

*The Nowruz Scrolls*

By

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## **In Place of an Introduction**

*The Nowruz Scrolls* combines scientific research into the tenets of the Zoroastrian faith with forays into the cultural values of contemporary Iranian peoples. Staged on the border of reality and fantasy, the story examines the process of marginalization that gnaws at the core beliefs of cultures that are being gradually subsumed by victorious cultures. The mechanism employed is at once simple and multifarious. It is simple in that it turns the members of the culture being subsumed into agents of their own marginalization. It is multifarious because it applies the same basic principle to all aspects of the target culture until total elimination is achieved. The Iranian and Arab cultures of Westasia have been in this rather uncomfortable situation since the dawn of Islam. The process is slow but steady, and barely detectable.

No doubt, a host of arguments can be made regarding the actual marginalization process. For the purposes of this brief note, however, a few words should suffice. There are two cultures: a victorious culture with a set of new and vibrant beliefs expressed in newly devised rituals, and an older culture targeted for marginalization, and eventual elimination. The agents of marginalization, mostly scholars and learned figures of the victorious culture, expose the tested spiritual and intellectual core beliefs of the old culture to the light of reason and knowledge, as well as to controversy, all along employing the values of the victorious culture. Over the centuries, their

debates result in a set of new opinions, sage remarks, and interpretations of the old culture that only partially resemble the original intent of its founders. Meanwhile, deprived of its source of replenishment, the wellspring of the ancient culture undergoes a slow death.

This, however, is only half of the story. In time, the opinions, sage remarks, and interpretations mentioned above produce their own bevy of dogmatic, uninspired, and hollow rituals. (The rituals are dogmatic, uninspired, and hollow, of course, from the point of view of the values of the old culture.) For a while these new rituals masquerade as a new set of core rituals for the members of the culture being dispossessed. Finally, the culture of the victor becomes the only source of belief and rituals for everyone in the new culture. Systematically distanced from their genuine beliefs, the members of the subsumed culture instinctively pay homage to their newly invented, ancient legacy.

The protagonist in *The Nowruz Scrolls* is an Afghan archaeologist who happens to stumble onto a set of scrolls on Mount Mugh. His fascination with the ancient scrolls is enhanced by the assertions of a Sughdian guide who claims to be able to reconstruct the true spiritual and intellectual wellspring that had informed the ancient scrolls, a wellspring long since gone dry.

At the end of the story, Pirzad the archeologist, realizes that *'aql* (wisdom) and *danesh* (knowledge), although powerful tools for understanding the material life of ancient peoples, are poor tools for fathoming their *khirad* (innate understanding). He also realizes that without a thorough grasp of *khirad*, he will have no recourse to the meaning and relevance of the set of core beliefs and rituals that sustain his being.

The Academy of Sciences of Tajikistan published the English text of *The Nowruz Scrolls* in the summer of 2001. This new edition is being published in 2004 due to a continuous

demand for the story. The volume consists of the revised English text and its translations in the Persian, Tajiki, and Russian languages. In the compilation of this volume, I have benefited from the kindness and genuine guidance of a number of friends and colleagues without whose assistance this volume would not have been possible. Dr. Ulmas Mirsaidov extended me a generous amount of assistance for both this and my other projects for the Academy of Sciences of Tajikistan. I thank him for his support and encouragement. Dr. Askarali Rajabov has been a pillar of continuous support for my work in Tajikistan during the last fourteen years. To him I owe a real debt of gratitude. The illustrations are contributed by Denise E. Williams; her interpretation of the *Scrolls* truly enhances their meaning. Lola Hojizoda translated the *Scrolls* into Russian. Zulfiya Rahimova and Margarita Moskvicheva served as text editors, while the final text was corrected and edited by Maria Zavialova. Salim Zarafshonfar edited the Tajiki, originally contributed by the author, with final editing by Zulfiya Rahimova and the author. Carol Bashiri created the graphics for the scrolls, formatted all versions, and prepared the camera-ready version. I have enjoyed her continual support in all my projects. I thank all the above-mentioned, and many others, for their contributions and remain the sole person responsible for any shortcomings.

Iraj Bashiri  
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# One

On a delightful April afternoon, Khurshed, Mohporah, Abid, and the present writer were sitting on the veranda of one of the rooms on the eighth floor of Hotel Tajikistan, in Dushanbe, talking about the diversity of peoples in the republic, the longevity of Tajik culture, and other socio-culturally related topics. Khurshed, a cinematographer, and his friend, Mohporah, were interested in the caves and villages around Dushanbe. They talked incessantly about their experiences while dealing with the villagers. From our earlier discussions, I had come to the conclusion that they might have gathered a lot of documentary materials about these villages, caves, and their associated peoples, village dwellers as well as visitors. Yet, I did not wish to solicit more information than they were willing to share.

"In one of those caves," said Khurshed, "there is a *yogi* who has not stepped out of the cave for years. You might not believe this but his bones have frozen in such a way that now he sits in a permanent lotus position. He cannot get up and move about."

Whenever I thought these discussions were reaching the level of the incredible, and there were a few such occasions, I looked at Abid, an educated, middle-aged fellow with a great deal of experience, for his opinion. Although he spoke little, Abid usually confirmed the cinematographers' statements with a nod of his head, convincing me, as it were, that he, too, had been a witness to some of those same events.

"Have you actually documented any of these incredible events and scenes that you so eloquently describe?" I asked. "I find them unbelievable."

"We have," said Khurshed calmly. "It is our job, after all. We have canister upon canister of raw materials on these people in the studio. Besides, our work is not finished yet. In a few days, we will be heading in that direction again."

"To produce more materials?" I asked.

"That as well as to discover new sites around Mount Mugh, the stronghold of the Sughdians during the early decades of the Arab invasion of the region."

"Mount Mugh?" I asked enthusiastically and added, "I am familiar with some of the work done there in the 1930's. Are you, by any chance, visiting the ruins on Mount Mugh?"

"No," said Khurshed laughing. Then, sitting back in his chair, he added, "That, I would say, is your kind of work. We are cinematographers not archaeologists."

"How do you get to these far-off places in the mountainous republic?" I asked, my curiosity peeking.

"Oh, we have Simurgh. It takes us any place we wish, even if it were located on top of Mount Qaf."

"Simurgh!" I echoed. "That's a familiar name. The bird that rises from its own ashes. Is that the one?"

"No, no," said Abid, shaking his head incredulously. "You are thinking of the *quqnu*, your proverbial phoenix."

"Which one is Simurgh then?"

"Are you familiar with Shaykh Attar?" Mohporah asked.

"Sort of," I said, evasively.

"In his *Conference of the Birds*, he talks about Mount Qaf and the birds of the world crossing its seven valleys to reach the abode of the Simurgh. Does that ring a bell?"

"Yes, it does," I said, and added, "sort of..."



"The studio helicopter takes us to these places," Khurshed said impatiently. "We call the old helicopter the Simurgh, because, in the past, it has worked some wonderful miracles for us."

"Remember?" said Abid, still on the subject of Mount Qaf, "We were planning to make a documentary, or was it a short

film, about the "Search for the Simurgh" or the "Search for the Buraq? Whatever happened to that project? I think we should not forget that."

Ignoring Abid's remark, Khurshed turned to me and, assuming a serious stance, said, "If you are genuinely interested in the ruins, you, too, can join us."

"I would definitely be interested," I said, "if you were going to Mount Mugh."

"What difference does it make whether *we* do or do not go to Mount Mugh? If *you* want to go to Mount Mugh, early in the morning, we can easily lower you down from the Simurgh and, late in the afternoon, pick you up on our way back."

I looked at Mohporah and Abid. They both were in agreement with Khurshed.

"Is that not dangerous?" I asked.

"No," said Khurshed with almost absolute certainty. "In fact, that is the only safe way to visit places that high and not have to climb for hours on end..."

"But the Simurgh bit," I asked again, "isn't that dangerous?"

"Not any more dangerous than falling off a cliff while trying to reach the summit on foot."

"Besides," said Mohporah. "You are asking the wrong question. The question is this: Are you really and truly interested in a rare trip like the one Khurshed is offering? I am sure you will never again in your life receive an offer like that. That, I believe, is what your question should be about."

"I really haven't figured you guys out yet," I said incredulously. "Are you serious or are you pulling my leg?"

"Oh yes. We are serious. We are professionals and professionals are always serious about their jobs. Are you?"

"Am I what?" I asked laughing involuntarily, "serious or professional?"

We all laughed. Then with a more somber note in my voice I added, "Of course I want to go. But there are some logistical concerns here that have little to do with my dedication to archaeology. Let there be no doubt in your mind that I am

extremely excited about the prospects of the adventure you offer. At the same time I am wary of the consequences. For instance, are there any wild animals or other dangers lurking? Things that I might be oblivious to?"

"Just the normal hazards," chimed in Abid. "A year ago we took a French explorer to the Yaghnob valley using a similar arrangement. We can equip you with a gun, if that would make you feel better. Nothing but vultures goes that high up. So you can be perfectly sure that you will have the place all to yourself for the whole day."

"Can I think this over before giving an answer?" I asked pensively.

"But of course you can," said Khurshed. "It's your decision. We are only trying to help you and to make your trip to our beautiful republic as enjoyable and meaningful as possible. We need, however, to know your decision by tomorrow afternoon. We head out early in the morning the next day."

"Where does the Simurgh fly out of?" I asked.

"Usually out of the airport. Sometimes we can arrange a lift off the floor of the stadium. It all depends."

"I accept your kind offer," I said abruptly.

"Just like that?" asked Khurshed rather surprised.

"Well, whether now or tonight or tomorrow morning, I'm the one who has to make the decision. The facts are not subject to change and I really want to visit Qal'a-i Mugh and see the layout and condition of the ruins. It's a chance that I cannot pass up. I'll go."

"Fine decision," said Khurshed. "You won't regret it. We will sort out the details tonight at dinner at Abid's."

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After going over the details of the trip at Abid's and setting up the schedule, whenever I thought of the forthcoming helicopter ride, the name Simurgh popped into my head. I imagined that, either from the airport or from the stadium floor, I would be picked up by a gigantic bird and carried to the top of Mount Qaf. Would human beings have access to Mount Qaf to

retrieve me? I wondered. Yet, on the morning of our departure, I boarded the helicopter with little trepidation. In fact, I was quite calm in spite of the fact that I was not at all sure about the possible ramifications of the task that I was undertaking.

Within a few minutes of our boarding, with a light jolt, Simurgh lifted us off the floor of the stadium. Nobody was talking. I did not know the pilot. "I thought Abid was going with us," I said, looking out the window at Abid diminishing in size as the helicopter gained altitude.

"Oh, no," said Khurshed. "He has some editing to do. We have a documentary in preparation. The filming for it is complete. Now is the time of sitting at the editing machine and tediously running the film frame by frame and segment after segment. We must examine each scene over and over again."

"Here," said Mohporah, handing me an envelope. "I brought some of the pictures that we took last time we went to one of those villages."

I took the black and white pictures out of the envelope and looked at them. The people pictured resembled Afghan mujahidins, but none of them seemed violent or carried a gun.

"They seem to be a nice and peaceful people," I said, pointing at a family portrait.

"They are," said Mohporah. "That's exactly why we are so interested in them. They have preserved some of the very unique customs of the region. For instance, they bury their hair cuttings under loose dirt. At the time of childbirth, they keep the childbearing woman totally isolated from the rest of the community. Still others cover their mouths when cooking on open fire in order not to contaminate the fire. Some of their rituals like putting oil on the body, placing thorn circles, kissing thresholds, and worshiping stones, are quite enigmatic..."

"Just the type of people I am interested in." I said.

"But after they have been dead for several centuries!" interrupted Khurshed laughing out loud.

"You could say that," I said laughing.

"Come with us, then," said Khurshed. "Forget about Qal'a-i Mugh."

"No thanks," I said. "You are covering the villages for all of us. I really would like to spend the day among the ruins of Qal'a-i Mugh. Who knows, I might see something that others might have missed!"

Khurshed and Mohporah looked at each other meaningfully and smiled. A long silence, broken only by the hum of the chopper followed. Outside the helicopter, the lush valleys and high mountain ranges were mesmerizing. Finally Mohporah, pointing to a distant site, said, "There's the ancient city of Panjekent in the distance."

I squinted my eyes to get a clearer view of the place through the lingering haze. Panjekent looked like a beautiful piece of sculpture carved out of a huge, chocolate-color mountainside. Rather than getting closer to the site, however, the helicopter pulled away.

"We'll be above Mount Mugh shortly," said Khurshed with a hint of apprehension in his voice. "We don't need to go much higher. You will be lowered in this basket. Once on the ground, all you need to do is to make sure that you exit the basket as quickly as you can and stay totally clear of the craft. The surface of the summit is not flat; that's why it is more dangerous to land than to lower you down. On one side there is a craggy drop of over six thousand feet. We'll stay absolutely clear of that, so don't be alarmed when you see the precipice. In real terms you'll be nowhere near that part of the mountain. The other side has a gentler slope. Our advice is that you stay within the Qal'a all the time. Mohporah made lunch for you. As you can see, your food and the items that you brought with you are all here in the basket next to you. As soon as you touch the surface, take those items out and place them on the ground. You don't need to take time to move them away from the basket.

As Khurshed went about tying up the loose ends and I stepped into the basket, the pilot began the count down from ten... nine... here, put your foot here...eight... hold on

tight...seven...don't let the basket lose its... six...equilibrium. Clear... five ... the basket as soon... four... good luck...see you ...three ... late in the afternoon...two... one...

My heart was pounding in my throat, but I was happy to have not lost my stiff upper lip. When the basket hit the ground, the sides were lowered automatically; I jumped out of it as if jumping out of the path of an adder. Then I grabbed my knapsack and jacket, as well as the lunch Mohporah had prepared, and before walking toward the ruins, I looked up at the helicopter as it gradually disappeared in the blue sky. I scanned the surroundings. The mountaintop looked quite tame in comparison to the heights nearby. Miniature fields and villages, rows of trees, and shiny bodies of water caught my sight. Suddenly I felt that I was cut off from the rest of the world and a strange sense of emptiness overwhelmed me.

At the site, I spent the better part of the morning surveying the grounds. I walked among the ruins, examined the remains of what seemed like a rather large fortress town with alleys, arches, and remnants of two-story buildings. The stone walls of the fortress impressed me greatly, and reminded me of the stonewalls of the stronghold of Hassan Sabbah on Mount Alamut that I had visited just a year prior to coming to Tajikistan.

Finally, when I was convinced that I had formed a pretty accurate mental picture of the place, I rested beside one of the walls facing the Zarafshan River that, like a thin turquoise line, ran below and down the valley until it disappeared in the distance. It was an incredibly beautiful sight. Then, for some reason, I thought of the Sughdians and of the miserable life that they must have led under their Arab overlords on this very foreboding mountain, cut off from family and friends. Wouldn't it be wonderful if, somehow, we could gain entry into their thoughts, rituals, and stories, I mused?

Having rested sufficiently, I took my tools out of the knapsack and began a systematic coverage of the area, taking pictures, measuring heights and lengths of walls, arches, and

what looked like remnants of rooms and doorways. I had to make sure that I saw and documented everything. This data had to be able to provide answers to questions that at the present did not yet exist. This is the hardest aspect of my work and I take it very seriously, because, usually, I can afford to visit certain places only once. My conceptual frame of the area, the data I collect on the site, and my on-the-site analysis of the data must satisfy any questions that might arise outside the field far into the future.

Altogether, I could determine the outline of five rooms. Four were rectangular, each 57feet long. The fifth, a smaller room, was 41 feet long. The heights of the walls varied depending on the amount of damage each had sustained over the centuries. Some of the walls were tall and strong enough to have supported two stories with ease while some of the other walls carried traces of stoves probably used for cooking or heating purposes.

By lunch time, I had reached a stretch of shrubbery that straddled a fast-running brook skirting the side of the adjacent mountain. There I found a comfortable place by the water and unpacked my lunch. The murmur of the water cascading over the rocks soothed my nerves; it also brought me back to the reality that I was alone on top of a mountain, waiting for a helicopter, Simurgh, to lift me up and take me back to civilization.

Mohporah had packed a nice lunch. Good Tajik *naan*, *fatir*, *sanbuse*, pickled eggplant, kabob, and a can of Mountain Dew. No tea. I was surprised to see Mountain Dew taking the place of the ever-present green tea. But then, I recalled mentioning that back home in Britain, Mountain Dew was my drink of choice.

With lunch over, I sat flat on the ground and rested my back against a rather large boulder. This gave me a better view of the rather steep cliff facing me across from the brook. On its far side, the craggy cliff gave way to a smooth surface that looked very much like a man-made wall. I rested my back by stretching my legs and putting my feet against another rock that was

mostly covered by brush. I put my hands behind my head and rested against the boulder, allowing my eyes to wander. As I casually surveyed the smooth cliff in front of me, a curious irregularity caught my sight. A corner rock, jutting out of the wall proper, although well hewn by time, looked totally out of place. It looked more like the corner of a well-carved box than of any rock formation belonging to that particular mountainside.

The more I looked at the rock, the more I became convinced that I should get up and closely examine that whole far end of the cliff. Eventually I could no longer bear the suspense. I got up, approached the wall and, carefully scraped around the unusual protrusion using my army knife,. The soft clay gave in easily, revealing the dimensions of a nicely cut niche holding an earthen or rock box. Its shape and exposed height precluded its being an ossuary; I wondered what the contents of such a box might be. I dug faster and faster, until most of the surrounding clay that held the box in place was scraped off. Then I took a sturdy stick from a pile of dried branches and cleaned the sides and back edge of the long box. Within minutes, the heavy relic was ready to be pulled out of its rocky grave.

Once out of the hole, the box looked proportionally shaped. I placed it on the ground gingerly and looked it over. There were no pictures or designs on it. My feeling was that whoever placed it in that hole must have put it right side up. So, using my sleeve, I began to wipe off what I thought was the top. A nice, light green marble with maroon veins began to show itself. I polished the top as well as I could, making sure that nothing wet was nearby. The rest of the box was a clear, shiny marble matching the top. Still, there were no marks, designs, or writing visible.

With trepidation, I ran the sharp edge of the knife blade around the edges to see if the top would yield. It did. With a slight nudge then, I opened the box by lifting the top up. A puff of dust with the putrid smell of dried hide filled my nostrils. The bottom half of the box contained some rolled-up

parchments and quite a lot of parchment dust, some of it still covering the remaining pages.

I could not believe my eyes. Looking around instinctively to make sure that no one was watching, I tried to take the parchments out. They were stuck together. Just my touch told me that they were even more fragile than I had thought upon seeing them. After contemplating the contents for a while, I formed a strategy. I decided to find out, first of all, if the parchments were fully rolled or, as I had surmised, only partially rolled. Since I could not see the entire roll, I placed my hand underneath the two sides of the roll, lifted gently, and felt for edges. The roll was open at the bottom, indicating that they were individual parchment pieces, or scrolls, stacked one on top of the other. Then I examined the top scroll to see how hard it was. It was quite inflexible. Anticipating that there would be some writing involved, I followed my standard procedure of recording everything that happens at a discovery site in detail. Therefore, I left the box and ran to my knapsack. I took out my recorder and a couple of fresh tapes and brought them close to the box. There I put a fresh tape in the machine. Then, before proceeding any further with the investigation of the contents of the box, I described in detail everything that I had done up to that point. I still did not know whether there was any writing on the parchments and, if so, whether the writing would still be legible.

Having made sure that the recorder was set and ready when I needed it, with both hands, I tried to gently peel off the first layer. It resisted but, eventually, like the dry bark of a birch tree, made a cracking sound and came off. I looked inside the scroll. The writing was fresh. I looked at the full page. Both the top and the bottom had been affected, the bottom more than the top. Continuing to talk to my tape, I tried to determine in what language the text was written. It was Sughdian, a language that I had worked on extensively in college alongside other ancient Eastern Iranian languages.

Looking at the front face of the first parchment, I was struck with the smooth quality of the material as well as with the hardness and resistance that prevented the full opening of the documents. The writing was nice and clear and, fortunately, I was not kept in suspense for long before learning about the contents of the documents. Within the first few lines, I discovered the theme: Nowruz, the ancient Iranian New Year Celebration.

Since my time on the mountaintop was limited, and the box was too heavy to move, especially into the Simurgh via the basket, I decided to read what I could of the contents of each scroll, including omissions, misspelled forms, missing letters, and the like, into the tape recorder. My hope, of course, was to be able to unroll all the materials and read their contents to the tape before the helicopter returned.

"Instruction," I heard myself say. "The top lines of the first document are missing and a good part of the bottom is blank indicating space for future additions. The content of the top scroll follows:

...that can be included in a brief note. Yet, in the midst of confusion and insecurity, we made an attempt at leaving an account of one of our most auspicious celebrations for our children, their children and all Sughdian children of the future. This effort began some time ago as a compilation of notes on Nowruz, its history, meaning, and rituals as they have come down to us from the savants of all ages. For its preparation we have consulted the mu bads, found pieces of information in diaries, archives and travelogues, and have interviewed people who have in one way or another been involved in the ceremonies. Their accounts speak for themselves. Please pray for our souls!

The top portion of the scroll had deteriorated and joined the dust at the bottom of the box. I looked at the back of the next page more closely. All I could make out was a faint trace of the writing on this page, too faint to make heads or tails of it. To safeguard the parchments, I spread my jacket by the side of the wall, placed the scroll I had finished reading on it and placed a small rock on top of the parchment. Then I peeled off the next layer, for some reason thinking of peeling onions. It, too, was not a complete page. It seemed that more was missing at the top of this one than from the top of the previous one." Instruction," I said into the tape. "More top lines of the document are missing. The rest of the contents of the second scroll follow:

...consulted the chief mu'bad of the Isfahan Atashgah and of the Fars province on the etymology of "sin." So far only one answer. I have also sent a messenger to Azerbaijan for the same purpose. The newly-acquired report contradicts the others. It attributes the letter to the initial of the word "ehin" for "ehidan." It explains that each "ehin" is one fistful plucked off a field of greenery. It further explains that "haft ehin" had been seven fistfuls or samples of greenery presented to the King as a measure of the forthcoming year's crop yield for each.

Although I personally have difficulty with this view, I am filing it to compare with the responses from the other centers. It seems that the farther we go from our center of Sughd, the more unusual are the views expressed on some of our very basic traditions.

Regarding the inclusion of the Uighur funerary materials, ...

The bottom of the parchment was torn off at this point indicating deletion of extraneous materials and the page carried the faint trace of the previous page on its back. None of the writing was clear enough to read.

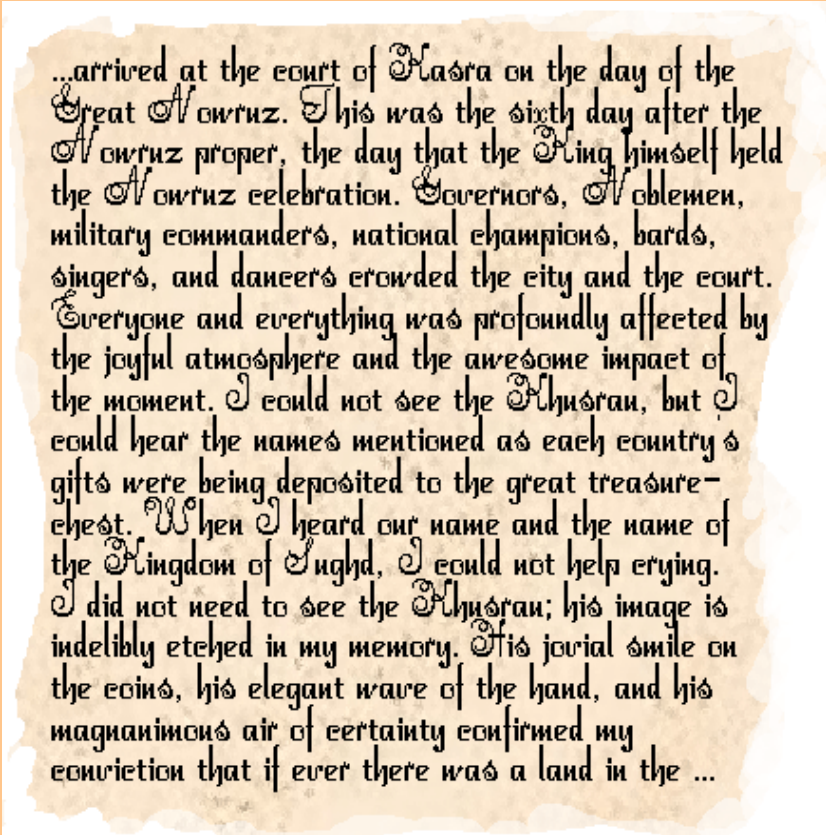
As I carefully surveyed each page, I became increasingly convinced that I had hit on a treasure trove of immense value. And as I discerned an inherent order in the fragments, I became more unhappy that so much of the information had turned into dust. When I reached to take out the next scroll, my fingers passed through the dust and I felt that I hit some small, solid object. I fumbled through the dust and came up with three beautiful, shining pieces of lapis-lazuli. The deep blue of the pieces that had retained their original polish took my breath away. I pressed the record button, then sat back and said: "Instruction. Three pieces of lapis were found among the dust. They appear to be either rough or there might be something etched on them. I need my magnifying glass to inspect them more closely. At the present, I am placing them in an empty film canister with #12 marking the gray lid." Then I moved directly to the next scroll and provided a similar instruction for it as I had done for the ones before. I read the contents of the scroll into the recorder:

...many people like that. One of the representatives, who took me into his confidence, showed me the camel loads of gifts that he was taking to the King. The first camel carried clothes prepared by women of Mjotan. The materials were silks of different hues, all bright. One bolt was sky blue, two bolts of a delightful peach yellow with a tinge of red, and a bolt of copper-red with occasional shimmers of silver. Looking at them as a whole, I felt I was walking along a river, amid a green field strewn with rocks of many hues. The colors of the mountains, the sea, wild flowers, and exotic birds all were rolled up and placed in an innocent-looking load of merchandise in a simple litter bound for the court of the King.

Seeing my astonishment, my companion said, These, of course, are mere bolts of cloth. Then he spread out the contents of a large bundle from the litter on the other side. These, he said, are the artwork of my people. Our women are the most dexterous in the world. Look at the embroidery on this tunic. The black tunic was embroidered with white paisley wrought with the finest of silk thread imaginable. The fringes were accentuated with gold and silver tinsels and spangles. Or, look at this robe, he said. It was a golden robe with a purple fringe skillfully wrought. You know that the color purple is exclusive to ...

There is nothing more disconcerting to the mind than interruption at the very place where one's interest is at its peak. Yet one cannot be blind to the difficulties of those who deposited the scrolls and, of course, their intent. In spite of this, I naturally expected to see each scroll add more information to the previous one and present a coherent picture of Nowruz. My

hope was that somewhere along the line I would hit upon a few pages that would provide the history that the first scroll spoke about. It seemed, however, that no such opportunity was forthcoming. So I continued the routine:



...arrived at the court of Masra on the day of the Great Nowruz. This was the sixth day after the Nowruz proper, the day that the King himself held the Nowruz celebration. Governors, Noblemen, military commanders, national champions, bards, singers, and dancers crowded the city and the court. Everyone and everything was profoundly affected by the joyful atmosphere and the awesome impact of the moment. I could not see the Ahura, but I could hear the names mentioned as each country's gifts were being deposited to the great treasure-chest. When I heard our name and the name of the Kingdom of Ughd, I could not help crying. I did not need to see the Ahura; his image is indelibly etched in my memory. His jovial smile on the coins, his elegant wave of the hand, and his magnanimous air of certainty confirmed my conviction that if ever there was a land in the ...

I checked the tape recorder to make sure that it was working properly and moved on to the next parchment.

...of the year. No one is sure what the land would yield as the best crop during any given growing season. Perhaps wheat and barley. During the year I was there, lentils were doing quite poorly all over the region. No one had a healthy display of lentils, which meant there would not be a bumper lentil harvest that year. We were the guests of the mayor of Ray for the auspicious occasion. He, too, was complaining about the poor performance of the lentils for their display. Look, he said, the haft-shir is the part of the display that usually does not come together easily. But there it is. Everything is there. The shaneh I bought from a Samanqandi merchant traveling to Baghdad. The sharab is from our own cellar; the shekar was sent from Khuzistan; and the shir and shani are available everywhere. Why is it, do you think, that we should have no control over...

This fragment contained some new information regarding the Nowruz display. More importantly, it harked back to pre-Islamic times when "sh" rather than "s" might have been used as the initial letter of the representatives of the seven symbolic creative forces. Looking about and seeing that there was no time to waste, I moved on to the next parchment.

...Atagi. But now he did not know what to do. Both he and his companion were shackled and thrown to the corner of a barn. I say companion, but in reality, the two did not know each other that well. My father had been commissioned by the governor of Khotan to deliver two jars of musk to Mada'in. This was his second trip there. The previous year, too, he had had the honor of taking the governor's gift to the palace of the King of Kings. Upon his arrival, the jars had been taken from him and placed among the many items contributed by other governors. They were all presented, alongside those who had carried them, to the King on the second day of the Nowruz. At this point, however, only the chamberlain knew who had contributed what gift and who had failed.

I was getting used to reading fragments of thoughts. I wondered what the scene at Mada'in, at the moment of the change of the seasons, would have been like. I wished I could know more about the carrier of the musk jars and about his companion. Did they escape the bandits who had robbed them? Could they return to Khotan and face the governor? Or did they live the rest of their lives like outlaws, away from kith and kin? Before picking up the next scroll, I changed the tape again then continued reading into the recorder:

The building of the columns took three full days. The King's advisor supervised the building of the columns personally. After the planting was done, for the next 20 days, the King's gardener visited the place, watered the plants, and took care of them. Most of the plants, especially millet, wheat, and saffron all did quite well. The sunflower, sesame, broadbean, and regular beans were presentable. The garbanzo beans, barley, vetch, and lentils, however, fared quite poorly. Within a few days of the first planting, it was obvious that we had a problem. The King required, almost demanded, a first-rate barley crop. Our barley crop for the year was one of the worst I could recall.

Fearing the worst, I talked to the mu bad about the problem. Not to worry, he advocated. Replace the poorly growing barley patch on the Nowruz column with the patch grown for the fire-temple. Do it early enough so that by the inspection day it looks normal. He also assured me that the gardener, a close friend of his, would not object to the exchange.

I followed the mu bad's recommendation and made the change. It was now up to Ahura Mazda to support us and allow the barley fields to grow tall and ...

I had always thought that the number of the *sabzeh* grown on the columns before the Nowruz was seven and that the seven "sin's" on the display were actually those seven *sabzehs*, the best of which was chosen as the crop to be planted for the coming year. This scroll left the number of the *sabzehs* open,

allowing all seeds to compete, as it were, for the attention of the king and the farmer. The next scroll, too, was about the same central theme only presented in a curious format:

... "And you sent him there alone?" he asked his wife angrily.  
"No, his brother went with him."  
"You mean you allowed two little kids to go to the mountain for a couple of bushes of spand? Could you not wait until I came back? Shouldn't the spand be dry?" The tone of his voice rose indicating his deep annoyance with his wife's decision.  
"Don't worry," his wife said calmly. "I was putting up the display. Eb, serke, and suman were already in the kitchen. The neighbor brought some samanu. I took a scrubel from the garden. You were bringing the senjed. Spand was all I needed."  
She fell silent for a bit, then, as if consoling herself, said, "Our kids are not as helpless as you think. They have grown up."  
"It's not a good time of the year, woman," he said impatiently. "Wolves are still around. Shepherds talk about their raids on the flocks all the time. The sun is about to set. What if two little boys lose their way in the dark? Did you not think about that? Could you not use a sekke?"  
"I could," the wife said with tears welling up in her eyes.  
"But now you're making me worried. Maybe I should go after them. I know where they might have gone for spand. Remember where we saw the large black and yellow snake..."  
Then she quickly realized she had hit on an even more provocative subject. She fell silent.  
"Fortunately," said the man. "It's still too cold for the snakes to be out. It's the wolves that worry me."  
"Don't think for a moment," said the mother angrily, "that I did not think about that. I only didn't think it would take them ..."

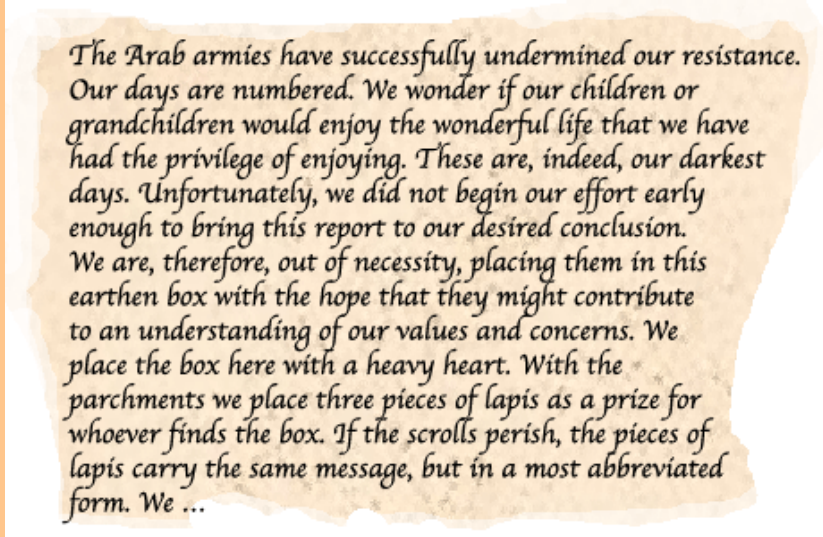
As I read through the scrolls, I thought of each as containing a cultural point preserved in a family's memory bank. Then I murmured to myself, "What an immensely interesting human story!"

"Instruction: I have looked through the next few scrolls and it seems that they are in no better shape than the previous ones. More importantly, it seems that they do not contain the whole story of Nowruz as held by the ancient peoples of the region.

My suspicions were confirmed when, to my dismay, the last page ended with the phrase, "far-off provinces..."

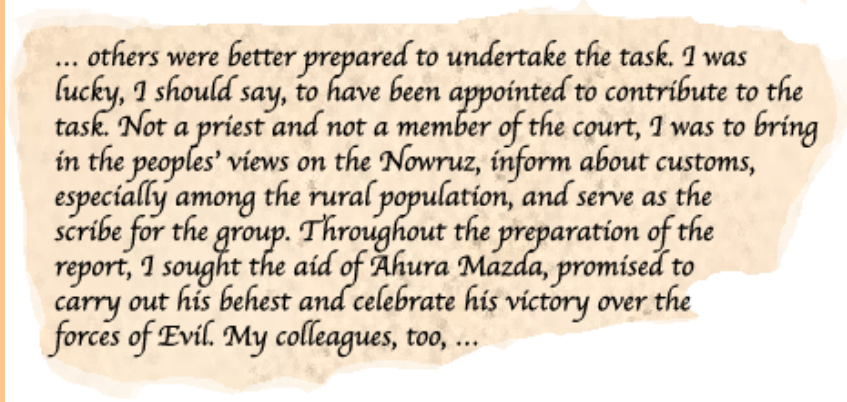
In desperation, I looked at the sky to see how much more reading time there was. The sun had passed the two-thirds spot that had always signaled to me the arrival of sunset. While there was still plenty of light, I sat back against the rock and continued reading into the recorder:

"Instruction: Beginning with this fragment, the writing is in different hands than the one that had rendered the previous scrolls. The script is less clear and there might be misreading on my part. Some of the vocabulary is unfamiliar.



*The Arab armies have successfully undermined our resistance. Our days are numbered. We wonder if our children or grandchildren would enjoy the wonderful life that we have had the privilege of enjoying. These are, indeed, our darkest days. Unfortunately, we did not begin our effort early enough to bring this report to our desired conclusion. We are, therefore, out of necessity, placing them in this earthen box with the hope that they might contribute to an understanding of our values and concerns. We place the box here with a heavy heart. With the parchments we place three pieces of lapis as a prize for whoever finds the box. If the scrolls perish, the pieces of lapis carry the same message, but in a most abbreviated form. We ...*

As I read through the materials, two things were on my mind, one disturbing me more than the other. The first was that the sun was reaching the western horizon casting long shadows on the mountainside across from me; the other was that the amount of information in the scrolls was dwindling. That a few of the parchments were completely blank indicated the haste with which the package had been put together. The last two scrolls were the most difficult, but the most interesting to read.



*... others were better prepared to undertake the task. I was lucky, I should say, to have been appointed to contribute to the task. Not a priest and not a member of the court, I was to bring in the peoples' views on the Nowruz, inform about customs, especially among the rural population, and serve as the scribe for the group. Throughout the preparation of the report, I sought the aid of Ahura Mazda, promised to carry out his behest and celebrate his victory over the forces of Evil. My colleagues, too, ...*

Much remained for me to discover about Nowruz, at least from my own incomplete knowledge of the ceremonies as they are performed at the present. Nevertheless, many points about the background of the rituals were clarified. I continued the recording:

On the occasion of the Nowruz, the Chief Priest becomes the first from among the people not directly related to the court to greet the King of Kings. Once in the Great Hall, he approaches the throne with a golden goblet full of red wine in one hand and a fistful of green sprouts in the other. Accompanying him are servants carrying an enormous amount of gifts including a gold ring, gold coins, a sword, a bow and arrows, and a pen and inkpot, a horse, an eagle, and a beautiful youth. When he reaches the royal space, he stands at a prescribed distance and performs the Nowruz ritual of wishing the King and the Kingdom long life and prosperity. He then tastes the wine, approaches the King with slow steps, stretches his arm and respectfully hands the goblet over to the King. Then, slowly, with his other hand, he places in the King's other hand, the green sprouts. All the time reciting a benediction and wishing the King happiness, gladness, and joy for the coming year. When the benediction is over, he steps aside, walks back in slow motion and bids the servants to place the items that they have brought as gifts in their prescribed places before the King. Then, following the priest's example, princes, governors, nobles, and dignitaries shower the King with their gifts. Each king, prince, and nobleman at court repeats the priest's last act of homage and wishes for the King happiness in the coming year. Throughout the day, then, a never-ending line parades before the King. Governors from far-off provinces ...

This piece, apparently intended as one of the first pages of the report, confirmed my idea that I might have opened the box upside down. In any event, it is unfortunate that so much of the material was lost. More unfortunate was that I knew I would not be able to carry the box with me up into Simurgh.

I stood up for the first time since I sat down to examine the scrolls. It was clear to me now why the *yogi* in the cave no longer wished to stand up and walk about.

My shadow on the side of the mountain was tall reminding me that I should get everything together and hurry back to the rendezvous spot where I was to be picked up in about an hour or so.

I cast one last long look at the scrolls in the box, closed the lid as it was and sealed it with some clay that I carefully prepared. I then placed the box back into the niche from which I had extracted it and sealed it in place. Except for the freshness of the clay around it, it was not possible to spot it among the bumps on the side of the mountain. I then washed my hands, cleaned my clothes, picked up my knapsack and jacket, and headed for the place from which I was to be picked up by Simurgh.

By the time I reached the spot, the copper-red clouds on the horizon had turned reddish gray. For a while, I looked at the large copper disc of the sun covered by two wedges of clouds just above the horizon. Then I looked around and listened carefully for the humming sound of the chopper. The silence on the mountaintop was palpable. I looked around again with rising apprehension asking myself, "What if the chopper does not come? What if they were delayed or could not find fuel? Or...?"

My imagination started to run away with me, but I did not allow it. First, I was still fully convinced that they would appear on the horizon any minute. Second, I was sure that they would somehow let me know of any changes in their schedule. Then,

the crevasse in front of me caught my sight. Like a gaping mouth, it sat there, both sides covered with sparse vegetation. A formidable grave if, for any reason, one was to fall down it. No one would want to go to its bottom to retrieve a corpse. "What if," I began to worry again, "within the next few minutes the helicopter comes and, while trying to lift me aboard, something goes wrong? Wouldn't I be hurled down that same crevasse? An unpleasant feeling overwhelmed me. I began to doubt that I had actually already accomplished the hardest part of the task. I steeled myself and concentrated on the pleasant change in the color of the clouds against the beautiful sunset. "They lowered me without a hitch. Why shouldn't they be able to lift me up the same way?" I argued with myself.

Once the bottom of the sun disc touched the horizon and a cold breeze brushed against my face, I began to worry for real. Somehow I sensed that they would not be returning to the summit after this time. And even if they did, I was not sure I wanted to risk being picked up in the dark. I started to panic. My eyes darting about, I searched for a solution. But a solution to what? What was I going to do on top of this godforsaken mountain without any prior preparation for a night's stay? What did I need to do to survive the night? I needed to make a fire. The sun was slowly sinking, the clouds were turning black, and the sudden chill in the air was becoming menacing and merciless.



I could no longer stand there by my knapsack and wait for the chopper. I needed firewood. I looked around. Where I stood, other than some dried brush, there was nothing substantial to be found. The ruins were pretty tidy and dry. I recalled seeing a good amount of sticks and leaves at the place where I had eaten my lunch. But that was some distance down from where I was. Without hesitation, I left my knapsack where it was and ran as fast as I could in the direction of the brook. There, I hurriedly put together a bundle of dried branches to haul back in the waning light. The broken walls of the ruins against the faint light directed me to the place where my knapsack was. All along, I was angry with myself more than at either Khurshed or Mohporah. I was mad at myself for being impulsive.

Then I remembered something that brought a faint smile to my lips. Mohporah had put a box of matches alongside the sugar and the assorted nuts in the lunch bag. At lunch, since I do not smoke, I regarded the matches as a useless item to be hauled up and down. Now, under different circumstances, the

same useless box of matches was turning out to be one of the things on which my life could depend. I thanked Mohporah from the bottom of my heart for her foresight.

## Two

Once it became certain that I had to stay alone for the whole night on the mountaintop, I moved the bundle of wood next to the only archway in the structure. Then I prepared the ground to make a fire at a corner where two run-down walls met. Early on, when the fire burned brightly, I could see a few yards around me and, for a while, the designs the flames made against the masonry at the bottom of the walls kept me occupied. Soon, however, I realized that I could not be as generous with feeding the fire as I wished. My limited supply of wood had to last till morning.

As I fed the fire less and less, more of the surrounding area was plunged into darkness until a time came when I could not see more than a couple of feet around me. Additionally, the increasing chill in the air and the dwindling amount of firewood heightened my concern. If I had thought about the possibility of being stranded earlier in the day, I could have gathered more wood and looked for a more sheltered place farther down the slope. By the brook, under the wall that held the scrolls box, I was sheltered from the wind. But that was now a dangerous journey in the dark. I had no choice but to make do with what circumstance I had put myself in.

Gradually a strange feeling crept over me and lodged itself quite high on my scale of fears. It began to control my every move. I felt that I could not, maybe even dared not, move a step away from the fire lest I might fall headlong down the precipice. This, in spite of the fact that I knew that I was nowhere near the precipice. If there was any positive note, it was the weather.

What if, alongside all these calamities, I was facing harsh winds and thunder and lightning? I had experienced Tajik weather before and I am sure I had no way of keeping myself from being literally blown away off the top of the mountain.

Still, the chill of the April night set in, nibbling at my ankles and sides, and the more I felt the pinch, the more I thought about the plight of the Sughdians. It did not matter that their plight had preceded mine by some twelve centuries. I was thinking about them all the same because, at this juncture in time and space, my own situation was not very different from theirs. They were in a siege forced upon them by their Arab enemies; an ever-increasing chill against which I had failed to prepare myself enveloped me. Isn't it ironic, I thought to myself that my fate and the fate of the Sughdians of centuries ago should shape up along pretty much the same line?

I was not at all happy with myself. To begin with, when accepting Khurshed's invitation, I had given uncalculated reason a free rein. I am sure, if I had given myself some time, the seemingly logical premises on which I had built my decision would have crumbled; they would have allowed substantial doubts to take hold and convince me against undertaking the trip. Thereafter, too, during the afternoon, I had allowed myself more time to record the materials off of the scrolls and less time to think about the possibility of the helicopter not returning to pick me up. What was the use of the recordings if I were not around to work with them and make them useful? If I had thought about the possibility of a delay in being picked up, I would have built a simple bed out of the brush to insulate myself against the cold. As things stood, however, I did not even dare get up and walk about to generate some heat lest I fall headlong down the open mouth of the crevasse.

As the night progressed, I caught myself dozing. I tried, quite unsuccessfully, I should add, to keep myself from falling asleep. But there was no doubt in my mind that sleep would overtake me. "When the fire dies down," I thought, I will freeze

in my sleep." A harrowing, but sobering thought. Fortunately, I had an ally in the cold itself. Every time I felt comfortable and dozed off, my ankles felt cold and I would wake up for another unsuccessful round of struggle with the cold.

As the cold of the night and darkness tightened their grip, I sought refuge in a different night, humming:

"Without you,  
On a moonlit night,  
My thoughts aflight,  
I visited that alley again.

"Turned into eyes,  
My body craved  
To actualize,  
Another meeting with you, in vain."

Over and over that dark night, I caught myself murmuring this famous song by the late Fereydun Moshiri. Gradually, the moonlight in the poem became a light in my life as well. A lullaby moving me gradually into the realm of dreams:

"Sweet anticipation,  
Of love's rejuvenation,  
Overflowed  
My mortal cup.

"In that sacred locality  
Outside all reality,  
The crazed lover with me  
Caught up."

"Thorns of your being blossomed,  
In every recess of my soul;  
Recollections of your laughter,  
Echoed from pole to pole..."

Somewhere towards the end of this stanza, I thought I heard a faint noise in the distance. For a moment, I was filled with a different kind of fear. I sat up and listened more carefully. Nothing happened. Perhaps a bird flying or a rodent moving about, I thought, and continued my song:

"Without you,  
On a moonlit night..."

Moments later, the noise was repeated, only slightly louder. I got up and listened more intently. "Who goes there?" I asked half-heartedly. There was no answer but the echo of my voice breaking the deep silence around me. Then, the noise got even louder and more distinct. A short distance away from where I was, someone was moving about.

"Who goes there?" I shouted with more authority. The noise moved closer and closer. I peered hard into the darkness. My vision could not penetrate beyond a few feet. The noise stopped. I braced myself for an attack, holding my army knife as firmly as I could, still murmuring:

"Turned into eyes  
My body craved  
To actualize  
Another meeting..."

"I have a gun trained on you," said a determined voice.

I jumped at hearing a human voice out of the darkness.

"Do not make any sudden moves.... Answer my questions clearly. I do not wish to harm you, but make a small mistake and I'll blow you away! Now, tell me who you are!"

Here it is, I said to myself. The very thing that I had dreaded might one day happen to me in this war-torn part of the world, where brother kills brother for money, for ethnic difference, some times even for being from a region in dispute between two clans.

"I am an archaeologist," I said. "I came here this morning to look at the ruins of the fortress...."

"Do you carry a gun?"

"Only an army knife," I replied.

"OK, throw your knife in my direction, nice and easy."

I held the knife by the blade. First I thought of throwing the knife into the dark with the hope of injuring or killing him. But then, considering the odds, I threw the knife on the ground in the intruder's direction. It fell on the damp floor of the by-gone hallway with a thud. A long silence followed. I looked around; all but the immediate area around the fire was plunged in darkness. "Are you still there?" I asked, feeling foolish and cowardly.

"I am," said the intruder calmly.

"Are you coming out of the darkness any time soon?" I asked.

"As soon as I get the information I need out of you."

"I am alone," I said. "I was left up here this morning. My friends were supposed to pick me up late in the afternoon. But, somehow, it seems our plans have fallen through..."

"Whom do you work for?" He interrupted me.

"Work for?" I asked, puzzled.

"Yes, work for," he repeated. "The Government or the Opposition?"

"Neither," I said. "I told you, I am an archaeologist originally from Afghanistan, a neighbor."

"Don't give me that," he said somewhat peeved. "I have been watching you since sunset, when you were gathering wood for your fire. You didn't act like an Afghan; so, who are you?"

"I am an Afghan, as I said, by birth," I explained. "But I have not been in Afghanistan for over twenty years. I am an affiliate of the School of Oriental Studies in Britain."

"I am willing to give you the benefit of the doubt and believe you, but would rather hear you swear to all that is holy that you are who you claim you are," he said.

"Of course," I said, "I swear by all that is holy that I am an Afghan born northeast of Kabul, that I currently live in Britain

and have for some twenty years, and that I am in no way affiliated with any political organizations in this region."

This statement seemed to have a favorable effect. He said, "Now, get up slowly, walk to the wall and face it. Do not, I repeat, do not turn to look at me or make any sudden moves."

Obedying orders, I got up and, still mindful of the precipice, walked to the wall and placed my open hands on its cold, damp bricks. At the same time, I heard the intruder getting closer. One of his feet, it seemed, dragged slightly on the ground, but I did not dare look. He walked to the fire and, I sensed, bent and stirred the burning coals. "You said you are an archaeologist, is that right?"

"That is right," I said, speaking directly to the damp bricks.

"So, what did you discover here today?"

"Not a whole lot," I lied. "I surveyed the Qal'a, measured the walls, their thickness, door and window positions, possible height of things, that sort of thing..."

"You did all that in the morning," he interrupted, with a sure voice. "I have been watching you all day, not just in the late afternoon as I said earlier," he continued. "There is no doubt in my mind that on the surface you are an archaeologist. Now, tell me about the documents that you handled all afternoon and about the messages you left for your communist comrades. Is this your regular rendezvous place?"

"No, no, no," I said, trying to take a glimpse. "You have it all wrong."

"Don't turn around yet," he commanded. "Some times my trigger finger is not in my full control. Dealing with communists and communist sympathizers is one of those occasions. So, let me get a clearer picture of your activities here. Then I will tell you what sort of life awaits you."

So far, his calm demeanor had assured me that all was well. This answer, however, was devoid of all warmth. In fact, it shocked me and made me remember I was in a relatively lawless land with no means to defend myself; the land where

the gun is in the other guy's hand and he has no qualms about using it. The extent of the threat frightened me.

"I did not bury any messages, I swear," I nearly pleaded.

"I was only a stone's throw away from you watching your every move," he said. "You recovered a box, examined it, took something from it and, I am sure, you left something in it. How do you explain those actions then?"

There was no alternative but to explain exactly what I had done. "You are right," I said. "If you must know, when I was having my lunch, I discovered a box on the side of the cliff. I took it down, examined its contents, and returned it to its place for safekeeping..."

"Was that a microfilm you put in your pocket?" He asked.

"No," I said. "There were three small pieces of lapis-lazuli. I took them as mementos since we don't get precious stones like that in my part of the world. They will come in handy in showing to my classes. Also, I didn't put them in my pocket. I placed them in a marked film canister. I can show them to you if I can have my knapsack."

"Why did you return the big box to its original place? I understand that such documents are invaluable in your line of work!"

"They are," I confirmed. "If one can move them without damaging them and their contents. But the documents in that box are in no shape to be handled roughly. I was to be picked up off the mountain in a manner similar to how I was dropped off--in a basket lowered from a helicopter. Were that box to fall, its contents would scatter to the four winds..."

"So you decided to come back later and take it?"

"No, I got a pretty clear idea of the contents. There was nothing extraordinary..."

"Fine. I believe you," he said, returning to his calm demeanor. "Now you can turn around and join me here by the fire."

I turned around. A middle-aged man with disheveled, long hair and a rather large, uncombed beard, wearing what looked

like civilian fatigues was sitting by the fire. He did not have a gun. A thick, long stick rested at his side.

Pointing to the stick, I said sarcastically, "Is that the gun with which you wanted to blow my head off?"

"No," he said. "With this." He casually uncovered a revolver hidden under the flap of his long coat.

"Oh, I see," I said, feeling somewhat foolish and disappointed.

"Now, tell me," he said. "What did you learn from your examination of the documents you read all this afternoon? You did not lift your head even to look at the beautiful blue Zarafshan below or at the cloudless sky above!"

"I read some document fragments about the Nowruz celebration in these parts, written mostly after the time of the Arab invasion..."

"Fragments you say?" He asked with a special glitter in his eyes. "Why would anyone preserve fragments for posterity?"

"Apparently, they did not have enough time to complete the task that they had assigned themselves. Therefore, they deposited the fragments of information that were prepared at the time. The edges of the scrolls, especially a good portion of the tops and bottoms of all had turned into dust..."

"And they should be handled, you think, by trained scholars using special retrieval methods?" He asked sarcastically.

"Not really," I said casually. "A good deal of what they contain is already known through other sources..."

"What if I were to tell you an *authentic* Nowruz story; I mean a real Nowruz the way it was celebrated by the ancient Sughdians who lived in the towns and villages around this very mountain?"

"That would be grand," I said. "But first, since you move about so easily, is it possible to get us some more firewood?"

"I wondered how you expected to survive the cold Mugh night without a real fire. This one is already on its way out..."

"I was wondering about that myself," I said curtly.

The events of the day had been unusual even without the inexplicable appearance of this mountain man. In fact, from the moment that Khurshed and Mohporah had begun the discussion of their trip to the villages surrounding Mount Mugh, things had assumed a weird turn for me. The finding of the box with truncated scrolls, being stranded on a mountaintop threatened by death, and the dread of being shot dead by a mysterious mountain man made it all seem as surreal as the moonless sky surrounding the mountaintop.

"Friend," he said, moving closer. "My name is Navruz. I am older, much older than most of the things around here. To give you a sense of how old I am, I was there when the first Nowruz was celebrated. And since that time, I have participated in every Nowruz celebration. Moreover, I intend to participate in all the Nowruzes yet to come. So, who can tell you the story of Nowruz better than Navruz!"

I looked at him as he talked. He was an ordinary fellow with a swarthy complexion, and a long, but somewhat sparse salt and pepper beard. He had a long head, bald on top with long, wavy black hair cascading to his shoulders. My first reaction to the name was surprise; but it was the timeline that baffled me the most. "Do I have to contend with a crazy dervish all night long?" I wondered. The man was implying he was over twelve hundred years old! Then, changing the subject, I said, "I guess you have a point there but, closer to the situation at hand, is there a way for us to revive this fire? I couldn't find more wood than what I have already finished..."

"Forget about fire," he said, "Instead, look at that dark sky over there. What do you see?"

I looked all around and said, "Darkness and faint stars?"

"Is that so?" he said. "Now, this is what I would like you to do. Make a wish, any wish, but don't tell me what it is. I assure you that you will not be disappointed."

He was making me quite uncomfortable. "What is this? Are you taking me for a fool or something?" I asked, quite upset. He did not respond. He remained silent for a long time, making me

even more nervous. Alone, in the middle of this nowhere land, what was I to do? I had no option but to listen to him. After all, Khurshed and Mohporah had told me similar incredible stories and I had listened politely. This man's claims, however, went way beyond the pale.

Seeing my indifference to his suggestion, he asked, "Did you make a wish?"

As long as I seemed to be living in some kind of fantasy land, I thought, "why not? Why not make a wish? What do I have to lose?" Recalling all the controversy that clouded the real intention of those who instituted the celebration as a means for perpetuating the profound bond between them and their creators, I wished that I could participate in a real Nowruz celebration. I did not tell him what my wish was but, instead, raising my arms as if embracing the whole world, I asked sarcastically, "Did I hear you correctly say that you were present when all this whole shebang was created?"

"No," he said emphatically. "I said no such thing. I said I attended the first Nowruz..."

"I'm sorry," I apologized. "But I don't see the difference."

"Oh yes, there is a lot of difference," he said, poking his walking stick in the dying fire. "When all that began, there were still no people to celebrate anything."

"Was there fire to keep them warm?" I asked sarcastically.

"Is the cold really a problem for you?" he asked while handing me something that, in the dark, felt like the dry, rough root of a plant.

"Here," he said. "Chew on this. It will warm you up in no time."

"What is that?" I asked, feeling the texture of the root.

"Something that I use when it becomes very cold up here. It will give you a lot of energy. But you must keep chewing on it."

I put the tip of the root in my mouth and pressed it with my tongue against my palate. It had a strong, acrid taste.

"Is this hemp?" I asked.

"I don't know your name for it," he said. "I call it *giyoh*. Without a good fire up here, *giyoh* is all that separates life from death."

As I chewed on the bitter root, peculiar but pleasant warmth crept into my body, making my head heavy and somewhat dizzy.

"This world is ancient," I heard him say. "Very ancient. Look at the depth of that dark universe above and imagine two primal forces there, in the sky, one next to the other with a Void separating the two. Also imagine those two forces resting in this position, next to each other, for close to 3,000 years--3,000 cosmic years, that is. As long as neither force takes action, the state between them remains unchanged, right? This is exactly what the state was between the primal light and primal darkness at the beginning of Time. They were in a state of inaction. For you, of course, what I am talking about might not be easy to conceptualize. I understand that. But for me, what I describe are routine happenings.

From where I sit, I can see events transpiring half the world away from this mountain. I can see large bonfires made by villagers who jump over them. Do you see that? Of course not. Because for you Nowruz is an annual event, a ritual that happened a couple of weeks ago and will not return until the same time next year. I, on the other hand, live what you might call a perpetual Nowruz... I'm digressing. I should avoid that," he interrupted himself. "Yet somehow I feel compelled to tell you more about myself, a lot more. I sense that if you know me better, the chances are greater that you will trust me more. Trust, after all, is the cornerstone of life... Now, where was I? Oh, yes. Like light, matter and motion are also constitutive components of life. Once the primal light force moved and created goodness, the primal darkness had no option but to oppose light; it created evil. These two opposing forces then contended for the destruction of each other. They vowed to prevent each other from undertaking the creation of any kingdoms that might prove detrimental to their respective growth. You can say that the sheer act of creation brought about the existence of two

diametrically opposite gods: Ahura Mazda, the god of goodness and sound mind (Mazda), or the god of life; and Angra Mainyu the god of evil, in other words, anger, or the god of death...."

"But what does all that have to do with Nowruz?" I interrupted.

"Everything," he said knowingly. "Contending forces are likely to collide. Are they not? That is the case today. It was the same at the beginning of Time. The forces of good and evil clashed in the Void. Equipped with a special, anti-evil prayer, however, Good defeated Evil and destined it to the depths of his creation, to the depths of darkness where it remained for the first 3,000 years of creation.

"Victorious Ahura Mazda then initiated the next three thousand years with the auspicious creation of two abstract prototype worlds: the world of the Right and the world of Matter. At the beginning of the second 3,000 years, however, these two worlds were no more than two concepts. Two conceptual forces that Ahura Mazda intended to fuse into a united front against the impending assault of Angra Mainyu. With the regenerative power that he intended to impart into the system, he was sure that he would be able to root evil out..."

"Let me get this straight," I interrupted again. "Am I to understand that this world in which we live today was, at some point in time, no more than a mere thought complex?"

"Trust me," he said. "It was a mere *concept* complex, a creation of the wisdom of Ahura Mazda."

"How did we get involved in it then?" I asked incredulously.

"For a professor you are really an impatient fellow," he said admonishingly. "Look. You have a long cold night ahead of you and I have a long story to recount. So don't be impatient! We're not talking here about ruins on which you can lay a yardstick and record an accurate measurement. Neither are we dealing with time and space in the manner you are familiar with. We are talking about eons of time and about expanses of resilient space. In that context, life as you have experienced thus far is a mere

accident; it will pass into nothingness in the same way that it has emerged out of nothingness!..."

"Fine, fine," I said impatiently. "Then tell me when was this life, the one that you are referring to as a nothing, when was that created?"

"Not when, my friend," he said calmly. "There is no when. There is only a continuum with no beginning and no end. Life is an accident on that continuum. The question, therefore, is: In what sequence?"

"Okay," I said. "In what sequence did the Creator bring elements of life into existence?"

"That's better," he said. "The Creator regarded order, as an unfailing system, paramount in his domain. He, therefore, created *Asha* or Truth. Consequently, righteousness or justice became the fulcrum of his work and the measure of his future creations..."

"I don't follow," I protested. "How can truth and righteousness form a society. By definition..."

"Impatient," he said. "Once a society is formed--and that's in the future--a choice needs to be made between good and evil. And it is not an easy choice, either, I should say. After all, more often than not, good and evil look alike."

"You are on target about that," I said.

"To enable the chooser to choose correctly between good and evil, the Creator created *Vohu Manah* or the Good Mind. Comparisons in the context of knowledge and reason enable the chooser to side with the Truth rather than with Falsehood..."

"But as yet I have seen no falsehood. Isn't evil dormant?"

"That is right, but for how long?"

"I don't know," I said. "You tell me."

"Not for as long as we would like."

"What happened then?" I asked.

"Out of the substance of *Vohu Manah*, the Creator brought forth *Spenta Armaiti* or that sense in the chooser that inspires piety and benevolence..."

"Why do you keep calling it the "chooser"? What is wrong with individual or person?" I protested vehemently.

"There are no individuals as yet," he explained calmly, "only forms. How can we attribute concepts to things that do not yet exist?" he asked rhetorically. He continued, "The Creator was striving to build what came to be known as *Khshathra Variya* or Holy dominion. This was a society of choosers populated by benevolent or pious existences..."

"But we still are lacking a lot, are we not?" I asked. "We lack concreteness. Where is concreteness?"

"Not at this state, yet," he said. "My name for it is *Hauratat* or perfection. From here on, perfection regenerates perfection. There are no alternatives. Ahura Mazda distinguished it as *Ameretat* or death-defying. I recognize it as the regenerative good that continually diminishes evil until evil is no more."

"So your contention is that out of *Vohu Manah* a perfect, immortal society was created. Where is that society now?" I asked.

"Well," he said. "The first thing to understand about that 'society' is that it was a conceptual entity. The second thing to realize is that it was a trial run for the Creator."

"A trial run for what? Building zillions of abstract, immortal righteous societies?"

"Don't be impertinent."

"I'm not," I said. "I am merely struggling to understand a tiny bit about something that you seem to have internalized so thoroughly."

"Then why don't you ask for a simple explanation?" He asked, somewhat alarmed.

"Fair is fair," I said. "So far all I can visualize two spheres--one dark and one light. The light sphere is positioning itself to accept certain forms while the other sphere is still dormant. So, where do people like you and me figure in all this?"

"Your visualization is quite accurate," he said. "However, instead of certain 'forms' I would use 'material form'..."

"Whatever," I interjected.

"What kind of recognition is 'whatever'?" He asked somewhat disappointedly. "Let us look at this from the point of view of the Creator. If and when you understand what I mean, you will not 'whatever' everything. Instead, you will want to learn more."

"Is that a fact?" I found myself acting like my students, especially when they are confronted with concepts that are somewhat difficult to grasp.

"It is," he said quietly, and patiently explained. "Remember on the evil side there is darkness and a potential assault. On the Creator's side there is a conceptual creation centered on Truth and a projected material world that, once eventually united with Truth, would form a most superior force against evil. Failure for good means prevalence of perpetual darkness. Now we cannot have that, can we?"

"We easily can," I said with a determined voice. "You are describing just the very situation in which I find myself. I am, of course, referring to this strange conversation amid the frigid circumstances and darkness. What else can I say?"

"Observant indeed you are, are you not?" he said matter-of-factly.

"But that is not what happened, is it?" I asked.

"Would *you* be here tonight, if it did?" he said facetiously, emphasizing "you."

"Apparently not," I said. "What happened then?"

"The ancients had a powerful imagination, something that successive generations seem to be blessed with less and less. I want you to follow the ancients and, in the same way that they made lions, scorpions, goats, and the like out of the positioning of the stars, imagine the Creator's construction of his material world..."

"How can I do that?" I interrupted. "I can barely keep my eyes open."

"Then maybe you should take it easy on the *giyoh* there," he said.

"You may be right," I said. "I think this *giyoh*, whatever in reality it is, does much more than just warm you up."

"Well then, ease up on that for a bit," he said in a friendly tone and continued. "This sky," he said, "is like an inverted bowl, is it not?"

"Absolutely," I agreed.

"If you could touch it, as I have," he said, "you would also agree that it is quite hard and metallic. In fact, Ahura Mazda created it out of shining metal to serve as a barrier between his creation and that of Angra Mainyu..."

"Isn't the sky one of the major creations of Ahura Mazda?" I asked.

"Of course it is. In fact, it is the first step in a chain of creations. It was devised to keep evil away and to keep the sun and the moon from falling..."

"What do you mean by falling?" I asked curiously.

"The Creator nailed the sun and the moon to the sky so that they would not fall."

"Nailed them!" I laughed and, bemused, asked, "And pray tell what was wrong with the barrier that already existed, the Void?"

"Allow me to answer your questions one at a time," he said in a rather formal tone. "The Void was susceptible to the movements of both forces. Angra Mainyu could operate in the Void just as Ahura Mazda could. Ahura Mazda was making sure that Evil would be kept at bay eternally. That is the only way he knew that his creation would prosper. Regarding your other question. The sun and the moon were nailed to the sky and they still are. To you nails are static things that prevent motion. In the grand scheme of things, that is not necessarily always the case... Think of invisible gravity and its role in the universe. Then, think of the binding forces of trust and love."

"Fine," I said. "I guess I can trust you as long as you agree that you are telling a story."

"To you this may be a story. But to me, who was fairly close to the action, it is fact."

Sentences like this made me shudder. There was no question in my mind that he had a screw loose. What was not clear were the consequences of this fellow's words and actions between now and sunrise, if there were to be one. I felt the best strategy to deal with the situation was to humor him and to hope that the night would pass quickly and uneventfully. "So," I said, with a long drawl on the "o". "What was on the agenda next?"

"You are not humoring me, are you?" He said sarcastically.

"Humoring you? Of course not," I said emphatically. "I believe every other word of what..."

"That's a good one," he laughed and went on. "Again, as with his abstract creation, everything that the Creator made was based on the substance of the barrier of the sky. He created the waters from the substance of the sky and the earth out of the substance of the waters. The plants came next and covered the whole surface of the earth. Each creation, of course, by dint of containing the cumulative forces inherent in the previous creations, was superior. The sacred white bull that was created next was superior to the plants in that it could move about and man who was created after the sacred white bull was superior to all. He was endowed with the gifts of speech and of reasoning."

"So we finally reach the mother of all theories: Man is the crown of creation..."

"By no means," he said. "Maybe next to the best and even that is debatable. Against Evil, man is weak and against the Lie, he is powerless. More than anyone Ahura Mazda was aware of that. That is why he could not choose man. He needed an invincible defender on his side."

"Then you must be moving into the realm of the prophets. The Prophet Zoroaster, maybe?"

"No, no, no," he said emphatically. "The Prophet Zoroaster is a relatively new addition to all this. I am talking about a force that binds the multiple facets of Ahura Mazda's dual creations together..."

"You spoke about these collective forces before," I said impatiently. "Are you referring to the phenomenal world?"

"Well, that" he said in a conciliatory manner, "as well as the less concrete forces that Ahura Mazda had already created to make his Material creation flourish..."

"And they are?" I interrupted, hoping to end this lecture so I could persuade him to light the fire and save me from the ever-increasing darkness.

"I am referring to the Holy Immortals and to the justice, honesty, peace, health, beauty, and joy that they bring to creation."

"I see," I said, having little to add.

"And that brings us to the main or master creation of Ahura Mazda; the one that welds his two worlds together and presents a unified front against the forces of the Lie, remember?..."

"Truth," I said. "Truth brings all this together, isn't that so?"

"That is right," he said, and added, "having created both his worlds, Ahura Mazda was content. The sky protected his creation and Truth, symbolized by the energy of a well-organized life, permeated its every aspect. It allowed growth for the plants that, in turn, fed the cattle. Sitting at the apex of all this, man could live a tranquil life while enhancing Good at the expense of Evil. The minutest progress of Good in the domain of Evil was doubly rewarding. It not only added to the kingdom of Good but it also diminished the kingdom of Evil by as much."

"How wonderful for Good!" I exclaimed.

"Indeed," he said, disregarding the sarcasm. "Evil, however, was not to sleep for ever," he went on. "When he woke up and observed the extent of Ahura Mazda's progress in the act of creation, he vowed to put an end to all life. As a first step, he ripped a hole in the fabric of the sky and entered Ahura Mazda's creation. Once there, he polluted the waters, poisoned the plants, and killed both the sacred white bull and Qayomart, the first human being..."

"End of the story," I said in a conclusive tone. "Now can we get that fire going?"

"Be patient professor," he said. "Chew on the root I gave you. Maybe it will make a patient man out of you. As for my story, it has not even begun. And, as for the fire you keep mentioning, I intend to kindle a different fire. I intend to kindle a fire within you that will incinerate all the dross of the ages your ancestors have accumulated before you and allow you a clear and unobstructed vision of the workings of the Right. I will show you what the scrolls carry only a faint trace of. To do that, however, I need your cooperation. You must show that you have full trust in me."

"Believe me," I said. "I have full trust in you..."

"I do want to believe you," he said pensively. "But, at this point, I regard your trust in me to be tantamount to Angra Mainyu's trust in himself and in his own power of destruction. He trusted that he could enter Ahura Mazda's creation, destroy every element in it, and bail out..."

"He did," I said. "Didn't he?"

"Destroy, yes," he said, rather bemused. "Bail out, no."

"What happened?"

"Truth prevailed. That's what happened," he said. "Recall that Truth permeated Ahura Mazda's creation. In the long run, it proved to be more resilient than Angra Mainyu's destructive power. In other words, while Angra Mainyu was going about destroying things. Truth went about patching up the sky. At the end, Angra Mainyu became trapped within Ahura Mazda's domain."

"Is that then your solution for the existence of evil?" I asked.

"You could say that," he said.

"To tell you the truth," I said jokingly, "I myself feel that somehow I have become trapped in the domain of the Devil. You see, I don't know for sure where I am, with whom I am speaking, or what is in store for me."

"You will know in time," he said, with a reassuring tone in his voice.

I continued chewing on the root and it continued to provide me with an extremely pleasant feeling. Additionally, I felt that it

boosted my ego. I had become more outgoing and more talkative than I could ever remember.

"So," I said. "If the first human being, and everything else created to support him, were destroyed, how did Ahura Mazda's creation become populated? After all, we are here. Are we not?"

"Well," he said. "That required a miracle. As it turned out, the seed of the first human, which had been taken to the moon, was purified by the sun. It returned to the earth in the form of a rhubarb plant..."

"Come on now," I protested. "It's not nice to denigrate people like that."

"Believe me," he said. "I am not. This was not the type of rhubarb that you find on the mountainside. It was a special cosmic rhubarb with two stems attached at the base."

"And next you would want me to believe that one stem was the male and the other was the female!"

"Exactly right," he said.

"Which means that we are all the descendants of the rhubarb plant!"

"You are, for sure," he said. "Although I should emphasize again, not of an ordinary rhubarb but of a special cosmic rhubarb."

"How about yourself? Or were you created out of something..."

"No need to be impertinent," he interrupted curtly.

"I'm sorry," I said, pulling my knees closer to myself to retain more of the heat.

"Look son," he said quite defiantly. "I am not looking for either your approval or disapproval. You raised the issue by examining those silly scrolls. I recognized the shortcomings that were inherent in the items. Not, mind you, because of the scribes or those who provided the information, but due to inevitable changes involved in cultural transformations. In other words, knowing what your assessment of the scrolls would be, and the further impact they might have on future generations, I felt a bit of education..."

"I said I'm sorry. You don't need to lecture me. I really didn't think you would become upset because of a joke."

"That was no joke, son," he muttered. "A joke is if I were to leave you alone on top of this mountain for the remainder of the night and not allow you the warmth that your body requires to survive."

"I'm sorry," I repeated. "But still a major part of your story is unclear for me. I don't understand how we, as people, communicate with the Creator..."

"Through your prayers," he interrupted.

"How?" I asked. "Without intermediaries?"

"Of course not," he said. "Through the *Ahuric Order*."

"What is that? How does that Order work?"

"The individual contacts his *Farahvashi* (soul) who, in turn, contacts an appropriate *Yazata*. What do they teach you in school?"

"Not these," I said sarcastically, and added, "Not at least where I went to school. But tell me, how many *Farahvashis* are there and how many *Yazatas*?"

"The number of *Farahvashis* at any given time is equal to the number of the faithful. The number of the *Yazatas*, who are higher up in the hierarchy than the *Farahvashis*, is large, but definite."

"Why so many *Yazatas*?" I asked. "Why not just one?"

"Because of the complexity of people's affairs. The more refined people's wishes and prayers become, the more the *Yazatas* must become specialized."

"What happens to the prayer after it is picked up, say, by a *Farahvashi*?" I asked.

"It is taken to an appropriate *Yazata*, who, in turn, takes it up to the appropriate *Spenta*. Through that *Spenta*, then, *Ahura Mazda* hears the individual's prayer through his mind and reacts accordingly."

"Navruz Aka," I said. "You are a wonderful story teller. I am honored to be here and to listen to you..."

"Thank you," he said, somewhat more annoyed. "But I do not want you to recognize my story-telling abilities. I want your trust. Your actions of the day communicated to me that you were genuinely interested in Nowruz, so I took you seriously. I thought I could help you understand your own traditions and help you see them the way they were, rather than through the concoctions of biased intermediaries and confused interpreters. Intermediaries and interpreters who, I should add, were well-intentioned, but lost nevertheless."

"I have no problem with what you say," I said, feeling somewhat foolish talking to the dark figure sitting at a distance from me. "Didn't I make that clear?"

"Then you trust me?"

"Of course," I said, and muttered, "What other option do I have?"

"Right there, I don't think you and I see eye to eye."

"What eye to eye?" I muttered. "All I can see is a dark shadow over there talking. I can't see why you have such an objection to having the fire on. Are you afraid of soldiers, or animals, or what?"

"I have no problem seeing," he said. "There goes the beautiful Zarafshan, blue as ever. The sky is relatively cloudless; animals and birds are going about their business. Fewer people than during the day, of course, but there are some people moving about down there."

"So," I blew up. "What kind of eyes do you have that you can see through the dark like that? Are you wearing some kind of night vision goggles or something?"

"No," he said, "I have conquered the darkness of Angra Mainyu. You have not. We belong to two different worlds."

"So, do I understand correctly that simply because you don't feel the cold and because you have X-ray vision and no need for sleep, I, too, must suffer?"

"Far from that," he said. "All you need to do is to genuinely trust me. Then you, too, can enjoy the light that guides me."

"Are you a fire-temple priest or something?" I blurted out.

"No," he said. "I told you my name is Navruz. I live away from the urban centers and enjoy nature."

"You spied on me all day and let me do what I did. You saw and heard me record the scrolls on my machine. Why didn't you show yourself to me then, when I could see you?"

"Because I wasn't quite sure you were who I thought you were," he said almost apologetically. "Many scientists visit these ruins. Some of them find 'important' information about the past, of which I am a part. But among all of them, I have the feeling that you are endowed with the potential for the trust needed."

"So, where did I go wrong?" I asked, somewhat amused.

"You resealed the box and returned it to its niche. You preserved what others would have taken away."

"But I did that because I have no way of taking it with me. I mean taking it with me without its contents being damaged or totally destroyed."

"That might well be the case. But we both know that the chances of you, or others like you, coming for this box is virtually nil. You were genuinely interested in Nowruz, rather than in the fleeting fame that that box in some museum might bring you. So you took only as much as you needed to understand Nowruz, as incomplete and affected as the information contained in those scrolls is."

"And that formed the basis of your trust in me?"

"Not quite. You may not know it; in fact there is no way for you to know. But you and I, or more accurately, your family and I, go back a long way together. You are from a good, upright Turanian stock..."

"Hold it right there," I said. "You may call me an Arab or a Mongol, but a Turanian?"

"Yes, indeed, a Turanian. Why is that making you so upset?"

"Upset!" I repeated. "Who is upset? You call me a Turanian to my face and expect me..."

"Fine," he said. "Don't fret. I didn't mean you personally. Let me rephrase."

"Oh, please," I said. "No need for sophistry or for smoothing the ruffled edges. I am not a kid."

"No. I am not worried about your feelings at all. Neither do I need to be. I think, however, that you need to get some facts straight or, should I say, you need much more direction than I had assumed."

"I don't think so," I said. "I definitely do not need any directions. I am the professor, remember, I give directions."

"Well, then," he said calmly. "Since you are so well informed, tell me about your ancestry and, I mean, from the very beginning. Humor me, if you want. But enlighten me."

"What do you mean from the very beginning?"

"I mean," he said, in the same cool and calculated manner, "from the cosmological to the mythical and historical times, all the way to the present when you are an Afghan, or a British-Afghan, or is it Afghan-British!"

"I am sorry," I admitted. "To be honest about it, I can't go that far back. There is no way."

"Then why the vehement protest?"

I did not have an answer. I fell silent. He, too, did not say a word. I felt increasingly alone and vulnerable. "Suppose *you* tell me about my ancestors," I said eventually.

"I was about to, wasn't I?"

"Yes, you were," I said, apologetically. "Please carry on."

"It was towards the end of the auspicious reign of King Faridun," he said. "For two years the whole nation had been plunged into turmoil and uncertainty. The king had decreed that each of his sons would inherit a part of his kingdom, but had relegated the actual time for the division to later. Now that time had arrived. Iraj, the youngest, received the heartland and the kingship. Salm was awarded the western lands, and Tur, to whose clan your family belonged, received the Eastern lands.

"Within a month of this decree, Tur summoned all his people and set forth for these parts. Your family, which at the time lived near Susa, heard the call and followed Tur's orders. Six months later, the people of Tur arrived at their destined

camping grounds adjacent to the lands of the Turks. Here your family prospered and, after the death of Tur, settled in the region of Issyk Kul, in Cholpan Ata, to be exact... By the way," he interrupted himself, "Have you been to Cholpan Ata?"

"No, I have not," I said.

"You should," he said, "because that is your true home."

"What did my family do in Cholpan Ata?" I was becoming increasingly curious.

"Your family was in charge of the Turk Bureau, an informal office that managed the affairs of Tur's people and their dealings with their Turkish neighbors in the region."

"This is all so fascinating," I said. "For how long was my family in charge of the Turk Bureau?"

"For quite a spell," he said and added, "until the building of Siyavoshgord."

"Where is Siyavoshgord?" I asked.

"Near present-day city of Khotan. Prince Siyavosh," he continued, "as you know, was commissioned by his father, who was also his king, to avenge the death of Iraj who, a long time ago, had been slain unjustly by Tur. But, when he came face to face with the Turanians who, in reality, were his own people, he refused to fight them. Instead, he signed a peace treaty with Piran, the Turanian Commander, and with the king of Turan, Afrasiyab, one of Tur's descendants and successors.

In the Iranian heartland, Siyavosh's father, Kaika'us, rejected the treaty, and tried to force Prince Siyavosh to break his promise to the Turanians and exterminate them. Siyavosh refused to obey his father's command. Consequently, he was forced to defect to Turan. In time, he married Piran's daughter. Later on, he married King Afrasiyab's daughter, Farangis, for whom he built a new city, Siyavoshgord. Subsequently, the new city became an Iranian outpost in the eastern confines of Turan. Your family moved from Cholpan Ata to Siyavoshgord to strengthen this outpost and support future Iranian expeditions against the Turks..."

"What happened to the Turk Bureau then?" I asked.

"The Turks moved on Cholpan Ata and annexed the region to their nomadic camping grounds," he replied.

"You really know a lot about my family, don't you?"

"Enough, I hope, for you to trust me," he said.

"I trust you," I said matter-of-factly.

"Do you mean it?" he asked incredulously. "If you truly mean it, get up and walk with me down the mountain to the Zarafshan!"

"When, now?" I asked with surprise.

"Yes, now," he said.

"But I cannot see in the pitch dark."

"What does it matter? I can see. I'll lead you."

"Well," I said. "If this is a test of my trust in you, I'll have to modify my answer." The steep grave, the precipice, flashed before my eyes.

"I still haven't convinced you of my true identity, have I?"

"Well, you have told me some wonderful stories. But none of it convinces me enough to walk with you off the summit of this mountain to certain death."

"What if I were to tell you about your Afghan background?"

"That might help," I replied.

He continued, "After the fall of Turan to King Kaykhusrau, your family, along with many others, accompanied the victorious monarch on his world tour. Kaykhusrau visited many places and, in the less-developed areas, left many families and groups. He left your family in Samangan where it has lived since the disappearance of Kaykhusrau into the bright light. During the reign of King Vishtasp, they became ardent followers of the Prophet Zoroaster.

"This is all very fine," I said, still unconvinced. "But this information that you are giving me, all of it, is in the realm of myths and legends. Besides, I bet you can say something like that about almost any Iranian, Tajik or Afghan. You are not telling me anything about my family, for instance, things that I might be able to either identify with or personally verify."

"Will that convince you?" he asked.

"It will definitely be a step in the right direction. So far, I should say, you have moved me from a total skeptic to a believer. Only reason keeps me at a distance."

"Is that so?" He said as if not giving the matter any thought. Then, using my first name even though we had not been introduced, he added, "Look, Pirzad, I did not intend to go over your genealogy, but hearing your reaction to the term 'Turan' compelled me to let you know that you need not get so hot under the collar. Ethnic misunderstandings must be understood and worked out rather than swept under the rug."

"I appreciate that," I said. "But that distinction is no longer recognized today; every Turk calls himself a Turanian."

"That might well be the case. So what? You carry a passport that identifies you as a British Afghan. Does that mean that you prefer British identity?"

"No," I said, masking my surprise. I had not told him anything substantial about myself, yet he was privy to some very intimate facts about me. "Did I mention my citizenship status at some point?" I asked.

"Do you feel that you should have?" He asked.

"I really am at a loss," I admitted. "I really don't know."

The more he talked, the more I felt I was shrinking into myself. Anyone familiar with the ancient history of the region could have provided the cosmological and mythical accounts that he was providing. But my name, passport, and national affiliation? I had not said anything specific about those! Did he deduce all that from the little I said? How did he know that I come from Mazar-i Sharif in ancient Samangan? Do I still have an accent?

"Ok," I said. "I get the point."

"Will you walk with me then?" he asked again with a friendly tone.

"I really trust you," I said almost pleadingly. "Please don't misunderstand me. But my reason for not extending my hand willingly to you, and I think that's the type of trust you are looking for, to walk with you to what can be certain death..."

"No," he said. "Please don't be dramatic. I see clearly that you need much more assurance before you will trust me as well as you trusted your father."

"What do you mean, 'trusted'? Did something happen to him?"

"I am sorry son," he said. "There is a letter waiting for you in Hotel Tajikistan. I am afraid, it contains some sad news for you."

"Look," I said. "You don't need to frighten me more than I am frightened already. I have not had a moment of respite since I set eyes on you. Please, leave me alone."

"How can I leave you alone now that you are gradually seeing things my way?"

"I told you," I said. "very little is likely to persuade me to walk with you to my death. But let me assure you that convincing me will take a whole lot more than regurgitating vague histories."

"Vague to you, son," he said knowingly. "Fact to me."

"And quit calling me son. We are virtually the same age!"

"Are we?" He said sarcastically and added, "but you are the one who failed the test. The Turks, whom you speak about with a certain air of condescension, know at least seven generations of their ancestors. In any event, did your great-grandfather tour Europe with Amir Amanullah?"

"Yes," I said sheepishly. "He did. In fact, my great-grandfather's trip was my grandfather's only real accomplishment. My father's, too, for that matter."

"Did you notice that? You said 'was'?"

"Yes, but I did not mean it in that way. Besides, you really haven't provided anything about me that no one else but I myself knows. Have you?"

"I haven't," he said and added, "neither did you ask."

"First, though," I asked point blank. "Why is my trust in you so important?"

"Because, I want you to 'see' how the wish you made ascends to the Right and returns--something no human being has ever witnessed."

"Navruz Aka, if that is your real name," I said. "Are you pulling my leg?"

"No," he said confidently. "I mean it."

"But what if I choose not to go?"

"That's what we have been debating, isn't it?"

"I guess in a way it is," I said and fell silent.

"Now about you. Things that no one else knows," he said. "When you were fifteen, playing by the mill, you fell in the river. Not being able to swim, the water swiftly carried you to the bridge and the whirlpool. You went under. Then you found yourself clinging to the branch of a fallen tree. Do you remember that?"

"Yes," I said, searching in the dark for him.

"How do you account for that?"

"I don't know. All I know is that a hand reached out and grabbed me. Then I was holding to a branch. Was that your hand?"

"I did not say that. I said I know of the incident," he said matter-of-factly. "When you were nineteen," he continued. "Didn't you often stand in front of the gate of your house? A beautiful woman in *paranja* met you and together you went to the end of the dark tunnel leading to your house? One day at the end of the tunnel, did not the woman in *paranja* turn out to be a man, the woman's husband? He trapped you and you started to shout..."

"Fine, fine. I accept," I interrupted. Then, as a last test, I asked, "Do you remember my last real Nowruz?"

"I do," he said.

"Tell me about it," I said.

"What is there to tell? You lived in a dorm in Kabul and, even though you did not have much money, you contributed to the celebration that your roommates put together. You had received a bundle of new clothes from Mazar, but had decided

not to wear them. Your shoes had holes at the bottom and your socks were no more than ankle covers..."

He was accurate to a fault. "How do you know all that? Please tell me. How do you know all that about me?" I beseeched him.

"I just know," he said. Then suddenly he got up and said, "You will stay warm for the rest of the night. For me, however, it is time to go."

"Where are you going?"

"Time to return your fire to you," he said and, as he spoke, he poked his staff into the embers. A flash of light appeared. I was resting near the fire, warm and toasty. From the ground level, he looked quite tall and unreal. "Don't go now that you have convinced me."

"Have I convinced you?" he asked as he recovered the embers with ash. "Are you then willing to walk with me?"

"Against all that is reasonable and sacred to me, I am," I said.

"Fine then," he said. "Here, hold on to my hand."

His hand was quite warm and he himself was much taller than I had imagined. What was uncanny about all of this was that when he pushed the embers aside, just a minute ago, he did not look like the person whom I had seen earlier; the fellow who sat next to me by the fire was an ordinary person in ordinary fatigues. Navruz Aka, on the other hand, had a bright face, wore an exquisite robe and a stylish Bakhtiari cap.

When I stood up, or should I say when I thought I stood up, my body was limp, and I felt somewhat lightheaded. Before we began our walk into the darkness, to steady myself, I held tightly to Navruz's hand. At first the ground under me felt quite concrete but, after a few steps, it felt soft and spongy. I felt as if I was walking in a marshy area. Soon after that, only the sensation of going downhill remained; otherwise, it felt as if I

was falling down the crevasse--the very thing that I dreaded. A weird feeling overtook me and I lost consciousness.

When I came to, even though it was pitch dark, I sensed that Navruz had grown unusually tall, in fact, gigantically tall. Additionally, rather than holding to his hand, as I had been before fainting, I was standing on his broad shoulder, holding to a few strands of his coarse hair. The falling sensation was replaced by one of standing on the wing of a slow plane or glider, moving deeper and deeper into the heart of darkness.

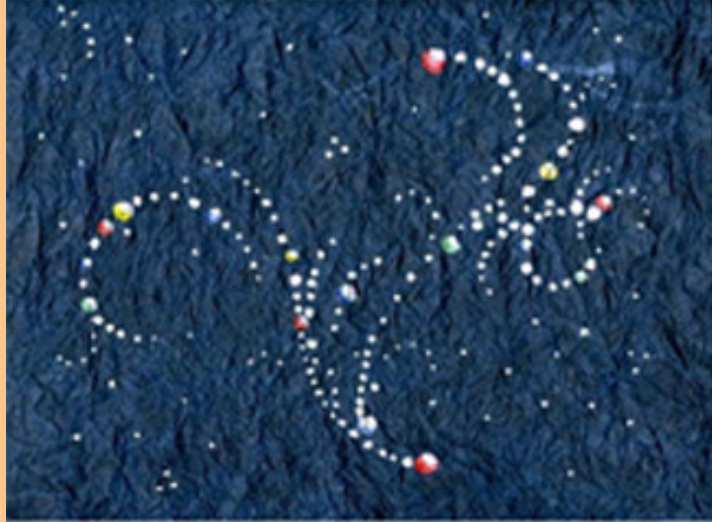
Even though I had not revealed the content of my wish, in a booming voice Navruz Aka said, "You wished to participate in a real Nowruz celebration; I am now about to walk you through your wish. However, there are certain things that you must know before we embark on our journey. First of all, you are a terrestrial being who is being allowed to view celestial beings at work. A great deal of what you see, therefore, needs to be explained in order for you to appreciate the process that your wish goes through, irrespective of its being accepted or rejected. Secondly, if your wish rises high enough to reach the Right, you should know that you will not see the final process. The intense white light of the Right blinds mortals instantly. When directed, you must cover your eyes immediately. Thirdly, at the end of the process you will either find yourself at the center of what you had wished for, or you will remain in the darkness from which you started. There is no recourse to a higher being or court. The decision of the Right is final."

Somewhat apprehensive of my situation, I placed my total trust in Navruz Aka, saying, "I no longer care where I am or where I'm heading. I place my total trust in you."

"So you do," said Navruz. "Prepare yourself then to accept the verdict of the Right."

"Is it a quick verdict?" I wanted to know.

"It can be," he said. "But, as I explained earlier, all wishes and the commands they invoke are processed carefully."



As we talked, the pitch darkness that had surrounded us for a long time gave way to a rather light shade of purple with millions of star-like dots moving about in it. "We are now at the place from which all wishes and prayers begin their long journey to the Right," said Navruz Aka. "Although you cannot distinguish your own wish from the others, I can assure you that it is being processed to rise to the next level."

"Do you think my wish will be granted?" I asked.

"It is hard to tell," he said. "This is only the first station. As you can see, a myriad of souls are carrying the wishes of their terrestrial mates to the next level."

"I am sorry," I said. "But as hard as I try, I cannot distinguish any particular rays. Are there shades to the dots that I do not recognize?"

"There are," he said and added, "If you recall, this is the level just above the level of the faithful. *All* wishes reach this station. It is beyond this purple station that the number of wishes begins to decrease. In fact, it is at this juncture that a lot of wishes are turned down and quite a large number remain in abeyance."

"I know that I cannot distinguish the dot or dots that represent my wish at this level," I said. "But, Navruz Aka, can you see if my wish is being granted?"

"Pretty soon," he said, "you will see that for yourself." Then, as we talked about the process, the color purple gradually gave way to a distinct shade of blue with bright white dots racing with incredible speed through the space."

"I understand that we have moved into a different realm," I said. "Can you tell me, at least, if my wish has cleared the level we were at?"

"Your wish has a much better chance at success now," he said, "than when you started."

"Are there more stages?"

"Yes," he said. "These two were the lower levels of the hierarchy. The chances of being rejected at these levels are not as great as being rejected at the higher levels..."

As Navruz talked, the blue color, too, faded into a light red color and the white dots turned into a silver band. "I thought I had a simple wish," I said.

"There is no such thing as a 'simple' wish," said Navruz Aka. "All wishes are equally important and go through the same process. Some wishes, as you might have noticed, do not rise above the first level. That simply means that the individual fielding the wish has not earned the required points for the wish to be granted at a particular time."

The red light did not fade into a different color as I expected it to. Rather, it was joined by five other colors that I recognized as orange, green, gray, yellow, and gold. Then, gradually, these colors dissolved into each other before my eyes. "Recall," said Navruz, "what I said about the intense white light of the Right. Very soon, these colors will rise and form the brightest white light possible. I ask you, therefore, to close your eyes and do not open them until the return of the red light."

"How long will it take?" I asked impatiently.

"It will take as long as it takes. All the wishes that have made it to the level of the Right will be examined within the period

that your eyes are closed. Then the white light will change back into its constitutive colors each carrying the results of the decisions reached."

"You mean the commands or decisions return to the associates of the Right symbolized with the color red."

"That is right," said Navruz Aka.

After living in a momentary world of psychedelic colors, I could not easily tolerate being thrown back to the darkness that had started early on that evening on Mount Mugh. Fortunately, the wait was not long. "I am sure you are very curious to find out whether your wish has been granted," said Navruz Aka. "It is safe to open your eyes."

As I opened my eyes, the color red dissociated itself from the other colors and began to dissolve into blue. Soon after that the blue, too, dissolved into the purple color that I had seen first. Then as I was about to ask Navruz Aka whether my wish had been granted, my nostrils were filled with the sweet smell of acacia. And, at the very same time, the color purple gave way to a delightful white light revealing a serene lake in the middle of a lush valley. Standing on Navruz Aka's shoulder, looking around, the shape of the valley impressed me. It looked very much like the inside of a bowl surrounded by a ring of snow-capped mountains. The valley itself was wide, especially on the left side of the lake. Its floor was covered with big boulders and trees and bushes. I could almost touch the clouds.

As a result of my brief sojourn through the world of the Right, I felt I could perceive; no, in fact, participate in all the events that were happening far and near. Events that otherwise would have been strange or unfamiliar to me were now quite familiar. For example, I could easily relate the rays of the blue light with the waters, the rays of the green light with the trees, and the gray rays with the earth, the rocks and the mountains. Similarly, I could easily associate everything in the valley, including human beings, with mysterious shades of the colors of the spectrum.

"Is the Right the life source?" I asked Navruz with heightened curiosity.

"No," he answered curtly. "The Right is the Right."

"I was thrilled to see the order of the Right in colors so bright and vivacious," I admitted. "I am even more thrilled to see this valley that, while it resembles home in every way, is so distant from home."

"You were taken through the processing stages of the Order of the Right so that you can distinguish the ethereal from the material. For instance, you see how every thing material in your world is enveloped in a halo that appears to you as some sort of light?"

"Yes," I said. "I am amazed that I have lived with these same materials so long and have been blind to their celestial value. Now, however, that I had a chance to view it, I am overwhelmed by the amount of information. For instance, when I was looking at those lights, among the myriad of light forms emerging from the darkness, I saw only a single ray of White Light. Why the singular distinction?"

"Because there exists only one white ray at any given time."

"But I cannot see a correlation between the bright light of the Right and all the colors that I encountered on our sojourn. Why is that?" I asked.

"You will see in a moment."

As we spoke, a white ray of light appeared in the valley and moved into center stage. Other lights that I had seen in the assembly also appeared in the valley and positioned themselves in relation to the white light. None of the lights had the brightness of the lights of the celestial assembly. Then, again, something incredible happened. As if by magic, the intensity of the lights faded and, gradually, distinct human forms emerged still holding the positioning that they had as lights. They moved slowly towards a display that had been spread at the side of the lake. I was seeing the display, which had been hidden from my sight by Navruz's huge body, for the first time.

"Do you see a correlation?" Asked Navruz.

"Indeed I do," I confirmed. "But who are all these people?"

"You will know all about them very soon," he said.

At the head of the display there was a gem-studded throne. A bejeweled crown hovered over the throne; it did not seem to be attached to anything. The white light, which now looked at once like Navruz when he was an ordinary fellow and ancient Mesopotamian kings, ascended the throne, placed the crown on his head, and acknowledged the crowd.

The crowd responded with a cheer of pure joy the likes of which I had never before heard. The joy visibly intensified the king's halo, which I could see shoot up to the sky. Similar rays ascended from the crowd illuminating the surface of the valley and the sky.

"Is that King Jamshid?" I asked.

"He is the carrier of the White Light," Navruz said. "He does not have a name."

"You said this is the first Nowruz. That makes the king either Gayomart or Jamshid," I insisted.

"I did not say the first Nowruz," he corrected me. "I said perpetual Nowruz. You are looking at a regenerative scene. As for the personages emerging from the light, the one who emerged from the White Light is chosen by the Right on behalf of the Creator as the ruler."

"Right there," I said triumphantly. "You just made my point,"

"I did no such thing," Navruz retorted. "I had hoped that you had left your scrolls behind on Mount Mugh where they belonged."

"But I thought I did," I protested.

"The material part, of course, you did," he said. "But the fundamental part is still with you. They are clouding your mind and your vision.

"So, what am I to make of this?" I protested.

"Concentrate on the essentials I showed you," he said.

"Fine," I said. "How would you relate the essentials you showed me to this?"

"At different times," Navruz Aka explained, "depending on their ability to carry out the behest of the Right, the carriers of the lights are endowed with different capabilities. The carrier of the Blue Light, for instance, controls the oceans, the seas, the lakes, and the rivers. Their pulse is in its hands as are the lives they command. If he fails, his kingdom will suffer. It will fall victim to harsh winds and draught. Consequently, all subsidiary beings endowed with the blue rays also suffer. Furthermore, because it is the greatest contributor to the intensity of the bright light of the Right, the Blue Light stands next to the White. Do I make sense?"

"Yes," I said. "You make good sense. However, if he has been the carrier of the Blue Light through eons, why does he look like a young prince as he stands behind his father."

"That is because when I showed you the deputies of the Right in their true form, you could not identify with them. I am, therefore, representing them in forms that are more easily understandable to you."

"Then those next to the 'crown prince' are the carriers of the Red and Green lights respectively, are they not?" I said sarcastically.

"That's exactly right. You might want to call them warrior chief and head priest because of my imposed forms on them; but, in reality, they are what you just mentioned, no more, no less."

As he spoke, the attendants whom, irrespective of Navruz's lecture, I recognized as a crown prince, a priest, a warrior chief, and several guards, placed themselves hierarchically behind the king. When they were all in their stations, the king held up his right hand. The crowd, from far and near, gave a series of loud cheers.

"Is this not the sound of pure joy lighting up the sky and the abode of evil!?" Navruz marveled.

Nowruz moved about at will. It seemed that no one was aware or otherwise alarmed by his intrusion. He walked still closer to the scene, standing directly above the king's head. There seemed to be no end to the majesty of the display.

As if looking at the whole colorful scene from the branch of a tall tree, I marveled as much at the familiarity of the items as at their unearthly nature and quality. In front of the king, at a distance of about ten feet or so, there was a large circular, raised platform, almost as high as the platform on which the throne stood. The platform, covered with a bright yellow silk fabric, held a most fascinating display.

The closest thing to the king was a large gold brazier in which fragrant firewood with a special aroma and glow burned. The sight of the fire was enchanting, the flames rose as high as the level of the king's head. Around the brazier, there were placed six silver trays each arranged at a certain distance from the other. On each tray, a different variety of sprout was arranged artistically. Each green arrangement was accentuated with strands of red saffron flowers. The trays were wide, about half a yard in diameter; their rims were quite low so that the entire growth could be seen. Each tray was on a separate low table and each table was covered with a cloth of a different color. All the colors were bright and deep.

Nightingales on the trees and a school of goldfish in a pond of fresh water flanked the display and large bowls full of rice, wheat, barley, walnuts, almonds, hazelnuts, and sunflower seeds filled in the empty spaces.

Farther away, there were larger enclosures holding lions, tigers, and cheetahs. An eagle, that otherwise would be hooded, perched on the branch of a tree very close to where I was. Here and there, bowls, full of sweets, bird eggs of many colors, delicious foods, and colorful drinks, complemented the items on the display.

Contributors, carrying their gifts to the royal court, stood in a line in front of the king. From my perch, I could see them pause in front of the king for just a moment, enough to listen to their name being announced, cast a glance at the sovereign, pay homage and move on. From there, they turned right and formed a semi-circle the other end of which placed them directly behind the crown prince and the king. The lions, tigers, and cheetahs

were the contributions of the most prominent of the subjects already in attendance at the ceremony.

Every minute, large amounts of shot silks, the likes of which I had not seen even in museums, fabrics of various hues, precious stones in unimaginable quantities, woven fabrics, especially carpets and tapestry with heavenly designs, spices, musk, amber, and gold and silver coins were being added to the display. The line of the gifts on the display before the king was proportionate to the infinite line that was shaping up behind his auspicious throne.

On both sides of the display, as far as the eye could see, red tulips and other wild flowers, trees, and bushes in bloom covered the ground. Interspersed among these beauties were musicians in felt hats, bright, embroidered silver robes, light blue, and collarless silk shirts playing familiar tunes. Accompanying them were beautifully dressed, slim dancers with long-flowing dark hair, golden headgear, and soft animal-skin shoes dancing among the tulips and the wild flowers. The music and the dance were soft and nonintrusive.

Seeing the magnificence of the gifts, their familiar shape and guessing at their value, I asked Navruz, "Are the gifts, too, in material form for my benefit?"

"Everything is," he smiled for the first time and winked. "They represent the love, the honor, and the loyalty that people of the Right feel towards the guardians of their prosperity. Through the king, they place their love at the threshold of the Creator."

"Are they the dots floating among the many colors of the hierarchy you walked me through?" I felt compelled to ask.

"Yes," he said and added. "You saw the supplications, joys, sorrows, and wishes of these same beings being transferred to the Right..."

"Why couldn't I see the Right's reaction to their wishes and solicitations?"

"You actually did. What you did not see was the Right."

Once a substantial amount of gifts had accumulated, creating a fair distance between the king and those yet to place their gifts, the king stopped the procession and addressed his subjects:

"Another new day has dawned," he said, "and with it, the conceptual world of the Creator has assumed a more vibrant form in us, especially in our thoughts, words, and deeds. As guardians of the Right, we not only have to be wise but have to choose wisely; we must deter the Lie from eclipsing the light of our judgment, the Creator's most cherished gift to us. Couple your wisdom with the piety endowed in you and serve responsibly the Right and the Creator who put you on this blessed earth. He gave you the gift of life and provided you with righteousness, a most sublime medium for your growth and prosperity, use it to your advantage which is also to the advantage of the Right.

"You are divided into distinct classes for particular services arising from the needs of the Right as he governs the universe through his aids, associates, and managers. You are meticulously divided into warriors, priests, nobles, and commoners according to your merit. Be satisfied with your station and, by no means, digress into the uncharted territories of the Lie. When you crave growth, and you will, increase your effort to excel within your reach; aspire to perfect your situation. Do not covet the wealth and status that belongs rightfully to others.

"On a different note, every year, at this time, the Creator refurbishes his creation. The Right requires that you, too, follow our example and refresh your bond of loyalty by offering prayers and by directing your best intentions, your most cherished gains, and your worthiest communal services to the throne so that they can be redirected to the Right. The Right, as has been our long-standing experience, reciprocates with abundance of rain, copious sunshine and, at the end, a bountiful harvest.

"Along the same line, in the tradition of our forefathers, the Right wants every one of you, irrespective of your position, to

refurbish your own lives. Imitate the freshness of spring in the air, the vibrancy of the plants and the gaiety of the animal kingdom. Kindle fires of joy in each other's hearts and dissipate gloom from each other's lives. Offer each other sweetmeats and flowers, clothe each other in new garbs, rival the green foliage of trees, the emerald brightness of the blades of grass, and the fragrant and fruitful blossoms of the orchards. Listen to the warble of the nightingales and give rein to the voice of reason within you. Exercise your power of imagination to experience the love and the wisdom of the Creator. Go forth into this newly fashioned world as members of a wholesome, caring, considerate, and charitable society. Keep your covenant with me and, through me, with the Right and the Creator. Do not lie lest your perfection suffers, do not think evil thoughts lest your trustworthiness is diminished, and, above all, do not act against the wishes of the Creator lest your immortal soul is burdened with worldly desire.

"Look at your bright new sun and thank the Creator for the fire of his Truth that burns within you. Always be mindful of the wisdom, piety, sense of community, and the perfection He has bestowed upon you. Immortalize yourself in the eyes of your progeny through your good thoughts, good words, and good deeds.

"Finally, the Creator's Truth rests in His creation. Choose from His waters, plants, and animals, as well as from among His less concrete benevolence--health, justice, and joy--as many as the number of days it took Him to create the world. Keep those symbols of regeneration before your mind's eye so that the integrity of the Triad is not compromised.

"Teach your offspring to celebrate this day by remembering you through your benevolent words, thoughts and deeds. Nourish them from the bounty on earth, and secure their prosperity through your devotion to the Right. Prepare them for an even brighter future.

"Know that immortality could easily turn into ignominy and demise should you ignore or forget the central Triad, the three gems that the Creator has invested in you. Make the gems the hallmark of your understanding of your relation to the Right and the Creator. Make every day worthy of an auspicious celebration like this."

At the behest of the King, humans, animals, plants, and birds, all around the display, broke out into a chorus of song, and danced. As if at the mercy of a hurricane, trees as tall as Navruz, swung their branches to and fro. There was, however, no hurricane. The trees, like all the rest of creation, plunged in mirth and joy, were dancing. The warbling of the nightingales and the murmur of the cascading water, mingled with the fragrance of the flowers and the sweet aroma of the acacia trees accentuated the gaiety of the moment.



Entranced by the captivating scene, I did not realize that Navruz had lifted me off his shoulder and placed me in the middle of the dancers. Looking around, I saw beautiful women, clad in soft animal skins, dancing a heavenly dance around me. I, too, danced and moved with the flow that was gradually carrying me away from where Navruz had put me down. In fact,

it was now, for the first time, that I saw Navruz in the clear light. A cosmic figure of gigantic proportion, clad in the most colorful attire imaginable, an attire that often blended with the surrounding foliage making him temporarily invisible. It seemed that I no longer held his attention. Was he convinced that I had discovered an alternative to the precious scrolls?

In spite of my struggle to stay close to Navruz, the flow of the dance continuously moved me away. Then a most frightening thing happened. Looking up, I saw Navruz, my only means of returning to Mount Mugh, leaving the scene without me. Panic-stricken and choking, I shouted, "Navruz Aka,... Navruz..."

## Three

"Professor,... professor," I felt someone nudging my shoulder. I opened my eyes. It was Mohporah, bending over me. The sun was up and the sky was clear and blue; a nippy chill lingered in the air. Automatically, I listened and looked for the helicopter. There was no sign of it. Looking beyond Mohporah, I saw Khurshed standing farther away looking down at the meandering Zarafshan.

"Sorry for leaving you like that," said Mohporah apologetically. "We climbed all night."

I pulled myself together, still trying to fully orient myself. "I was expecting you late yesterday afternoon." I mumbled.

"I know," she said. "Unfortunately, Simurgh developed engine trouble and had to be left in one of the villages with the pilot. An associate drove us to the foot of the mountain before sunrise and we have been climbing since..."

"Yesterday afternoon, as soon as I began to doubt that you would return, I knew that I had complicated your plans. I am truly sorry," I said.

"Not at all," she assured me. "This kind of thing happens quite regularly."

While we talked, Khurshed joined us. He, too, apologized, criticizing the war in the south and the economy after the collapse of the Soviet Union for the situation. "This kind of irresponsibility," he said, "did not happen under socialism. Everything was systematically taken care of. But now, the smallest problem disables a whole operation."

"Don't let it bother you, Khurshed Aka," I said. "These things happen."

"Do they happen in England?"

"Not exactly this same thing," I said, "but British life has its own problems."

"Please, please," said Mohporah. "Not this early in the morning." Then turning to me, she asked, "Did you sleep well? Fortunately, it did not get as cold as it sometimes does."

"I did, I guess," I said and looked about to see any sign of Navruz. Not seeing him there, I added, "in fact, I had a visitor."

"A visitor?" echoed Khurshed. "Up here?"

"Yes," I said still trying to make sense of the situation. "His name was Navruz. He stayed with me and talked to me late into the night."

As I talked I felt a bitter taste in my mouth. "He gave me some kind of a root to chew on. It kept me warm. "

The two looked at each other and nodded. "Where did he go then?" Asked Khurshed with interest.

"I don't know," I said hesitantly and, adding, "Just a minute," as I headed down in the direction of the brook to check on the wall with the scrolls.

"Where are you going?" Asked Khurshed, following me.

"Yesterday, I found some rather ancient scrolls in a box at the side of a cliff over there," I said. "I thought I would not be able to carry them onto the helicopter. But now that we are walking, I think I can manage that..."

"You're not joking, are you?" Asked Khurshed incredulously.

"No," I said. "I am dead serious."

But once I jumped over the brook and looked at the wall, my heart sank. The box had been yanked out of the wall; clumps of moist clay still clung to the sides of the niche.

"The box..." I said. "It's been removed." Then turning and looking toward where I had stayed the night, I said to myself, "Was my knapsack still there? I wasn't paying attention..."

Dushanbe, 2001  
Minneapolis, 2004