

# **The Excavations**

**of**

**Gau Hobson Delfan**

*No fact in the long history of the world is so startling as the wide and repeated extermination of its inhabitants.*

Charles Darwin.

*And upon her forehead, a name written, MYSTERY, BABYLON THE GREAT ...*

Revelation 17:5

*Then spoke the thunder.*

TS Eliot.

**For Those in the Past in the World Above**

IT SEEMS UNLIKELY that you are reading this. It is written after you are gone. And yet the singularity herself, from which all sprang, demonstrates that nothing is impossible. Keep that thought in mind. Nothing is impossible. It is an axiom and a pun and an article of faith. If you cannot accept it then you must block your ears now. Get out now, while you can, gentle reader, because this chronicle contains events so capriciously violent, so violently capricious, that they become their opposite, not chance but destiny.

Are you with me still? Then we are entangled, you and I. We are particularly entangled, and though entire universes interpose between us we will spin in tune and as your tune changes then so will mine and so the story may be heard. It is the story of the digging as told to me by those survivors who knew both your world and ours. It is informed and illuminated by the books which Jack Delfan treasured and those texts which the Partner carried in the memory banks of his ATV and copied to the motherdrive in the chamber of the book. I tell it, with what art I can muster, for your people and for mine. I tell it that we might have faith in the grace of the all, the nothing, that we might have faith that a world can be again.

Know that the earth changed in the years before the flood. The very seas dried up and great ships lay in the sand. Jack Delfan was among the last to tend the animals on the continent that was called Africa. And then he washed his hands of saving the wild and commenced to dig. He chose a spot in the lee of a monstrous tanker because of the shelter and stores the anachronism offered, and because it was a place where compasses went haywire. He calculated it would be hard to find. There, the patriarch bent his back to the spade for some years.



## **Part I**

### **The Father and the Son**

# 1

## The Creed

DOWN IN THE corrugated bulkheads, down among bulwark stays and bilge strakes, derrick post and screw shaft, down in the iron darkness, the vessel moans in the breeze, sings to its single crew member. He sleeps in a seaman's birth towards the stern. He turns and mutters. He sweats. He grinds his teeth and dreams the apocalypse, the dimness and the low bruised clouds and shafts of sunlight white on the pan and the four riders coming and the hooves of their horses as they beat on the earth speak like thunder.

Jack Delfan sits up naked and wide-eyed in his bunk. He reaches for the rope-pull that works the bulb above. Its light comes slow and blue and his eyes narrow beneath the crags of his brow. Eyebrows pulling together as his head inclines to aid his hearing. Of that distant and urgent... drumming? That ... approaching ... vehicle?

He climbs a long clanging journey up emergency ladders on hold pillars and transverse girders. He arrives at deck level through a hatchway of his own devising, the round and bolted lid lifting on its hinge and the prophet's head emerging. Accompanied by the venerable barrel of a .577 Westley Richards Nitro Express hunting rifle. He stares out at the metal plain, the red dunes beyond. A zephyr whispering in the wires of the lift rig. A cable clanking. His head turning to port and then to starboard and he clambers naked yet onto the deck and canters to the starboard rail. He looks down. Just sand. And then the pan and beyond that sand again. He frowns. He lifts his heavy head, nostrils funnelling in molecules alien to his chosen purlieus. Analysing them in the mucus of his cranial cavities. A smell of the world he came from. He lifts the rifle and checks the massive round in its chamber. He strides across the deck to the lift rig and leans over the port rail. It's there, blades retracted. Some fifty yards beyond the rapture tree and the little circle of rocks where three lengths of

ironwood smoulder in the ashes. A gleaming black ovoid. Like the tanker has turned goose and started laying.

Jack Delfan climbs the wooded stile and steps onto the crude railed platform of the lift. He releases the brake and drops with chains roaring in their pulleys, resonating in glooming holds within. He bends his knees for the impact of the earth and takes it and he opens the gate in the rail and steps onto the sand with weapon held ready. His eyes catching a movement at the trunk of the rapture tree and the stock coming up to his shoulder and Jack Delfan sees the Partner step out with hands held carefully aloft. A lean and whimsical figure all garbed in solartect.

Hello, Jack, he says.

The patriarch's knees are slightly bent, his weight balanced and like his breathing functioning in service of the sights which remain fixed on a point between the Partner's eyes.

What want you?

Offer a friend a drink?

Delfan gestures with his head towards the egg.

You don't carry refreshment in that abomination?

I was hoping you'd have something artisanal.

Jack Delfan lifting the barrel to indicate a leather bag that hangs from a branch above the Partner's head.

Try that.

What is it?

Qhilika.

I'm sorry?

Mead.

Ah.

The Partner smiling at this eccentricity. Reaching up to take the bag from its rope cradle and bring it down and remove the cork. Lifting the mouth piece to take in aromas and smile again. And drink.

Fantastic.

He wipes his lips with the back of this hand and feels about his mouth with his tongue.

The chewy bits?

Bee grubs.

The Partner leaning to spit a fragment upon the sand. He straightens to look, regretful, at his friend.

It's hard to talk when you standing there naked with a gun on me, Jack.

I wasn't expecting visitors.

Would it have made a difference?

How much tax does the secretariat compute me to owe?

The Partner shaking a rueful head.

It's not about the tax, Jack. Not directly.

So why are you here?

I've brought something for you. But we can't do this while you've got that blunderbuss pointing at me. It's dangerous. And you really should have some trousers on.

Jack Delfan lowering the .577. The Partner turning towards the egg. A hum coming from the thing as a hatch slides open. And the midwife steps out in her solartect gear and Jack Delfan sees that she carries an infant in her arms who waves his arms and stares about and smiles.

Da, he says. Da.



Delfan's eyes like those of a man hallucinating. All the universe reduced in his mind to the small focus of horror which is the babe in its swaddling.

What the hell is that, he says.

He's yours, Jack. Attested by your genes.

Delfan looking from the Partner to the midwife. Whose eyes are directed in turn at Delfan's groin. Where his parts hang large and soft and strangely innocent in a jungle of curls.

Dear god, she says.

She walks across the sand with the boy waving his arms, saying da, da, da.

The orphanage won't take him, says the Partner. Administratively, you seem to have disappeared. But they know you're out here. And they say they lack revenue for orphans.

Delfan standing outraged with the rifle forgotten in his hand.

And Eileen?

She's an elusive lady.

Delfan's head twisting on his neck in the grip of the rage and he turns and lifts the .577 to align the bore with the midwife's skull.

I thought you said we could do this, she says to the Partner, without force.

The partner smiling, mild and regretful.

He's your boy, Jack. I checked the tests myself. Put the gun down.

Jack Delfan feels the earth's plates shifting on their tides of ore and he knows that there is no gun that can stop what's coming.

The midwife bending to seat the boy in the sand. Where he sways a little before finding his balance.

Da, he says.

Yes, says the midwife.

That is your father. Dada.

She opens a zip on her thigh pad and brings out a tablet of clear and finely bevelled silcoplast, offers it to the Partner.

You better handle the admin.

The Partner takes the tablet and it activates at his touch so that its interface glows and blinks within, seeking contact with the biochips of those about. The Partner walks across to Jack Delfan who is staring down at the boy.

Jack, if you can just put your right thumb on the flashing square.

Delfan looks up at him.

By way of receipt.

Delfan lifts his thumb to show a lurid scar.

I cut it out.

The Partner, reassuring, offers the tablet.

It doesn't matter about the chip. Your prints will be on the system. Just give us your left thumb.

I sign nothing.

A bellow of such proportions that it elicits a resonating groan from the hulk.

I sign nothing.

He lifts the rifle and releases the safety catch and a fires a round that makes the great ship ring like a struck gong. The infant staring up at his father with mouth agape. The silence, when it returns, is prodigious.

I'll sort it out on the frame, says the Partner. Speaking to the midwife.

It's a sin, she says. It's a sin that we have to hand this child over to a naked lunatic.

You've broken the world, roars Jack Delfan. You've shattered it.

The Partner nods.

Goodbye, Jack.

He turns and walks towards the egg and the midwife follows him and gets in and throws out cartons onto the sand.

BiodDeg diapers, she shouts. Sun screens. Basic infant nutrition. MediGear.

The cartons coming tumbling to rest, displaying the logo of the secretariat and a thoughtful message: A gift from the affiliated peoples. Taxes save lives.

Jack Delfan watches the hatch hum shut and the blades unfurl and start to spin.

How go your wars, he shouts. And your religions. Have you reintroduced torture again? Are you using the rack and the screw?

The midwife's voice coming strange and amplified over the beat of the rotors. Keep the child out of the sun. The craft lurching up with sand and leaves and ash billowing in the bloodshot morning and then it rises above the deck and banks and skims off across the dunes.

Jack Delfan wipes sweat from his brow and stares down at the infant. Who gravely asks his question.

Da, he says. Da?

Delfan leans the rifle against the rail of the lift-platform and he strides to the rapture tree and grasps a large and well-used spade. The infant watching with wide eyes as his father comes to stand before him. He looms over the boy, blocking the sun, edged by its radiance, a primitive intent on slaughter. His shadow stretching across the earth and up the side of the hull and the shovel hanging like a guillotine

I name thee Hob, he says.

Da, says the infant. Da?

Delfan brings the spade down, impales it in the sand. It stands there, humming.

Da, says the child, the son. Da?

Dig, roars Jack Delfan. Dig ... be my creed.