

ALGOL ASYLUM

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PART ONE

AUTOGENES

Chapter One

The Algol Parallax

The smell of roasting flesh drifted across the broken, vine-covered fences, the suburban lawns and verges, their polite conformity submerged beneath immense ferns, towering grasses and extravagant flowers previously unknown to modern science. Dense moss and sinuous creepers draped the boughs of looming cycads and primitive conifers, throwbacks to the extinct flora of a distant epoch.

Those who remained in the area had consumed the last of the domestic pets and unwary strays trapped scavenging amid the chaotic debris of looted supermarkets, gutted delicatessens and desecrated restaurants long ago. And several months had passed since far more spectacular animals—gazelles, big cats, giraffe, a small herd of zebras, various species of monkeys, tropical birds and even an African elephant—liberated by their keepers at a nearby zoo, first appeared among the resurgent forests of the emerald inferno. The jungle that had overwhelmed our mundane bourgeois enclave provided a potential habitat eminently suited to their continued survival.

Alligators and crocodiles had colonised the adjacent river and lurked beneath the scum-occluded surfaces of stagnant swimming pools. I recalled encountering a full-grown cayman slithering across the patio one morning, the carcass of a Staffordshire bull terrier clutched in its powerful jaws. The anti-social cur had been abandoned by a local family who had embraced the dubious refuge the authorities offered as the global catastrophe—the Algol Parallax—accelerated exponentially.

Salvation Stations. That was how the threadbare remnants of the beleaguered government described the places where countless thousands—perhaps *millions*—had fled, bundled into the backs of military transports under armed guard. Considering the regime's appalling record of flagrant human rights' abuses, its cynical use of the word *salvation* implied ominous possibilities. I had *seen* their putative sanctuaries. They amounted to little more than sprawling concentration camps. What ultimate fate awaited the terrified refugees corralled behind imposing watchtowers and chain-link fences enmeshed with tangled bouquets of scintillating razor-wire?

The wild animals that populated the locality provided the Szilardian hunters with

an abundant bounty they eagerly exploited. I would watch, fascinated, as troupes of feral children and adolescents stalked and slaughtered their prey with merciless efficiency. Like the reclusive tribes of the Amazonian rainforest they daubed their bodies with vivid pigments whose curious designs implied symbolic meanings beyond my comprehension. In this bizarrely-transformed suburban jungle the custom suggested a barbaric refinement of the innocuous face-painting craze once popular at garden fêtes, theme parks and children's birthday parties. Displaying a natural talent for tactical ingenuity, they fashioned devious snares which proved lethal to the small and medium-sized animals that foraged in the dark forests and overgrown gardens.

But when it came to the larger beasts, the Szilardians genuinely surpassed themselves. These sky-clad children exhibited the disciplined ferocity of young wolves as they overwhelmed their quarry—many of which possessed both the ability and inclination to wound or kill their relentless tormentors. They corralled wildebeest, zebras and potentially deadly wild boars into camouflaged traps they created on the transformed common and other recreation areas. And I remembered marvelling with excitement as they drove the young elephant to its death, impaled on the tortuous spikes of an immense, stake-lined pit they dug on the treacherous local golf course.

Observing the climax of the hunt, I imagined I had travelled back in time to witness a violent spectacle unseen since the late Pleistocene era—a platoon of neolithic hunters pursuing a powerful mammoth to its inevitable end. Having butchered the elephant, the Szilardians conveyed their bloody trophies back to the sprawling encampments that dominated the area. An orgy of uninhibited celebration followed, primitive rituals continuing long into the night. For a while I continued to affect the aloof demeanour of an impartial observer, clinging to the obsolete concept of *professional detachment*. But I possessed no privileged immunity as the seductive spell of naïve brutality worked its insidious magic. The compelling power of irrational abandon felt so natural.

So ... *liberating*.

The Szilardian hunters exhibited such deadly skill that the zoo animals soon faced the daunting spectre of extinction. Even the ferocious reptiles that prowled the

rivers enjoyed no special exemption. Resplendent in crocodile-skin robes—the animals' powerful jaws fashioned into ornate headdresses—the Szilardian priests resembled theriomorphic incarnations of the Egyptian deity Sobek, sacred patron of the mighty Nile. The blood and bones of animals provided the magical ingredients crucial to the nameless ceremonies the shamans celebrated with increasing frequency as the impending stellar cataclysm approached its inevitable apogee. However, the tribe respected the wild animals they incorporated into their mythology and wisely curtailed the lethal safaris. The gratuitous extermination of life was, after all, the exclusive preserve of *civilised* man.

Since the zoo animals had been granted the status of protected species—and the once-cherished domestic pets had vanished long ago—the pungent meat cooking on the filthy barbecues, erected like sacrificial pyres amid the tall ferns and cycad groves, derived from the strange *new* species that flourished in this transfigured wilderness. Exotic substitutes replaced the wildebeest steaks and filleted giraffe; the marinated alligator and puréed monkey-brains; the braised poodles, sautéed rabbits and gerbils, upon which we had come to depend. And learned to enjoy.

Immense centipedes and huge beetles—an entire cryptozoology of gigantic arthropods—had appeared in innumerable swarms as if conceived by the spontaneous miracle of parthenogenesis. Colonies of enormous ants, their brilliant exoskeletons gleaming like harsh obsidian armour, cut invincible swathes through the verdant forests. The belligerent insects constructed imposing mounds and towers whose precise, symmetrical architecture and monumental proportions suggested the majestic ziggurats and obelisks of a lost civilisation. These forbidding megaliths dominated the stark wasteland of empty car parks, shopping precincts and abandoned playgrounds that now resembled the hostile topography of a strange, alien world.

And it was not solely on land that this explosion of spectacular fecundity occurred.

The depths and shallows of the adjacent reservoir—transmuted into an eerie, inland lagoon—supported an abundance of aquatic life forms. Large armoured fish—reminiscent of ichtyosaurs and coelacanths—glided ominously beneath the algae-carpeted surfaces of the nearby river and canal network. These formidable predators competed with other species that reminded me of elaborately-coloured zebra sharks

whose extended caudal fin with its elongated upper lobe recalled the most ancient antecedents of the genus *carcharodon*.

A wide variety of cephalopods thrived. Many of these tentacled invertebrates appeared almost indistinguishable from modern squid and octopi. Others resembled the hard-shelled ammonites, nautiluses and orthoceras which had evolved and died out hundreds of millions of years ago. Crustaceans identical to the trilobites that dominated the Devonian oceans, until they disappeared at the end of the Permian era, moved in shoals like squadrons of armoured submersibles. Occasionally they ventured to the water's edge along with other species whose vividly-coloured carapaces recalled the symbolic liveries of the famous *Heikegani* crab which, according to Japanese folklore, depicted the faces of drowned samurai killed during the historic sea battle of Dan-no-ura.

Large amphibians lurked amid the profusion of pungent weeds, immense lily pads and bulbous fungi that flourished along the water's edge. These ranged in size and general appearance from creatures that resembled mutated frogs and grotesquely deformed cane toads to gigantic salamanders as big as monitor lizards, their gleaming flesh extravagantly patterned. Observing this fabulous menagerie, I half-expected to see a *truly* mythical chimera such as the monstrous basilisk prowling the turgid swampland, ready to cast its petrifying gaze upon an unsuspecting victim. Lizards and snakes—some lethally venomous—crawled and slithered through the tangled brush of unruly ferns and flowering shrubs, as patient and cold-blooded as death itself.

Strange birds perched among the branches of the immense cycads. Their brilliant plumage glittered with the dazzling iridescence of turquoise, amethyst, sapphire and gold, the metallic glamour of sun-burnished chrome. Capable of only limited flight, these transmogrified birds of paradise found themselves at a serious disadvantage. Their conspicuous magnificence rendered them fatally vulnerable to the swift arrows and poisoned darts of the ruthless Szilardian hunters.

At first I approached the curious delicacies that constituted our new dietary staples with trepidation. The slimy meat prised from the shells of giant crustaceans and gem-encrusted bugs—the oily flesh of hideous fish—struck me as utterly repellent. Even the *smell* was overwhelming.

But I persisted—despite the nauseating quality of the bizarre feasts the Szilardians prepared with the sybaritic gusto of primitive epicures. And gradually my palate began to adjust to the ripe flavours, their unique piquancy reminiscent of rancid cheese. Soon I began to savour the taste. After a time I relished it. And tonight—*of all nights*—I eagerly anticipated the final repast sizzling and spitting on the Szilardian pyres. Our Last Supper would inaugurate the advent of a New Age.

I opened another bottle of Château Montrachet and filled the grimy mug wedged between my thighs. Empty bottles littered the dilapidated patio. Once their celebrated names and reputations suggested a cachet of refinement and sophistication, the exclusive preserve of a privileged elite. Unadulterated snobbery, of course. But in a previous life I had succumbed to its spurious allure.

I had spent years—and a considerable sum of money—assembling what I considered a respectable wine cellar. A case of Château Mouton Rothschild '58—adorned with labels designed by Salvador Dali—once enjoyed pride of place among an impressive collection of impeccable vintage. Several weeks earlier I had consumed the entire consignment with some of the neighbourhood children, the golden-eyed Szilardian tykes who visited my home regularly.

The claret proved a delicious accompaniment to the braised millipede steaks we greedily devoured from gleaming platters the resourceful urchins had fashioned from the chromium hub caps of expensive automobiles rusting on the forecourt of an abandoned dealership. Some of the tattooed savages made necklaces from the vehicles' hood ornaments, elaborate charms designed to ward off the insidious spell of death that had claimed the ravaged sun-carriages whose magical names—Porsche, Ferrari, Lamborgini—once conjured glamorous visions of shameless wealth and luxury. Now they idled silently on the concrete aprons of derelict showrooms: relics of a forgotten technology justly condemned to the scrap heap of obsolescence.

As I raised the mug to my lips the rattle of glass distracted me. A creature resembling a jewelled horseshoe crab scurried from beneath the nearby pile of debris. Its luminous carapace evoked visions of a dazzling scarab, the emblem of immortality revered by the Pharaohs. I drained half the mug in a single mouthful and watched as the gilded insect scuttled across the concrete. I wiped a residue of dribbled wine from the corner of my mouth, soiling the sleeve of my shirt.

Refilling the mug, I took a few moments to survey my surroundings.

Sometimes I imagined myself an insane king, revelling in death, as the apocalyptic wilderness assumed the symbolic dimensions of a cautionary fable. Enthroned by the cosmic ocean of infinity, I anticipated a catastrophic tsunami. But I had no desire to reverse the disastrous tide. On the contrary, I *welcomed* it. Perhaps casting myself in such an apocryphal role satisfied a romantic impulse—a masochistic longing for oblivion. Whatever the reason, it hardly mattered.

The crisis had exposed the frailty of humanity's monumental follies—just as the vanity and arrogance I had cultivated in both my personal and professional lives faded like the memory of an insubstantial dream. By what right dare I claim sovereignty of this brave new world? I was simply a relic of the past—a living fossil—earmarked for extinction. The future belonged to the various new species which emerged in ever more bewildering diversity from the emerald inferno that engulfed the planet. But what of the *people* that remained? What about the Szilardians?

Szilard's Divergence—identified years earlier by the geneticist, Vladimir Szilard—described a complex syndrome of chromosomal variations previously undetected by modern science. The Nobel laureate claimed that these strange mutations encrypted genetic codes which held the key to the next phase of human evolution. He considered the feral prodigies we came to call *Szilardians* the logical successors to the beleaguered species *homo sapiens*—inheritors of the earth.

Typically, the Szilardians were tall, endowed with an elegant, statuesque physique and natural athleticism. But they exhibited anomalous characteristics even Szilard himself could not explain. Their jewelled eyes; the metallic lustre of their hair; and the texture of their flesh which exuded a vivid iridescence beneath a translucent membrane of reptilian scales, suggested metabolic adaptations whose ultimate purpose remained mysterious—the chimerical fusion of a hybrid species.

I enjoyed a more than cordial relationship with the Szilardians whose encampments dominated the area. As the sole representative of my species, I found myself elevated to the status of a privileged dignitary, my every need catered to. Quite what motivated their behaviour initially defied my comprehension. Did they regard me as a curious novelty—a domesticated pet? At times I felt like a royal hostage enjoying the lavish hospitality of my captors while they awaited payment of

a kingly ransom. Of course this situation could not continue indefinitely.

The final alignment of the Algol Parallax—the fateful configuration the infamous cult leader and renegade psychiatrist, Andromeda Polidori, dubbed the Advent of Lilith—would occur in a matter of hours. The prospect—though daunting—no longer alarmed me. But I found myself wondering what role I was destined to play in the ceremonial drama Andromeda and her fanatical disciples so eagerly anticipated. An honoured guest and welcome celebrant? Or sacrificial victim? Both options seemed feasible. And—despite the apparent paradox—utterly reconcilable.

And, of course, by this time I had finally grasped the true nature of the position I occupied in the mystical hierarchy that formed the basis of Szilardian society. My apparent significance to the tribe did not stem from any special qualities I personally possessed. It derived from a separate source entirely. From my wife. Evangelique.

Why?

The answer was simple.

The Szilardians *worshipped* Evangelique.

Chapter Two

Dawn of the Demon Star

Evangelique had been diagnosed with Velikovsky's Aphasia shortly after a series of spectacular meteor showers ignited the skies of the northern hemisphere, a cosmic augury portending imminent disaster. The sheer scale of the event had silenced the remaining sceptics—myself among them—who continued to dismiss the significance of the Algol Parallax, despite the overwhelming wealth of evidence compiled by astronomers and physicists the world over. Prompted by a toxic cocktail of obstinacy, political bias and inchoate fear, those of us who chose to ignore, downplay and publicly ridicule the seriousness of the situation branded its advocates “*the Chicken Little Tendency*”, stigmatising their concerns as the hysterical fantasies of irresponsible alarmists.

Unleashed from the Oort cloud as Algol's inexorable transit exerted a gravitational force 5.8 times greater than the sun, the meteors provided the planet's awestruck population with more than just a terrifying firework display. Painstaking research provided incontrovertible proof that these extraterrestrial bombardments acted as delivery systems for biological agents—*alien life forms*—that established a tenacious beachhead on earth. Exposed to the intense levels of cosmic radiation that penetrated the planet's ravaged atmosphere, these strange organisms thrived.

The consequences of this microscopic invasion became apparent as a series of deadly epidemics—mysterious conditions previously unknown to medical science—erupted globally. Genetic mutation and unpredictable contamination vectors confounded efforts to contain—let alone *cure*—the plagues whose progress surpassed the darkest days of the Spanish influenza outbreak or the apocalyptic death toll of the Black Death. Many believed that doomsday had finally arrived.

The Algol Apocalypse, they called it. Dawn of the Demon Star.

Velikovsky's Aphasia was rare. The condition affected the central nervous system and regions of the brain including Broca's and Wernicke's areas, the parietal lobe and pre-frontal cortex. The disease induced a peculiar trance state which became progressively more profound and ultimately fatal. Some compared it to the

transcendental ecstasies experienced by the participants in certain obscure religious ceremonies. Or those subjected—both willingly and otherwise—to clandestine experiments involving hazardous psychotropic drugs. One particular group of clinicians seriously questioned whether the syndrome should even be classified as a disease in the strictest sense of the word. They suggested it might be more accurately described as an *adaptation*.

Initially I treated these left field ideas with an attitude of lofty derision—if not outright contempt. It struck me as a return to the worst excesses of the so-called *anti-psychiatry* movement—an egregious chapter that besmirched the annals of serious analysis—during which formerly conscientious practitioners abandoned scientific rigour in favour of woolly-minded mysticism. I regarded their approach as credulous and naïve at best—dangerously irresponsible at worst.

With the blinkered obstinacy of religious zealots, many of us continued to cling to the obsolete dogma of scientific orthodoxy, anxious to derive what comfort we could from the old certainties—even while they disintegrated before our eyes. However, as life on earth changed irrevocably—the process of global transmutation accelerating rapidly—I reconsidered my position. Perhaps my relationship with Evangelique played a part, softening my customary intransigence.

In common with the majority who contracted Velikovsky's Aphasia, Evangelique had succumbed to an impenetrable fugue like a mesmerised somnambulist indifferent to her surroundings. Her relationship with reality had become little more than symbolic, as if she had begun to explore the phenomenon of consciousness on a purely conceptual level. Life in the abstract. Eventually I came to the conclusion that this might have been the only logical response to the drastic upheavals that transformed not only our lives—but the planet itself—beyond recognition. Those of us who remained unaffected by the virulent alien organisms that decimated entire populations regarded the future with apprehension—if not outright panic. Velikovsky's Aphasia patients, however, greeted oblivion serenely. And Evangelique herself epitomised that catatonic tranquillity—a symptom commonly observed in those afflicted with the tertiary and terminal phases of the disease.

Afflicted?

Though her condition rendered Evangelique's true feelings completely

inscrutable, I never detected the slightest indication that she was actually *suffering*. She radiated an aura of Zen-like calm that inspired something approaching religious awe in some who encountered her during those last fateful days before her mysterious disappearance. The Szilardians especially.

At times I felt I could see a faint nimbus of light enfolding Evangelique's delicate figure like the halo of an ethereal saint. Despite my natural prejudice, I began to consider the possibility that Velikovsky's Aphasia might incorporate a genuinely metaphysical aspect—a spiritual element—beyond the scope of empirical analysis. Accepting the inevitable, I abandoned any attempt to treat her. I simply observed as Evangelique passively welcomed the steady throng of Szilardian devotees who arrived on a daily basis, offering gifts and tributes with an attitude of wide-eyed reverence. Though her demeanour remained preternaturally distant and aloof, it was only in the presence of her newly-evolved acolytes that my spellbound wife exhibited any semblance of regular cognition or the vaguest awareness of her environment—the objective reality of both herself and others.

In the middle of the garden—rising above a riotous explosion of unmanageable foliage—stood the secluded altar where Evangelique held court. A gazebo. The modest folly had been erected by the house's previous occupants, a former B-movie actor and his wife, a popular television chef. The gazebo had always struck me as a faintly ridiculous manifestation of middle class affectation. However, I had resisted the impulse to demolish the structure. Allowing it to remain intact felt like an ironic gesture—a sly poke at my neighbours' bourgeois aspirations.

Now my perspective—reality itself—had undergone a radical metamorphosis.

The gazebo had been transformed into a numinous shrine. The structure resembled a pagan grotto secreted at the heart of an enchanted forest. Vines and flowering creepers festooned the cupola and pillars. Like the extravagant medallions of a prehistoric fertility cult strange anemones adorned the dense curtains of fragrant moss that draped the domed platform and balustrade.

In the eyes of her pious congregation, Evangelique assumed the role of an enigmatic oracle—the priestess of an ancient Mystery school. Her wordless conjurations silently conveyed the celestial message of a goddess whose empyrean presence they experienced vicariously through her. She seemed otherworldly.

Unreal. Long white hair framed her neurasthenic features like the unruly mane of a transmogrified gorgon, a veil of nacreous serpents fermenting exotic toxins. Our relationship had completely disintegrated, of course. My existence ceased to have any meaning for her—an insignificant cipher overwhelmed by a forest of symbols. I had become a ghost—an untimely spectre—haunting the baroque topography of her transfigured dreams.

In the final days before she vanished, Evangelique seldom left the pastoral alcove where she remained majestically ensconced like the iconic Madonna of a de Chirico canvas, reclining upon a splendid catafalque of richly-embroidered silk, brocade and satin. Various fetishes—hand-carved talismans that resembled the primitive totems of some obscure shamanistic religion or cannibalised from the components of discarded consumer goods like the brutalised idols of an anachronistic cargo cult—filled the sacred arbour. Votive offerings. What these strange artefacts signified I could scarcely guess. Evangelique's presence—the charismatic air of divinity she exuded—imbued the grotesque objects with whatever savage magic the Szilardians venerated.

Occasionally I watched as she performed a ritual laying-on of hands, like a faith healer or psychic surgeon. The Szilardians who surrendered to the sacerdotal miracle of her touch responded as if literally possessed. They exhibited the ecstatic frenzy observed among the celebrants of voodoo rituals or Pentecostal revivalist meetings while Evangelique dispensed her benediction with the regal authority of an omnipotent magician. Had she become a conduit for some cosmic agency, channelling its power like a psychic lightning rod? Once I would have considered the idea absurd.

Once.

I drank more wine and listened to the rustling sounds of the giant insects foraging beneath the thick carpet of ferns and those nesting among the cycads, the moss-choked gutters and collapsing roofs of the adjacent houses steadily enveloped by the encroaching wilderness.

Close to the gazebo the wreckage of a police helicopter lay submerged beneath a thick covering of gnarled creepers and vines that resembled the scabrous tentacles of

a gargantuan squid—a malevolent *kraken*—that had snatched the aircraft from the sky, crushing it like a fragile steel mosquito. Of course, no such thing had actually happened. The pilot had simply lost control of the aircraft and been forced to execute an emergency crash landing. The three skeletons of the helicopter's crew remained faintly visible beneath the dense vegetation that resembled the thick camouflage webbing customarily deployed to disguise field artillery and machine gun nests.

The police officers had survived the crash with only minor injuries. However, when confronted by a group of curious Szilardians—armed with hand-crafted weapons as they returned from a successful hunting expedition—the policemen panicked and opened fire without provocation. Unfounded rumours had accused the Szilardians of perpetrating a catalogue of atrocities, including child sacrifice and cannibalism. Having spent so much time among them, I knew these stories lacked any basis in fact.

Unfortunately the police seemed to *believe* the stories. The initial volley of gunfire killed two of the hunters—children no more than twelve or thirteen years old—instantly. Four more sustained injuries of varying severity. Despite the superior fire-power at its disposal, the helicopter crew found itself quickly overwhelmed by a disciplined cadre of adolescent killers, skilled in the lethal deployment of bow, blade and spear. The Szilardians exhibited a prodigious talent for the kind of atavistic violence I associated with the innocent savagery of tribal societies. I could not condemn them. The police had initiated the violence. The Szilardians had simply defended themselves.

The sight of the helicopter's twisted rotors draped with garlands of flowering creepers—the buckled fuselage succumbing to the relentless pressure exerted by the web of vines—reminded me of Max Ernst's surrealist masterpiece, *Garden Airplane-Trap*. And I remembered what Andromeda called the Algol Ascendency, during one of our many conversations, which began as psychiatric consultations at Wyvern Abbey asylum. According to Andromeda, the artist Salvador Dali qualified as one of her astrological prodigies. I wondered if his German contemporary might have been equally blessed. Or cursed. Had Ernst also received the cosmic benediction of the periodically-occulted star the ancient Greeks characterised as the winking eye of the

decapitated Medusa?

Andromeda.

Irresistibly my thoughts returned to the countless hours we once spent together. Society had condemned her as heretic, renegade. Insane. But now?

Now the stars intervened.

Chapter Three

Beelzebub's Bawdy House

It seemed an eternity had passed since I first encountered Dr. Andromeda Polidori. Prior to her catastrophic fall from grace, she had pursued a successful career in psychiatry. An eminent practitioner, she had been held in considerable esteem by her colleagues and peers. So what had gone wrong? Why had Andromeda been consigned to an asylum for the criminally insane?

Dr. Andromeda Polidori had spent sixteen years incarcerated at Wyvern Abbey—the most notorious institution of its kind in the country—when we first met. Her crimes? Despite the passage of time—and the stringent efforts of both the police and psychiatric investigators—their true nature still resisted definitive analysis or rational comprehension.

But the consequences remained incontrovertible.

Seven of her followers—adherents to the Astroproteurgy cult she founded—had died while participating in the quasi-mystical procedures she devised. Andromeda coined the term Astral Entelechy to describe the pivotal ritual her devotees celebrated. Despite the wealth of witness testimony and forensic evidence produced in court, the precise methodology—the ultimate *purpose*—of Astral Entelechy remained vague. When challenged in the dock about the actual specifics, Andromeda skilfully deflected the prosecution's questions. Exhibiting an attitude of haughty defiance, she remained cool and elusive—inscrutable as a sphinx. Despite her obstinacy, it seemed clear that Andromeda advocated the Astral Entelechy process as a sacrament of transcendence, a means to achieve enlightenment.

Engaged as a psychiatric consultant by the prosecution team, the photographic material I studied resembled scenes of deliberate torture. Dr. Polidori's disciples—*victims* in my opinion—had voluntarily submitted to forms of excruciating bodily suspension that bore a striking resemblance to the *strappado* and *squassation* techniques practised by officers of the Inquisition while extorting spurious confessions from alleged heretics. And—more recently—the enhanced interrogation methods implemented by the military and intelligence agencies. More provocatively,

perhaps, I also noticed a disturbing similarity to the perverse *kinbaku* bondage style popular in Japan.

Official sources maintained that death in each case resulted from multiple causes. An adverse reaction to the drugs Dr. Polidori administered—a potent cocktail including DMT, psilocybin, LSD and phencyclidine—combined with dehydration, prolonged stress and asphyxiation allegedly caused the seven deaths which landed Andromeda in the dock. But the medical examiner's testimony remained contentious. Inconclusive. And the fact that Andromeda's fanatical disciples *willingly* embraced their fate further complicated the prosecution case. Based solely on the evidence, an acquittal began to look like a distinct possibility. Some pundits suggested that the disgraced psychiatrist might actually leave court a free woman.

However, the testimony she delivered from the dock convinced everyone that Dr. Andromeda Polidori had succumbed to a pernicious dream of madness more dangerous and insidious than any of the patients she had previously treated. The statements she made in her own defence—the apocalyptic sermons of a deluded visionary—alienated the entire assembly. The tantalising prospect of freedom that seemed briefly attainable evaporated. Her own words damned her.

Following a scant three hours' deliberation the jury returned a unanimous verdict. Not guilty by reason of insanity.

Pronouncing sentence, the judge condemned her to an indeterminate period of incarceration with a recommendation that she serve no less than thirty years before being considered eligible for parole. The severity of the sentence reassured a vengeful public that Andromeda—depicted by the salivating tabloid press and media as an irredeemable monster—would be suitably punished.

Punished?

At the time, observing Andromeda's stoic response as the sentence was handed down, I questioned that assumption. She appeared almost nonchalant as she was led away, her slender figure flanked by a pair of burly police officers. I thought briefly of Joan of Arc—bravely confronting the ecclesiastical prosecutors who dismissed her miraculous voices as the satanic utterances of Asteroth, Belial and Leviathan—prepared to face the stake with pious equanimity.

Andromeda's case and the startling revelations that emerged during her trial had

become a *cause célèbre* for some considerable time. However, the media soon found new folk devils to appal and enthrall their audience. Inevitably Andromeda Polidori would be forgotten. Or so it seemed.

An unprecedented catastrophe—the Algol Parallax—changed everything.

I had accepted the position of senior psychiatric consultant at Wyvern Abbey shortly after the suicide of the institution's previous incumbent, Dr. Percy Godwin. An orderly had discovered his body lying in a bathtub in the asylum's grim hydrotherapy suite. Godwin had opened both his wrists with a Liston knife, part of a collection of antique surgical instruments he'd accumulated along with various archaic medical texts and other works of a more ... *esoteric* nature. A man of uncommon humanity, professional acumen and insight, the nature of Godwin's death sent shockwaves through the psychiatric community. It stunned those who knew him personally.

Including myself.

When I first entered the profession, Godwin had been my mentor, guiding me through the maze of potential dangers lying in wait for an inexperienced young psychiatrist. I found his tutelage invaluable while I negotiated the hazards of those difficult early years. And when Evangelique succumbed to the latter stages of Velikovsky's Aphasia, his patience and counsel held me back from a threatened nervous collapse. Consequently I felt compelled to solve the mystery of his death. Perhaps I believed I might exorcise the melancholy ghost of the troubled psychiatrist I occasionally imagined haunting the gloomy precincts of Wyvern Abbey.

That a celebrated paragon of reason and rationality should have embarked upon such a radical course of self-destruction seemed incomprehensible. He left no suicide note—in the accepted sense. An incoherent recording, during which he quoted WB Yeats' *The Second Coming*, shed no light on the incident—other than to imply the catastrophic disintegration of his mind. Something about the nature of his death implied a *ritualistic* dimension that disturbed me profoundly.

What had motivated it?

The subsequent investigation failed to provide a conclusive answer. When I perused his personal journals and clinical notes I became increasingly—and uncomfortably—aware of the overwhelming significance he attached to the case of

his most fascinating and infamous ward. Andromeda Polidori. And I found it significant that Godwin had altered—and even destroyed—many of the records documenting her treatment. The surviving material suggested a hazardous dynamic during which the distinction between analyst and analysand had become dangerously blurred. I sensed that his relationship with Andromeda had played a part in Godwin's death. Had the cult leader somehow *suborned* his suicide? It seemed unlikely. And yet I could not completely dismiss the suspicion.

When I arrived at the asylum, its curious architecture and location suggested other possibilities I scarcely relished: the notion that something more than a conventional breakdown accounted for Godwin's suicide. An indefinable element beyond the scope of analysis.

Wyvern Abbey was—I had to admit—an extraordinary place with a remarkable history. Lord Grayson Mordaunt, the ninth earl of Summerskill, had commissioned the original building during the late eighteenth century. Fabulously wealthy, a prominent Whig and noted eccentric, Mordaunt cultivated a colourful reputation. An associate of Sir Francis Dashwood, he became a member of the Hellfire Club the notorious rake established at his ancestral estate of West Wycombe. That riotous assembly included the artist William Hogarth; Horace Walpole, author of the archetypal Gothic novel, *The Castle of Otranto*; First Lord of the Admiralty, the Earl of Sandwich; as well as many other respectable members of parliament and the aristocracy—not to mention the occasional foreign dignitary such as the esteemed American statesman and polymath, Benjamin Franklin.

Following the dissolution of Dashwood's scandalous sect—which by that time had relocated from the baronet's home to the labyrinthine tunnel system at Medmenham—the ninth earl of Summerskill embarked upon the construction of the imposing Gothic manor his political opponents and detractors dubbed *Mordaunt's folly*. Perhaps prompted by Horace Walpole's example—his fellow enthusiast's famous villa at Strawberry Hill provided a potent catalyst for the resurgence of the Gothic style that persisted well into the nineteenth century—Mordaunt lavished a considerable fortune on his own extravagant creation.

However, while Strawberry Hill resembled an opulent faux-medieval confection, Mordaunt's folly adhered far more assiduously to the sombre conventions of

melancholy romanticism championed by advocates of the Gothic revival. Even by the standards of the time, the scale of the building was impressive. Its lofty towers, castellated battlements and vertiginous buttresses evoked a palpable atmosphere of eerie foreboding. The monumental edifice loomed over the surrounding landscape, an impregnable citadel casting long shadows across the picturesque woodlands and gentle hills like the malevolent spell of an omnipotent wizard. From any perspective Mordaunt's folly resembled the ominous stronghold of a noble tyrant—the castle of the infamous Gilles de Rais that dominated the dark forests of Tiffauge or the remote and sinister Château Silling immortalised by the Marquis de Sade. In fact, the estate's name—Wyvern *Abbey*—seemed quite incongruous.

Nothing about the place implied an attitude of Christian piety.

And yet the estate's elaborate design *did* incorporate an ornate chapel. The earl reputedly spent a considerable fortune ensuring it met his precise—and mysterious—specifications. *Mysterious?* Rumours abounded that Summerskill's eccentric master had dedicated his chapel—the heart of Wyvern Abbey—not to the glory of Jehovah but to the satanic majesty of the Desolate One.

Considering Mordaunt's relationship with Francis Dashwood and the baronet's infamous Hellfire Club, it seemed inevitable that local gossips—and the enemies he'd made among his own class—should voice such suspicions. However, the consistency of the rumours that spread throughout the county lent even the more outrageous stories concerning the debauchery indulged by Mordaunt and a gathering of like-minded nobles a veneer of salacious credibility.

Tales of wild orgies, devil worship and black magic rituals soon reached the ears of the public at large. The earl's alleged exploits were caricatured by cartoonists and described with lurid relish in the most popular scandal sheets of the day. For a time Mordaunt acquired a cachet of dubious celebrity as *Britain's Baron Bluebeard*; his impressive estate dubbed *Beelzebub's Bawdy House*.

At the height of his notoriety, parties of sight-seers embarked upon paid excursions, hoping to catch a glimpse of him and his confederates—in much the same way that tourists spied upon the antics of Lord Byron and his celebrated guests at the Villa Diodati, literary birthplace of Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein*.

Another curious aspect of Wyvern Abbey was its precise, geographical location.

Mordaunt had elected to construct his impressive Gothic pile in the heart of an area known as Wyvern's Dyke. Viewed from the air, the topography resembled the immense coils of a gigantic serpent. Archaeologists generally agreed that these prehistoric earthworks dated back to a period estimated somewhere in the region of 3000 BCE. Nobody could state conclusively who had actually created the monument. Some maintained that a Celtic people—the Ordovices—had been responsible, since various artefacts associated with them had been discovered there.

Whilst not dismissing the Ordovician connection, other investigators—mystics, self-styled pagans and historical revisionists—claimed that Wyvern's Dyke pre-dated the accepted chronology by several millennia. According to those observers, the site was the relic of a lost civilisation, overlooked by—or *deliberately erased from*—the accepted historical record. Advocates of this fanciful hypothesis argued that some of the beliefs and rituals of that putative prehistoric society might have survived—albeit in a distorted, fragmentary form—and been practised by ancient tribes such as the Ordovices and Silures until they were violently suppressed by the Roman invaders and the harsh orthodoxy of the Christian church.

And as for the precise nature of these beliefs? Nobody seemed to know.

After the ninth earl's death, the property devolved to his natural heir and remained the Summerskill family seat until the mid-nineteen-thirties. The thirteenth earl of Summerskill—final scion of the Mordaunt dynasty—died without issue, bankrupt, his inheritance squandered. The state seized the property and what remained of the land as Lord Grayson's once-magnificent fiefdom sank beneath a mire of debt, unpaid taxes and death duties. Much of the estate had already been parcelled off in discrete packages and developed as suburban housing from the turn of the twentieth century as the thirteenth earl pursued his curious—and costly—interests with profligate abandon.

Quite coincidentally, I had acquired a modest house in one of those anonymous middle class neighbourhoods while still maintaining my private practise—years before the Algol Parallax transformed reality and Evangelique succumbed to Velikovsky's Aphasia. From the patio I had enjoyed a clear view of Mordaunt's Folly squatting like a haunted fairytale castle—the fantastic lair of the cursed aristocrat Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont immortalised in *La Belle et le Bête*—high on

the distant hillside. It occupied the nexus of Wyvern's Dyke, a location superstitious yokels traditionally called *the divill's head*. In those days I considered Wyvern Abbey a baroque curiosity. Its allegedly maleficent reputation struck me as nothing more than just a little local colour—fodder for sightseers and amateur historians.

In time I would revise that opinion.

Chapter Four

As Above, So Below

When I first entered Andromeda's quarters at Wyvern Abbey asylum, I had the immediate impression that far from being an ordinary inmate—a *prisoner*—the disgraced psychiatrist enjoyed a position of considerable privilege. In fact, taking the overbearing, Gothic atmosphere of Mordaunt's folly into account, one might have assumed that Andromeda was nothing less than the lady of this forbidding manor—enigmatic chatelaine and natural heir to Earl Summerskill's strange legacy. Rather than the cramped single cell—perhaps even the proverbial *rubber room*—I had expected, she occupied a self-contained suite, comprising a living room, separate bedroom, bathroom and cooking facilities. Bookshelves lined the walls. Many of the books looked extremely old and, I suspected, valuable. Andromeda's private library resembled an antiquarian treasure trove, a repository of ancient secrets and forbidden knowledge.

And I noticed that the door to her quarters remained unlocked. Since the terms of her incarceration stipulated that Andromeda should serve a minimum thirty years of a recommended life sentence, this lapse in security struck me as inexcusable. And the staff treated her with a degree of deference I found genuinely alarming—as if they too had succumbed to the strange enchantment that captivated her starry-eyed acolytes. I remembered the death of my predecessor, Dr. Percy Godwin. He had killed himself following a series of allegedly *intense* sessions with his most notorious charge. What could have passed between them that might account for such an act?

Andromeda's subversive influence appeared to have undermined the strict protocols crucial to an institution like Wyvern Abbey. Whilst I remained at a loss to explain the phenomenon, I could not deny that Andromeda exuded a beguiling combination of intelligence and charisma—not to mention considerable physical attractiveness. She reminded me of the so-called Scarlet Women rhapsodised by notorious occultists like Aleister Crowley and Jack Parsons: the muses and priestesses who officiated at ceremonies such as the Black Mass and the infamous Babalon Working. Despite my scepticism, she created a powerful impression.

Posters, drawings, paintings and charts covered the walls. Many of the images initially eluded me. But some I recognised. Caravaggio's *Medusa* exerted a stark, familiar power; its furious eyes transfixed the viewer like the mythic gorgon herself as the blood spurted from her severed neck. Reproductions of Escher's remarkable etchings—*Relativity*, *Stars* and *Reptiles*—appeared alongside noted works of surrealism including Paul Delvaux's nude somnambulists and the dream-like tableaux of Giorgio de Chirico. Andromeda's private gallery also included iconic images such as Goya's *Saturn Devouring his Son*, Frantisek Kupka's *The Conqueror Worm*, William Blake's *Moses Erecting the Brazen Serpent* and Franz von Stuck's *The Sin*. In fact, this latter image reminded me of the resemblance Andromeda herself bore to the artist's evocative *Circe*—I could hardly imagine a more appropriate parallel, considering the sinister reputation that legendary siren enjoyed.

Astronomical and astrological charts—many painstakingly drawn by Andromeda herself—overlapped, implying the dialectical synthesis of both disciplines. Among these cosmic maps I would eventually become familiar with the Behenian stars: fifteen stellar bodies including Sirius, Arcturus, Vega and Aldebaran traditionally attributed with particular significance by practitioners of ceremonial magic.

The profusion of images included complex diagrams illustrating the esoteric researches conducted by John Dee, Giordano Bruno and Jacob Boehme. Da Vinci's *L'Uomo Vitruviano* stood at the centre of a constellation of similar pictures—among them Basil Valentine's *Azoth* series—which portrayed the symbiotic relationship between man and the universe: microcosm and macrocosm in perfect harmony. Andromeda had inscribed the Da Vinci with the motto of Hermes Trismegistus.

As above—so below.

Reptilian motifs—the image of the serpent elevated to the status of divinity—recurred constantly. The symbol of the Ouroboros appeared alongside the Caduceus—whose intertwining snakes suggested a provocative correspondence with the DNA helix—and the Staff of Flamel, the crucified serpent associated with various strands of Gnostic philosophy and the occult science of alchemy.

As I examined these images, I thought about the asylum's geographical location. The immense and ancient earthworks—Wyvern's Dyke—resembled a monstrous serpent, its undulating coils surrounding the building which stood upon a wedge-

shaped structure locals traditionally called *the divill's head*. True, it *did* resemble the head of a snake. But it might equally have represented the engorged glans of a gargantuan penis. And recent historical research suggested that in earlier times the prosaic sons and daughters of the soil had, in fact, dubbed this strange callosity *the divill's prick*. Devoured by a demon—or ravished by one. Which, I idly wondered, presented Earl Summerskill's superstitious tenants with a more terrifying prospect?

And the name itself. *Wyvern*. It described a particular species of dragon—a denizen of the heraldic bestiary that included such exotic chimeras as the griffin, fiery salamander and manticore.

A winged reptile.

And the wealth of serpentine imagery extended beyond mere pictorial representations. Suspended from the ceiling by chains that resembled twisted snakes, a large crystal globe encircled by a gold serpent with its tail in its mouth provided the room's sole source of illumination. A pair of silver wings that recalled the symbolism of the Caduceus provided the incandescent sphere's crowning glory.

This antique *objet d'art* was known as a Rosicrucian lamp.

Andromeda would later maintain that this particular artefact had once been among various esoteric accoutrements used at an inn called the George and Vulture in London during the mid-eighteenth century. According to legend, Francis Dashwood, Horace Walpole and Grayson Mordaunt had attended the profane rituals celebrated at the George and Vulture. These meetings inspired the notorious baronet to establish his own more infamous Hellfire Clubs at West Wycombe and Medmenham, as well as prompting the construction of Walpole and Mordaunt's respective follies at Strawberry Hill and Wyvern's Dyke.

And, I would learn in due course, the lineage did not end there.

When I first encountered Andromeda Polidori I discovered her sitting at a large table, apparently engrossed in deep contemplation of a Tarot spread. The cards I recognised as the famous Thoth deck painted by Lady Frieda Harris under the direct supervision of Aleister Crowley. Combined with the Master Therion's adroit synthesis of Egyptian, Qabalistic, astrological and Hermetic motifs, Lady Harris's exquisite illustrations depicted a symbolic constellation of powerful, archetypal images—a genuine work of art in its own right. Even a layman and avowed

rationalist such as myself—at that time insensitive to the cards' deeper meanings—could not fail to appreciate the impressive level of creative imagination the Thoth deck represented. Closely adjacent, I noticed a complex house of cards Andromeda had constructed using elements of the Zener and Rorschach decks as well as various trumps derived from the Marseilles Tarot and those designed by AE Waite.

What kind of game is she playing? I thought, wondering if she had staged this curious scene for my benefit. But why? Psychopaths are sly and expert manipulators—a critical trait that defines the condition. And at that time I had no doubt that Andromeda's deranged imagination had soared to the vertiginous limits of elevated psychosis—that her malevolent intelligence transcended the familiar spectrum of ordinary madness. Far from daunted, I considered her case a challenge. My smug attitude reflected that curious combination of naivete and cynicism common to many analysts.

At first she seemed unaware of my presence. A deliberate affectation, I guessed. And, in the brief interval before we spoke, I noticed something else.

The original source of Andromeda's insidious nightmares.

The book that started it all.

Syzygy—HP Haggard's immense magnum opus—lay, unopened, on a nearby table. The ornate gold leaf designs that embossed its sumptuous leather cover and spine assumed a tantalising glow in the subdued illumination of the Rosicrucian lamp. The gilded tome exuded a subtle yet nonetheless compelling attraction.

It *demande*d to be read.

Astrotheurgy—the apocalyptic cult Andromeda founded—derived from a variety of sources. However, the movement drew its principle inspiration from the writings of the enigmatic occultist, Qabalistic scholar and astrologer, Hermione Persephone Haggard. An exponent of the 1880s magical revival, HP Haggard had remained an obscure—largely forgotten—figure until Andromeda rediscovered her work and introduced it to a new generation of eager devotees. An habitu  of such esoteric circles as the Theosophical Society and the legendary Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn established by William Wynn Westcott and Samuel Liddell Mathers, whose illustrious membership included renowned Victorian literati like WB Yeats, Arthur Machen, Bram Stoker and Edward Bulwer-Lytton and Mathers's personal

bête noir; Aleister Crowley, she failed to achieve the degree of celebrity—or infamy—enjoyed by her more notable contemporaries.

Haggard broke with both Theosophy and the Golden Dawn on the eve of the Great War to create her own sect, the Church of Astrosophy. While the merciless efficiency of industrialised slaughter transformed the fields of Passchendaele, Ypres, Amiens and the Somme into squalid abattoirs, the popular press—still reporting the sensational details of Crowley's scandalous career—ignored Haggard's nascent religion in favour of the indiscriminate blood-letting that characterised the genocidal sacraments of modern warfare.

However, following the Armistice, the spiritualist movement experienced an unprecedented boom in popularity. The appalling casualty rates of the Great War decimated an entire generation, an obscenity compounded by the global influenza epidemic whose death toll actually *surpassed* the conflict's monstrous body count. In the wake of these monumental tragedies—overwhelmed by grief—millions turned to clairvoyants, mediums and sooth-sayers. The bereaved, the desperate and the gullible—eager to glean whatever crumbs of comfort they could—resorted to the absurd rituals of the drawing room séance, exchanging banal pleasantries with dubious spirit guides and the disembodied voices of departed loved ones allegedly consigned to the Other Side.

In this climate of superstitious credulity HP Haggard enjoyed a brief period of fame among those drawn to the arcane mysteries of the paranormal with the 1928 publication of her immense exegesis, *Syzygy*. A curious synthesis of astrology, numerology, alchemy and philosophical speculation, the so-called 'bible of Astrosophy' also incorporated the latest contemporary breakthroughs in astronomical research and theoretical physics. Among other insights, she placed significant emphasis on the then-recent discoveries made by the British astronomer, Arthur Eddington.

On the 29th of May 1919 Eddington documented a total solar eclipse—the alignment of earth, moon and sun conventional astronomy defines as *syzygy*—from the island of Principe off the west coast of Africa. His observations confirmed Einstein's previously unproven assertion in the General Theory of Relativity that light bends in response to gravitational force. A major breakthrough.

Haggard, however, went several steps further.

According to the guru of Astroposophy, the photographs of the 1919 eclipse depicted a literal manifestation of the Black Sun, the apocalyptic sigil associated with the swastika in its malignant anti-clockwise configuration—the pagan insignia adopted by the emergent Nazi party. Haggard dubbed this phenomenon *the Harbinger*: a sinister augury heralding an imminent global catastrophe. She supported her contention with a series of complex astrological predictions and pessimistic references to the rise of sinister ariosophist cults—infamous racist organisations such as the Vril and Thule Gesellschaft—which sponsored the formation and ascendancy of the NSDAP. In Haggard's opinion, these 'black lodges' represented a critical threat not only to the political and social equilibrium of those times, but to the evolutionary potential of consciousness itself—a diabolical contaminant that might literally corrupt and pollute the fundamental basis of reality.

Extravagant claims, one might have said. At the time.

But ... with the wisdom of *hindsight*?

Did the monumental atrocities of the Third Reich transcend ordinary human cruelty? Had the baleful agencies of a higher reality—an ancient and truly objective evil—actively influenced the affairs of mankind? *Where was god in Auschwitz?* people once asked, despairing.

Perhaps god *was* Auschwitz.

Initially I considered Haggard's description of Eddington's eclipse as *the Harbinger*—a star of ill-omen portending disaster—absurd, the grandiose delusion of a self-styled prophet. However, upon reflection, something gave me pause. Eddington's photographic plates recorded the image of the Black Sun in 1919—the same year Adolf Hitler attended his first meeting of Anton Drexler's fledgling German Worker's Party: a small, apparently insignificant group of extreme nationalists and right wing malcontents destined to assume terrifying proportions under his eventual leadership. Coincidence?

Haggard characterised the material plane as one of the *lower astral frequencies*. She coined the term *dark aether* to describe the obscure element that formed the fundamental basis of physical reality. If such a phenomenon actually existed, modern scientific techniques had consistently failed to detect its presence—let alone

identify its true nature or purpose. But the lack of tangible evidence never discouraged Haggard or her small coterie of followers. Quite the reverse.

They accepted the existence of dark aether as an article of faith.

I had encountered such ideas before. Gnostic heretics such as the Cathars and Bogomils in medieval Europe had preached that all matter was intrinsically evil—the work of a lesser creator frequently known as the Demiurge. In fact, the notion that aether itself—a universal fluid which mediated and catalysed the various and complex mechanisms of the physical universe—truly existed had only been discredited by the Michelson-Morley experiments in 1887. Yet even Einstein had considered the possible existence of what he called 'new aether'. And recent breakthroughs validated the existence of both dark matter *and* dark energy—a concept perilously close to the *dark aether* Haggard postulated. The abstract vagaries of quantum mechanics, Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle and the emblematic mascot of Schrödinger's cat—the infamous familiar of modern physics—shattered the comfortable orthodoxy of the Newtonian model. At times their bewildering paradoxes lurched towards the conceptual realms of philosophy or the irrational extremes of mysticism. Some believed this disturbing tendency endowed Haggard's cosmic dogma with a veneer of *empirical* respectability.

Syzygy comprised three separate volumes individually entitled *Autogenes*, *Cosmogenes* and *Aeogenes*. The titles referred to a hypothetical process of metaphysical evolution undertaken by the disciples of Astroposophy—the literal ascendancy of body, mind and spirit to the apotheosis of the High Archetype, similar to the concept of the Pleroma the Gnostics described as *the source of divine power*. Haggard coined the term *ontological aeons* to describe the critical phases of enlightenment. At each stage of initiation the acolyte would transcend the mundane and literally embody an aspect of that macrocosmic triune—just as the alchemists aspired to transmute base metal into gold. She appropriated—and mystically extrapolated—the astronomical term *syzygy* to characterise a propitious convergence of the stars with the re-integration of the High Archetype's creative energies.

Syzygy would catalyse the ultimate transfiguration.

And one star system, in particular, dominated Haggard's esoteric doctrine.

Algol.

Chapter Five

The Egregore Configuration

Located in the constellation of Perseus, the Algol system consisted of three stellar bodies individually designated Beta Persei A, B and C. In ancient times it had acquired a sinister reputation. The name Algol derived from the Arabic *Ra's-al-Ghul*, translated literally as 'the head of the demon'. The Hebrews called it *Rosh ha Satan*. And, according to some sources, Chinese observers described it as *Tseih She*—'piled up corpses'. However—evocative as these macabre appellations might have been—the allusion to *Greek* mythology exercised the greatest fascination over the imagination of HP Haggard and the devotees of Astroposophy.

To the Greeks the periodic dimming of Beta Persei A—occurring every sixty-eight hours and forty-nine minutes when eclipsed by the orbit of its smaller companion, Beta Persei B—represented the blinking eye of Medusa's severed head. An 'evil star' they knew by the word *disaster*. In *Syzygy*, Haggard conflated the Neoplatonist concept of the Hypercosmic Gods—the progenitors of Essence, Life and Soul—with the idealised emanations she termed Autogenes, Cosmogenes and Aeogenes, identifying their stellar manifestations with the triple star system Algol.

Once I would have treated such claims with complete disdain: the quasi-mystical, pseudo-scientific elaborations of a highly-imaginative—critically undisciplined—mind. But the reality of the Algol Parallax fundamentally challenged my arrogant pre-conceptions.

While Andromeda continued to study the cards, I noticed something. A small framed photograph, adjacent to the elaborate house of cards she'd previously constructed. Abandoning standard protocol—I habitually adopted a passive approach, stringently avoiding confrontation—I lifted the picture. The image—an old, sepia-toned Daguerreotype—depicted a young woman with the pale, delicate features of a Victorian doll, the archaic coiffure and dress of that period.

Hermione Persephone Haggard.

The iconic guru of Astroposophy transfixed me with the inscrutable stare of a whey-faced Medusa, her large eyes infused with an icy translucence that recalled

Franz von Stuck's portrait of the mythical gorgon. And I found myself irresistibly reminded of the familiar photograph of Klara Hitler—the intense expression eerily reminiscent of her son's coruscating gaze.

“Beautiful. Wasn't she—?”

Andromeda's soft, mellifluous voice interrupted my train of thought.

“Quite . . . remarkable looking,” I replied. “Piercing eyes.”

“I would expect no less from such a visionary,” Andromeda said, her attention still focused on the Tarot cards. Did she deliberately avert her gaze—or was she actually preoccupied?

“Sometimes people can confuse the persuasive delusions of intractable madness with the philosophical insights of a genuine visionary experience,” I suggested.

Andromeda looked up from the Tarot spread and fixed me with a frank, appraising gaze. The elusive incandescence of her cold green eyes suggested she shared whatever strange dreams inspired HP Haggard's cosmic doctrine—a creed the disgraced psychiatrist had appropriated and adapted to create the cult she named *Astropotheurgy*.

I noticed the cards spread before her—the Fool, the Magus, the Priestess, the Tower, the Devil, the Hanged Man, Lust, the Star, The Lovers, Death, Art, the Aeon and the Universe. I would subsequently learn that Andromeda employed a complex divination system of her own devising. It included thirteen of the Major Arcana as the basis for a spread that might comprise as many as three dozen cards, arranged in formations that resembled complex molecular diagrams. She called it the *Egregore Configuration*. At that time I had no real inkling as to the cards' true meaning. And yet I experienced a profound sense that this esoteric system expressed something significant and directly relevant—not only to the awful predicament of the world but to my own personal circumstances.

One card, in particular, prompted this unaccustomed intuition.

The Star.

It made me think of *Evangelique*.

At this stage she had only recently entered the tertiary stage of Velikovsky's *Aphasia*. But she had already passed the point of no return—a nebulous threshold of dreams inaccessible to those unaffected by the condition. Soon, she would be lost to

me—to the world—forever.

Created in accordance with Aleister Crowley's precise specifications, Lady Harris's vivid illustration—the Star—depicted a luminous nude bearing two chalice-like cups, from which she poured a mysterious elixir. The serpentine curves of her figure; the ghostly pallor; and a rope of long white hair snaking down her back like the undulating coils of a blanched anaconda, reminded me of the strange metamorphosis that had overtaken Evangelique. The ethereal creature she had become. The enormously-inflated disk of the full moon flanked the naked sylph like a brilliant mandala invoking Selene, Tanith, Artemis and all the various aspects of the lunar goddess. In the distance, a seven-pointed star exuded waves of radiation whose occult influence appeared to transform the earth below and the very fabric of space itself. The central figure embodied that cosmic energy, an avatar imbued with the awesome power of divinity.

“Madness—” Andromeda said after a brief pause which somehow seemed timeless. I had the impression that seconds, minutes—*perhaps hours*—might have passed. Of course, I realised how absurd the very notion seemed. And yet the feeling remained persuasive, impossible to shrug off. Quite what caused it I could scarcely guess. Had it something to do with the cards? During her trial, the prosecution suggested that Andromeda had practised some subtle form of mind control—perhaps hypnotism—designed to secure her followers' slavish obedience. At the time I had considered the idea far-fetched. However, nobody could deny that seven of her inner-circle had enthusiastically embraced a painfully protracted form of ritual suicide at her behest. Quite how she convinced them to endure such torture—and inevitable death—remained a mystery. As I stood before Andromeda, a seductive conjureess ensconced at the heart of her arcane shrine—the walls adorned with symbolic images, magical diagrams and alchemical motifs—it was tempting to accept such dubious claims. To believe she had exerted a genuinely mesmeric influence over her disciples.

“I ... I beg your pardon—” I said clumsily, attempting to regain my composure.

“Madness,” Andromeda repeated patiently, as if conversing with a backward child. She seemed to relish the word and all its morbid connotations. “I believe we were discussing the distinction between madness and the elevated perception

enjoyed by the genuine visionary, the truly illuminated. How, I wonder, does one diagnose the transcendent? The miraculous? I'm sure you're familiar with the parable of the Grand Inquisitor from Dostoevsky's *The Karamazov Brothers*—”

“I know the story.”

“In that case then you'll recall that the Second Coming of Christ, occurring in Spain at the height of the Inquisition, poses such a threat to the power and authority of the established Church that the Son of God is turned over to the ecclesiastical police and sentenced to burn at the stake. The true message of Christ is far too subversive. It is literally heretical, since—as the Grand Inquisitor reveals—the Catholic church actually worships *the wise spirit, the dread spirit of death and destruction*. In other words, *Satan*. The Father of Lies has always been Prince of this World. The truth is never tolerated. It is—and always has been—censored and suppressed. And those who dare speak out are mercilessly vilified and persecuted. The dissidents consigned to the pyre were once branded *apostata, heretica, malefica* or *relapsa*. Now the degradation ceremonials of the standard diagnostic technique stigmatise those who fail to conform with meaningless labels like *schizophrenic, borderline personality disorder, paranoid* or *psychotic*.”

“You believe madness is a myth?”

“An interesting observation, Doctor,” Andromeda remarked, a sphinx-like smile on her lips. “Don't you find it intriguing that the lexicon of analysis invokes the symbolic archetypes of classical mythology? Narcissus. Oedipus. Electra. Eros and Thanatos. The spurious basis of diagnosis derives from flawed observation, ill-conceived speculation and the random aggregation of symptoms attributed with pseudo-scientific terms like *complex, syndrome* or *constellation*. Even the origin of the word itself—*psyche iatros*, quite literally 'doctor of the soul'—suggests that psychiatry is a genuine vocation practised by a priestly elite. In reality, of course, we so-called 'doctors of the soul' were nothing more than salesmen, marketing our product to an unsuspecting population—a universal panacea that medicalised and commodified the human condition. The supposedly *empirical* basis of psychiatry is no more valid than phrenology.”

“Or astrology—” I commented drily.

“Wouldn't you agree, Dr. Lewis, that the fundamental basis of what most

clinicians call *madness* is the pathological failure to distinguish between fantasy and reality?” Andromeda responded, obviously unperturbed by the personal sleight my previous remark implied.

“Broadly speaking? Yes.”

“And yet you deny the reality of the Algol Parallax—despite the overwhelming evidence,” Andromeda continued. “Your position is clearly untenable. But you cling to the your obsolete dogma like a drowning man clutching at a concrete life preserver.”

While Andromeda spoke, my gaze alighted upon a dramatic image pasted to the wall between a reproduction of Dali's *The Metamorphosis of Narcissus* and Gustave Moreau's *The Apparition*. I recognised the stark tableau depicting the doomed casualties of a notorious maritime disaster as Theodore Gericault's sombre masterpiece, *The Raft of the Medusa*. Once again I experienced the powerful suspicion that Andromeda had deliberately stage-managed the scene in anticipation of our first meeting. What resembled a random collage of posters, reproducing masterpieces of the Surrealist, Expressionist, Romantic and Art Nouveau schools; astrological and alchemical diagrams; stellar telemetry charts and astronomical photographs, represented much more than the chaotic kaleidoscope—the visual manifestations of a fractured mind—I had initially assumed.

Dr. Andromeda Polidori had expertly choreographed what researchers in the field of experimental psychiatry—and practitioners of ceremonial magic—termed *set and setting*. Adherents to the theory maintained that the precise organisation of the physical environment in tune with the subject's individual mind-space produced a spontaneous psychological reaction—a critical sympathetic resonance—conductive to profound, transcendental experiences. An indispensable aid to the process of enlightenment. Or the subtle dynamics of mind control.

I remembered Andromeda's disciples. The ones who died as a result of the bizarre ceremonies she devised. Was she attempting to draw me into her insidious sphere of influence? Had she succeeded with my predecessor? Dr Godwin's death—the manner of his suicide—still baffled me.

Had she converted him to her cause?

“Does it frighten you that much, Doctor?” Andromeda enquired.

“Does what ... frighten me?” I asked reluctantly.

“The ineluctable modality of the real,” she elaborated confidently. “You stand at the edge of the abyss and still deny its existence. Wilful self-delusion is the very essence of despair—the fundamental madness of the soul. The Inquisition might have compelled Galileo to recant. But the world is not flat. The sun and the planets do not orbit the earth. You insist on calling me mad, Dr. Lewis. But the stars themselves corroborate my philosophy. Reality has proved me right!”

“Well, I suppose it's an ill solar wind—” I remarked with grudging resignation.

“Don't be so downhearted, Doctor. It isn't the end of the world. Just the apocalypse—”

Of course, Andromeda was right. This was not the end.

Simply the beginning.