

Fiction

# Darkness Upon the Face of the Deep

By Harlan Ellison

  
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Morning of the day after All Hallow's Eve dawned with a brightness that cast orange and rose light over the mountain of Hindustan. Hysteria seemed to have possessed the birds: they rose in a canopy, spreading their great patchwork wings, proclaiming in a minor key another year of safety.

In the valley shadowed beneath the grandfather mountain could be heard the sound of nails being prised from the heavy slats used to board up the villagers' windows. And the laugh of the first adventurous child as he held his nose and yanked off the wreath of malodorous henbane protecting a front door. The fountain had been unplugged and its music rose toward the black thorn of the escarpment. The nilgai, sheep, and goats had been chivvied together in the shallow caves where they had been secreted; and now the

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shepherd girls drove them up the ramps from underground. Fresh flowers were laid on the pedestals of the thirty-two idols circling the rustic plaza.

When the mountain of Hindustan creaked, and then rumbled, the villagers paused in their activities, relief drained from their faces, and they turned to stare up at the dark spire.

Slowly, then more rapidly, the face of the mountain showed a fissure. The rent widened and very softly from within the crevice a sooty shadow began to seep out. It could not be said to shine—it was an absence of illumination—but it spilled out into the air and scintillated, neither smoke nor fog.

The mountain split.

The villagers had held silent for longer than might have been prudent, but when the shapes began soaring out of the great black wound, rising in a cloud to throw a blade-shaped shadow across the sun, a covey of snakelike, winged blood bats, they knew they had been falsely lulled into thinking danger had passed. One of the gods had lied, or the seer had miscalculated the year.

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Then they screamed, the music died, and they rushed to replace the boards across their windows.

In the Deccan, on the plateau that lies between what were known as the Narbada and Kristna rivers, some of the oldest men and only three of the very oldest women remember the stories passed down through many generations, of the village of Antagarh. Not the tiny village of that name to be found on maps of the present day, but the original Antagarh, where the sigil of even more ancient days had been hidden. Where all in a morning the darkness descended, and feasted, and finally lifted, leaving only one child.

This little boy, possessing sight only in his left eye, had been lost on the face of the mountain (it is said), and thus escaped the fate that befell his village. (It is said.)

No mother, no father, no home waiting at his return later that day (for Antagarh no longer existed; just a plain of pumice on which nothing grew for three hundred years; no blade of grass, no weed, no shrub; where no line of dawn sunlight passed again). The child crawled through the gray dust, and saw a cloud of black wings rising

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away from the valley, snake bat shapes climbing toward the staring idiot's eye of the sun.

Alone, he lay in the wasteland and watched as his past disappeared. His future: sailing toward him borne on the wind that blows forever between the stars, the wind that carries ancient and encoded messages of indecipherable night.

\* \* \* \*

On rare, perfect nights when the stars had swung into extraordinary alignments unnoticed by dozing humanity, the glyph would slowly begin to glow. As if breathing deeply with the light from stellar lamps, the engraved stone seal would become lambent, radiating warmth through its deep orange surface. The signs stood out perfectly, barely smoothed by erosion: circles, crescents, hooks, human heads, hands, and designs that were neither animal nor human. A coherent script utterly beyond understanding, giving itself

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up to no known mechanical system of decipherment. The radiance stronger as night deepened.

They were hiding in the ruins of the sphinx gate at Alaja Hüyük, waiting for the Syrian mercenary in the employ of the Israeli MOSSAD, who was coming with supplies from Damascus to guide them to Mamoula, when they perceived the light of the glyph. They held it and marveled, somewhat fearful, but now certain that they were onto something significant.

Bobby Shafka said, "Is it warm?"

Loder shook his head. "Not at all." He passed it over and Shafka held it in his palm, then placed his other hand over it. He nodded agreement.

The glyph grew brighter. "It's like that little mirror you use to keep your pipe lit," Shafka said.

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Dennis Loder drew deeply at the sandblast briar. Sweet silver smoke trailed up against the cool night. He reached into one of the many pockets of the sleeveless thermal vest and took out the pipe mirror. It was called a Micro-Sun, and it was a device so simple, yet so extraordinary, that it made one think it was some incredibly ancient device rediscovered in modern times. A disc the size of a half dollar, it was only a concave, highly-burnished gold circle set into plastic. But when held over the dying dottle in the heel of the bowl, it reflected and concentrated the pipe's own heat back into the bowl and renewed the burn. Loder laid it atop the mouth of the briar and took three short puffs. The smoke thickened.

"No, not exactly like it," he said. But he knew what Bobby meant: both of the devices seemed magical. Then he raised a hand to stop conversation. "Is that the man?"



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"I didn't hear anything," Shafka said, covering the glyph so its light would not pool out from them. They sat with their backs to the cooling stones and listened. "Did you hear something?"

Loder waited a moment, listening; then he relaxed again. "I guess not. But he should have come already, don't you think?"

Shafka smiled, "This really isn't your line of work, is it?"

"I told you that when you conned me into coming."

"Little late for regrets, don't you think?"

"Dead is what we can get if any of the brotherhood finds us. I'm not like you; I'm a shard digger, a pencil pusher. You've been trying to get me in trouble for thirty years. I was doing pretty good at resisting your blandishments..."

"Until I promised you fame and fortune?"

"Until you preyed on my childhood weakness for movies about sunken treasure and lost cities."

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They had been friends all their lives, had grown up three houses apart on the same street, Dunster Road in York, Pennsylvania. Dennis had been the milder of the pair, bookish and shy, tall for his age at any age, and determined to become an archaeologist; Bobby Shafka had gotten into trouble the first time (as best as Dennis could remember) in grade school: he had somehow, impossibly, manhandled a three hundred pound rotary mower buggy up four flights of stairs from the groundskeeper's shed, to the roof of the school building, worked it to the edge, and precariously balanced it there, slowly tipping back and forth over oblivion. The secret dream he had shared only with his best pal, Dennis Loder, was to become the captain of a tramp steamer, plying dark and dangerous waters, like Wolf Larsen in the Jack London novel.

Dennis had gotten his degree at Syracuse University, his master's at Cambridge; he had worked digs in Iraq—including Nippur,

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Nimrud, Tell al Rimah and Choga Mami—and in 1980 had assisted on the site at Tell Brak, here in Syria; but he had been the less adventurous of the pals, and he had gone on staff at the National Geographic Society magazine.

Bobby Shafka had conned and gladhanded his way into a scholarship at Wharton, made a few contacts, dropped out after a year and a half, signed on as a flack for the pulpwood industry, working out of their Manhattan association offices, made a few contacts, moved up to a middle-management position with the largest lithographing conglomerate on the East Coast, made a few contacts, went into partnership with a triad of young attorneys who had opened a hot private club in TriBeCa, made a few contacts, and cut a deal for time served and testimony with the D.A.'s office when the triad was busted holding two and a half million street-value crystal meth and Bangkok heroin.

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Bobby had made no serviceable contacts in a holding cell for sixteen weeks, and now he was back at starters, hustling a main chance. He was under contract to *The National Enquirer* to unearth a four-thousand-year-old Hittite tomb in Mamoula, based entirely on his ability to con and gladhand the expatriate Aussie associate editor ... and his possession of the authenticated glyph. Which he had come to hold ... having made a few contacts.

And he had conned his best friend Dennis Loder into coming with him, to a country that had excelled for more than twenty years in the spawning of terrorists pledged to killing every American they could set eyes on. It hadn't been easy; but when Bobby promised to give Dennis the first publication rights for *National Geographic*, and let him have the glyph studied, and showed him the irrefutable proof that the glyph had been turned up in 1872 with the discovery of the Hamah Stones of the Hittites (and had been kept secret by Subhi

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Pasha, known in Europe as Subhi Bey before his appointment to Damascus), Dennis had been seduced by the towering ghosts of Schliemann, Rawlinson, Belzoni, Carter and Lord Carnarvon—and Saturday afternoon movies—and he had joined with his dangerous old pal on their first adventure since the old neighborhood.

Curiously enough, it had not been Loder's association with the Geographic Society that had effected the impossible task of smuggling two Americans into forbidden lands. It had been the *Enquirer's* far-flung network of snitches, *paparazzi*, palace servants, ex-CIA agents, mercenaries, and turncoats-for-hire that had put together the route. They had come in by way of Dubai and Bahrain, across the neutral zone between Saudi Arabia and Iraq, and northwest across the desolate Al-Ha-Arah—it had taken six weeks, done so circuitously—to the penultimate drop-off at Alaja Hüyük where they would be met tonight by the man they had heard called

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Yaffa Al-Mansur. (He had also been referred to, during their journey, as Ibrahim ibn Abd-an-Nasr, Abu Rumaneh, Ibrahim At-Turki, Bashar Al-Sherrif, Homa Baktiari, and even Shain, though Bobby swore when he had first been recommended to them by the Aussie associate editor, he had called him Abdullah.)

But Yaffa Al-Mansur was now a full day late. They had been hiding in the ancient stones through the blistering heat since dawn, waiting. And now it was night, and they were alone; and the engraved stone seal that had brought them half across the world to find an impossible secret had begun to glow.

Bobby opened his hand and the light illuminated the ground around them. Loder gestured with the stem of his pipe. "This is something we didn't count on."

"I suppose I should be freaked," Shafka said. "But it's kind of, I don't know, kind of thrilling. Know what I mean?"

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Loder chuckled. "Should make one superlative headline for that rag of yours: *Ancient Aliens Leave Deadly Laser Stone!* If you can find some woman who'll swear she was impregnated by the alien who left it, and she's discovered by amniocentesis that she's going to give birth to a baby with two heads that look like James Dean and Elvis Presley, you'll never have to work another day in your life."

Bobby made a rueful face. "From your lips to the ears of whatever gods are engraved on this stone. I'm so broke I couldn't buy hairpins for a goldfish."

"*If* the tomb is there; and *if* it's 2000-1300 B.C.E.; and *if* those gods are still around and can hear us, try praying to Karhuha, Sarku, and the goddess Küpapa. Even the Phoenicians held them in high regard." And he intoned:

*Great old Hittites left this here,  
How long ago is still unknown.*

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*The world is breathless, that is clear.  
There is nothing like the lion stone!*

Bobby said, "And that is what...?"

"From the lion stone at Karatepe. We don't know as much as we need to know about the Hittites. That's why I'm with you."

"Sitting in the dirt in the middle of the Moslem brotherhood, waiting for a man possibly named Yaffa..."

"Or Abu, or Abdullah, or Bashar, or Shain..."

Bobby picked up the chant. "Or Manny, Moe, or Jack."

Loder revived the glow in his pipe with the little golden disc and said, "Do you know what 'Syria' means?" Bobby shook his head.

"Trick question," Dennis said. "Uncertain origin. No one knows what it means. There was a country named *Suri* in Asia Minor, mentioned in Mesopotamian cuneiform script, about 4000 B.C.E. Not likely it's the Greek abbreviation of *Assyria*. We find this tomb that probably doesn't exist and we might get our best clues."



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Bobby clenched his hand around the glyph. "I'm about to shine it on with this thing. We could still be sitting here at the turn of the century. He's not coming."

The voice came from behind and above them. "Ah, but he is here, great gentlemen." They jerked with terror, and spun half around, looking for the speaker who had come upon them without a sound.

He stood on the carved stones above them, and looked down, his face hidden in the shadows. He seemed taller and more formidable than some Arab double-agent. He seemed to be an emissary of the ancient gods whose names Loder had invoked.

But when he climbed down, they saw that he was just a man. An almost perfectly square man, nearly as wide as he was tall, with plump cheeks and a spotty beard. "Yaffa Al-Mansur, strictly as advertised," he said, pronouncing it *advertize-ed*.

"You're late," Bobby said, dropping his voice into the range he used for inept switchboard operators.

Yaffa waved away the comment, settled down between them and pulled a pop-lid tin of pudding from his djellabah. He produced a

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folding military-issue spoon, yanked off the lid of the pudding tin, and began eating. "I have been snaking and moving, great gentlemen. Taking roads where no roads exist, ducking and dogging—"

"I think you mean 'dodging'," Loder said.

"...ah! Even so. And as a regrettable consequential, I confess to a fractional tardiness." He paused, spooned pudding into the foliage of his beard, then said: "And pray kindly tell me, great gentlemen, which among the multitude many is your favorite American blues guitarist?"

They stared at him. The stars shone like ice, the glyph lay in Bobby's hand brightly lit, the distant slicing of a jackal's cry echoed past them, and they stared.

"For my own good self," Yaffa said, "there was none more exalted than Blind Lemon Jefferson, though I now and yon feel that Son House was the nonpareil of Delta blues. And which of them whom you adore is your favorites, great sirs?"

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Two hours later, after Yaffa had relieved himself and slept, they moved out. Toward Mamoula, that their guide called Ma'alula, 33°50'N, 36°33'E, where speaking neither Arabic nor Kurdish would be of any help. For in Mamoula, in the mountains, though they have lost the ability over the centuries to write it, the hidden residents speak the Aramaic of Jesus's time, precisely as the Christ spoke it. Toward Mamoula, carrying the light.

\* \* \* \*

These were the direct descendants of the Hittite Empire that had ruled the Levant till the end of the Late Bronze Age. Craggy men naked beneath their djellabahs, their curved knives hanging by a thong across their chests and below their armpits; wearing the traditional skullcaps; sandals or handmade boots according to their occupation. Dark eyes studying the two infidels and the intruder from some great city in the lowlands—Hamath, or even Damascus, of which they had heard. These were the blood of the Akhlamu, and

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the Aramaeans; sinew of Canaanites and the Aramaean neo-Hittites who crushed Shalmaneser III at the battle of Qarqar in 853 B.C.E.

They had driven through the night and late into the next day. There had been a Land Rover, fully stocked; even to several bottles of San Pellegrino and Vichy water. Yaffa had babbled happily of Lightnin' Hopkins and Lonnie Johnson, and of having worked briefly with Malkin of the MOSSAD, who had walked up to the fugitive Eichmann on Garibaldi Street in Buenos Aires in 1960 and said, "*Un momentito, señor.*" Bobby Shafka had slept fitfully, unable to find a place for his spine; and Dennis sat silently (save when he was forced to make a sound in response to Yaffa's paeans in praise of Tampa Red's left hand). He smoked his pipe and held the glyph, and found himself sinking deeper and deeper into fear. This was more than stone. What had he been thinking of, to let Bobby suck him in this way?

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The Rover hit a scree as they began their shallow ascent, and Loder was knocked against the door with enough force to jam his crazybone. He gave a yelp. Bobby slept on. Yaffa chuckled lightly, navigated through the sheet of coarse debris mantling the mountain slope, and spoke softly to his shotgun passenger.

“Will you be taking treasures from the land, Dr. Loder?”

There was none of the punkah-wallah “sahib” burlesque in his voice now. He spoke flawless English, with only the faintest trace of the Levant.

Loder looked at him. Yaffa's face was faintly lit by the dial glow from the dashboard. His features were sharper now; almost nothing left of the simpering pouch-cheeked caricature that had found them near the sphinx gate. “Perhaps,” Loder answered. They rode in silence for a while, then Dennis said, “I was wondering when you'd divest yourself of the funnyface.”

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"A man must play many parts to survive, Doctor.

"And what will you do with these treasures ... should they exist?"

"I'll take them back and use them to help decipher the history of the land, and the people who came and went here."

"You know Hafez al-Assad has decreed death on the spot for archaeological pilferage. This does not frighten you?"

"Yes, it frightens me."

"But not as much as you are frightened by that glowing stone seal in your vest pocket, do I perceive correctly?"

Loder placed the little golden pipe mirror atop the bowl and puffed the tobacco to a cheery glow.

"That has a marvelous bouquet," Yaffa said, watching the ruts that served as road, skirting the talus at the foot of a steep declivity.

"Oriental tobaccos? Latakia; perique, perhaps?"

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Loder shook his head. "One whiff of latakia and I'm on my back. No, it's just some Virginia, and a nice toasted cavendish. Why have you revealed yourself to me, and not to my partner?"

"Because I think you have been duped by friendship. I think that you regret this expedition, that you are a decent sort of man; and I know you are frightened."

"You saw the glyph glowing?"

"Yes. When I found you. I was above you, studying you, for many minutes before I declared myself."

"And you don't much care for Bobby, is that it?"

Yaffa shrugged. "He is like most men. He lives on the edge of the moment. He is like the dust. It lies a while, then is blown away."

"He's my friend. We grew up together. I hope whoever hired you to guide us can count on your fidelity to both of us. We're in your hands, you know."

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Yaffa turned his head for a moment. He looked at Loder, and said, "Yes, I know that. And we are all three in the hands of Allah."

"Does Allah have any knowledge of this stone seal? Some random bit of minutiae that might make our little journey safer and more productive?"

The Syrian brought the Land Rover to a slow, smooth stop. He turned in his seat and stared at Loder. "I was paid to come and meet you, to take you to Ma'alula where, I was told, you will put to advantage some information as to the location of a very old Hittite tomb. I was told no more than that, and in truth, I need know nothing more. But now I have seen this strange compass you follow; and I say this to you, Dr. Loder: if it were I, my fear would send me in another direction. Where we go is not merely into the mountains. Where we go is back in time. These people live as they lived four thousand years ago, for the most part. They have been touched by



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civilization, but it is a gentle, not a lingering touch. What they know, they know in their blood and bones. And if there were not others depending on me for the money I have been paid, I would never have spoken to you back at the broken stones. I would have slipped away and left you to fend for yourselves."

He stared out the windscreen and added, "My greatest fear is that Allah may feel the need to close his hands around us harshly." And in a silent moment he shifted out of neutral, into low, and began climbing once more.

Now it was day, and they moved carefully through the hard-packed clay of Mamoula's only street. Above them the mountains loomed painfully, old men with arthritis.

No one spoke to them. Women carrying early morning water in leather sacks stepped between the wattle and daub buildings to avoid them. But they were watched. They passed three small

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children playing in a mud puddle. An impossibly old man sitting on a stool in front of a house, holding a crooked staff as if it were a symbol of office, closed his eyes and feigned sleep as they detoured toward him. They retreated to the center of the street. Each time Yaffa approached a man, young or old, to ask a question—the object of his attention turned his back and walked away.

At last, they stood at the foot of the rutted trail that climbed from the end of the village street, through talus slides, into the higher mountain passes. They had gone from one end of Mamoula to the other, and there was no help.

Yaffa said to Loder, "I know how to do this. Will you let me do what is necessary?"

Bobby answered. "Do what you have to do."

Loder said, "It doesn't entail hurting anyone, does it?"

"No," Yaffa said. "I have children of my own."

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"Just *do* it, man," Bobby said urgently. "I didn't come all this way to go back empty. This is *it* for me!"

Yaffa turned and walked back down the street as the eyes of the town followed. Bobby and Dennis stood where they were, and watched. Yaffa went to the children playing in the mudhole, stooped, and lifted a five-year-old little girl high in the air over his head. The child, taken by surprise, was dumbfounded for a moment, then laughed as the squat, cherubic stranger whirled her around high above. She laughed and laughed, until the mother came running from one of the houses, shrieking in a lost tongue. Yaffa stood his ground as the woman flew at him. He set the child on his shoulder and raised a hand to stop the woman. Here and there on the street others took a step toward the intruder; then they waited. He had the child.

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Yaffa spoke quickly and earnestly to the woman. Neither Dennis nor Bobby understood a word. Bobby leaned toward Loder and whispered, "What language?" Dennis shook his head. "Not Arabic, not Kurdish. I don't know. It may be Aramaic, or some dialect that's transitional. I've only heard Aramaic spoken once, at a university lecture. It didn't sound anything like that. I have no idea what he's saying ... but I can guess."

He paused. "If the woman brings a man to him, I think I know what's going on."

As if to Loder's surmise, the woman turned toward a group of men halfway down the street. She took several steps toward them, and one of the younger men shouted to her. She stopped, looked back at Yaffa and the child, as if insuring their immobility, and then shouted back something to the young man.

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In a moment, after hurried conversation in the group, the young man strode manfully to Yaffa, stood before him, and held out his arms for the little girl. The child, gurgling at her father, was content to perch on Yaffa's shoulder.

Yaffa spoke softly but at length to the young man.

Finally, the man nodded, and indicated Yaffa should follow him. Yaffa gestured to Bobby and Dennis to come; and he turned and walked along behind the young man; toward the ancient on the stool before the rude domicile. The young man went to the withered elder, kneeled before him deferentially, and spoke passionately. The old man listened for a time, then stopped the younger with a raised finger. He looked up, directly at Yaffa, and nodded almost imperceptibly. Yaffa instantly handed the child to the woman dogging his footsteps.

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The family rushed away, and Yaffa motioned Shafka and Loder to follow him as the old man slowly and painfully rose and went into the hut. They followed.

\* \* \* \*

The Land Rover was abandoned two days' climb into the Qalamun Sinnir. The two guides assigned by Mamoula's oldest resident had been terrified of the vehicle, and they had ridden ahead on stumpy-legged, hairy ponies, leading three more by tether reins. Above six thousand feet the trail that was no trail vanished entirely, and the slopes covered with garigue—a degenerate Mediterranean scrub—and maquis—a thick scrubby underbrush—became too steep; and the shrub ripped loose and clogged the wheel wells. They left the vehicle and mounted the ponies.

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For the most part, they rode in silence. Once, Yaffa fell back and asked Loder, "Now I must know. How do we come to *this* place, of all places? Is it the writing on the seal?"

Loder mopped his brow. "No, we can't decode the engravings. It was more than a hundred years ago, and it was just like what happened to us in Mamoula. A stone turned up, with carvings. They traced it back to Hamah, but the people wouldn't tell them where they were. Eventually, they were located, and that formed the first body of information we had on the Hittite Kingdom.

"The seal was also found. But it was held by one in the employ of the Subhi Pasha, who delivered it to him with everything he had learned of its origin. Which wasn't much. It was a minor find, and lay unrecognized until 1980 when an art cache in Baghdad was rifled, and the glyph began its travels through the international art theft underground."

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Bobby, who had been listening, broke in. "During my brief and really terrific stay at that country club with bars they called a Federal Pen, I got to know Frondizi, the art forger they'd put away for those Modiglianis, remember? And he'd gotten it somehow; and he was ready to turn it into a little nest egg for his twilight years, y'know? So I made a deal with him, got the *Enquirer* interested because of the lost tomb angle..."

Yaffa said, "Tell me of the tomb."

Loder held his pipe and the reins in one hand and, with difficulty and a pipe nail, cleaned the dottle from the bowl. "The glyph is a funerary seal. It came off a sarcophagus. Hittite. We think. Maybe not. Maybe older. No way of knowing because the inscriptions are beyond us. But the Subhi Pasha's man was very precise as to where the tomb was located." He pointed above them. "Up there somewhere, above Mamoula."



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"And the glowing of the stone?" Yaffa demanded.

"We didn't know about that," Bobby Shafka said. "It didn't start till the night you found us."

Yaffa was silent for a time, then said, "I think you are two very foolish men." He spurred the pony and pulled ahead of them, saying over his shoulder, "And I am the most foolish of all." He fell in behind the guides.

They were approaching 6500 feet, and mist began to lattice their passage.

\* \* \* \*

"There's something I've never told you, that I ought to tell you."

"Why tell me now?"

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"Who knows what the hell can happen. I've been riding scared these last few days. When those guys from Mamoula saw this valley..."

"Not valley. This is a meander belt: part of an old flood plain. Very uncommon at this altitude."

"Whatever. When they came out of the pass and saw this, and they wouldn't come down, and they took off ... well, who the hell knows what can happen. And I just wanted to tell you something I never told you."

"Which is—?"

"You gonna be able to handle it?"

"Bobby! For pete's sake, get *on* with it already!"

"I'm gay. Always have been."

"That's your big secret?"

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"Well ... pretty big secret, yeah. My mother never even knew. That's it, anyway. What, you don't think that's something important enough to tell your best friend?"

"Bobby, I've known you're homosexual since we were fifteen."

"You have?"

"What do you think, I'm smart enough to be the one person you picked for this lunatic trip, but I'm not smart enough to know you're gay. Truly, Bobby, I wouldn't sell *you* that short."

"Man, I hope I don't have to say I'm sorry we pulled this caper. That stuff in the Subhi Pasha's papers about 'losing your immortal soul' scares the crap outta me!"

"Little late for you to be getting religion, isn't it?"

"Well, you know ... when you spend your life in the closet, and every time some asshole talks about faggots and pooftas, you just get to believe you're going to Hell, and you sort of give religion a

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pass. But what d'ya think, there's something to it? We could be going into someplace we ought not, what d'ya think?"

Loder drew on his pipe, put the little gold reflector over the mouth of the bowl, and sent a cloud of smoke toward the evening sky.

"What I think, pal, is that it's not just a little, it's a *lot* too late to be worrying about it."

They had camped on a cusp. He pointed to the meander belt below them, to the low central hill encircled by the stream. "That's the core. When we go down there, and we dig, I think we're going to find it's a burial mound. And I think we're going to find something no one has ever seen. And I think we're going to have one deuce of a time lugging it out of here and down these mountains. And I think we should have been better prepared, and maybe had a helicopter standing by, to get us out of here. And I think a whole *lot* of things,

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Bobby. But about losing 'my immortal soul,' well, it's too late for us to try to buy into God's good graces."

Night fell suddenly, and it grew cool enough to come out in the open, and Yaffa found them, and led them down to the meander core, taking with them only the pony carrying water and digging gear. And as they neared the central hill, Bobby Shafka looked at his friend, about to say something from their childhood; and he saw the glyph glowing in Loder's vest pocket; and he was frightened at his impertinence, thinking he could pull this off. Just one more harebrained scheme. And this time, lost up here in a valley filling with mist, following a hundred-year-old line of bullshit, he had finally bet too much. This time, he was sure, he was going to take Dennis down with him ... and that was *that* for their immortal souls.

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The wind rose. The wind that blows forever between the stars, carrying ancient and encoded messages of indecipherable night. And darkness upon the face of the deep.

\* \* \* \*

The ground split. The glyph became unbearably bright, and the earth split. Yaffa had gone. One moment he was there, beside them, and a moment later ... gone. He had not abandoned them; they never thought that for an instant. He had done what any sensible man would do: he had gotten out while he could. There were those who depended on him, he'd said so. And they were alone with the sarcophagus.

The glyph had shone so brightly, through the heavy duck of Loder's thermal vest, that he had pulled it out, and averted his eyes lest he go blind. Yes, staring into the sun.

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For no reason he could name—no more reason than that which told him he and Bobby Shafka had brought the stone seal home—he laid the glyph on the mound. And the earth split.

They went down the ancient steps carved in the stone, and came to the entrance to the portal. It stood open. When the earth had split, it had made itself an open way.

They needed no flashlights. The glyph illuminated the hewn stone walls of the passage that descended at a shallow angle beneath the meander belt. And far below, ahead of them, lay the sarcophagus. Now they knew, without question.

“If you mention immortal souls one more time,” Dennis said tightly, and he ground his teeth, “I will do you in myself.”

And they came to the great chamber where the sarcophagus lay.

\* \* \* \*

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It was large, but not beautiful. Stone box and lid, deeply etched with inscriptions, and a frieze of kings and servants.

Loder bent over the casket and said nothing. He ran his hands over the surface, and looked more closely. Once, he motioned Bobby to him, and pointed to the fractured sigil niche where the glyph had been positioned. "I don't think it was there when they buried this," Dennis said.

"*They?* What 'they'? Isn't this Hittite?"

Loder shook his head. "It's been reused. It was made for someone else. Look at the lid. That's the name of the king who was buried in this box. It's an early use of the Phoenician alphabet. I'd date this no earlier than 1000 B.C.E. The glyph is at least three thousand years older ... that's if we believe the tests the *Geographic* paid out a fortune to have run on it." He walked around the sarcophagus, Bobby following in awe.



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"These scenes carved on the sides and ends. They're typical of Canaanite and Phoenician art, with a mixture of Egyptian and Asiatic motifs. No, this box came later than what was buried in it."

"So what's in it?" Bobby said, in a hushed tone.

Loder walked to the wall and slid down. He pulled out his pipe and loaded it. "What turned the Sahara from a fertile land into a rocky desert? What caused the collapse of the great empires in the twelfth century B.C.E.? Desolation, unexplained, for Greece in the seventh century. Why?"

"Stop it, Dennis. You're doing a job on me, so knock it off! What's in the box?"

He lit the pipe and drew deeply. The rich smell of black cavendish, the first alien odor to find its way into this tomb, filled the musty chamber. "It's 1200 B.C.E. In the heart of the Anatolian plateau the dynasty of Hittite kings, treated on equal terms with the Pharaohs of

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Egypt, rulers of all they surveyed, part of the greatest empire the world has ever known, abruptly comes to an end. Their capital city is abandoned. Why?

"This coffin dates to that period, if I'm worth the faith you had in bringing me along. I know pretty much what I'm talking about; but there are experts; they might..."

*"What the fuck is in the goddam box, Dennis!"*

"I don't know."

"So what, then? We're both scared out of our minds, this damned rock acts like it wants to jump up and open the casket itself, we've come all this way and if we ever get back it'll be a miracle. So what's it gonna be? Do we do the thing or do we get the hell out of here. Or what?"

Loder stood and walked to the sarcophagus. Bobby Shafka was a step behind him. He watched as Dennis placed the agonizingly bright

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sigil at the line where lid and box met. Light flooded from the glyph, spread like lava in that thin line, circumnavigated the casket, and met in brilliance where it had started.

As they stepped back, the lid rose as if lifted from within.

At the same moment they heard the beating of wings.

Down the length of the entrance passage, they heard the beating of wings.

Bobby pulled a pistol from his inside jacket pocket. Dennis had not known he was carrying a weapon.

He faced the mouth of the chamber passage, and he said softly, "I'll kill myself before I let them take my soul!"

Then, in a moment, as the chamber filled, there was less time left of life than they could ever have imagined.

Dennis screamed at Bobby. "Soul? *Soul?* Where do you get *that!*? They don't want your soul ... *they're just hungry!*"

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Then, in an instant, despite the roar of Bobby's gun, there was no time left at all.

And they were table scraps of the great, long banquet to come; at the groaning board laid only for the one-eyed child. (It is said.)

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