. Besides, she'd sniff, it didn't stink like that military fish-jerky.

"No," he'd reply and spit because he knew it annoyed her, "but your nips at the bottle do."

Then she'd reach up over the huge old industrial stove and pull out her treasure. She made a display of carefully wiping off the precious old heirloom, a cobalt blue thin-necked bottle with matching ball-topped stopper. Handling it like a baby, she'd look past the Sergeant's bulky form slouched against the doorjamb and into the distance of a life she never knew but imagined with great elaborate weavings taken from stories she'd heard and bits of life she'd seen in the compounds.

The Woman fantasized herself a featured part in cool pastiches of fragrant gentility on shady green-hung verandahs, suitably yet seductively attired in fragile billowing lace and crisp linen, carrying on scintillating and delicately flirtatious conversations in subdued and cultured voices, backed by real music, fortified by real drink. The cool, reflective depth of smooth cobalt blue, the fiery surprise of the liquor breaking against the back of her throat, the shuddering gasp as it barreled down into her numb, churning stomach — all these simple physicalities had become transformed into exquisite pleasures because they had become associated with her visions of paradise.

Nipping from the cobalt bottle was a habit now, like digging crust balls of grit and aborted tears from the tight corners of her eyes. Like gnawing her fingernails down to pliable sheets of cartilage, suitably softened so as not to dig into her perpetually clenched fists. Like wiping the long stainless steel countertop in the Mess hall as though she expected real guests in real clothes for a real dinner. Like constantly, expectantly scanning the barren horizon for something that might never materialize, something that might never come to take her away from all this.

But a drink — a long, slow, burning ice-fire drink from the cobalt bottle — was a step into a past she'd never known but which, because of that bottle and the dreams she poured into it, was more

real than this dried up day-in-day-out excuse for life that was no more substantial to her than the jostling dance of crazy heat waves on the far horizon. Only the moments with the blue bottle were real. The rest of this was just a haze, a wavering insubstantial rising of an ephemeral nothing up from ochre dust into pale red gritty air out to thin blue breathless sky straight up to nothing.

Beyond this nothingness there was a more severe nothingness. Drabber, more colorless, more depressing because it didn't even offer the quasi-interesting article of disgust or pain. At least this hot flat dry reality offered that. Out there, less than nothing. The Woman was trapped by the limitless horizons.

A sound and a movement on the edge of the canyon caught his attention. Sarge glanced that way and saw a lizard scrabbling up over the edge of the deep decline. Nothing new there.

He stared towards the horizon, which for him was full of rich colors and experiences and memories that were not his but which swirled for him nonetheless. He saw in the pale recesses of distant vision all the things he'd never see here at the Station.

Whereas for the Woman the world ended at the end of articulate sight, for Sarge it began there. The two of them lived their lives in the same space but saw themselves in entirely different ways: one inside and one outside the boundary.

Sarge glared down at the double spots in front of his boots. That sea kelp crap was about as logical as this whole damn war, he thought. Chew it to keep your mouth wet and your body from dehydrating, but if you swallow it your stomach'd cramp and you'd blow up like a horned toad for two days and then have a case of the runs that'd keep you out of action for two more days. Yet spitting it out meant losing moisture. Some military genius wearing four star-crescents must've been responsible for that brilliant bit of culinary ingenuity. And probably got another star for it, the Sergeant spat again.

Towards the middle of the last century there was a traffic jam in Low Earth Orbit, what they called LEO. Tens of thousands of satellites collided and almost every system dependent on them went down. Some blamed rogue multi-nationals and others cast a wider net of blame on all countries that super-weaponized space. It called a halt to satellites, AI, and anything that hinted at autonomous non-human control.

Sarge tended to think, along with many others, that it was a good thing it all came to an end. Get people back to human basics. Astronomers liked it because they could once again see the skies at night. Actual physical communities became important units again, though Sarge shrugged at that one, being isolated out here in the outback and only seeing people other than the Woman when the troop trains came through for a few hours every week or two.

Not everything was hearts and flowers though, he often grumbled. It wasn't like there'd been no problems before all the tech went down. The arms manufacturers and dealers still needed customers. The inherent combative nature of many humans still needed an outlet. The Woman often lectured him about ancient warfare, though how she learned anything about any of that... She often complained that they had no books at the Station. That she knew of. Then again, she did serve meals to all the soldiers passing through so perhaps the more educated ones told her about such things.

The Conclave of Nations, to accommodate the insistent corporate need for an arms market and an outlet for humans' instinct for conflict, set up isolated Battle Labs in different battlespace locales. Here in the Australian bush, in the icy mountains of Antarctica where a tail-end of the US 10th Mountain Division and a bunch of Finns ran the show, in the dense jungle of the Darien Gap, the vast emptiness of the Gobi Desert, and for urban warfare the empty Chinese cities constructed in the first of the last century and which had stood empty for most of the time.

Sarge spat onto the dusty ground again. He hated to admit that he had to agree it was a clever idea to channel aggression into five remote places and leave the rest of the world in a more peaceful, or at least a more large-scale conflict-free, situation.

Yes, he admitted to himself, he had in his younger years gone on unsanctioned military combat expeditions and considered himself fortunate not to have been captured and eliminated for having done so. He never spoke about it and so far no one had ever brought it up.

He listened to another flurry of neutrino pops, fainter than the scuttle of tiny iguana talons across the tin supply shed roofs. Damned stupid way to run a false war. But no one asked him. No one ever would, now.

He turned around and inspected the Way Station, a weathered cluster of faded white clapboard and corrugated tin, a mixture of old sheep Station buildings and military issue storage hutments. The Woman's father's buildings were peeling and scored with decades of gritty blasting wind, vagrant scraping tumbleweeds, and dogs' quick claws scrabbling at the doors to get out of the heat and wind. The metal hutments were decaled and spray-painted with wavy stock numbers and ludicrous official-ese instructions on how to operate something as simple as a sliding door.

A wooden windmill with spinning steel blades creaked rhythmically in the wind, a lanky mosquito siphoning precious water from deep in the bowels of the arid earth. Next to it stood a water tower thick and dribbled with yearly coats of black creosote paint perched on spraddly steel girders. Below the windmill an asthmatic coal oil- powered well-pump kept the blades turning when the wind failed. A burlap-wrapped pipe angled down from the main water tower to the hot-water tank behind the house, glinting bare steel and solar panels, squatting like a shorter offspring of the water tower, a baby mosquito that hadn't yet matured into its tarnished tin wings. At least they had the comforts of hot water out here.

Hot showers outside for the troops, hot baths inside for the Sarge and the Woman. Funny thing about baths, though. They could have had one any time the troops weren't in, which was most of the time. But when they'd first married and come to the Station, back when the newness of their marriage hadn't yet been soured by isolation and despair, they'd bathed together. One of the few truly sensual experiences either had experienced with each other, or for the Woman, at all. Running the bathwater had been a discreet blushing signal for intimacy. Back then.

Now they both found it difficult to run a bath. It was almost an insult. They didn't hesitate to insult each other openly at any time, but there was something inviolate about the bath. Something crouched, afraid, hiding inside the shared soul of their soured marriage that cringed at the sound of running bathwater, embarrassed by its failure, its crippled ugliness, its pathetic shrunken ridiculous mimicry of a happiness that never took root and grew. The shame of their failure had a life of its own. Though neither of them had the slightest desire to resurrect that pathetic echo of their momentary happiness, each felt a perverse respect for it and so neither one of them, for years, had taken a bath.

Besides, showers washed the grit of the desert down the drain. Showers cleansed the body. Pelted the skin. Drowned the mind. Sang to the soul. Swirled away the refuse of life. They were steeped enough in the misery of their lives. A washing away was what they needed. There were no baths taken in the Station House.

Sarge longed for the languid, comforting warmth of a bath. Alone. That would be fine. Too many ghosts out here. Too few people. Too many ghosts.

The Communications shed was off to one side, its rafters filled with burlap sacks full of sea kelp, extra parts, maintenance tools, dusty boxes of out-of-issue train parts, his own dress uniform, and a private cache of memoirs. The memoirs, stuffed into

his military trunk, tucked behind the dusty boxes, were like the Woman's cobalt bottle – his touch with what was and what might have been. It included a few books that she did not know about.

Every once in a while, when the troop trains came through for longer than refueling and one meal, he and the Commander would go off to the Communications shed, and Sarge'd pull down the trunk, supposedly to pull out the precious bottle of real liquor and the two round-bottom pewter cups. But really it was to have someone to talk to about the old days, to gossip with about what was going on back at Command H.Q. and out on the distant battlefield in the G'nantan Breaks. The Commanders had been getting younger and younger though, and many of them couldn't remember the "old days."

They talked in that new talk. Time and distance were military metric now, and though the old Sergeant had to use those terms in Communications, and did so quite well, they refused to come out of his mouth or register in his ear unless he was sitting in front of the Comm-panel with the earpiece plugged in and the channels open.

Behind the Station buildings a faint blue shadow curved in a huge U-shaped arc with its bottom near the Way Station, the arms spraddling wider and wider apart and off into the smudgy horizon. The Great Canyon. The Barrier. Breech between Territories. So vast and rugged and deadly that no man had crossed it in living memory. So infamous that it was a threat for cheeky children and miscreant troopers: "One more move like that and you'll end up in the Great Canyon."

Another round of neutrino ordnance tumbled across the desert, dancing a short spin in synchronous time with a cluster of brittle tumbleweeds. The old Sergeant looked back towards the red scarp of mountains wavering in the opposite distance like a sharp chin jutting up out of the desert in challenge to the looming placidity of endless flat space.

It didn't touch them directly but it was out there.

The War.

And in a way, her cobalt bottle and his military trunk were both the weapons and the safety catches in the internecine war he and the Woman fought out here alone in the desert, in much the same way The Powers fought out there in the G'nantan Breaks. Those neutrino blasters were like their hurled insults and spitting venom. But behind the actual barrage was the more frightening threat of seizure and damage to those most prized possessions: bottle and trunk. Behind that threat was the knowledge that if one moved towards the opponent's prize there'd be as swift and sure a movement toward one's own. A standoff. That's all. A pointless, persistent, tiresome, never-ending standoff.

Like the war, about the only thing it did, in either case, snorted the old Sergeant, was give people something to do and keep down the population.

In a world so devoid of other interests or pleasure, the War provided the meaning for existence. Surely there had been something before this. Surely mankind had not always lived just to fight. There must once have been more – could there be more again – to life than either endless, deadening boredom or briefly, invigorating, but ultimately deadly War?

It often seemed to the Sergeant that just as the Station was perched on the edge of the Great Canyon, where any significant trembling of the earth or a great wind or an accidental too-close passing of a heavenly body would shake, blow, or gravitate the whole cluster of buildings into the blue-black Canyon maw, so his life was perched on the edge of this War. He and the Woman were held in taut suspension between the stability of Command H.Q. and the terrifying physicality of battlefront action. The stream of doomed young troopers out to the G'nantan Ridge could at any time carry him and her along in their eddy, helpless bits of desert detritus sucked into the relentless maelstrom of destruction,

continually fizzling and popping just over the edge of the horizon and realizability.

Protective breach between Territories or no, the Canyon was no protector to them. It was a horizontal wall of seductive nightmare images. It yawned and beckoned and threatened. The Woman, having grown up beside it, had learned to cope by completely ignoring it. The Sergeant never went closer to the edge than he had to, but spent long hours leaning against the spindly water tower legs, staring across the blue chasm, trying to imagine the unseen depths dropping dizzily from sharp edges in the wrinkled folds of ancient earth. He filled the entire geological expanse - that negative impression, eaten-out cavity, remnant reverse of a once-proud river - over and over again with all the vile and vitriol of his wasting life. He built up a false sense of strength by imagining courageous exploits should the canyon ever rise up and threaten him, as in the back of the childish haunted part of his mind it threatened to do.

He took what it no longer was - a whole, flat, solid, compact chunk of planet threaded by a flat green-edged river and all its tributaries twinkling in a gentle sun - and responded to that ghost image of its glory days. He refused to fully admit that like the vast yawning nothingness on the fringe of the Way Station, so too was his own future. Time was the succubus that drained the Great Canyon of its youth and life. This War was her bung great-granddaughter.

Some fools claimed to like this region. The Sergeant had always thought that was a sour-grapes pose by people who couldn't have cut it anywhere else, like back at Command H.Q. He vaguely remembered the Woman's father, an unimpressive wind-bitten geezer who came into Command once or twice with other herders to protest troops crossing their lands and commandeering their herds. But that was long ago, during Sergeant's early days in Military. Anyone these days who claimed to like the barren reaches between here and

G'nantan either hadn't been here and believed the fairy tales spewed out by Command or had been here and back and were so thankful to have made the return trip that this Way Station seemed like the pearly gates themselves as glimpsed just after stepping from Charon's ferryboat across the River Styx straight into Hades and onto the paradisiacal Elysian Fields.

The Sergeant turned away from the fuzzy blue crescent, its edges blurred by sand flurries curling out over the sharp escarpments like a woman's long hair lifting off her shoulders in a wind. He looked back towards G'nantan Ridge, trying to see the evidence of what he heard. All the senses went awry out here. Vision argued with hearing, which played hell with smell, and all denied taste. Touch was the only true barometer of the body, and the body was always hot, gritty, and lifeless on the outside. On the inside one hoarded moisture, thought, emotion, and that most fragile of all senses – hope.

The Sergeant spat another brown blob into the dust, squatted on his haunches and sighted out across the hot shimmering distance where the troop train should have appeared going on – almost an hour and three-quarters now. Hell.

A hand emerged from the blue shadow of the Great Canyon. It paused above the cliff rim like a tentacled creature with eyes on the ends of each digit, searching for the endless vertical wall that had suddenly ended. Every finger was covered with cracked scabs crusted with dust, oozing fresh squeaks of blood. The leggy fingers waved hesitantly. They moved down, wary antennae searching by sense of touch. They felt horizontal ground. They pulled back, surprised.

Then they spread out, the thumb and small finger edging out wider, a bit wider still, feeling solid horizontal earth beneath

their bony probings. Maybe it wasn't just another teasing ledge. There was sunlight on the hand. The flat ground felt warm. Hot almost.

The entire hand arched up and lurched forward like a pale, drunken tarantula.

It felt again, then collapsed, flat and still, raising a small puffing billow of sunlit dust against the blue background of the canyon depths.

"Hey! You! Get away from there!"

Startled by her voice, the old Sergeant stood up and turned around. The Woman was running from the back porch of the Station house towards the water tower. Something dark and alive was huddled beside the girder where that leak he still hadn't fixed made a puddle of mud and patch of water that shrank in the heat of the day until by evening, which was the only time he was willing to try to repair the leak anyway, it was just a shade darker than the rest of the ground and not worth worrying about. Until the next day. So, like the leaky roof that never gets fixed because it never leaks unless it's raining, and then when it's raining you can't fix it....

He cursed himself. Gods knew what wild creature, scenting the water, had crawled up the Canyon walls. In this great expanse of Middle Country it was only in the Canyon, with its crenellated sides and seasonal waterholes along the ancient dry riverbed far below, that anything that size could live. How had it gotten up this far?

"Sarge!" she shouted. Then she snarled to the thing at the end of her neutrino rifle, "Don't move."

The thing seemed to cringe, though whether at her grating voice or the threatening gun barrel he couldn't tell. Either was sufficient.

The old Sergeant huffed his bulk back to the Way Station with surprising speed.

The thing at the end of the gun huddled in a tight ball of desert tans, streaked with what must be days of blood and dust. Its short brownish hair stood out in tufts that made it look even more frightened, and its wide-set grey eyes darted quickly about, looking for some means of escape, but unable to hide the fatigue and pain and thirst. It couldn't go any farther.

The Sergeant quickly glanced along the trail it had left from, sure enough, the shadow edge of the Great Canyon straight to the compound, straight for the water tower. From the look of things it must have dragged that bleeding left leg all the way.

'It,' he'd been thinking. Thinking of what was obviously a person as an animal, as something spat up by the Great Canyon.

"Back down, Woman, can't you see she's hurt," he said, his voice soothing and gentle as he moved towards the frightened girl.

"You be careful, she could be Enemy," the Woman raised her barrel again, sighting down it at the wretched creature.

"I said back down, Woman," Sarge repeated through clenched teeth exposed by his smiling face. "She's wearing our uniform."

"She came up out of the Great Canyon. Nothing lives in the Great Canyon. She's a spy."

"Maybe. Maybe one of our spies, did you ever stop to think of that?" Though his voice was still soothing and his steps were slow, there was no mistaking the venom directed toward the Woman behind him. He held both his hands out, palms up, at the huddled mass trying to inch her way back towards the sheer drop-off of the fabled rift.

"Ho there," he said, bending down to her level and sitting back on the heels of his military boots. He spoke as to a wild animal, a house pet, or a sheepdog that'd been abandoned and finally dragged itself home half-mad with hunger and pain. And fear.

Those darting grey eyes overflowed with fear, a jumpy bewildered wild kind of fear. Not quite madness yet, Sarge reckoned, but darned close.

It — no, she — had stopped trying to back away from him, though. He sat where he was, keeping his eyes on her eyes, talking intermittently to her and to his wife, always in that same soothing croon.

"We won't hurt you. Who are you? What division are you with? Go get her some water, and something soft to eat. And bring some of your precious brandy, too."

He heard the Woman gasp as if garroted from behind, and his smile widened. His belly even shook a little, knowing what a blow it was to her to give up her precious liquor. "Do it, I said," he repeated in the sweetest tone yet. "Now."

"Stupid fool," she muttered, turning away. "I hope she claws you to death and they court-martial your dead body and throw it into the Great Canyon where you both belong."

But she obeyed him.

The girl's eyes glimmered briefly with relief, then took up their fierce darting. First all around her perimeter, constantly on guard for danger from every direction; then towards that small sheet of water in the clawed-up mud hole; then towards the old Sergeant.

He felt a stab of pity as he realized she had tried to eat the mud. Her mouth was smeared with it, her teeth streaked and clotted from trying to suck moisture out of a handful of what must have been the only wet thing besides her own blood she'd seen in days.

"It'll be all right here. We'll take care of you. The troop train is due any minute now," he smiled, pointing at his military watch, just like the one on her wrist. The mechanism didn't seem to spark any recognition with her. He tried to point to her watch but she shrank away in fear so he rocked back on his heels and smiled at her some more.

"Probably fell and knocked your head on a rock, didn't you? We'll take care of you. Get you watered and fed and doctored up. I'm pretty good with a first aid kit, you know." He rocked back and forth, smiled, and looked hard at the girl, trying to make some sense of her being here in this condition. He knew scouts were often sent out alone, and there were rumors about very unorthodox methods being used these days, things that if admitted or proved could dangerously trip the Balance of Battle. Perhaps she was one of those – a Special Forces Trooper.

"Back when I was first in the Service I was a Medic's Mate. Pretty good at it, too. I'll fix that cut for you real well, won't even have a scar. Course they could fix that anyway back at H.Q., but I doubt you're going there. Bound for the Ridge, I suppose.

"Yep," he said, noting that his rocking had a soothing effect on her. Though she still scouted the perimeter every three seconds or so, he could see she was beginning to relax just a bit. It was funny how much of his early training came back to him now. Not just the medical stuff, but how to gauge an enemy in a one-on-one stand. How to note their muscular readiness, the tenseness of the neck, the tendons on the back of the hand, the jaw tensor just in front of the earlobe.

"Reckon I could've gone on and been a full Medic if I hadn't gotten married."

He spat a dark stream of sea kelp juice onto the dirt beside him and the girl looked at it curiously, hungrily. Oh gods, he thought. Sarge's mind reeled between pity, envy, and gratefulness. All these years he'd cursed his easy, quiet life out here at the remote Station. Yet secret relief had flowed through his veins, knowing he would never have to stand in battle. The choices? Battle or boredom. A brief ecstatic moment of glory or a long arid eternity of comparative comfort and relative irritating peace. Though life at the Station was not life at H.Q., it was a hell of a lot safer than the hell these poor devils were headed for.

The back door slammed a second time and the Woman scuffled out towards them. He held his arm out to halt her. "Leave it on the ground, then go back into the house," he ordered.

The girl had already started to inch away again at the sight of the Woman. Sarge couldn't stop a wry smile: even the near-mad recognize the malicious. And then a wry chuckle from the back of his own heart: he had thought so many times that he had been mad to marry her. Perhaps the truth was he had not been mad enough. If so, he would have seen....

Sarge heard the Woman's muffled "Hummmph" and the clank of metal tray and utensils. Then the back door slammed again. He reached behind him, never taking his eyes off the girl, found the water jug, and held it out to her.

"Water," he said, pointing from the jug to the tower to the puddle to his own mouth, then to hers.

Her wandering eyes fixed on the sweating jug. The fine edges of her dusty nostrils twitched at the scent. She looked up at the old Sergeant, toward the house, around her perimeter, at the jug, and back at the Sergeant. Ah, he thought, she's reasoning. A good sign.

He nodded again, went through the whole process of sign language, and held the jug out further.

The girl inched forward, ready always to spring away, a pitiful readiness considering her injured leg. Her arm reached out towards the jug but her eyes were locked on his.

"That's right, trooper. Water. Good clean water. What's your name, girl? I won't hurt you. Here, take the water."

He set the jug down between them and sat back on his heels, watching her, still talking in the soothing querying tone.

"You with the train coming in? One of their scouts, I bet. Got lost down in the Great Canyon. Shame to send you down there. Too dangerous." He flashed on the thought (later than he should have, he reproached himself) that she might not be alone. If she was one

of their own, there might be others with her who needed rescue. If she was from the other side, Enemy....

She halted once he stopped talking, sensing his sudden wariness. Panic came back into her eyes and her darting looks around the perimeter intensified.

No, no, he thought. If there were others with her, she wouldn't be so terrified. The deadly potency of a nightmare is that you have to face it alone. She bore the hyper-alert stamp of solitary suffering, of having scrambled up out of that gnawing gash in the earth all by herself.

"It's all right," he resumed the crooning. "It's all right. Go ahead. It's yours." He motioned that it belonged to her, that she should take the water.

In one quick flashing motion the jug was off the ground. Water gushed over her face and into her gaping muddy mouth.

"Don't drink that too fast now, girl," he cautioned, "it'll make you sick if you do."

Too late.

She turned away and wretched up dirt, half-chewed sage branches, a dried lizard leg. Gods, what a mess. What a horrible time she must have had. Personal pity washed over the tough old Sergeant. Everyone knew the way things were these days, everyone accepted it. But this poor girl....

Body sense took over and she sipped more slowly now, washing out her mouth and spitting away the detritus of vomit, then slowly sipping the cool clean water, leaving her eyes on the Sergeant for longer and longer spans of seconds.

Reaching behind him again he brought forward the shallow bowl of mush. "Food," he said, going through the motions again.

She nodded. At last. A sign of understanding. The old Sergeant's smile was genuine this time. She was not completely mad. She did understand. She was beginning to come around.

Some fifteen minutes later the Sergeant and the girl sat again under the water tower. He'd motioned her to crawl and limp under the troop train water pipe and let her revel in the ecstasy of abundant moisture.

She wasn't clean yet by any means, and in the hot desert air her clothes and hair were almost dry again, but at least she looked a little better. Streaks of dirt still ran down her face and bare arms. Her ragged fingernails were crusted and broken and scabbed with dried blood. The slender arms had been raked with barbs and sharp rocks, raw red ruffle-edge cuts wove over thin blue veins. The cut on her forehead covered an egg-sized welt and she still couldn't let him do more than gingerly touch at it. Already the inflammation of blood poisoning was spreading out from the hot red circle in fine, quick tentacles that once connected with a major artery, which would mean big trouble, fast. Her leg injury was probably a slight fracture, but she kept it behind her and wouldn't let him come near.

Her mind, however, was clearing like the sky after a summer cloudburst.

"What's your name then, trooper?" he asked for the fifth time as he feigned disinterest and daubed at her head wound with gauze dipped in watered brandy. He felt the Woman's harsh eyes boring into his back from behind the screen door. She'd try to make him pay for this solicitude, one way or another, there was no doubt of that. But oddly enough, for the first time in – gods, was it really decades? – the old Sergeant wasn't at all sure he'd take it.

Sarge pointed to the name patch above the left pocket of his uniform, then pointed to where hers should be, but wasn't. She was a scout, surely, without ID in case of capture.

A single raspy word crawled up her still dry throat and scrambled hesitantly out her mouth. "Kat," she said.

"Kat?"

She nodded, and a glimmer of pleasure at the recognition of her own name in her own ears crossed the drawn, weary face.

"Kat," he nodded. "Fred," he said, pointing to himself.

"F...red?"

"Good, trooper," he smiled. "Kat. What's your division?"

Her grey eyes went blank again.

He heard the rumble just before the Woman called out to him.

"Cooee!"

Kat jumped up and started limping and stumbling back towards the Canyon rim. No! He couldn't lose her. She might be important. Hell, no - she was important!

The old Sergeant ran after her, swept her up in his arms, remembering to favor her bad leg, and carried her screaming and scratching towards the Communications shed.

A long trail of dust billowed and snaked its way across the face of the desert. Steel belly tracks rattled and clawed for surface grip. The noise was a welcome growl to the couple at the Way Station but not to the lost trooper.

"No! Let me go! Noooooooooooooo!"

Her screams, the scrawl of steel against steel against gritty cracked land against the Woman's vengeful cackling rattled in Sarge's head as he fumbled at the tin door.

"Be still, Kat. You'll be safe here. Safe, safe. Do you understand, safe?"

"Hide me?" she said, falling suddenly still in his arms and ducking her head against his neck. Sarge was almost overwhelmed by the surge of tenderness welling up within him for this helpless child, this young woman who looked to him, clung to him for protection.

"Yes, hide. We'll hide you here. You'll be safe. These may be your people," he indicated the noisome beast lugging its heavy sections closer to the Station. There was no sign of recognition in her eyes. "I'll find out. Don't worry, I'll take care of you."

"Oh, will you now?"

The Woman stood beside them, leaning against the shed wall. "Isn't that called 'Aiding and abetting a trooper on AWOL'? Isn't that a Court Martial offense?"

The girl, standing on her one good leg and leaning against Sarge's strong arm, stared with outright hostility at the Woman. She had lost all fear of the scrawny, wispy-haired harpy.

"Where are you planning to keep your winsome little waif? And who's going to feed her? Cook for her? And where's she going to sleep? And what about that wound? You're no doctor," she snorted, raising her voice as the troop train came closer and closer.

"Medic's Mate my grandfather's ass, you couldn't - "

"Shut up, Woman. You know your job. You do it. Keep your mouth shut. Don't you realize this could be a matter of great national security? It's a military decision. My decision, not yours. So shut your trap and get in there and start cooking, fast. And listen..."

He took a deep breath, looking at his wife's blazing, hateful eyes and set face. Behind him the girl Kat clung to his arm, her breath coming in the short spurts he knew would prepare her to spring at this Woman tooth and claw if it came to that. She might not remember it yet, but this girl had the signs of a very well-trained fighter.

The Woman began to back off a bit, whether at the look in the girl's eyes, which he could not see, or the approach of the loud train full of hot, hungry troopers, or the sudden turn in her husband's attitude, he did not know, but with every tiny inch she backed away, inside he grew a foot.

"Listen carefully," he continued. "Don't say a word, don't write a note, don't sing a song, don't so much as blink your eyes or pick your nose or fart or do anything that'd give her away, you hear me? This is my Command, my post, and she is my ward. You work for the military. I am the military out here. I give the orders. You get all that, Woman?"

She looked at him. That look, those few seconds were filled with the endless days and years and eternities they had spent alone here in the desert warring out their own balance of power. The Woman realized that it was all over. The delicate balance had been tripped by that scraggly half-wit she-mutt bitch who had crawled out of the blue hell hole at their backs, and nothing would ever be the same again.

All right then, a new game.

The look of deadly vengeance shifted over to the grey-eyed creature and the Woman said in a very quiet voice, "I understand perfectly."

"Then get back to the kitchen and get ready," he said, opening the hutment door and switching on the lights.

The Woman walked away, glaring back at the girl, who flung her a grimy-toothed snarl before she followed Sarge into the clean white coolness of the Communications shed.

Five cars long, the troop train stretched the length of the Way Station. The front car sweated and dripped from its fill-up at the water tower. Troopers were loading supplies into its back compartment and the hatches under the four troop carrier cars, open-sided affairs with canvas sides that were all rolled and strapped up now but actually afforded little protection from anything but the blazing sun. One look at the troopers told that.

Like Kat, they were all dressed in drab battle fatigues, not any cleaner, but mostly in one piece, name tags above the left pocket, various stripes and bars and insignias of rank. The troopers loading supplies would soon be finished and take their places in the Mess, and another group would do the mechanical checkout on the troop train while the supply group ate, showered, and stretched their legs in gaming sprints around the compound.

The Woman was busy and never had a chance to say much of anything to anyone. She was never the picture of pleasantries anyway, so no one noticed a difference. But then, not many of these troopers had ever seen her before. Troopers seldom passed through the Way Stations more than once.

'They are all so young', she thought, serving their trays from the huge barrels of food in the Mess, 'so young.' Thoughts of 'I was that young once' and 'My child would be that age by now' crisscrossed her angry mind in dust flurries of envy and nostalgia and regret and hatred. All the bitterness that had lain quietly festering and regularly geysering up all these years in the well-choreographed verbal battles she and the old Sergeant had, threatened to explode from within her frail body and annihilate her entirely, taking them all with her: the troopers, the buildings, the man who was her husband, the girl in the shed, everything.

Yet even as she felt that hate bubbling and simmering, she couldn't suppress a chuckle as she slammed the lid down again on the gravy urn. That was her life. Simmering, never boiling. Covered. Contained. Even now, despite the gnawing hungry itch inside her, there was a hard steel lid atop it all. And knowing that made bearing the other that much harder.

She thought of the cool blue bottle with its etched butterfly design, and, surprised at the surcease it brought, settled her mind there, like another butterfly, alone in cobalt, cold and hard and transparent and fragile and stiff as glass. That was her then, she decided. That's who she was. She was that cobalt blue bottle hidden behind the crass clumsiness of the Troopers' Mess, the Station, her life.

A long cool sigh passed the parched thin lips, and the Woman seemed at that moment, to a trooper holding out his tray for more, to have left for another land, another place, another time.

"Ma'am?" he said, gently. "Ma'am..."

Shaking her head, she came back and actually smiled at the fair-haired youth, seeing him too as a beautifully-crafted, fragile piece of workmanship.

"There you are," she said, giving him a double helping, which was entirely against her own strict rules.

The boy didn't know that, but he felt her wistful smile, and in the midst of this barren, tractless land, with the knowledge of not knowing what lay ahead of him, that small gesture of generosity touched him deeply.

"Thank you, ma'am," he said, smiling back at her.

And for the second time in many many, too many, years, the Woman smiled back, and meant it.

Sarge had met this Commander before. He was a young man to be so advanced in rank. Few troopers lived through a stint at G'nantan Ridge. Those who did were either wounded in early forays and shipped back to H.Q. for patching and then shipped back to the front, or they deserted. Very few lived and were decorated and promoted for it. If and when that happened, the trooper was almost a hallowed saint among the military.

Commander Denton Farley was his own legend.

His family history was all military. The old Sergeant knew the stories, owned books written by the boy's grandfather, a tactical genius if there ever was one. There's a man they needed these days. He believed if you were fighting a war, the object was to win it. Go in there and win.

Hah!

Not these days.

The object was to sustain the level of hostilities and casualties and maintain the balance of tension...but why?

Here Sarge would go into an hour-long - yes, godsdammit, hour, forget your mili-metric time-keeping - rant about how it was touted about that an economy supported by a military was profitable. Sure, for the devil, the arms dealers, and the enemy.

Well, anyway, Major Denton Farley's history was good. His heritage proved out during his early training and it had been almost a test of the system to send him out to the Ridge on his first combat assignment. The Powers-that-were had to prove their system was right, and what better way than to take the prodigy, the offspring of both the old system and the new, and test his mettle in the fire of their own making.

They'd had a repair layover that time, some four years back, and the Sarge and young Farley had spent long hours in the Communications shack talking about Farley's dad, whom the Sarge had served under for a couple of months during the early Ridge Campaign, before it got so formalized and deadly. Sarge remembered the grandfather, too, from H.Q., where the old man (well, he was old to Sarge at the time, probably only forty-five, though, Sarge had admitted with chagrin when Farley teased him about it) was in charge of Scout and Spy Operations. The grandfather...ah, he was a legend.

That first night in the Comm shack, Sarge'd pulled down his trunk, laid out the sterling silver flask and round-bottom cups like a priest laying out his Holy Sacraments, and then produced from the book-laden shelf behind him an autographed copy of General Roland Farley's biography, signed by both the author and the General himself.

The boy was impressed, by the brandy and the confidences as well as the homage this crusty old back-country Sergeant paid his family. A friendship of worshiped and worshiper was struck and sealed that night. Truth to tell, Sarge never expected to see the boy again and though he thought it a godsdamn shame and was tempted

to sabotage him somehow to save him from certain slaughter, something about the boy kept him from it.

The eyes. Fiery green eyes full of confidence and courage and youthful enthusiasm. No, even if the boy, gods rest his soul, died in his first minute out on the Breaks, he deserved to die like a soldier. That was something Sarge could not deny him. Behind those eyes were his father and his grandfather, the great General. So he didn't drug the boy. Instead they got stinking drunk and stayed up all night singing and laughing and swapping tales like old mates who've been years apart and have worlds of adventures to relate.

Young Commander Denton Farley had aged. A lot. They say if you live through your first battle at G'nantan Ridge, you've lived through an entire lifetime. After that, you're running on borrowed time. The smooth face was furrowed above the brows and heavily scored down each cheek from the middle of the characteristic, straight, high Farley nose to the lower edges of his mouth. The mouth was still the mouth of a boy: finely drawn, delicately bowed. Unlike so many young military men, Farley wore no moustache or beard, as if to better display the family birthmark, a flat brown-rose mole on the left side of his chin.

But the lines around his eyes told it all. Squinting into the blinding sun and wind. Regardless of goggles and caps and helmets, the G'nantan Ridge and the Breaks were mica-flecked, red and white and yellow granite skyscrapers that glinted like jewels and spotlights in the glowering sun, creating flares around every image, blinding the unwary trooper to what was enemy, what wind, what dust, what pure illusion.

Farley had been through the Way Station an extraordinary four times now. He wore his first maple leaf this time. If he lived through this one, he'd at least have the choice to retire to a comfortable post at H.Q. and spend the rest of his days training neutrino fodder and helping maintain that tightrope Balance of Power deemed so essential in today's no-win on-going war.

No one else but Farley had gone out and come back so many times. Though he tried to put his troops at ease, chatting with them at Mess, patting them on the back, calling them all by name - he was only a few years older than some of the rawest recruits - you could tell he was different. Not only was he their Commanding officer, but he was more, much more than that. They held him in awe.

Sarge stood in the doorway of the Mess watching Farley make the rounds, being sure his people were taken care of, touching each of them as he spoke to them. Sarge remembered that as one of the General's principles: "Be with your troops. Touch them, feel them, give them part of yourself."

He even went behind the counter and personally thanked the Woman for her hard work on their behalf. And her? She... somehow, something had changed. She actually smiled at him. A...a tender smile? From her?

"Thank you, Lydia," Farley said in a quiet voice. "You're taking good care of my people. I appreciate that."

The Woman glowed. Godsdamn if she didn't actually glow. What the hell was going on here, wondered Sarge.

Farley gently put his arm around her shoulders and gave her a squeeze. The Woman nodded back at him, her throat too full of happiness to speak, and her eyes filling with tears. She quickly turned away.

"You go on now, Major Farley. I got duties to attend to, you can't be back here botherin' me like this."

Farley chuckled, "Bye, Lydia," and kissed her on the cheek, softly as the desert wind on the first night of a full moon. Then he left.

She turned back to the pots of food and stirred her tears into them.

"Now," said Farley to Sarge, all the while scanning the workers and the work, the horizon, keeping an eye on everything going on, "what was it you wanted to show me?"

"It's in the Communications shack," Sarge replied, puzzled about the Woman, but knowing he'd have years to work that one out and this one needed dealing with right away.

"Geez, Sarge, not another flask of brandy I hope. we're pulling out in forty minutes."

"Nope," said Sarge, clamping his mouth tightly and walking ahead of Farley, past the troop train and the mechanics crawling all over it.

"How's it going?" asked Farley casually.

"Weak splice on car five, sir," replied a dark-skinned woman from between cars four and five.

"Fix it?"

"Good enough to get us there, sir, not good enough to bring us back."

Silence. Neither Sarge nor Farley wanted to mention the fact that more than likely ninety percent of those getting there would not be coming back. That was the deal. But no one talked about it.

"Just get us there, Jonesy," said Farley. "The rest'll take care of itself."

"You got it, sir," she saluted, flashing him a gorgeous smile that would have been more at home presiding over a state dinner than tugging at a ratchet wrench under a troop train.

Farley didn't sigh. Sarge heard it anyway.

"Now," said Sarge, standing in front of the door. "This is maybe a surprise, maybe not. But I found it, and if it's not yours, I'll keep it. I'll take care of it until we can find out where it belongs. Deal?"

Farley's green eyes looked hard at the old Sergeant. He'd known this man a long time, as military time goes. And if what he had recently discovered was actually true, a much much longer time

than that, in a number of other times and places. Things were a bit odd at the Way Station today.

Lydia for one. She was known as the grouchiest bitch this side of the Great Canyon. Great cook, but a real bitch. A shame women had been barred from the service during her generation's youth, she'd have made a real hellion of a trooper.

Maybe she had been, in some other time and place... There had been something slightly familiar about her the first time Farley had seen her out here at the Way Station. He remembered feeling like his loyalties were being fought over by Lydia and the Sergeant, as though if he were for one he'd automatically be against the other. Lots of couples were like that, he supposed, but he sensed something deeper with these two. There was an anathema and an animosity, stronger than seemed warranted in these otherwise drab people in a drab assignment. Sometimes his skin prickled with an instinctive sense of danger when he was around Lydia; other times she seemed an understanding refuge from persecution; and other times just a nothing cog in the giant War machine that threatened to grind them all into nonentities.

Farley now knew from experience and advice from others in the Kurultai that even though you recalled a particular lifetime you might not recognize all the main players in it when they showed up in that or other lifetimes. Unfortunately, the cosmos did not issue a playbill listing all the characters for each incarnation. More's the pity, he thought.

Sarge...well, he was known for button-holing the troop Commanders into long sessions of drinking and nostalgia, though he had never evidenced any particular remembrance of another life together as far as the Major could tell. Many Commanders cut short their allotted time at the Way Station to avoid having to drink and reminisce with Sarge. A lot of them thought him a slobbering old fool caught in the past and avoided him when they could. Of course,

not many had the chance to come back again. But word got around. As word always does.

But things were different today, as he'd known it would be after what he had learned about himself and others whom he was beginning to recognize from other times. Sarge was unusually protective. It didn't matter much to Farley. Whatever it was, artifact or creature or antique weapon, he wasn't that interested. Of course Sarge could keep it. He wouldn't deny the old man that pleasure. In spite of his eccentricities he had been good to Farley. He genuinely liked the boy, regardless of his formidable lineage, and Farley knew that. He also supposed that the feelings Sarge now had were remnants or reverberations of other times and places where he and Farley had served together, playing the Great Game for the Kurultai.

But today was like that time Sarge's bitch had whelped, bred gods know how with some wild wolf or coyote out in the dunes or the Canyon edges. Sarge'd kept her and the pups in the Comm shack and showed them off to Farley and one of his aides when he came through the second time. He was proud as a father over those pups.

Back at H.Q. Farley learned that the bitch bled to death a few days after that. Birth complications. The pups didn't live long either. Someone said — they were always making up exotic stories about the people at the Way Stations — that in his sorrow and anger old Sarge took the whole lot of them in an old toesack out to the edge of the Great Canyon and hurled the remaining blind, mewling pups one by one into the blue shadows of hell, then locked himself in the Comm shed for two weeks. Strange story, but out here, maybe true.

Another litter then?

"Deal," the Commander agreed, many more things on his mind than worrying about Sarge's playthings or passing passions.

"Shake?" said the old man, holding out a beefy hand and looking the young Major square in the eyes.

Farley went along with the old-fashioned gesture. "Shake."
Sarge unlocked the door. They walked in.

"Kat!!" Farley cried.

Kat's eyes blazed alive. "Al! ..." she started to say something more, shook her wounded head as though to clear it, but then the curtain of fear and uncertainty descended again and the girl shrank further into the corner.

"Where'd you find her?" he demanded, moving quickly towards her.

"Under the water tower..." muttered Sarge, utterly dismayed that Farley knew her. "She crawled up outta the canyon."

"Kat, what happened to you?" Farley looked her over, taking note of every bruise and scratch, then searching her eyes. "Has she talked?"

"Yes," responded Sarge dully, a sense of loss and defeat already creeping across his heart.

"What?" demanded Farley in a tone not to be denied. The tone of a Commander. "What?" he repeated, his eyes still on the girl huddled in a tight ball of fear.

"Only her name. That's all she knows."

Farley crouched down in front of her, more than an arm's length away. "Kat," he crooned, "Kat, it's me, Denton."

Sarge was galled at the rise of jealousy he felt against the handsome young man assuming "his" posture with the grey-eyed girl. He couldn't bear to look at them. He glanced up at his military trunk. He needed a drink.

Farley seemed to feel the need to explain, to both of them. "You're one of my scouts, Kat. Remember? On a mission? We were supposed to meet back at Station Five. What happened?"

Kat's eyes darted up to Sarge, whose back was turned as he hauled down the heavy military chest. She looked at Farley, then began the perimeter-darting maneuver again and tensed her body.

"Has she had medical treatment?"

"As much as she'd allow me to do. Not much I'm afraid, Major Farley."

"We'll do it as soon as she's de-briefed. Alert my Medic and prepare for treatment in twenty minutes." He looked hard at the girl.

Something clicked inside her, for she didn't move away any further.

Sarge stood a long moment with the chest in mid-air, watching the girl and Farley. Her grey eyes locked on his green ones. The old man was torn again between personal jealousy and relief.

"She didn't say anything else?"

"No, Major," he repeated, "nothing. She was dazed, wouldn't even talk at first. Finally I got her to drink something and eat a little. Washed her down under the water tank and tried to clean the head wound up a bit. She wouldn't let me touch the leg. When we heard you coming she took off like a rabbit, thought she was gonna jump back into the blue hole. I had to haul her into the Comm shack over my shoulder. The noise frightened her."

"Naturally."

"What, sir?"

"Naturally," repeated Farley, moving slightly to the side to inspect Kat from a distance, never moving in so close as to spook her. "It's the drug."

"Sir...?" Sarge set the trunk down.

"It's a new process, Sergeant. We give our spies... this is all top secret now; I can trust you, can't I?" he glanced back at the hefty old man.

"Uh...sure...of course, Denton, you know you can. I mean, Major Farley, sir. Yes, sir. Top Secret, sir."

"Good." He turned back to Kat and looked her straight in the eyes as he talked. "We give our best spies a drug, a memory-lapse drug. We imprint their grid-path, tell them what to look for, open channels for information storage, and assure that whatever they find out can only be released by the antidote to the drug; which of course, only a few of us carry. That way..."

"I see..." said Sarge, for the moment caught up in the ingenuousness of the plan. "Then if they're captured, they're just like, robots, automatons. Nobody gets anything out of them. Only their name. No rank, no serial number, no mission, no information."

"Right, Sergeant."

"Brilliant. Brilliant, Major. Worthy of the General himself."

"Thank you, Sergeant. It was my idea." Farley beamed a perfectly-bred smile back at him.

"Brilliant," continued the old man, bending down to unlatch the hasps and dig for the flask of brandy.

"But Sergeant...."

"Yes, Sir?"

"We have to be alone."

"Sir?"

"So I can administer the release drug. Top Secret you know."

"Oh. Oh, sure. Oh sure, Denton... uh, Major Farley, sir. I understand. Of course."

"And no one else knows about her being here?"

"The Woman...Lydia knows, but I've ordered her to keep quiet."

"Good. Please tell her that I appreciate her cooperation, will you?" Farley smiled his most charming smile at the Sergeant.

Though he knew it was charm meant for effect, it still worked. The Sergeant nodded, feeling as though he were on a mission from the General himself. He quickly set out the brandy flask and the two round-bottom cups and backed out of the Communications shack. "I'll speak to her right away, Sir."

Farley rose and went to stand beside the Sergeant. He clasped him on the shoulder and shook his hand. "I knew I could count on you, Sergeant. And...they will hear about this at H.Q., I promise you that."

"Thank you, Sir. Thank you."

"Not at all, Sergeant. You've more than earned it. Thank you."

As the old Sergeant backed out of the Comm shack, Farley began digging in his pocket. "This takes a little while, Sarge, so see that we're not disturbed until it's time for the Medic, will you?"

"Yessir, I'll take care of it for you."

"Good man," smiled the progeny of many generations of tacticians. "Your Comm-bands still the same frequency?"

"Yessir, still the same. They're all yours."

"Coded?"

"Of course, Sir."

"Of course. Thank you, Sergeant. Thank you very much."

The Sergeant bowed out the door as though taking leave of royalty. Casting one last look at Kat he saw puzzlement in her grey eyes. She knew he was leaving; she seemed to be understanding more and more of what was going on, and there was recognition in her look, but beyond that.... Well, he supposed, after the antidote was administered.... He wondered if she'd remember that he had cared for her. If it would matter to her if she did remember. While a bit of his heart shrank within him, his chest swelled at Major Farley's praise and trust.

Turning the key to the shack door behind him and pocketing it, Sarge walked whistling in the late afternoon sun towards the Mess. He was astonishingly hungry all of a sudden.

Kat was a mess. That welt on her head was inflamed and infected; it'd have to be lanced and disinfected before they headed out. The leg, probably just a fracture. Simple splint would suffice. But they didn't have much time.

"Kat," he said, crouching down closer to her this time, "Kat, do you know me?"

The girl looked at him for a long, long time. She looked at his eyes, looked deep into them, then moved her glance around his face as if she were reading a map. She looked at his mouth, the finely carved bow of his upper lip, bit her own lower lip in consternation, stared at his dusty rose mole. A pained nostalgic look darted across her face.

"Al...?"

"Kat," he said, soothingly, in much the same tones Sarge had used with her under the water tower. "Kat, you're mine. You're my scout. You're my spy. Can you talk? Can you speak?"

A long moment of silence. Only the buzzing of the electric light in the shed and the lambent hum of Communications electronics.

"...yes..."

"Who are you?"

"Kat."

"Good," Farley nodded, trying to be efficient and hold back his desire to gather her into his arms and comfort her, kiss her wounds, and caress her scarred and battered body.

"What do you know besides your name?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?!"

She shook her head slowly. Then she lifted an arm and pointed at the doorway. "I remember him. And the woman." Affection for Sarge and revulsion for Lydia were obvious.

"And what before that? Think hard, Kat. What before that?"

She sat back, rearranging her injured leg, and began a slow rub around the back of her neck. "I...dry...thirsty...pain...I don't know," she said.

"Try, Kat, try to remember," he urged, moving closer to her.

She didn't back away this time. Her hand rubbed hard at the back of her neck. She found something and pulled at it.

"My head. I fell a long way down, from somewhere. And when I woke up it was dark. I don't know where I was or what I was doing there. I was just - there - " Her fingers pulled the thing around and Farley caught the gleam of it.

He reached down and pulled the chain up out of her uniform shirt. "It's all right, Kat," he soothed, the other hand gently caressing her neck and shoulder.

From the gold chain, splotted with dirt and stuck with brambles and thistledown, hung a little charm of fine gold wire shaped into three small butterflies. "You shouldn't be wearing this on your neck, trooper," he said, working to unclasp the knotted hasp and trying hard to hide his surprise. Where had this come from?!

Kat just sat and watched his face, with more curiosity than recognition. Farley held up the necklace, dangling it in front of her. She looked at it, cocking her head to the side, blinking her eyes, almost on the verge of remembering something.

"I...that's..."

"Do you know what this is, Kat?" he asked, watching her struggle with fleeting thoughts, trying to fit them into place. "Where did you find it? Did you take it from someone, someone out there?"

"No. It was on my neck. I guess, I guess it's mine."

"What is it?"

She shrugged, and that seemed to hurt her. She shrank back again. "Just a necklace. I don't know," she whined, reaching up to touch her head.

"No," he stopped her hand, "don't touch that. We'll get it fixed soon. Now try, Kat, try to remember something. Do you remember me?"

Kat's lower lip quivered as she looked from the butterflies to the man and back to the fragile necklace. Tears filled her eyes and she nodded. "Yes, I do...but...I don't know how...or who...", she sobbed and broke down, finally.

Then he took her in his arms and held her close, both cursing the whole damned wretched business and relieved that at least one barrier was down. They just didn't have much time. He had to push her. He had to force her to remember. It was vital. If she didn't remember now, everything might be lost. Sitting beside her, rocking her against him, Major Farley unfastened his left boot and dug down inside it. He pulled out a small pouch wound with braided thread in soft pastel colors and laid it on his knee.

"Here, Kat. Look, I'll show you."

Laying her gold chain beside the pouch and glancing over to be sure she was looking at the objects, he began unwrapping the pouch. From it he pulled a golden chain, thicker than hers yet like hers, with a small charm: four golden butterflies. Laying them side by side, he took her hand and made her touch them both.

"Remember, Kat. Remember."

But she just kept shaking her head; it wasn't working.

"Damn," he muttered. He had to break all the way through. Quickly. "All right," said Major Farley, in a most authoritarian voice, "listen, Trooper. You have your duties to perform. You have reports to give. Now straighten up."

It didn't work. She shook her head as though trying to make his words fit with something inside, but couldn't. She just looked at him and kept shaking her head slowly. All right then, straight to the other matter.

"See these?"

She nodded at the almost identical goldwork pieces.

"These are remembrance, Kat. You have this," he picked up the three-butterfly charm and held it out to her, "because something happened out there. You were able to remember three lives. Three lifetimes. Three different 'yous' all happening at the same time, in different places, in different time periods. Because you could go back and forth between those lives, and know what you were doing, where you were going, who you were in each one. Because you carried memories back and forth over what we call time and place. That you have this talisman is proof that you can remember – that you have remembered. Sometimes a trauma does it, carries you over into another one. A vision from sickness, high fever, delirium, a near-death experience."

She looked as though he'd just told her the desert outside was really a tropical rain forest. But he continued anyway, hoping to jog something to the surface.

"Mine," he held it up, "is because I too can remember. I can remember four now, Kat. I remember you in another time and place. Remember how sometimes I'd jump awake in the night, from what others call a dream, but from what we who wear these know are journeys back and forth into our other selves."

At the implications of that intimacy, she saw another of those fleeting, ungraspable visions pass quickly by. She reached up and touched his hand, then his face. Finally she was able to say....

"Did I...do I, love you?"

Ahhh, he cried inside. What's happened to her? What happened out there in the Canyon? Did they get to her? Did they break her training? Break her mind? Are they going to break my heart? Then his grandfather's voice, stern and cold, moved inside him.

"A warrior in battle has no room for emotion, Trooper. A warrior is his own sword, his own weapon. You must train that weapon, keep it sharp and ready, keep it working in top shape, keep

it only for yourself. Carry only one weapon. Know how to use it many ways. That is your advantage. A warrior with one weapon he really knows how to use is of far greater value than a whole army bristling with tools they cannot wield. You have chosen this way because of who you are, Denton, you have no other choice. Just as my father trained me, and I trained your father and you. If we have done our work well, you will learn to recognize and train others. And even in this stupid, silly excuse for a war, this patronizing enfeebling mewling de-nobling political shuffling ass-kissing, snotty-nosed excuse...you can still count for something. But do it our way, Denton. Your way. Never theirs. As you see," he turned so the lifeless sun glinted on his insignia, "even the hypocrite knows his own hypocrisy and knows our way is best and right. Even if they haven't a set of balls among all of them – on either side – to do it our way, they know us and let us do as we please. We learned something a long time ago, we Farleys. You can't kiss a moving ass."

The young Lieutenant had smiled and his stern grandfather pulled in one corner of his cropped mustache, biting back his own grin. That was one of the old General's favorite sayings. "So take care of your own ass and take care of your troops. Teach them how to take care of their own asses, and if you catch one of them trying to kiss yours, godsdammit, kick him up in rank and out of your Command."

Kat was good. Had been. One of the best. Major Farley Commanded regular troops, but he also had a Special Corps. A concession given to his grandfather and passed down through the family. Though the rules and regulations of The Wars had been drawn up and followed for eighty plus years now, (like Sarge the Major also used the old time terminology in his own mind) there were unspoken exceptions that only a few of the highest ranking policy-makers knew about. The Farley Special Corps was one of them.

The other side more than likely had their own version of it, for seldom in the precarious Balance of Power that was today's peace-through-war status quo, did anything happen on one side and not the other. However, theirs was not as effective.

In fact, Farley was becoming almost too effective. He wondered for a split-second if it was internal sabotage. If some of his own had followed Kat and the others into the Great Canyon, ambushed them before they could cross it and complete their mission, and then killed them all...except for Kat. The others hadn't reported in yet either. Would they ever find them? And even if they did, would they all be like this? Dazed, wounded minds in battered bodies? Farley's personal sadness gave way to a fine-honed anger. If the rest of them were at all like Kat, the entire mission was a failure. It would set them back at least six months of hard work and re-training. Damn!

She still looked up at him, those wide grey eyes deep and curious, wanting memory from him, wanting something to cling to, to give her wandering self a center, a hold.

And she had been so close. Where had the necklace come from? Who gave it to her, out there in the Canyon? Had she found it? Put it around her neck? When? Who lost it? It should have meant something to her.

They used to talk for hours and hours at night, gazing up into winking brightness, Farley telling her about the other times he remembered, about why he wore the butterflies. How he was beginning to remember her from another one of those times, hundreds of years ago in one of the glittering cities of Europe and then the remote high mountains of the Himalayas. They were in love then, too, he told her. It was also where he remembered Sarge from, but he had not mentioned that to her then, and probably would not now, given how things were in that other time. Farley tried to get Kat to remember her dreams, to watch the times her mind wandered, to investigate her imaginings. But she seemed afraid of it, as well as

slightly amused and skeptical. That Farley believed it she had no doubt. And that his own talisman could be what he said it was, true enough. But what proof?

Kat was a practical warrior. It was one of the reasons she'd been chosen in the first place for the Special Corps. Her logic-runs were quick and comprehensive. She had an incredibly synergistic mind and saw patterns, tangents and linkages where more experienced officers hadn't even thought to look. She was a natural for tactical espionage.

Despite that, she had been interested in accounts of dreams and other lives and had not scoffed so much as she seemed a bit in awe. Already there was the Farley Mystique about her Commander. And the fact that he spent more and more time with her did not go unnoticed by the others in the training group. He overheard her answer one day when one of the others made comment about her and the Major sleeping so close on the desert training maneuvers.

"The Farleys believe in acquisition of knowledge and skill by example and osmosis, Trooper, as well as practice and discipline. Would you care to question the Major about that? Or perhaps the General?"

Word must have gotten around, because from then on, no one said a thing to either of them about their "arrangement." And no one could ever accuse Farley of being partial in the field or in his training. If he and Kat chose to spend their off hours "osmosising" there certainly wasn't anyone below the rank of High Commanding General Emeritus who would say anything more about it.

"Yes," he finally answered her question, "you do love me."

Pondering this, it helped her fit some of those loose pieces together. The Major noticed that the Commander part of his mind was eager now to prod her memory again.

"And you?" she asked, throwing him back into that dangerous emotion land again.

'Why now?' he moaned softly to himself. 'Why now, when I've finally come to a higher realization, does she slip away like this? I could tell her. I could tell her about the fourth one, it could be the key.'

She was so close to remembering this time. The skeptic at least considers the argument. She had listened, and absorbed, and somewhere in that formerly wonderfully well-constructed mind of hers was the whole groundwork of the great network of the Kurultai as symbolized by the butterflies. That he had attained his fourth should have been cause for joy and congratulations from her. Instead it was met with a vacant stare. Yet where had she gotten this piece? Why?

There was a sharp rap at the door of the Comm shack.

"Major. It's me, Major - Lieutenant Newcomb, sir. I've come with the med-kit as you ordered, sir." His muffled voiced seemed yet another dream.

Kat jumped back, panicked. The Major just briefly noted his own remorse that she did not cling to him for safety but instead moved back and away. Something strange had happened out there. He wondered if it had something to do with the two of them, Farley and Kat, from some other time. Something he didn't yet know about. He had a frantic, turbulent remembrance of that most frightening night....

She had crawled up to place her bloody lips on his in a cold ritualistic kiss. Their hands were red, their backs and bellies streaked with sticky fluids. A strange look came over Kat. She stared at the man beneath her and slowly drew a hand across his exposed throat, as though feeling for something she expected to find and at the same time marking him with her smeared blood.

"Must we always grapple so on the fields of battle?" she husked, in a voice so unlike her own that Farley shivered beneath her touch. Where her graceful hand rested he felt cold steel penetrating his vulnerable flesh – again.

Their passion had been violent, almost wounding in its intensity. The smell of her blood mixing with their sweat, the pungent scent of bruised sage beneath their bedrolls, the icy draught of moonlight shafting through the cold night, all seemed to possess Kat. Her insistent plunging and the alternate grasping and pushing away had first confused the man. The uncanny strength of her limbs and ferocity of her teeth where she nipped at his flesh frightened him, calling to mind ancient stories of battle queens and warrior princesses. He feared she had been taken over by another life, and who knows what they had been to each other then.

Apparently, not the best of friends.

Then Farley too had been swept up by their isolation in the desert night, the aroma of man-woman pheromones and then the bitter metallic scent of Kat's moonblood. The soldier in him was used to the effects of bloodlust, that primitive mechanism that tripped off a blinding defend-and-kill drive that would release its grip only in victory or death. Wise leaders honed this basic sense into something that worked for them on the battlefield. Wise warriors learned to guard against it, to save their finely trained acumen as long as they could before giving in to the unthinking savagery that turned them from humans into animals.

He had seen her face in the moonlight: delicate nostrils flaring, swollen lips curled back in a fierce rictus, slits of eyes piercing past him. It was the face of passion, but to the sexually aroused man beneath her it was not the sort of passion that promised pleasure. Yet the male in him made fierce response to Kat's desperate questing on him. The warrior leader in him marveled again at the well of basic passions seething beneath the surface of

every human, requiring only that odd, unlikely key to unleash and override individual personality, culture, training. The Awareness in him nodded at this affirmation of bleed-through and even found amusement in the word-play. He and Kat met in bloodlust, trying to consume some undone thing from some other time, trying to balance the cosmic scales against each other's bodies.

Then thought was lost in the growing flow of whirling energy, the scalding heat of demanding caresses. Parry and thrust built to a deafening roar as every cell in his body screamed protest, howled for vengeance, and demanded release.

It was granted.

Their breath had slowed to match the distant gust of wind across the desert. Their bodies lay entwined, one flesh where they touched and melded together, cold individualism creeping in where the night air outlined self on naked skin.

Then she had made that ritualistic move up his body, drawing her hand across his throat and uttering those chilling words. "Must we always grapple so on the fields of battle?" Farley had no response. Kat required none.

She stood straddling him, staring down as though trying to place him, to remember something fast slipping away through the narrow slits of her glinting eyes. He knew it was a moment of Awareness but it frightened him, he didn't want it. It was a time he didn't remember, and from the rage and hatred this coupling had generated, he didn't particularly want to remember it. Whatever they were to each other in that time that had bled through into that night, it was a bloody, vicious, hateful thing.

Since he could not recall it and Kat had so far refused to accept the entire idea of multiple lives, Farley chose the easier way and let vague memory slide back beneath the veneer of present time. His quest for full Awareness

was overridden by the growing love he felt for this woman and by fear of what he would find out were he to press himself against his fear and try to penetrate the Veil, which was in this instance more like an armed barricade

bristling with enraged warriors. He would let it lie, in hopes of lying again with the usually calm and controlled, very capable, almost worshipful Kat he knew in present time.

He would foster his remembrance of the time he did recall with clarity, when they were cousins, blood-brothers, comrades-in-arms and much much more in those heady years of youthful arrogance and glory on the Aegean. They had loved each other deeply then, and he saw that love blooming again. He wanted it again. Different this time, they were not of the same blood, had not grown from toddlers to boys to boisterous youths together, had not sworn undying fealty and placed each other above all others, man or woman. But much of it was here: Kat's shy admiration of the famed warrior and her unquestioning acceptance of his desires, turning the merest suggestion into a military order. The first time they'd made love there was a familiarity that made their rising desires a choreography of well-remembered caresses. Afterwards they'd slept languidly in each other's arms like two exhausted children after a hard day of play.

This had been the second time. The difference was so shattering that Farley almost shrank from the thought of a third. If he and this woman, this person, male or female, were so closely linked and the Veil between them so thin, what else might come through? She turned and walked away. He sat up to watch her enter the small, icy stream and wash the blood from her body. He had shivered and touched his hand to the hot place on his neck. Whatever horror lay between them he would face later.

But now he was here. Now.

Denton removed Kat's blood marks only after he had copied down the sigils. Without any potentially inappropriate or embarrassing

explanation he later showed the drawings to his mother, an historical linguist and professor. She immediately recognized one of them as a Late Period Egyptian hieroglyph for "Transformation". Her words sent a resonance through him as though a bell had been rung and if he just listened closely enough he could discern what it meant.

"All right, Lieutenant, just a moment," he called out. Turning to Kat, he held her face gently in his hands and kissed her eyes, her nose, her bruised cheeks, the inflamed knot on her temple, and finally one soft, long kiss on her still gritty lips.

"We belong together, Kat. You will remember," he breathed into her, not caring a General's nit for whether or not he was displaying emotion. He had put yet another piece into the puzzle - a time of break-through science and glittering ballrooms, of wind-swept icy heights and smoke-dimmed ancient temples - and that gave him a strength, a surety, and beyond that, a hope for the freedom that yet another piece would bring.

The frightened, grimy Special Corps Trooper responded, slightly at first, and then with a recognized warmth, to the Major's kiss.

"Sir?" the Lieutenant knocked on the tin door again.

Farley pulled away and tucked his own talisman back into his boot, doing the same with Kat's. "Keep it here, Kat." He pulled away and looked her hard in the eyes, commanding, "You will remember, Kat. Soon. Remember love, and lives, and dreams."

"All right, Lieutenant," he called out, leaving her and unlocking the door.

Lieutenant Newcomb, the Medic, was on his first tour of active duty. His slender silhouette was outlined in the still seething light of late afternoon. Beside him, Farley saw Sarge, curious, concerned.

"All right," he said, "come in, both of you."

Sarge walked quickly over to Kat and held his hands out to her. She returned his smile and let him help her to her feet.

"One of ours, Sir?" asked Newcomb, already assaying the patient and laying out his tools, moving the flask and cups to the side.

"Apparently," replied Farley noncommittally. "We'll be taking her on to G'nantan Ridge with us."

"In her condition?"

Sarge looked at Farley, too, wanting more than anything to keep the grey-eyed girl there with him until she was more able to stand the rigors of travel.

The girl's eyes darted from man to man, unsure of who was what. Leaning on Sarge as she did, it was obvious she trusted him; after all, he was the first link to human kindness since her ordeal, whatever and whenever that might have been. Yet there was that other link, that almost-connected-brain-straining-to-remember bond with the handsome Commander. There was something about Denton Farley that summoned up a deep response from Kat, something beyond thought or conscious memory, the helping-hand-into-the-lifeboat feeling, the other side of a balancing see-saw, the feeling of complementarity that in spite of differences sexual, political, racial, always, always recognizes the other part of the Self in the Other. That is what she almost recognized, almost grasped, about Farley. Kat knew enough to know that he was an answer. What she didn't know was the question. The Lieutenant, now, was a stranger, but his manners were harmless and soft and she did not seem to fear him as he walked toward her, looking with professional interest at her head wound.

"I'll have to lance it, Sir. Take a few minutes. You'll either have to hold her down or I'll have to sedate her."

"No sedation!" barked Farley, startling them all. "I don't want her sedated."

Sarge looked at him, then quickly understood. Of course: the antidote. Any administration of a sedative or anesthetic could reverse or totally destroy the effects of the antidote, and all that effort would be lost. Sarge tried to be helpful.

"He's right, boy. I used to be a Medic-Aide. No sense using that now. Need all the alert troopers you can get, even ones in pain." He turned back to Kat. "It won't hurt that much, darlin', just a simple lancing. It'll feel better after he's done it, really. You can take that, can't you, brave strong girl like you? Climb up out of the Great Canyon like you did, hell, you can do anything."

Kat smiled wanly at Sarge and looked over at Farley. His eyes asked her to do as he wished. He was relieved to see a nod of trust towards him, too.

"Okay," shrugged Newcomb. "Bring her over here under the light." He noticed the limp. "What's this?"

"Just a fracture, I think, Lieutenant. No bones poking through, slight hematoma, already yellowing around the edges." Sarge waited for Newcomb's reaction to his own analysis of his girl's condition.

Newcomb sighed, wiping beads of sweat from his clear, young brow up into short-cropped blond hair. "All right, trooper, up on the table, then. We'll take care of the leg first. Sarge, you spare some of that brandy?"

Sarge looked at the young Medic with high disapproval.

"Not for me, sir, for her. Just a little calm-me-down. That okay, Major?" His voice carried just a tinge of exasperation. Farley nodded.

The Comm lines began to buzz and pop. Sarge looked up, startled, as though this was the last place in the world he expected to hear from anyplace else in the world. "Oh," he said in a small voice.

Farley nodded him over to the console and moved to take his place beside the girl, helping her up on the table and stretching the injured leg out straight.

"Do I know him?" she asked Farley, nodding toward the young Medic.

"No," Farley said quickly, then, glancing at the Lieutenant's curious look, shot him a well-who-knows-what-happens-out-there-in-the-desert look.

Newcomb shrugged back; who was he to question the Major. But the Major knew that Kat did know Newcomb, only not from this lifetime. He had a tendency to show up in their various times together, as well as when what Farley called the Core Kurultai Team was not all together. He thought of Newcomb as a supporting player and had often wondered about the lives in which Newcomb and the others who peopled the secondary ring of his own existence played starring roles. The odd thing about self-consciousness is that it typically places the self in the starring role of the play one sees going on all around, even when what one is doing is not really all that significant.

And interesting how the more advanced spiritual trainings worked to get one past that self-centered perspective and see things from a higher, wider, significantly vaster perspective of multiple time and place. Even the old adages 'walk a mile in his shoes' and 'put yourself in my place' carried beginning instructions on how to increase perspective. One side of Farley's mouth turned up in a smile as he recalled how valuable a couple of lifetimes as an actor were, learning totally new perspectives for each role. Now if the Kurultai could figure out a way to get everyone in the Great Game to do a significant series of lives on the stage or before the cameras, it could go a long way to teaching people how to loosen themselves from the grip of their supposed only existence and begin to see their overshadowing spiritual souls as the actor and each life as a role. Mystery plays and rituals

were supposed to help along the process that way, but in Farley's observation, too many so-called participants were just observers and kept the experience encapsulated within their own emotions rather than applying it more widely, as was the intent.

Newcomb's narrowly focused intent was now a positive thing, though. Rolling up Kat's fatigues pant leg, he began running his trained fingers along her warped shinbone. She winced, but never cried out, didn't even grip Farley's nearby hand for support. Newcomb looked up at her. "We can do a closed reduction, thank the gods. I'm going to have to pull it slightly, Trooper - what's your name?"

"Kat," she answered before Farley or Sarge could get the word out. They exchanged a hopeful glance, the two men.

"All right, Trooper Kat, you take a big swig of this brandy here, and then Major Farley's going to hold you by the hips and I'm going to pull and twist from the ankle. It may hurt, it may not, but it'll be over quick and that's it. Okay?" He handed her the precious flask.

Sarge watched from behind the console, busy tuning in the proper frequencies for Comm remote with both H.Q. and the base camp at G'nantan Ridge.

Kat gave a short nod, took a long pull on the brandy flask, let out a long hot breath and shook her head from the sharp sting. The brandy quickly suffused through her weakened system; both Farley and Newcomb felt her relaxing beneath their grasps.

"Okay then, Trooper Kat," Newcomb began in a crooning manner, "what we're going to do here," he ran his hands up and down Kat's leg from boot top to knee again and again, caressing the skin and putting the patient at ease with his touch, "is, we're going to pull down to free the bone edges from each other and then twist it just a hair to the right. Not much, just a hair. You were a lucky girl. This isn't bad at all." He smiled, glancing from her eyes back to the distorted line of shinbone beneath his hands. "In fact,

this is going to be much easier," one hand stayed just below the kneecap and the other moved smooth as nightwind down to her ankle, "than any of us thought. You are a lucky girl, Kat." He smiled at her once more, and, satisfied the brandy had taken enough effect, gave a quick jerking twist with each hand in the opposite direction.

Even against the static of the Comm console they all heard the scrape and crackle of bones notching back together and Kat's gasp of surprise.

"There now. That wasn't so awfully bad, was it?" he continued, rubbing along the fracture line to stir the blood back into circulation and realign the muscles as best he could.

Kat swayed back against Farley's chest for an instant, then caught herself and sat up again. The sharp pain, swift and brutal, was like a sword-cut, she thought...oddly, for they didn't use swords anymore, those were ancient weapons. In and out. You didn't really know if you'd been hurt or not. All she felt now was the Major's arms around her waist and his chest at her back and the Lieutenant's soft white hands massaging her leg. The brandy burned like the sun seen through a dust storm: hot, fiery, and diffused.

"H.Q. on the line, sir," interrupted the Sergeant.

"Give them the report, Sarge," said Farley.

"Me, Major sir?" Sarge was awed at being given the responsibility, and extravagantly pleased, too. What a day of changes! "They want your code, sir."

"Oh two five nine niner kay bee six oh double two."

Sarge repeated the code and began relaying the arrival time of the troop train, how many troopers aboard, e.t.d., weather conditions, and all the other mundane essentials he'd heard the Commanders give for years on years on years now, always thinking he could do it just as well as they. Yet here, on his first chance, his voice faltered slightly and he kept having to clear his throat.

"You ready for the rest of it, trooper?" asked Newcomb, turning her face upward to the light to inspect the festering streaked knot of red and yellow on her forehead.

Kat nodded.

"This one's going to hurt," Newcomb warned her.

She simply nodded again.

"Good trooper, sir. If she's not ours, she should be," the Medic said to his Major.

Farley smiled and shrugged, a who-can-tell sort of look.

"They want to know your e.t.d. revised, sir."

"Same as before: on schedule," Farley snapped.

"They report a storm in the pass, sir, ten K's out of G'nantan Ridge Crest."

Farley stopped and thought a moment. "Ground speed?" he asked, meanwhile following Newcomb's instructions and holding Kat's head tight against his chest, exposing the fiery wound to the bare light of the Comm shed.

Sarge went back to the console. The Lieutenant produced a long lancing needle, and bringing it up on Kat's blind side, pinched and picked up a piece of the infected skin, slipped in the thick hollow rod. Days of pus and brutal exposure oozed out the other end of the needle tube. He didn't even have to apply suction, just pressed continuously from perimeter to needle hole to coax out the poison. Kat's jaw muscles were taut and her left hand on Farley's forearm was a viselike grip but she didn't utter so much as a gasp.

"Erratic, sir; three to seven K's per hour... er, per metriday."

"Same e.t.d., Sarge. We'll either beat it through or we'll ride it through. That speed won't hurt us. Take a little paint off the engine in the lead, that's all."

Sarge shook his head in admiration. Any other Commander would have waited until the storm cleared. But Farley wasn't like any other. That's what the enemy'd expect, too, so even smarter on his

part to move on. Sarge wished he were thirty years younger and could go with them. "Yes, sir."

"All right, now some bakycycline, a bandage, and you should be fine in a day or so, Kat," Newcomb patted her on the shoulder and smiled at her. "Going to have to have some protective face gear, though, if you're going through that sandstorm with us. Any contamination and I'll have to do it all again."

"Bandage it up tight, then," Farley suggested.

"Can't. Too much pressure or friction'd start up the whole process again. Break out one of the storm-suits and use the hood, that'd be good enough."

"You've got a big O.K., Major," smiled Sarge, basking in the reflected light of Farley's courageous drive through to base camp at G'nantan Ridge.

"Then notify base camp, Sergeant. Same code, every third item, then the rest in sequence."

"Yes, sir," said Sarge, quickly going back to work.

Lieutenant Newcomb administered the infection-fighting drug, cleaned off the rest of Kat's face with swabs and disinfectant, tied on a simple porous calf brace, and rolled down her pants leg. "You're a good patient, but I hope I never have to treat you again."

Kat smiled at him, a half-meek, half-superior smile that threw him off a bit. He looked up at Farley. "Will that be all, Major?"

Farley nodded. "Good work, Newcomb. Very good work."

"Thank you, sir," said the young blond medic, quickly packing up his bag.

The Major picked up the flask and gave Sarge a questioning glance; Sarge nodded, and the Major poured out a healthy measure of the fiery liquid into one of Sarge's prized round-bottom cups and handed it to the boy.

Reluctant to take it, he passed an awkward moment looking from face to face. But his Major nodded and held it out again.

Who was he, a lowly lieutenant, a medical trooper, to disobey what was almost an order from his Commander, much less that his Commander was a Farley? He took the cup, raised it to the three of them, bowed in a quaintly archaic manner to his patient, and downed the warm golden liquid in one breathtaking slide.

"Thank you, sirs," he gasped, eyes watering and insides feeling like he'd just swallowed the setting sun.

Both Farley and Sarge chuckled at him. Poor boy'd probably never so much as a sip of good brandy in his entire life. GuzzBuzz was all that most of the troopers ever got: fit for a buzzard, guzzle it quick.

"Thank you very much, sirs," Lieutenant Newcomb said, weaving his way to the door of the Comm Shack.

"Base Camp notified and confirmed, sir. They'll have a guide party meet you at the pass. Green ground flares, three to each side."

The door opened, blasting the electric coolness with red dusty light and heat as Newcomb walked out, then isolating the three of them again as it slammed shut. Sarge looked at his watch. He saw it in new-time, read it in old time, then had to transpose again to new-time. "Not much time left, sir."

"Here, Kat," said Farley, moving her gingerly over to the edge of the table.

"Is it fixed?" she said, moving her hand up to her head.

Farley caught her hand. "Don't touch it. Yes, it's fixed for now, but it'll take a while to be completely healed. You'll have to wear a storm-helmet later on." Since she seemed intent on touching the wound, he guided her fingers gently around it. "He did a good job. The boy's a good medic."

"Too bad he's going..." Sarge stopped his lament under Farley's sharp stare. The old man looked quickly at Kat, but she hadn't seemed to notice anything. "Well, how about a drink, Major? A little toast to send you on your way?"

"Fine, Sergeant," the Major said, on edge but wearing the fine veneer of years of training and breeding.

"What do I do now?" asked Kat, glancing from one to the other.

Sarge was painfully silent. He still wanted to keep her. He wanted to care for her. To carry her upstairs to the quiet white room in the northeast corner and tuck her into the old-fashioned bed, pull the quilt his own grandmother had made around her shoulders and let her sleep peacefully, quietly, for days if need be. He wanted to come in in the mornings and raise the shades to the first clean rays of sunlight streaking across the polished wooden floor, bring her hot breakfast and cool tea and sit in the ancient rocker beside the bed and talk to her, just talk to her. There was so much he wanted to tell her. Things he hadn't told anyone, ever. She would be a living repository for his faded dreams and hollow ambitions and all the things he'd ever wondered about but had been afraid to tell anyone. He wanted to pour that fullness of his life that lay all bundled up inside the hollowness of his existence into this innocent, grey-eyed girl who could absorb everything he could give her and more.

He could imagine her sitting there, cool lacy white sleeves puffed out over her slender arms, sipping tea, watching him, listening as she did now, her head half-cocked to the side, listening as though every word he said was the most important thing she'd ever heard in her entire life. Sarge wanted so badly to say, "Stay here with me. I'll take care of you, you'll make me happy."

Instead he looked at Major Denton Farley, who was going to decide for all them.

"Now you come with us, to G'nantan Ridge," stated Farley, as though there simply was no other alternative.

"Are you going?" she addressed Sarge.

Farley felt that unwarranted emotion again, seeing in Sarge the essence of the same.

"No, Kat, I can't. I belong here."

She glanced up at Farley, querying. He nodded.

"But maybe you'll be back. I'll see you again, trooper, soon," he added hastily. "Isn't that right, Major?" That was out of line and they both knew it, but the girl looked up again at Farley with such a warmth for the older man, her savior, that the Major, the fine-honed weapon of war, once again displayed why the Farleys were so different.

"Yeah, Kat, that's right. Maybe real soon you can come back and visit the Sergeant."

"Good," she said, nodding her head, a bit woozy from the drugs and the brandy, smiling warmly at the old man. "Then...that's good."

Sarge could barely hide the poignant pain behind his own smile. He knew beyond a doubt he'd never lay eyes on this precious girl again.

Outside, the rough troop train engine turned over, sputtered, turned over again, caught, and surrounded the tin Comm shack with its insistent predatory purr.

The troops were moving towards the train with that unique military combination of moving quickly while still dragging one's feet. No one wanted to be seen slacking off, but none of them were anxious to move to the next step. Those in charge of various aspects of the mission reported to Farley with, "All fueled up and ready, sir," "Supplies laid in and ready, Major Farley," "Artillery has the new coordinates, sir," and "Gunnery briefed and ready, Major." To each of them he gave an approving nod and salute, and sometimes a pat on the shoulder, all the while struggling not to reveal what he knew for a certainty -- that most of them would not

return from this mission. What kind of a leader was he to take his people into certain death?

Major Denton Farley, scion of a great military family, winner of medals and Commendations, was beginning to tire of his own nobility.

Breathing in deeply of the dry sere air, he held his breath, and in that moment, between the in-breath and the out-breath, that space which he was taught was where all creativity and any magic there might be in this world originated, Farley made a conscious connection with the other lifetimes he could recall. Some were military, in the Greek and Persian Peloponnesian Wars and the fin-de-siècle British Empire; and some were not, in an ancient white megalithic city perched dizzyingly high in the Andes and in some vast system of underground caverns whose locale he still could not place. That one he thought might be a time yet to come, as far as the regular historical timeline went.

But of all those other remembered lives (and Farley was well aware that there were probably many more to which he was not consciously connected and for which he wore no butterflies), this life he currently was living seemed the most useless. What was the point of this endless war except to perpetuate a system that seemed to have a life of its own and required human lives to keep it going. It was ridiculous. More than that, it was dreadfully criminal.

It reminded him of stories about the ancient Indian juggernaut, a huge machine with giant stone wheels pulled along ceremonial causeways by thousands of religious devotees. To grease the wheels, some mothers would place their children beneath the rolling, crushing stones, certain that their sacrifice would bring good fortune to the family and instant paradise to the small soul.

This war was a juggernaut, and both sides were ritualistically tossing their precious youth beneath the relentlessly rolling, continually crushing wheels. To what end? Farley saw no increase in

good fortune to anyone but the arms merchants and power brokers. He knew enough to know that paradise was only one of two places. Inside one's own mind was one, but that was fleeting at best. Denton himself found precious little paradise within his own restless and questing mind, save in the rare but comforting stillness of an exquisite inertia after a battle or after making love, most recently with Kat.

The other place of paradise was the remote possibility of a very remote place or state of existence gained only by a tiringly long succession of incarnations, the eventual awareness of all of which supposedly liberated one from the wheels of rebirth - but only if the battle between the Light and the Dark had been resolved. Farley was beginning to very much doubt that would ever be the case.

In those other times and places they were all playing the Great Game with focused attention, with a sense of mission, with actual progress, or sometimes actual defeat. But never this stalemate. What had gone wrong? How had they come to this point and how long would it last? He fleetingly passed off the thought that perhaps this period in time, where all humanity was caught up in a constant state of war that never went anywhere, might be that place of stasis between the in-breath and out-breath of the species, or this latest version of the species.

Even if that were true, it had gone on way too long and was threatening to squelch any of the better qualities of humans in service to the automaton of continuing war. The wrong god was holding sway, though Farley didn't believe in any gods at all. He knew better.

Who was here now? Kat, yes, but there were many mysteries there. His grandfather, General Roland Farley, had been Kurultai, but Farley had not awakened in time to learn much directly from him. The Sergeant here at the Station he often knew as Fred in other times and places, but the man was only half-awake and really

no good to the plan this way. Fred's wife Lydia...there was something about her Farley just could not yet grasp. Lieutenant Newcombe, even were he to wake up, was typically a helper and not a thinker and doer.

What about the Dark Side? Where were they? Lysander and Eccritus, then Brentye and Bonner, and all the others. Were they all on the other side of the battle lines? It would be quite unusual were the lines so cleanly drawn. Farley had enough self-knowledge to smile with chagrin, partially recalling his own vacillation between sides during the ongoing Sparta-Athens-Persian conflict.

There were holes in his long-view timeline, dark sections that offered no insight into what had been going on behind the scenes, among the Kurultai. Finding regular history was easy enough, and sometimes you could easily read the tracks and results of how the Great Game was really going. But the Major had a sense that of late there was some dangerous malfunction, a communications gap between the ultimate mission and those here in incarnation to carry out that mission. Perhaps...he dared to think about it, and as he did, the small spark of excitement the thought provoked led him to believe he might just have picked up the tiniest thread of a great idea, and if he pulled on it....

Everything hinged on more humans coming awake and using their powers of conscious creativity. Perhaps they needed to activate a few more of the ancient power centers scattered across the globe and amp up the transformative energies.

Ah, but where were they, those yet undiscovered or un-activated power places?

"Major!" Lieutenant Newcombe loped up to Farley, his face a conflict of emotions. "I --, she --, there's something --."

"What is it, Lieutenant?"

Newcombe glanced over his shoulder as if at a ghost. "Her uniform, sir, Trooper Kat's uniform turned white. And then...it was back to the right colors again. I think...."

Newcombe backed away a few steps from Farley's harsh look and shook his head like a dog trying to shed a bug from his ear. "Maybe I've been in the sun too long, sir... Sorry, sir."

Farley looked across the staging ground to where the old Sergeant was helping Kat make her way to the troop train. "Did anyone else see it?"

Newcombe shrugged, shrinking more into himself with regret that he had troubled his Commander with a personal weakness of his own. "Sorry, sir... it was probably just my eyes reacting to all the light... I'm fine to go the Ridge, Sir. I'll just take some sight vitamins and wear blackout goggles all the way there. I'll be fine, sir. Don't worry. Sorry, sir..., " He ducked and hurried away.

Farley tried to hold back the fear creeping around the edges of his heart. If Newcombe had been right, and if Kat's clothes had gone to white, then two things were going on. Newcombe was getting closer to recalling another lifetime and Kat was closer to going over. To dying in this here-and-now.

Ah, but maybe, he grasped at the reprieve, maybe it's because she has been so close to death what with being lost and injured out in the Great Canyon. Or maybe it's the last of her injuries fighting the medicines. After all, he and the Sergeant had not observed any shift. With a sigh of relief, Farley decided that Kat was fine now, would be fine, and would be coming back from G'nantan Ridge. And after that, together they would leave the military and go searching for a way to break this deadly stalemate of perpetual conflict. Perhaps they'd even take Sarge with them, and Lieutenant Newcombe.

But for now, he was still the Commander, he had a mission, and there was enough of his inbred nobility left alive that Major

Denton Farley was determined to do his duty to his mission and his troopers.

The Commander sat in the rear of the last car of the troop train, looking back as it made the wide curve, watching the Way Station shrink behind them. Kat was beside him on the outside. He thought to protect her as much as possible from the curious stares and questions a new addition to this regiment would bring. He was reminded of the first time he brought Chareas, as this Kat had been back then in Athens, into camp near Salonica. There'd been outright hostility then, particularly from the handful of men and women who were used to sharing his favors, military or otherwise. That they were cousins worsened the matter. How could these others compete with blood? They'd all spilt blood with Alcibiades, but these two had issued from the same fountain of it. Their leader was not to be allowed the same family and childhood ties they had. He was more than mortal and he must be theirs alone. It was a hard first campaign for Chareas.

Eventually Chareas had proven himself not just a poet and historian but also quite a capable fighter, and eventually there was a begrudging acceptance of their leader Alcibiades's favourite.

Kat was waving back at the Sergeant like a small child. Farley waved, too, to the old Sergeant and to Lydia. They stood side by side, one thick arm and one scrawny, raised and waving lazily like reeds along a riverbank on a still day, moved by invisible currents beneath the surface of the smooth water.

The wind was rising, exchanging hot daytime air for the slightly less hot twilight air. It whined around the edges of the outbuildings, rattling tin doors and shaking the loose edges Sarge would probably take way longer to batten down than was necessary.

Behind the house the windmill's rhythmic creaking screed a resigned return to the boredom of the time spent waiting for the troop trains. Nothing else would ever happen here.

The setting sun cast long grotesque shadows across the face of the two-story house. Fist-sized rocks cast shadows like tombstones across the otherwise dead landscape. Behind it all, beyond the reach of sullen, red darkness that was sunset on the desert, stretched the gaping blue threat of the Great Canyon.

Glancing at the young woman beside him, Farley shivered. The shadows, the Canyon, the vacancy behind those usually vibrant grey eyes. His own recent victories in the battlefields and in the Kurultai were shadowed by her fall.

His only comfort was in knowing that this was not the only time and place they came together. It was not the only communion the two of them had. Perhaps by working harder on the other sides which he now finally understood and remembered, he could spur her into remembrance in this particular lifetime. He knew she must know something of the Great Game, have some sense of being part of the Kurultai because now that he remembered other times he knew she was there with him. Against the hollow of his ankle he felt the soft silk pouch and the hard outlines of the butterfly charm. He knew she could feel the same, minus the pouch, sharp against her own ankle. But did she even notice it? What the flying hell had happened to her out there? Would that there actually was a drug, an antidote, to whatever it was that had happened. Why couldn't he see it? If he had indeed reached a peak of remembrance, then why couldn't he help her more, and more quickly?

Words from the Old General came floating through his mind, weaving a binding spell around his questions as the Major turned from the wavering scene behind them to stare at the back of his trooper's necks, car after car of them, out into the desert as they headed, so many of them, for the last battle – their first. "Every one has to find the answers on their own. You can lay them down in

front of them, you can prop their eyes open, you can tell them what they're looking at. But until it all comes together in their own head, it won't make a damn bit of sense to them. There's nothing more you can do for your warriors. Lay it out, make 'em look, tell 'em what it is, then wait. Those who see it, they're the ones you want. Those who don't, never will. Forget them."

But he couldn't forget Kat. She had already seen so much. He had known that before. From the first time. She had come to him full of knowledge and skill. She just wasn't aware of the source. And now, now that he knew, it pained him, frustrated him not to be able to tell her, to show her.

Before. Before this had happened, whatever it was that had happened out there in the Great Canyon, they would have lain tonight looking up at the stars and he would have talked to her about other times and other places where they had done much the same thing. As different people in different bodies in a different time and place, but the same thing. She would have smiled at him indulgently, wanting to believe but unable to make that leap. And then finally he could have talked to her about things he knew she would remember. He could have named names and described places. For now he knew that his fourth time was one she had helped him to see. He knew that in that time she did remember. But this was not yet one of those remembering times.

And where had her butterflies come from? Their arrival was always unexpected, mysterious, serendipitous. His had come yesterday morning in the early dispatches brought by his aide-de-camp just before they pulled out for G'nantan Ridge. A few weeks before, on training maneuvers in the far desert with his Special Forces, Farley had lost his four-butterfly chain and charm. It frightened him at first, thinking perhaps he'd also lose the conscious memory of those other three lives. But that had not happened.

And then, the night before they were to leave, he'd had the dream, the one that was as real as all the others, so real he knew it for reality. So real that the next morning, simply by slipping back into the memory of the dream, he was able to smell the fresh salt-sea air, hear the flutter and whip of heavy canvas sails in the morning wind, see and know the men beside him in the ship. Personalities, quirks, histories, wounds, proclivities.

Farley's dreams had never been vivid until the last few years. Now they propelled him cycling and spinning into a different yet somehow familiar reality where he interacted with people he seemed to have known for a long time, walked along paths the end of which he knew, and realized there was an entire history, future, and expanded present within the parameters of the dream itself. How is it, he wondered, that these whole worlds are created from our minds? Or are they separate worlds indeed, where other parts of our minds live and move and have their being?

At breakfast, the Aide had brought in the package. It was from his mother. Attached to the thick envelope was a note, simply inscribed with her impeccable script. "Son, I wanted to give you something noble and meaningful to commemorate your fourth campaign. But somehow this seemed more appropriate. I don't know why, perhaps it's a portent of more to come. All my love, Mother."

Inside was the chain with the four golden butterflies, the center one set with a small emerald. He had never spoken to her about this, except once to ask her about dreams. She was silent for a long moment, staring out the window panes of her garden room.

"Your father used to say," she began, so characteristic of the gentle woman whose entire life had revolved around Farley's late father, "that the memory of reality and the memory of a dream were no different. I do not know." She sighed and Farley had understood that she really did not know and regretted her inability. Yet she had been the one to "award" him the token of achievement. The workings of the cosmos were strange indeed.

Kat stretched her leg out on the running board of the car.

"Does it hurt much?"

She shrugged. On a body used to the rigors of Special Forces training and now having been subjected to who knows how many days of privation in the Great Canyon, it wasn't much by comparison.

"Where are we going?" she asked again.

Farley put his arm around her shoulders and moved closer to her. He didn't want the other troopers to hear her. Doubts or confusion were not allowed.

"We're going into the war zone, Kat."

"War zone?!" A few heads inclined slightly in their direction.

He spoke louder to cover the moment. "The action. What we've all been waiting for. Our chance to right the wrongs of the years. Now, Trooper, now we have our chance."

She looked at him like he was talking crazy, like *he'd* been knocked on the head instead of her. Indeed he was talking crazy. It was like the ancient story of a species of small furry animals that every year or so took off on a mad dash for the sea and threw themselves headlong over glacial cliffs into a frozen, suicidal cold. It was called "balancing nature." According to some that's what all this war was supposed to be about.

But it wasn't. Not really. Still, most people went along with it. That was the true craziness. They knew it was crazy, but they did it anyway. The numbers were against the Farleys and the Kats and the Special Forces. But they were allowed to exist anyway. Maybe because of that. Because they didn't really seem to be a threat, yet they kept things interesting. But what was this now?

"War zone?" she repeated in a shocked whisper. "Why?!?!?"

Oh, gods, Farley cried inside.

"Because it is our duty," he answered softly, hoping to keep her voice down, too. The rumble of the troop train helped drown some of their conversation. Ahead of them rose a tall pillar of red sun-glintoned dust, sparkling golden at the top and fading as the

last beams of sunlight disappeared up the column. The storm. It was faster and closer than they had estimated.

"Down shields" came the order, passed back from the engine car. Hands shot up to unwrap the thick canvas shields, flapping them down against the open-sided cars as dozens of fingers worked to secure snaps and ties to the metal struts.

Kat sat dazed, watching the frantic activity as all around her the troop car was shadowed and enclosed in a stifling dusk. Farley reached across her and tied down the ends of the protective canvas.

"What is it?" she moved closer to him, shrinking down beside him.

"Sandstorm," he replied, working furiously on the ties. It should have been her job, as outside rider, but... Once done, he pulled out the storm helmet.

"Here, Kat, put this on. It'll keep your wound clean."

"What?"

"Keep the dust out of your wound."

She felt at the spot on her head, already smaller and cooler.

"Oh," she managed. "Then what?"

Oh shit, he thought. That mind. It's starting to work again. She's going to realize where we're going and what we're going to do. "Never lie to your troops," came the Old General's voice, just when Farley needed least to hear it. "If they can't trust you, who can they trust?"

"Then we get to base camp at G'nantan Ridge."

The wind hit just as they entered the canyon. A fierce buffeting, howling, gritty wind that blasted against them from the desert, driving the troop train towards the high canyon walls.

"But..." she seemed to be remembering something vitally important and wouldn't pull on the helmet. "That...that's where...G'nantan Ridge?..."

"Yes?..."

"On no!" Her face went ghostly pale. He couldn't stand it. Farley put his mouth over hers so he wouldn't have to look at her eyes. She cried into him, tried to pull away. He held her closer, tighter. Not until this very moment did he remember completely either.

Oh, gods, no....

For an instant Kat melted into him. Then she shoved away, jerked at the snaps of the canvas shields and fought off his attempts to hold her back.

"No! Kat!" he cried. The other troopers were staring at them curiously through dust goggles. Before he could stop her, she had slipped between an opening and was out of the troop car. Gone.

"Kat!!!!"

The young woman felt an intense grinding against her entire body, as though she was a tiny creature being rubbed between two giant pieces of sandstone. Blurs of metal and gritty high walls and the intense weight of an irresistible force ground her life out between a canyon wall and a troop train, rolling her around and around and around in a painful, struggling, strangling grind of hot, ripping, shredding, stifling pain. She screamed along with the wind and both kept on howling until Commander Major Denton Farley could not hear anything anymore.

THE KURULTAI SERIES

History keeps repeating itself so that everyone
has the opportunity to be and do everything.

Time and space recycle *ad infinitum*;
the boundaries of experience and age are not fixed.

A group of souls called the Kurultai
intertwine lives through time and place.

Their Mission is the enlightenment and evolution of humanity
from Tribal to Individual to Group Consciousness.
Maintain the uniqueness of each; collaborate for the good of all.

Lovers now, Warriors another time, Scientists, Magicians, Clergy.

Sometimes siblings, parents, rivals, compatriots,
sometimes total strangers.

Who kills whom, who is loyal, whence cometh betrayal?

And always -- the battle between the Darkness and the Light.

But how can you tell who's on which side when
the players in the Kurultai keep changing between lifetimes?

AMBER WAVES OF GREED

Katy is a glamorous gangster moll in 1950s America, helping her mob boss boyfriend by using strategy and tactics from her remembered lifetime as a warrior-poet back during the Peloponnesian Wars in ancient Greece.

Now if she could only retrieve her memory of who his rival boss really is from back then, before the tensions boil over again in deadly far-reaching violence.

*"We are all just dreamers,
looking for the right place to wake up."*

THE CANYON OF FORGETFULNESS

Trooper Kat crawls up out of a canyon in the Australian outback in 2163 with no memory of who she is or how she got there. The old Sergeant who runs the isolated supply station takes her in against the objections of his embittered wife.

When a troop train arrives on its way to a doomed battle, the handsome, idolized Commander reclaims Kat, one of his spies who he remembers from other lives together. As her memory starts to return, Kat knows she must escape, or die.

"Whose life is this anyway?"

CONSTELLATIONS

Catherine is a brilliant young Englishwoman making an international reputation as a scientist. But she has troubling visions of other times and places. Her grandmother practices black magic and is overly interested in what Catherine knows or may find out about the Kurultai.

At the New Science Frontiers Conference in Vienna in 1900, Catherine meets a British officer who claims to know her from other lives and whose compelling presence increases her visions. She begins to believe him, against the disapproval of her American fiancé. Meanwhile, the grandmother plots to destroy all the scientists whose work could advance humanity. If she is also rid of her potentially very dangerous granddaughter, all the better.

"Humans are at the crossroads of evolution and idiocy."

HEIR APPARENT

Brother Charles is a monk in 14th century France who knows he's really special. His English lady-in-waiting mother always tells him that as she secretly trains him in the ways of the Kurultai. As the first-born, illegitimate, unacknowledged son of Charles the VI, King of France, Brother Charles has become a pawn in the Great Game, though he considers himself a major player.

He makes his way, along with another young monk he both favours and tries to protect, to a royal gathering where the fate of France is to be decided by those pulling strings behind the scenes. Along the way the monks trace the pilgrimage path of Cathedrals, encounter secret Masons, learn about the Black Virgin, and find themselves at the center of power-plays both bigger and more immediate than they imagined. Will Brother Charles see the truth before it's too late?

"Perhaps we ourselves are the answer the cosmos seeks to find."

THE BLOOD-DARK [SEA](#)

Famous Athenian general Alcibiades is charming and brilliant with a talent for being on the winning side in the Peloponnesian Wars, even if that means switching sides...a lot. He's also a member of the Kurultai, trained in ancient mystery schools in Greece, Egypt, and Carthage.

His cousin and adoring lover Chareas is a soldier and poet-historian, concerned Alcibiades is going over to the Dark Side. Chareas fears he may have to kill his beloved Alcibiades in order to save the progress of humanity.

*"In the struggle between the promise of humanity and despair,
who will win if we do nothing? And who will win if we do
something, anything?"*

Subsequent stories are set in Tibet in the early 1900s, Egypt in
2012, Mezo-America in 500 C.E., the Gobi Desert, and more.

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