

Chapter one: Shaman of Darkness

For we know in part, and we prophesy in part I Corinthians (Ch. XIII, v. 9)

Cusco, Peru: September 23, 2010

“They have a prophecy down here.” Gabriel was looking out of the old B-727 window as he spoke to Amanoyama. The airhostess was of the old school, this being South America, which meant she was dressed to give male passengers coffee, sandwiches and mainly a secret hard on. Fully tarted up with bright red lips and plenty of foundation, the twenty-something year old announced that seat belts should be secured. As she did so, an overhead baggage compartment flew open yet again. Still chewing on her gum, she smashed it back into place with a deft thwack of her hand, causing her uniform to open enough to reveal a full rounded breast below. Looking at her thick, black hair, Gabriel realized he was back in Latino female heaven.

“I would love to hear about it if we survive this landing,” the big man replied with a wry smile. Amanoyama knew that the approach to Cusco was one of the world’s least enviable landing spots.

From Lima, the plane had flown south; alongside the snake-like chain of the Andes. Gabriel could see the fondly remembered Mt. Salcantay in the distance, towering at well over 6000 meters. He flashed back on that struggle to reach the cloud temple, *Puyupatamarca*, at night. He had been chosen as support guide for a hugely overweight, black woman from Chicago. While the rest of his party were already eating in their tents at 3000 meters, he had to painfully watch her walk five paces forward and then stop for five minute breaks. If she had been cute, the moonlight walk might have been not just bearable but probably very memorable, he now lamented.

One thing had distinguished that excruciating slowness over ancient Inca stonework: He had seen Salcantay Apu majestically bathed in moonlight. It was spectral in its simplicity. It was no wonder the local Quechua people called it a sacred spirit, an *Apu*. Every mountain was sacred to these indigenous people. In Shinto Japan it had been the same. Even today, Mt. Fuji was not simply a beautiful high mountain. No, it was a *spirit*. Gabriel clearly understood this from his own experience of these two different cultures.

Cusco lies in a tightly formed valley surrounded by fairly high mountains. To navigate into it, the plane had to gradually snake down through corridors of solid rock and that was where the air currents tended to be very unstable; consequently, planes were regularly grounded until winds grew more favourable. The wind was surely a

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spirit too for those who belonged here. It was an invisible one that commanded both entry and exit from the “Navel of the World” - Cusco.

Gabriel had spent many lazy hours in his beloved Cusco airport just waiting to take off. As the dilapidated Taca Airlines 727 swung east for its final approach, he wistfully returned to his student days as an acolyte priest. Now, the Jesuits seemed a galaxy away, as his eyes lingered over the sublime sight of the stewardess. She was bending over to adjust seat positions just ahead of him. If this was sin, then humanity was hopelessly doomed, he allowed himself to ponder with a smile. The old broken nose gave him a De Niro look and the curls on his greying black hair fell to his shoulders. He was still athletic at the age of fifty-eight.

He felt the same every time this valley came into view. It was surely the magic of those long dead Incas: the magic of other worlds. It was a magic he knew was fast disappearing from the consciousness of modern men. He and his small party glimpsed the dark tiled roofs of Cusco’s rustic housing rising up from below the clouds. The land was brown and dusty.

Outside Masami's window she spotted words engraved on the mountainside: “Look everybody! It says 'Viva El Peru'.” But there was no time to look. *Thump!* Wheels bashed into the runway inelegantly. There was a round of wild applause from the Peruvian passengers as the old Boeing came to a halt. This was something the stunned Japanese had never experienced. They could now see they were not that far from the end of the runway as the plane turned towards the terminal. In fact, they were painfully short of any remaining runway. At this altitude of over three thousand meters, air was scarce. With no wind at all now, air resistance was even scarcer, making both take offs and landings a breath stopping affair. Even Gabriel still prayed to the Madonna on every flight. A fallen Jesuit he might be, but prayer was something that remained integral to his life.

“Move slowly, my friends,” he warned. “When you get off the plane you will be breathing very thin air. You risk fainting if you make sudden movements. Mary, I know you are fit but I have even seen teenagers pass out here from not paying attention to this. Nijitora san, you might want to cut back on smoking today. We do have a mountain to climb and a jungle to trek. Best condition, right?”

The diminutive Nijitora gave a sarcastic “Sure, boss!” look at Gabriel, but the still sprightly Mary was quite sure that she had definitely better pay attention. At seventy, she could not afford to go down in a third world country. Her grey hair was offset by sparkling blue eyes making her seem far more youthful. Although quite stocky, she had a stamina that Gabriel now knew came from deep inside a very wise

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soul.

Amanoyama's weight would be a major factor here, thought Gabriel. His sumo-like body had to work much harder to deliver oxygen to the muscles at this elevation. Besides that he had never even been in the Southern hemisphere; being a tough *yakuza* down in this other world would simply not be enough. Gabriel knew that better than most. Here the rules were all upside down. Here the mountains ruled.

There was the jet lag to consider too. The flight from Europe had been via Ariba in the Caribbean. The one night stopover in Lima had been so short they later agreed that they might as well have stayed at the airport. Gabriel had shown them peasants living in massive old sewer pipes at the side of the road going in to Lima. Above these hovels, gigantic billboards displayed white, toothy beauties and their cool looking hubbies. There were perfect white teeth everywhere. These models of modern, money magic (MMM) were standing next to a brand new Mercedes SL. Gabriel had sighed deeply as he looked up and then down again at this travesty of common sense. South America was to him a festering shit hole of fiscal impossibility. Millions of peasants had flocked to this city; lured by such advertising inanity. They were a long way from Tokyo. Here it was so obvious who ran the country and from where.

“Ok, Gabu san! We are definitely paying attention now,” gasped Masami as they crossed the tarmac to the baggage area, dramatically holding her hand to her throat, as if trying to get air. Within five minutes they were in oxygen-deprived Cusco terminal and drinking raw coca leaf tea. The plant was sacred down here in Peru. In fact, it was so sacred that the Incas used to count distances by how many times they chewed on a wad of it; they kept it stuffed in between their gums and cheeks. Science had recently confirmed the plant was rich in minerals and vitamins that were highly beneficial to the human body. It was even written up in his in-flight magazine, in both English and Spanish. The article was entitled, 'From Sacred Plant to Scared Plant.' In his native Spanish, he read:

Cocaine is the world's most powerful stimulant of natural origin. South American Indians have used cocaine as it occurs in the leaves of Erythroxylon coca for at least 5000 years. Coca-chewing promotes clarity of mind and a positive mood. Traditionally, the leaves have been chewed for social, mystical, medicinal and religious purposes. Coca has even been used to provide a measure of time and distance. Native travellers sometimes described a journey in terms of the number of mouthfuls of coca typically chewed in making the trip. This was a "cocada" - the time or distance and man could walk before a coca pellet was exhausted.

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Now though, fabulously wealthy drug lords had found a way to turn that healthy combination into an expensive and slow killer. They used kerosene and other ingredients to transform the raw plant into a deadly concoction: cocaine. It provided short term physical and often sexual boosts; along with that came feelings of near omnipotence. When made into the deadly crack that could be smoked, the high was incredible, but what inevitably came after was a depression so profound that men would kill, rape and torture to be brought out of it. The only way out was with more crack.

One leaf of this small green plant forgotten in a tourist's baggage could mean thirty years in jail in the US: one leaf! That was darkly hilarious to Gabriel who knew full well that the single biggest market for the drug was the very same country. CIA projects were bankrolled with coke dollars; the *Firm* most certainly did not count distance walked chewing peacefully. But they could count the number of plasma beam weapons, teleportation chairs and psycho-ops projects powered by this plant. The infamous mind fuck of 9/11 was no doubt funded in such a way. Gabriel knew too that telling this to the average Joe would never make sense. Joe was blind, deaf and dumb just trying hard to make ends meet. What? Would a government lie to its people? Never! Kill their own citizens? Absurd!

Monasterio

“Oishi! Delicious!” Mary sipped the piping hot *maté de coca* as they enjoyed the flutes and guitars of the assembled musicians. Cusco was a great place to arrive any time.

“What a welcome to the “Navel of the world!” Navel was *oheso* in translation. Mary was now able to freely speak Japanese as she had shared some of her past with the group and admitted to being somewhat of a double agent. After that ceremony at the Osirion in Italy though, she had realized that position was no longer tenable. There was no more time to be playing MI6 games. They were now deeply embedded together in a synchronistic unfolding that made all previous alliances and promises look simply naive and simple minded.’ Us and them’ was for children. What they were headed into now was for adults only.

“A L’Hotel Monasterio, por favor,” Gabriel said to the copper-skinned taxi driver, who nodded back at him as they set off down the filthy, cobbled street. It was full of potholes, stray dogs and assorted street vendors as they drove towards Cusco center, twenty minutes away. They passed the impressively huge statue of the great

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Inca king Pachakutec and were soon driving up the Avenue Del Sol.

Gabriel was feeling deeply nostalgic. “Some of these people look like the country folk in Japan, don’t you think? Not their dress of course, but their skin colour and their dark eyes.”

Masami pointed across the street at the colourful Quechua women with their long braided hair. With those distinctive top hats and baggy dresses hanging far down over their fat backsides, they moved nimbly in and out of the throngs now bustling up towards the Plaza Del Armas. It was the central the hub of the once great Inca city. The crucifix-adorned taxi turned into this massive, central square. It was dominated by two great churches on adjoining sides that had been built by the Spanish on top of Inca palaces. They were astonishing buildings to still be standing from the 16th century. A magnificent fountain served as the dead center of the Plaza and around it sat tourists on benches, as well as an equal number of locals quietly passing the morning. The inhabitants of this ancient Inca capital were called Cusquenians.

“I see you have child labour here, Gabu san,” said Nijitora suddenly vocal from the back of the minibus; predictably he was already smoking. His statement came as a jolt to the whole entourage.

“What do you mean, Nijitora san?” Gabriel was surprised at this conversational offering from the usually silent, always smoking and very secretive yakuza boss.

“Look at all these kids hustling tourists for a shoe shine or to buy a postcard, or the basic, ‘Give me money!’. They're not working just for themselves, I know. I've been there on the streets. I can tell a professional hustler a mile off, even if he is only seven.

Gabriel had to nod in agreement: “Very perceptive, my friend. A lot of their fathers, especially the native Quechua ones, are hopeless drunks. There's a lot of domestic violence and they often leave the women alone with the kids. Since the women are invariably strong Catholics, prostitution is not a viable choice. So they send their kids out to work. They are amazingly creative. Some of them speak English at five. They sleep out often. Tough as nails.”

“I can see that.” Nijitora’s jaw tightened as they passed by two young boys being shooed away by fat Americans. Memories too razor sharp to go near were being stuffed back into the basement of his soul. He knew full well the cost of not taking rejection too personally. He knew that to survive a child will do absolutely anything.

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“Hotel Monasterio, Signor!” The driver announced their arrival and pulled the minibus to a stop. They were outside a set of massive wooden gates that looked hundreds of years old. This was one of the city’s oldest and finest hotels. It had previously been a Catholic monastery. The tourist pamphlet Gabriel had received in the mail proudly described its history.

The Monastery was originally built in 1595 on the site of the palace of Inca Amaru Qhala. In 1598, it was founded as the Seminary of San Antonio Abad by the sixth Bishop of Cuzco, Monsignor Antonio de la Raya, to train Catholic priests.

The building was seriously damaged by the earthquake in 1650, and upon restoration the beautiful Chapel was added. It is decorated in the indigenous Baroque style with gold-plated pictures frames and truly magnificent paintings by the best artists of the Cusquenian Art School, depicting scenes from the life of San Antonio Abad.

It was the only place Gabriel could have considered taking a group like this, especially since he alone knew what lay ahead for them. They might as well get the very best at the beginning, he reasoned with himself.

After checking everybody in, Gabriel announced: “We head out for the Holy Mountain tomorrow night. We will commence the pilgrimage with everybody else at dawn the following day. Enjoy the city. It has lots of good restaurants and really great native music almost everywhere. You might even like to go to mass at the Cathedral; it is quite an experience whether you are a believer or not. Just to see how well a foreign religion has integrated with an ancient shamanic culture is worthwhile. So please rest up in the meantime, breathe slowly and deeply and get fully acclimatized. Remember, we will be going up to over 5,000 meters. I’ll be very busy getting supplies and a mule for our stuff. Buenos Dias!”

Qoyllurit'i Prophecy

“I’m totally fucked!” Amanoyama was being uncharacteristically direct. Strangely enough, he had collapsed by the side of the path right next to that symbolic 'Station of the Cross' - the one where Jesus had stumbled on his way to crucifixion. Gabriel did not fail to notice this sublime and sarcastic synchronicity. A Shinto/Buddhist /Pantheist yakuza stumbles on his way to a place he has no religious conceptions about. Was it to get him at least thinking seriously about monotheism and eschatology, Gabriel wondered? Yet he knew full well the oriental mind had little interest in such things.

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“Take one step at a time, Amanoyama san. We are all exhausted, but just look around. Old women and children are doing this too and carrying half their households! Just take it easy there for a while. You’ll be fine.” Gabriel patted the big man on the back. He then helped him to lie down on the bank of the gravel and dirt path up to the sacred mountain. Its name was *Ocangate Apu* in the Quechua tongue. Gabriel thought this delightful language was still harbouring the spirit of the 'people of the light' - the Inca. In the few hundred years up to their fateful meeting with the Spanish, they had forged an empire that stretched from Colombia to Argentina. They had connected it all with over 30,000 kilometers of good roads.

Their intricate mythology included a peculiar story about Gods they called the *Viracocha*. They were creator gods described as “white men with long robes and beards”. The Inca also recorded that “they came from beyond the sea and taught us all we know”. Gabriel knew who they were, or at least he thought he knew. They were also the same gods who built gigantic stone temples. They crafted fortresses made of perfectly fitted stones weighing over 100 tons at Sacsayhuaman. They were gods who had left such perfectly straight lines etched so deeply into hard rock in Bolivia that even modern sonic cutters could not rival them. No, they were not any kind of spiritual ghost gods he knew. Gabriel had tracked their architecture and legend all over the world in twenty years of research. They had arms and legs and balls and brains. They were, however very likely to have been about four meters tall.

Their impoverished Inca descendents now filed past the prostrate Amanoyama. Gabriel had lit a hand rolled cigarette; at this altitude it was an empowering smoke that filled his lungs. It was no wonder, he thought, that the local shamans and the medicine men and women considered this plant, like coca, to be a power plant that strengthened the spirit. Gabriel would need all his strength. He had problems already with the big yakuza. Would he make it? That was the billion yen question.

The view beyond them was breathtaking. Far ahead, Gabriel could see the shimmering white of the great glaciers of the Sinakara valley. The sky was a blue that can only ever be appreciated at this altitude. But more than anything, it was the thousands upon thousands of moving figures slowly wending their way upwards that struck Mary in particular. She had never been in the Andes and this was the epitome of all Peru's mountain landscapes. This was the annual pilgrimage to the snow star festival, the *Qoylluriti*. She looked back just in time to see Gabriel helping Amanoyama up to his feet.

The Inca descendants had been doing this pilgrimage for millennia, but the smart Spanish had turned it into something else: They had transformed native thanks to the holy water springing from these glaciers into a purely Christian celebration.

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When the guide explained this to Mary, she had been shocked. “So all these native people are Catholics? I just cannot understand it at all!”

It *was* bizarre, but 60,000 native Quechua pilgrims were all now doing a Catholic-style Stations of the Cross. The fourteen stages of the saviour's journey to death and resurrection were marked out up here by crosses bedecked with colourful ribbons. These travelers from all over South America would be gathering at the makeshift village at the top for three days. The motive was to dance, sing and pray to the Lord of the glacier, who was now Jesus himself and no longer a shamanic totem. Then the ending ceremony would unfold as it did every year. Gabriel had taken them here for that moment of climax the following day. He felt sure it had to do with the prophecy.

Masami remembered what he had told them as she struggled on behind their rented mule. She had completely missed the meaning and shrugged off the suggestion as Gabriel had explained, “They say that the *Inca Lumina*, the new People of the Light, will appear on this mountain in 2012. They say that the universe will be turned inside out. They call it *Pachakuti*. They say that massive destruction will come with great awakening. They say that their great Inca ancestors will return with the Viracocha Gods and a new time will begin. They call it the Sixth Sun.”

On the mule's back was a well packed heap of camp gear half its size. It was composed of their tents, sleeping pads, extra clothes and water. Although vendors made a killing each year, selling water up here, there was no telling where it came from. They were very skilled at re-using plastic containers. They had it right down to the cap's seal looking almost perfect.

Masami watched as the deeply-lined, dark brown faces of the peasants passed her by in silence. She turned to Mary and asked, “Why so many people, Mary san? Where on Earth do they all come from?” Mary could only shrug, breathe deeply and push her self another step. Age was a bitch, she thought, now more than ever.

Here in Peru, participation in Qoylluritt'i meant that the munificent blessings of the Lord of the festival, Jesus Christ himself, would later rain down upon all the participating agricultural communities. Those were spread as far and wide as their delegates sent here had journeyed. Most of them were just barely surviving. To get such blessings you had to suffer. You had to make this arduous climb, sing and dance through extremely cold nights and then walk down again. They called the reciprocal relationship between man and Nature *Aini*. If you bled for her, she would bleed for you. If you expressed your gratitude by putting your body on her line, she would reciprocate by feeding, clothing and protecting your interests. It was a sublime

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understanding of what deep ecologists and awakened environmentalists were proclaiming as the new gospel. Gabriel had it down to a more basic understanding: *Do not shit in your nest!*

Here, Gabriel's group were all newcomers. And it showed. They were all suffering already and there were still six more Stations of the Cross to go. Each station was marked with a meter high cross; often tied with a large, red ribbon symbolizing the bleeding heart of the Lord.

“I might as well smoke here. If I am going to die climbing up this bloody mountain, I want to go with a Marlborough. Your prophecy better be right on, Gabriel, and your reason for taking us up here!” Nijitora was hurting almost as badly as his big friend. He lit up and sat next to the sleeping Amanoyama. Masami and Mary took off their back packs and sat too. Gabriel told the guide to go ahead and make camp. They would all need to collapse after finally arriving.

“Have some more coca everybody. It really helps.” Gabriel passed out a palm full of the small green leaves to the women and to Nijitora. Amanoyama needed to catch a few winks before being awoken for the next kilometer or so. The bitter taste of the coca was not so bad any more. They knew by now that it really did give a boost. It felt a bit like three cups of coffee laced with large spoonfuls of white sugar. Apparently, it encouraged hemoglobin to be transported better by red blood cells; hemoglobin carried oxygen molecules to the body's extremities. They all sat chewing in a semi daze. Nijitora continued to smoke as he chewed and said, “I think we need to get Amanoyama san on a horse, Gabriel.” Mary looked serious as she leaned over the prostrate man.

Gabriel replied, “They're all rented out. No way we can get one at this altitude anyway. He'll make it. I have taken people to Machu Picchu many times on the old Inca Trail. Although not as high, the climb is far tougher. We once had a woman who wanted to die right here in Peru. She begged me to leave her there at 4200 meters to die. It was her romanticized version of the '*Celestine Prophecy*', or whatever. She wanted to die with the old Inca spirits and be immortal.”

“What happened?” Mary was still looking quite good as she asked this, Gabriel thought, considering she was seventy; considering their current location, and the fact that thick air was scarce.

“I told the selfish bitch that if she did not get up to the Dead Woman's pass, *Warmiwaynusca*, that my porters would physically carry her over it. I told the neurotic old bag (that was how pissed off I felt) that she was not dying on my watch:

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Not there, not then. She just went on and on. It was a form of altitude sickness. It hits everybody differently. Some throw up. Some pass out. Some go temporarily loony.”

An hour passed. Hundreds trudged on. Walking with a slight wobble, Amanoyama was able to keep up with Gabriel as the road up the mountain got progressively busier. A Coca Cola vendor stood here, a coca leaf salesman there. There was a plethora of food stalls and even raw juice stalls that looked particularly delicious, but Amanoyama had no stomach for any of it. He looked pale. But naturally enough, being a tough guy, he toughed it out to the tents.

Parked amidst hundreds of others, Gabriel caught sight of Manuel, their Quechua guide who was standing outside their three tents. A small man with dark leathery skin, coming up here for him was like a stroll round the Plaza Del Armas. He had previously won the Inca Trail marathon in three hours. That was a full marathon up and down over the Dead Woman's Pass and into the ruins at Machu Picchu. Gabriel reckoned he must be nearly inhuman. It had taken his group three nights and four days to do the same.

“Over here, boss!” Manuel had pitched the three tents so that there was one for the women and two for the men. He himself would sleep outside like just about everybody else up here. “Coffee?” he asked the group. Gabriel would regret offering to light a fire to make the coffee. It took him two hours of constant blowing to keep it going at this altitude. He was totally exhausted after drinking it; entirely defeating the purpose. It was to have given them the energy to check out the massive sprawl that lay all around them - horses, goats, people and lots of noise.

“What are they all so energized about, Gabu san?” Nijitora looked around him. He was a small, wiry man of forty-three who was already losing his top hair. His trademark cap was a way of concealing that embarrassment. Japanese men rarely go bald in their forties, but he had lived too hard for too long to keep it. There was something childlike about his face, almost impish, in its curious mix of concentration and free abandon. Nobody on that mountain could have imagined how he grew up.

“It is all a prayer to the Lord, Nijitora san. It is all about praising Christ and asking for mercy.” Gabriel had popped his head into Nijitora's tent to answer his question.

“I will never understand these Christians, Gabu san. So weak! Begging for mercy?”

“That is a long story, my friend. Buddhists talk about compassion and we

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Christians talk about mercy and forgiveness, but it is all the same in the end. We are all weak when the chips are down, Nijitora san.”

The singing was accompanied by trombones, brass bands, drums and even accordions. Every single item had been taken up here the same way they had come: on foot and by hand. Now it was about five in the afternoon and the warm sun was beginning to sink below the gigantic peaks surrounding them. Everybody was lethargic and so it was decided to call it a day and get up at dawn.

As soon as the sun set, high altitude revealed another of its horrendous wonders. It was the sudden freezing, gnawing cold. The temperature plunged from fifteen above zero to ten below in less than three hours. In his tent, with Amanoyama almost flattening him due to the tilt, Gabriel was suffering. The shivering would have been bearable had it not been for the breathing. As he breathed harder to get more air, the shivering attacks started and he would come close to hyperventilating. Stuck between a freezing rock and a bone chilling hard place, he had no respite but to simply be with it.

“*Shoganai Gabu san,*” grunted Amanoyama from his sleeping bag: “Grin and bear it!” Outside the tent, a forty year old Quechua woman slept under a plastic sheet with no socks on. Gabriel felt deeply humbled. Amanoyama grunted and snored but otherwise seemed okay. It was a very short night. All around their tents people were dancing and praying and singing. Gabriel felt like an invalid up here; half a man amongst warriors of the soul.

The Star

At dawn they proceeded in file along the last part of the route that led in front of the church.

“How on Earth did they get that up here, Gabriel?” Mary asked. She was looking at the queue to get into the church; there were thousands of people. It would take days it seemed for some to get a look at the blessed crucifixes inside.

“Like everything else: bit by bit, little by little. You cannot have a ceremony worshipping the Lord of the snow and the star without a church.” Gabriel had been a boy of eight in Cusco when they started building it and fondly remembered the festivals like Corpus Christi that preceded the climb up every year. At the age of sixteen he had made the first of five ascents.

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“What is the star? The snow is obvious as we can all see the glacier clearly from here,” Masami asked as she huddled up to Nijitora, who had lit up his first cigarette of the day. Heavy coughing resulted, but there was no booze allowed up here any more, as it had been used far too copiously in the past. People had got killed in melees. They were only trying to keep warm, but sixty thousand is a lot of people when the shit hits the fan. Gabriel remembered one very bad year in particular.

“The eternal star: the blazing star. My suspicion is that it is Sirius. Somehow these people in ages past had a stellar connection. They built all their monuments to star alignment. These days they have forgotten but still have a sense that a great and beautiful star is intimately related to their lives. It is *Aini* at a cosmic level. Like Castaneda had said in *Hendaye*: 'as above, so below'”. Gabriel could see his explanation made absolutely no impact on Masami.

The bear-clan were the chosen ones here. They dressed in fabulous costumes and carried whips. As they danced they would ritually strike at each other. It was penance with a motive. It kept them warm. People from the jungles below had come with fantastic head dresses made out of long bird feathers. Clanging, trumpeting and singing now rose to a climax. The group could just see the small figures up on the glacier. The top ranking bear men had skidded over the ice the night before to place their gigantic crucifixes on the ice. Having dragged them from hundreds of kilometers away, they would see them blessed very soon. It was the rising sun they waited for. Light was creeping into the valley even now.

Gabriel pushed forward and motioned for the others to keep close. He knew that the closer they got the higher the chance they would get what they had come for. Only he knew exactly why the trip had been made. On that last night in Italy, Enki had asked Gabriel to remain behind after addressing the astonished group. What he had shared with them before that was equally incredible however. With jaws agape, they had sat entranced by his presence as Enki spoke.

“The prophecy of *Pachakuti* says that the messengers of the stars will return. They are the so called 'pre-Inca' who built the monuments they have all forgotten. They are the same beings they called the *Viracocha*; the white, bearded Gods who came across the sea to teach them all they know about agriculture, city planning and medicine. They were the same gods their relatives up North in Central America called *Kukulcan* and *Quetzcoatl*. Those Gods are *us*. We are *them*. But we too have our Gods. They will return *with* us. We have chosen this mountain as a place of return among many others. The synchronic lines here are very favourable but there is more. It is the energy of the people we are particularly interested in.”

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Enki spoke English with a thick accent - not too unlike modern Iranians or Iraqis. His powerful body, now seated before them in the lotus position, was oozing with an electric vitality. Masami could not stop herself thinking about the size of a cock in a three meter high man. He was strikingly handsome with his dark brown skin and wore the gold head band of royal Annunaki.

He explained how he and Ninhursag, his best genetic engineer, had hatched the plan to increase gold production on Earth. It was done through the cloning of thousands of slave workers. But over many generations, like certain Biblical figures much later would feel too, the slaves were often closer to them than their own. His brother Enlil was of a different ilk however. He saw the rapidly evolving LULU, the prototype humans, as a dire threat to Annunaki authority.

Enki had motioned for Gabriel to stay behind only with Castaneda and Horus. The Japanese group had filed out and returned to the temple entrance to spend their last night thoroughly astonished by what they had seen. Amanoyama and Nijitora had known of Enki's existence from their work at the FT base in Japan. Masami was simply dumb with shock. Mary was stunned. She had felt that she was in the presence of a strangely advanced human. It was though one that still seemed to have very human problems. She saw how he looked at Masami, no doubt wondering, she surmised, how he would fit that massive cock into her.

Enki had spoken once again: "Gabriel, there is still a lot you have to remember. You must take these people to Peru and once more meet Don Ignacio in the jungle. He will help connect you with *our* Gods. But before that, we need you all to connect with the first part of the incoming wave."

"What wave?" Sitting in front of a man almost twice his size, Gabriel felt the surreal nature of his position. Enki had dark eyes under very thick eyebrows. He looked to be in perfect health for a man over 500, 000 years old. How many descendants had he spawned, Gabriel wondered? How many kings would later forget that their divine right stemmed not from an invisible, all powerful God, but from this man sitting here?

Enki replied in a matter of fact way, "The galactic wave. It follows its own synchronic lines as it spirals out through our galaxy's plasma. It is right on schedule to impact Earth in 2012. Since it will follow the synchronic lines of this planet when it arrives from the encounter with the sun, key locations will get the most power from the event.

"The event?" Gabriel was confused.

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“The end of your world, Gabriel, as you know it that is.” The three men glanced at each other to gauge their own reactions, against their will.

Enki had told him that Qoylluriti was a sacred place due not only to its high elevation but also to having been a centre of star worship for millennia. He stressed that such places held strong charges of human emotion that literally lived on in the mountains. People who were there, or had been there, were actually already connected to the incoming galactic storm. They were like surfers who had been intuitively alerted to a powerful wave. They now had to prepare to head out towards it; to meet it in a sense. With two years to countdown, Gabriel had been given the task of helping others prepare. One way of doing that was to be at the right place at the right time.

“So what do I do on the third day of the festival?” he asked Enki.

“Simply feel the wave and connect. Simply accept it. Simply let it wash over you. Some will appreciate it. Others will not. But it is vital that your group in particular is charged by this energy in order to meet the 'relatives' in the jungle. Think of it as a baptism by invisible light.”

With that Enki had asked Horus to prepare his return co-ordinates. Horus had gone back to the hand panel and as Enki disappeared a massive burst of water came splashing into the chamber. Horus saw Gabriel's shock and explained, “No problem Gabriel. An equal mass as his body has to come *here* when he goes *there*. Water is the easiest way to keep the cosmic balance when we teleport. The universe is, after all, a very highly attuned, perfectly synchronized milieu.”

They all stood watching the sun's rays creep towards the crucifixes. Suddenly all the racket stopped. A sombre looking congregation now looked up. Nobody said a word. As the first rays of the Sun hit the far right crucifix, Gabriel clearly felt it. Something that was too delicate for any language to express swept *through* them and down the valley behind. There was a keen sense that everything was going to be radically different soon. It was like the excitement a child feels on being told of an upcoming journey to a new place. Gabriel felt it was a journey home. Pachakuti might mean an earthshaking cataclysm to some, but for those who had swum out to meet the wave it would be different. They would be speeding along on its crest as it lifted up their world of experience to new peaks. Like an enormous tsunami of tough love, it would transform everything in its path. Humanity was not its victim in any way. The wave could just as easily destroy as it could uplift. Everything would depend on where

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humanity stood: On the beach waiting for an end, or on a wave riding into a beginning? That was what was coming. This was only the faint echo of its leading edge. It was the plasmic energy before the wave itself.

“Something very strange just happened, right?” Nijitora was quietly smiling as he asked the question; so too were the others.

“Yes,” said Mary, “and these sixty thousand peasants just made it possible I think.”

“We're peasants too. Now it is time to meet a peasant shaman.” Gabriel laughed.

Infierno

“It means hell.” The putt-putt of the old outboard engine on the canoe overwhelmed Gabriel's comment. Amanoyama was straining to hear him as they pulled in to the muddy bank of the brown river. “*Infierno* means hell in Spanish. That is the name of this place. Don Ignacio is the mayor of it. We are going to meet the mayor of hell!”

Nijitora, balancing as he stood up, could not resist this opportunity to banter: “Oh hell! What are we going to do now? Do we have to vote for this guy?”

The Tambo Pata River was a tributary of the once mighty Amazon that flowed two hundred meters wide at this point. They had been pushing against its considerable force for four hours since leaving Puerto Maldonado downstream. It boasted the last airport before Brazil in the far east of Peru.

Masami and Mary were helped off the rickety canoe by the driver. He held their hands as they crossed the plywood plank that served as a gangway. *Plop!* The mud was like soggy clay and would deeply stain any clothing that contacted it. Thick tree growth lined both sides of the river. Many of the lower branches had been ripped off during sudden rises in water level after heavy rain. They climbed up the muddy path from the gangplank. At least there was a wooden handrail, thought Masami. She simply could not comprehend why Gabriel had brought them here.

“There is a man we must meet, Masami san. He is a legendary shaman in Peru

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and will do a ceremony with us to help you, your man, and all of us to understand better.”

“Understand what?” Her mascara was streaked. She had been crying again. The question told Gabriel he was wasting his time. There was nothing for it but simply to accept that Masami did not have a spiritual bone in her body, or at least not one that was perceivable, he reckoned. She was there to be with Nijitora; she had to be treated as such. In a jungle like this Masami could end up being a great inspiration simply because she was so entirely out of place. Like an Eskimo in New York, she might entertain them. For Gabriel, she was a secretly erotic and lighthearted addition to the group.

It was just past noon when they got to the village hall. Standing in a clearing, it was a completely basic wooden structure, thatched with banana leaves, and had a few tables with benches in it. The village held no more than 200 people. It spread out into the neighbouring jungle with everyone living in primitively made shacks; mostly on stilts to keep clear of forest vermin as much as possible. The constant trill of insects was first noticed by Mary.

“That sound does wonders for the body. And it never seems to stop. There must be millions and millions of them.”

“Wait till you hear the howler monkeys, the bamboo rats and the macaws, Mary!” Gabriel looked over at her as they headed behind the village hall. The driver of the boat led them through thick bush on a very narrow trail. Masami was predictably jumpy about what might be on the ground or in the trees.

“What about snakes, tarantulas or millipedes down here? Translate please, Gabriel. Ask the boat driver, *please!*” Gabriel went through the motions of inquiring, but knew this jungle very well. He assured her that she would have to be very unlucky or very stupid to have such an encounter. Most jungle life fled in horror from stinking human bodies. As for big animals like jaguar, tapir, caiman or the giant capybara rat, you would have to stay quiet for ages just to get a glimpse. He assured her all would be well as he had been coming here every summer while a student at the seminary in Cusco.

His Jesuit mentor had been a highly controversial figure. He had spent decades in this jungle serving the indigenous communities. His name had been William Johnson, born in Ireland and sent out to South America after graduating from Trinity College in Dublin. Thanks to him, Gabriel had been introduced to the old shaman, Don Ignacio. Johnson had told him that since the Lord works in strange and

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mysterious ways, he had taken the legendary *planta* with the shaman as a young missionary. The vision he had had on his third shamanic ceremony was to define his entire life as a Christian. In one night he had gone through the entire Passion; in real time, and in real pain.

As they came through the last growth of shrub before the clearing Gabriel smelt it; it was unmistakable. Don Ignacio would be nearby, he knew now for certain. There is something about the smell of the ayahuasca bark that puts the entire body on instant alert. In that sense it was like the smell of dead bodies or old vomit. Unmistakable! It ripped right through all concepts about smells and simply alarmed the entire being, as if to say, “Stay Away!”

Suddenly Don Ignacio appeared behind Amanoyama at the back of the group now heading towards his house. He was holding a rusty machete and a long bundle of what looked like thin tree branches: “Buenos Dias, Signor.”

Amanoyama swung round and in a fraction of a second knew that he was meeting a man who had faced the worst fears imaginable. It was pure instinct. As a wizened yakuza, he was used to dealing with life and death on the streets; used to seeing men beg for mercy before their hands were cut off, or even worse, when automatic pistols were aimed in these richer times. He was used to the shaky timbre in a man's presence that spoke of his presence far louder than words.

He bowed deeply: “BOOWANES DEEAAZ SEENYORI.” The big yakuza's pronunciation was terrible. Amanoyama bowed again at the man who would soon pull him out of the darkest, deepest pit of fear he would ever know. It was as if the second bow was silently asking for help in advance that only the shaman could give - soul rescue help.

Gabriel ran up to hug his old maestro, the master of the forest, who healed all ills with his vile concoctions. He responded like the prodigal son's father.

“You have grown, my son. It has been many seasons since we last met. Do you still have the cross I gave you?” Don Ignacio was pleased to see Gabriel take it out from his pocket and immediately realized that his young Jesuit was now an older, wiser man more full of doubt than ever. No blame, he thought. Life is a bitch and will kick a man in the balls for so long and so hard, he will let go of everything once held dear; except one thing. He will not let go of the idea that he is who *he thinks he is*. But the sacred brew changes all that, he knew. It would again for Gabriel and these gringos from the East.

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He was about the same height as Nijitora who he now embraced warmly. The *maestro*, or “master” in Spanish, instantly recognized in the tough yakuza a man after his own heart. For a man of seventy five he was wiry and strong and had no difficulty carrying twenty kilos of ayahuasca lianas off of trees. He had hacked them down thirty minutes deep into the jungle behind Infierno. He said with a grin that his new wife was twenty five.

“That would do it! That would definitely keep you in shape.” Nijitora smiled to himself.

Don Ignacio motioned to them all to gather around the fire over which a massive iron pot was now boiling. After introductions translated by Gabriel from Spanish to Japanese, they all sat down on the simple wooden benches Don Ignacio had brought over from his porch nearby. A very attractive young *mestizo* woman, part native and part white as so many were down here, popped her head out the door and smiled broadly at them. She had perfect teeth. Gabriel could see why Don Ignacio was looking so chipper.

Turning to the shaman he said, “It looks and smells like a good brew, Maestro.” Gabriel stared deep into the pot and felt a wave of nausea rise up from a place he had put away for good he had thought. He had sworn to Jesus he would never do this ceremony again; not after that final night, when he had been sure it was not only psychic death he faced.

The old shaman had grey hair and deep set, brown eyes. His trousers were rolled up to the knees and he was barefoot. His tawny forearms stuck out of a dirty old shirt buttoned only half way up. On his chest sat a huge silver cross. Lines on his face spoke of a tough life in this jungle. He was a well respected healer and after years of service had become the mayor of this fledgling community.

Corn and yucca, the potato-like staple in these parts, were grown by everybody. Chickens, goats and fish supplemented the food supply. Cash was brought in through trade with neighbours. There were the occasional government grants inspired by Fujimori's time in power. He was third generation Japanese. Gabriel had met him in Tokyo two years previously. He was now a disgraced politician and had been caught in Chile thinking to outrun the people he had betrayed. But back then it had been different. He had given every community a putt- putt canoe out here, which got him hundreds of thousands of jungle votes and a presidency. His tattered image still adorned many adobe walls in the communities scattered between here and the border with Brazil. 'Viva Fujimori' was still very much the sentiment of an impoverished community. For them, a boat like that was an ocean liner. They could get up and

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down river, transporting goods and services, and thus had a lifeline to Puerto Maldonado. Overland through the jungle was a nightmare; in the rainy season it was a sheer impossibility. Gasoline was cheap enough and you could put a lot on a twenty foot long canoe.

“This is very good *medicina*, Gabriel. I have been brewing the *planta* for over fifty years and this time it might be the best ever. I have spent a week locating the best vines for you and your friends. When I got your message by telegram up here, I knew right away what you needed. I am here to serve, amigo. Here to serve.”

Gabriel noted how he was adding quite a lot of *chacruna* leaves to the pulped and chopped sections of the vine boiling vigorously in the pot. Mary and Amanoyama looked pensive as they too stared into the pot. Nijitora smoked quietly and smiled. He could feel that a great and powerful old man had concocted something very special for them. Masami was staring at the river; oblivious to the content of the conversation. She knew if she allowed this reality to penetrate she would want to run. She could not leave her man. She would have to go with him, even if it meant going to hell, literally.

Don Ignacio explained: “Better visions this way, *amigo*. The vine will clean you up and the leaves will blast you out. We will have three days worth of ayahuasaca from this pot. Why not go and have a siesta? I will be here all afternoon adding water and tending the fire. Please tell your friends not to eat or have sex.”

Nijitora roared with laughter when he heard this. “Mary, stay away from Amanoyama now! And you, Gabu san, I saw how you looked at the mayor's wife. And you, Masami! Come over here!”

Some men get this excited, thought Gabriel, when near the vine of the dead. But most run in horror.

Past Life Siesta

The hammocks were stretched from each supporting beam of the big old hut they had been given to use by the mayor. It was clean enough inside and bottled water had been left for them on the plastic table. One light bulb connected to the generator supply outside. Don Ignacio's pet monkey, Popenito, hung lazily from the ceiling scratching his rapidly inflating little cock. He seemed to be looking down right on Masami when she noticed him.

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“Ahhh! A fucking monkey is in this room. And he has a hard on! Nijitora, kill him or something!” She was getting close to a breakdown, thought Gabriel. After all they had been through, only 20% at most had been consciously processed over the last two weeks - after meeting a three meter tall alien and a five hundred year old alchemist, it was only natural. She was still a young girl really. The aroused monkey was the last straw.

Nijitora went over and comforted her. He was always extremely gentle with his lover, in public at least. He whispered in her ear and she smiled. He was certainly a charmer, thought Mary. But Mary also knew that men like him had very short fuses in private. The monkey scampered off as Amanoyama ordered him to leave in Japanese. It was a priceless sight: a 120 kilo yakuza in a banana thatch shack, yelling at a two foot tall monkey with a hard on: “*Denasai!* Get out, get out!” With one hand on his erect member and the other in his nostril, the little Popenito scampered past the Japanese nemesis. Gabriel could barely contain himself. To think that the ex-top gun but one of the entire *yamabushi gumi* had just experienced a run in with a hairy little hominid who was picking his nose while fondling his own diminutive cock!

“Time for a siesta, friends,” suggested Gabriel. “You can have juices made up by Lalita, Don Ignacio's wife any time. Mango, passion juice, guava, you name it. She will personally collect the fruit and press it whenever you want. It's hanging all around us. Heaven might have a small place in hell here, you know.” The group all smiled. It really was time for a break. The afternoon heat was building and the hammocks looked very inviting. Within half an hour they were all swinging, all asleep. Gabriel fell into a deep trance almost immediately. It had been the smell.

After the hypnotherapy session in Tokyo when he had recalled a life as a conquistador, Gabriel had searched the internet. He'd needed to find information on four key words that had come up: *Basque*, *Conquistador*, *Inca* and *Roberto*. These four words had flashed through Google at the speed of light and fished up an astonishing find:

Letter from Lope de Aguirre, rebel, to King Philip of Spain, 1561

To King Philip, the Spaniard, son of Charles the Invincible:

From Lope de Aguirre, your lesser vassal, old Christian, of middling parents but fortunately of noble blood, native of the Basque country of the kingdom of Spain, citizen of the town of Onate.

In my youth I crossed the sea to the land of Peru to gain fame, lance in hand, and to fulfill the obligation of all good men. In 24 years I have done you great service in Peru, in conquests of the Indians, in founding towns, and especially in battles and

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encounters fought in your name, always to the best of my power and ability, without requesting of your officials pay nor assistance, as can be seen in your royal records.

I firmly believe, most excellent King and lord, that to me and my companions you have been nothing but cruel and ungrateful. I also believe that those who write to you from this land deceive you, because of the great distance.

Gabriel had little knowledge about his forefathers when he had read this. He knew that the de Sosayas had a long connection with Peru. One of his great uncles had told him that when the last great flood had struck, the ancestors from Peru had got in reed boats and crossed many seas to finally arrive in what is now Spain. He had said that the origin of the true Basque people was South America. You only had to look at the prominent, hooked noses of the Inca even today to see the resemblance, he'd said. Gabriel had studied at a Jesuit school in Spain before going to Peru as a teenager to live with his great Aunt Isabella. She lived in Miraflores, the prosperous area of Lima where all the nobility were from. She had made sure he was well taken care of and accompanied him on the first few trips to Cusco. It was she who had introduced him to the wizened old missionary from Ireland.

“This man does not preach to the so-called natives. He goes with him into their deepest, darkest fears and he actually loves them. Now that is what a true Jesuit should be doing, Gabriel. You can become a man like him: A man beyond religion, a true religious!”

Gabriel had subsequently entered the seminary of San Antonio Abad in Cusco where he graduated with honours at the age of twenty-six. Two years later he was in Osaka. He knew there was a strong connection between his Spanish and Peruvian lives that preceded his birth, but that went back only a couple of generations. In that past life session he had clearly experienced life as a *Roberto de Sosaya*. Somehow he was connected to the disenfranchised *Aguirre* who, like so many other conquistadors, had most definitely been 'royally screwed'.

The letter provided more clues as he had read on:

We went along our route down the Maranon River while all these killings and bad events were taking place. It took us ten and a half months to reach the mouth of the river, where it enters the sea. We traveled a good hundred days, and traveled 1,500 leagues. It is a large and fearsome river, with 80 leagues of fresh water at the mouth.

It is very deep, and for 800 leagues along its banks it is deserted, with no towns, as your majesty will see from the true report we have made. Along the route we took there are more than 6,000 islands. God only knows how we escaped from such a fearsome lake! I advise you, King and lord, not to attempt nor allow a fleet to be sent to this ill-fated river, because in Christian faith I swear, King and lord, that if a hundred thousand men come none will escape, because the stories are false and in

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this river there is nothing but despair, especially for those newly arrived from Spain.

Here really had been hell for the conquistadors. Gabriel was amazed at their resilience. He could easily identify with these written sentiments that were shared no doubt by all true soldiers throughout time. They were all vassals in the service of greedy bastards like Philip of Spain.

*The captains and officers with me at present, and who promise to die in this demand like pitiful men are: Juan Jeronimo de Espinola Ginoves, admiral; Juan Gomez, Cristobal Garcia, captain of infantry, both Andaluz; mounted captain Diego Tirado Andaluz, from whom your judges, King and lord, with great injury, took Indians he had earned with his lance; **captain of my guard Roberto de Sosaya** and his ensign Nuflo Hernandez, Valencian; signed: **Lope de Aguirre, the Wanderer.***

Gabriel was falling into a very deep trance now. The insect trilling had helped a lot to remove all the stress of the journey so far. Here he was, preparing for a reality threatening ceremony, yet swinging in the bosom of his ancient ancestors. As he fell into the deep relaxation that the jungle so deliciously afforded, he caught glimpses of those first conquistadors. It made no difference if these were semi-fabricated accounts of history, from tales or from memories. The facts were that the Spanish in the jungle had meant blood curdling suffering on a catastrophic scale to the indigenous population. They were natives who now all spoke the language of their decisively cruel masters. Aguirre was clear when he singled out the priests in his letter:

“If you want to know the life they lead here, it is to deal in merchandise, seek and acquire temporal goods, and sell the Sacraments of the Church for a price. They are enemies of the poor, uncharitable, ambitious, gluttonous, and arrogant, so that even the lowest of the priests try to command and govern all these lands. Correct this, King and lord, because from these things and bad examples faith is not impressed upon the natives. Furthermore, if this dissolution of the priests is not stopped, there will be no shortage of scandal.”

Madre de Dios: That was the name of the entire stretch of river to Puerto Maldonado. The first group of Spanish had met heavy resistance from the 'Indians'. Driven back, their boat had been destroyed. They were routed. When the next expedition came back a floating wooden statue stopped their canoes. It was a statue of the Virgin Mary. That was all they needed to spur them on to victory. Gabriel's dream now replayed their treatment of the 'natives' who had beaten back those bloodthirsty warriors with all but the most primitive of weapons. Now, there would be no mercy, no Christian forgiveness.

As his body twitched in the swinging hammock; as Don Ignacio stoked the fire below the pot; as the others slept through their own particular dreams; as the Amazon chirped and whooped and trilled, the vision of what they had done to the women assaulted Gabriel's senses head on. His covered eyeballs swiveled rapidly in their

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dreaming sockets. Stripping the women naked of the very little that they wore - a devil-worshipping sign to those conquistadors of course - they had bound them to trees. Covering their bodies with the sweet resin from a forest tree, they then left them to the fire ants. One sting could leave a man in agony and in fever for three days. The screams of the women catapulted through five hundred years like a knife through cream.

Gabriel awoke violently; sweating profusely. If he had been connected to these men, if he had been a participant no matter how unwillingly in this carnage, then surely he would be beyond any kind of forgiveness. The entire sordid history of the Caucasians, and their demented suppression of all aboriginals in the name of Christ, was a crime that knew no bottom to its ghastly depths. It had all been done in the name of the Lord; all in the name of the Queen; all in the name of 'ME'.

The full import of why he was here was suddenly made clear to his drowsy mind. As he looked around at the great tranquility and the expansive abundance of the jungle, a profound fear gripped his heart. What if he was here not only to remember, but to beg for redemption?

What if the entire journey had led them all here for exactly that purpose? The Japanese had created an equal amount of suffering to those it had slashed and hacked into imperial submission to its 'superior system'. With equally brilliant rhetoric they had justified the slaughter, rape and pillage of millions throughout Asia. What had the aboriginal people ever done but at worst, fight amongst themselves with sticks and clubs? What aboriginal people had ever been possessed by the madness to assume their version of reality was superior to all else in the human world? These questions pervaded his dream like tenacious insects caught in the light of a night torch.

From the Maya to the Lakota, the Inca, the Maori and the Haida, their way had always been harmony with Nature first. Self defense was an obvious response to attack, but the idea of sublimating an entire world was something that the Europeans and the Japanese in particular had a definite proclivity for. The scale of it was deeply disturbing to Gabriel. And now they were giving themselves in to a plant that could take you any where, any time and was infamous for its ability to dig through all emotional scar tissue and pierce the tenderest part of the human heart! This was the part that is always dark and hidden. He would be one of the first to know this for sure, he felt. It is the part all human beings most religiously avoid facing; seeing as it contains the vilest sins; the most despicable thoughts, the unforgiveable itself. If it were only one life of mistakes, we might all have a relatively easy time, he pondered. But all our relations sleep in our souls, especially all our ethnic relations. Gabriel had always insisted that 2012 represented the penultimate time for humanity to 'own its shit' totally.

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They came out of their cocoon-like, wrap-around hammocks at staggered times throughout the afternoon. Nijitora sat by the river smoking. Masami was trying to get the water going on the very basic shower in an outhouse. None of her tarantula fears surfaced; the fact was that tarantulas were as shy as wolves around humans.

Amanoyama was already meditating like the old warrior soul he was. He knew full well that bravado alone would not get him through this first night with Don Ignacio. He would be up against the toughest enemy ever: his own fear. It was that stealthiest of all foes precisely because of its damned unpredictability and genius for finding the chinks in any man's inner armour. He hummed the Buddhist mantra, the greatest source of strength there was: the Heart Sutra. "*Maka Hanya hara mita shingyo.*"

Mary was sitting next to Don Ignacio as he added the final water to boil the thick brown-red concoction one more time. A few more chacruna leaves were added. Each leaf could visually result in unimaginable inner twists on journeys that make dreams seem like simple photographs encased in concrete frames. The vine of the dead was not named so by ancient Quechua warriors with even an iota of flippancy. They knew, as did Gabriel, who had been close to the very edge on one previous occasion, that *ayahuasca* is like covering yourself in sweet molasses and walking into spiritual fire ant territory naked. The fire ants though would only gnaw you to death slowly if you focused on them; he knew from bitter experience. It was surely just as possible to leap straight into heaven's gate and visit exquisite worlds of celestial beauty. It all came down to individual ability to deal with 'issues'. Everything with the *planta* depended on staying humbly in the naked reality of this moment.

Gabriel had told the group about this mysterious plant concoction and that even Harvard trained scientists were now rigorously attempting to decode its secrets. But he knew full well there was nothing that could prepare a man for that moment when he realizes he has just drunk the psychic equivalent of deadly nightshade poison.

The sun was now setting over the Amazon. The sublime light that reflected off the hazy river at this hour; the slow flight of parakeets over the trees, and the sound of millions of awakening insects were unfolding before Gabriel. How he loved this total chaos of Nature. In the distance, swinging over the tree tops, howler monkeys were beginning their evening chant to the world. It was a sound Gabriel knew that, in itself, could easily be mistaken for an approaching storm.