

The Tale of the Soldier: An Ant, a Rock and a Greek

The rock face was almost sheer, yet Milinda managed somehow to find toe-hold enough to propel his body up as far as the first outcrop. He had discarded sword, shield and all his remaining accoutrements of war, as being too heavy, too cumbersome, for the purpose which he had set himself. The light cast by a winter sun at noon sharpened the air into dust-free clarity, save for the tiny area immediately around the body of Milinda, where the contact of his soft, leather boots on the rock sent up puffs of yellow dust every time he stretched across the stone. It was a difficult balance between resting his cheek against the rock's warmth, getting back his breath, and allowing a debilitating tiredness to seep through the muscles of his forearms and calves; it was best to keep moving, albeit slowly like a scarab beetle; after all, it was how he had survived when all the others had not.

He did not look down, and instead wondered whether a scarab beetle did move slowly. Being shaped like a scratching, brittle water-clock, did it not scurry across the sand and the shadows and the years? Perhaps, like human beings, they were breakable clocks. *Rhēktikai klepsydrai*. Time's broken passage through water, through blood. He had been pestered by such insectiferous questions ever since, at the age of three or possibly four, one afternoon, when everyone else was rolling around in the hot time of their first sleep, in their black-winged sojourn with Morpheus, he had been sitting on a small stone seat and watching a whitened wall, when a black insect the size of his thumb-nail, its body resembling a miniature Athenian helmet from the time of the internecine wars, began to make its way tentatively upwards, along the course of a fissure. Its movement was sporadic yet hypnotic, and Milinda felt a great rush of blood to his head, as though he had placed a large white shell against the side of his skull. As he watched, the feeling began to grow on him that as long as the beast had not reached its destination – presumably the plant-pot perching on top of the wall – he did not need to breathe, or even really to see, in order to know which course the insect would take next. He felt the lids half-close over his eyes. He was acutely, intensely, aware of the texture, the temperature, the taste of surfaces, and of a silence around him which was deeper than the usual quietude of mid-afternoon. No rustling of palm-fronds in gentle breezes, no squawking birds from the shade of banyan trees, no crying babies, not even the sound of ripening grapes. Just him, the beetle and the wall. The sun burned on his back, its heat searing through the thin white cotton of his kamise. Yet Milinda did not shift on his stone seat, did not breathe as he followed the course of the beetle.

Some twenty-five years later, here in the high mountain passes, he had reached a vertical crossroads. Above his head, sat the dark mass of an impassable outcrop, while the narrow track in which he had managed to lodge his feet veered off leftwards into nothing. To the right, the rock-face swept up in a series of dangerous arcs, whose ends crumbled into schist. The tiny, loose chips glinted like diamonds. Sweat ran into his eyes. He blinked, twice, and swung his body around. His boot landed right on the scree. He felt the stones crumble and slip out from underneath the leather, but he did not hear them hit the valley floor. His foot was slipping. In order to maintain a forward and upward momentum, he had to keep moving with a certain level of swing and turn, from right to left and then back again. He had to believe with every sinew in his body that he could make the end of this track, that he could get above the outcrop, perhaps, even, that he might reach the top of the cliff – but such wild imaginings could be dangerous – no, he must slither on, one toe-grip after another, smelling his way across the old stone.

The insect had paused at the division of the fissure. The upper part of its body quivered and twitched, and its antennae twirled around its head as though it were attempting to measure the precise geometer of the wall. Somewhere in its deep, carboniferous past, the beetle had been a piece of plankton, slipping silently through the ocean. Perhaps, fifty metres below the sea's shimmering structure, the same rock, which back then, in his family home, in the enclosed garden that lay behind the house-maids' cubicula, had gone to form the yellow wall up which the beast was crawling, had been lain down aeons earlier as formless sand at the bottom of the sea. Perhaps, in one particularly transparent future, the beetle had become the pupil of a boy, seamed through with particles of light.

It had been a long journey, this trek across landed satrapies and gushing, torrential potamôn *I*. They had been following the dreams of the mad king. The Son of Ammon had acquired more wealth and power than any before him and yet still he'd wanted more. He had heard a story about giant ants who lived somewhere to the north of the lands of the Indikoi and to the east of the territories of the Gedrosians, Arachosians, Bactrians: creatures the size of foxes that dug gold from the sand. But eventually, the men had turned back and to be frank, even the two-horned One had balked at taking an army through these narrow defiles, where they would have been hopelessly trapped should anyone have wished to attack – and many of the Dardicae would have wished to do just that. Conquering Abisares, ruler of the lush valley of Kasperia, was one thing. Subduing these mountains was quite another.

Like so many others, Milinda had left his wife and family by the mountains of home and had followed the Great One, east, ever east. Except that in Milinda's case, it was not Makedonia, but Sikelia, pearl of Megalê Hellas, that was home. And specifically, the town of Megara Hyblaea, which lay close to the great Sirakusa, city of springs and quails. Yes, well, now the Lord of Men had gone off south and west, had marched through deserts without deities as, one by one, his men had fallen around him, had been killed by the sun, disease or bandits, or else had been driven slowly insane by recurring, mysterious hallucinations. In the chaos of the retreat from the bank of that last river across which his subjects finally had refused to follow him, hidden somewhere in the vast shanks of the fields of this elephant land, Milinda and his small band had become separated from the main body of the army. Perhaps it had happened in a dark forest filled with wild boar and black bears the size of temples, or perhaps they had smelled a certain scent and followed it to a strange island where maiden witches had cared for them and fed them the livers of newly-born infants, or perhaps they had heard a cry from far above, and looking up had seen, outlined against the deep blue of the sky, a large white bird draped with a black scapular reciting an epic poem which had exhorted them to leave the army and turn north, towards the glacier mountains that lay beyond the frontier of Bactria. Maybe they had simply deserted, or decided to follow a different path. Or perhaps it had been some combination of all of these possibilities which had led Milinda's tiny band away from the Eastern Gedrosian Desert and up through field, forest and gorge, all the way to the wall of stone, which like the fissure along which now he trod, ran horizontally from east to west. After a while, the rivers all had begun to look the same, and likewise the rocks, the cities, the people. Or rather, Milinda had begun to feel as though he had come across each of these things somewhere before. He was no longer surprised at the concubine with the face of a lion, or the five cubits-long hair of the wandering holy man, or the deep, black wells that had swirled at the centre of the pupils of the woman whom he had left behind on the Median mountain. When he had gazed into her eyes, he had seen his own face reflected, and yet the face had not been his, but had been made up of the thousand faces of his ancestors, all the way back to the swirling rock and dust of the void.

And now, Milinda was battling, not with armies, but against the same stone and light and burning sun, the hard rock-face that grazed the skin beneath his beard, that drew blood from the flesh. He paused for a moment and watched the scarlet bead lose its gleam and turn, by degrees, to iron. His breathing was laboured; he had to hug the surface of the rock so closely that it was becoming difficult to expand his chest. He closed his eyes, yet the verticality of the world did not disappear, but instead replicated, each shadow dancing behind his lids and mocking him. The choreic forms acquired mouths and began to sing high-pitched, bird-like notes of the sort he had heard once while resting his black-haired head on a plush takia in a brothel in a caravanserai on the outskirts of Kaspapuros. And the songs were the songs of pornai everywhere, their tremulous lyrics evoking the artifices of fake love, of the abandonment of golden plate armour and of the underpinning melancholy of a life which must end, if not today beneath the blade of a Mede, then tomorrow under the foot of a howling god-elephant. Everything dies or vanishes beneath the sand, even, at the end, the temples and mountains and the naked, dancing oracles, it must all cease and turn and be lost like the slap of skin across the marble floors of alabaster palaces. No echoes yet will hover, of the whispers of possible fates, of the hissing snakes of entwined bodies. Nothing will be, but darkness and oblivion. If, at this moment, Milinda should lose his grip, then his fall, the cracking of his skull, the splay of his spirit, discharged from his head like powder from a magician's box, the slow desiccation of his flesh, the ebb and dissipation of his life-force, would mean absolutely nothing. His blood would seep like tiny, red worms into the cracks in the rock, and would feed the wiry occupants of some subterranean ant colony who would drink, long and deep, for a thousand ant-years, and perhaps these insects, too would sing the magic of this joyous affliction which had descended upon them as though from the crown of a Kabbalistical tree and perhaps, in insectile legend, the crimson rain would be half-forgotten, half-remembered as the beneficent act of the six-legged goddess whose black body swells infinitely between the stars.

The sinews of his arms, which had slashed bronze blades across the gurgling windpipes of Persians, Medes and Hinds alike, not to mention those of the barbaroi of the cold, northern rivers, and which had helped slip his opalescent seed into the bellies of uncounted wives, daughters and whores, would be torn apart and eaten by jackals and vultures and would be carried thus across continents, perhaps all the way back to Sikelia where the scavenger would live out its span and then die on some high, windy rock, the light fading to sky blue in the bird's eyes, in Milinda's eyes, and the vulture's dust be scattered across the grazing goat's sacred mountain, from where, during the mid-winter festival, the high men of the village would haul down the fattened, smiling beast for ritual slaughter and communal consumption. Milinda-the-wall-gazer, rolling around comically in the stomach of a village elder! Or else, that of the village idiot. Perhaps the goat's skin would be dried and treated and scrolled into parchment and the scrolls sold to an itinerant merchant who would carry them in his caravan all the way to Rhegion, in Megalê Hellas where many years later, they would be purchased for three silver dirhams (*O, Deus! Pretium nunc eruditionis! 2*) by a monastery inhabited by overweight Benedictines whose abbot specialised in the study of the tiers of sacredness and the vicissitudes of sacrifice and in the drawing-up of superior books of hours for the glass-windowed, Adriatic gentry. The Hours of the Virgin, scrawled across Milinda's stiffened, hairless integument. *Obsecro te*. The Office of the Dead. Eagle, lion, angel, ox. Saints' Days. Perhaps the abbot once had been an evangelist, St. John, say, of the Revelation, and perhaps Milinda's skin would be the palimpsest for the hallucinatory gospel. The psychedelic helter-skelter to the Dajjal's cyclopean Armageddon. Hammered shield syncopation. *O intemerata*. Banging our bones on the wood of boxes sealed with the lips of djinns, intoning spells, wishes, dreams into the darkness, longing for connection, for an intertwining of sinews, for a

merging of the white cabbage florets of our brains. *Mary, Mary, I beseech thee, O undefiled one, how does your garden grow.* Yes, Milinda had trodden upon the minds of his enemies, and he had felt within his body, the rise of their dreams. And on battlefields all the way from Sikelia to the Hyphasis, he had walked faster and faster through the corpses, and had taken off his sandals and had run, barefoot, through the cerebral cortexes of the hunted, the moaning, the dead. And as he had run, he had begun to dance, to pace in measured steps, the dance of the spider. The loop of the minstrel's arms across its soft, wooden body. The elegant, melancholy chorea of the lute. Tonewoods.

In the brain behind his eyes, he saw white, hooded figures rowing a long boat with a vulture-beak prow, a huge pennant, projecting outwards from the bow flagpole as though held stiff, shining, seraphic, in the darkening air by some invisible force (faith, perhaps, or old blood), and at the stern, an orange canopy containing a single box. In the background, a turreted, grisaille castle. High Mediaeval. And something else as well, the rhythmic, pulsing backbone of it all. The music of a nine-course lute, southern German, cut fresh from dark, sycamore forests, sap glinting through leaves in the sun and having passed through the hands of the woodcutter, the merchant, the craftsman, the troubadour or possibly minnesanger, the music of the lute causing the waves on the river to billow in the shady murk against the green banks, the water to lap dangerously up towards the gunwale and the fluttering, orange tent. Ultimately, this is where the vulture's poem ends as the melancholic, yearning sweep of the music hurls the ship over onto its side and water fills the box, taking it down, down, down to the cold bed of the river, where there is no breath, but only darkness and the clasp of lips. Love, at last.

He opened his eyes. A bead of water trickled down his left cheek. He forced his muscles to move, loosened the joints, which had become stiffened by the act of holding him stationary against the rock, and he began at last to climb. Far below, the pile of armour, the breastplate and shin-guards which he had abandoned, gleamed in the sunlight like a great brass eye.

At length, he reached the top of the cliff and hauled his body over the ridge. He rolled over onto his back and lay there, exhausted, for what seemed like the entirety of the time between sunrise and sunset. He fell asleep, and dreamed of a great, grey river which flowed between mountains and whose body coiled far into the west. There was a bridge across the river, a strange contraption that reminded him of the loping spider dances of the women of the land of orchards and dust. And bridge, sky and river all moved to the music of the pandoura, to the same notes as before, though now the music had become disordered, polytonic, multi-layered, and as he watched, Milinda saw a figure fall through the air. And then he was rising through the water, from darkness to light, and he felt a hand enclose him and take him up. And when the box opened around him, he saw again the deep, black eyes of the Medean courtesan, the boy gazing at the beetle as it crawled across the hot wall, the soldier climbing up the burning rock-face, the insect sinking into the referential of its evolutionary trajectory...

Spread-eagled on the rock, he was a sun-clock, and when the sun began to lose power, he woke up. He felt an itch on the lower part of his sword-arm. There was a black beetle crawling across his wrist. It had bitten through the integument, leaving a trail of red dots. He shook his arm, but the beetle did not budge. He shook harder. Glancing up at him and dancing to the rhythm of his pulse, the beetle opened its mouth and in a light Glaswegian accent and in a style of evocation derived perhaps from long hours at the knee of a Milngavie lawyer or a Whitecraigs entrepreneur, it began to speak:

“As is known to those who dwell on the summits of forsaken mountains, the music made by the tongues of insects falls into seven distinct categories:

á The Yemeni Wind (The Melisma of Happy Arabia). A screaming, fluctuant noise, almost burning in its intensity. With massed numbers of insects, the power of its natural frequency can be used to destroy buildings and to sweep up the souls of the believers.

B' The Copulation of the Unbelievers. The emanations which manifest as sound from the dancing pelvises of infidelitrous insects possess a quite different quality from those of the Peoples of the Parchment. The notes assume the monochrome forms of seventy-two orgiastic silent movie stars and as they decay, one into another, the seething, pentagonal whole which they form reduces to immortality and then vanishes.

γ' The Seventy-Two Sects of Hell. Backwards-playing parchment tapes of the echoing, vibrato voices of old mesquitas, buried and lost in the forests of the Holy Lands of the South Saxons, the codes for which can be ascertained by a close, and possibly incipiently psychotic, study of the chiromancy of the Old Testament, particularly the Raqs de Suleiman and the hierophantic elements within Genesis.

δ' The Howling of the Female Singers. A Portuguese beach-front in December. A tinny loudspeaker. A cunt vocal, electronically-modulated to sound like a Nestorian choir. Men with twitching moustaches, swigging brass thimblefuls of clear medronho and dreaming of Prince Henry the Navigator's love-handles.

é The March of the Ya'juj. Clap, clap, clap. Army-regulation boots on marble floors, circa 2208 CE. The skins of corrupt Roman emperors, blackened by orderlies and sprayed with Clark's Waterproof Aerosol, prove indestructible as rubber soles. The Ya'juj are led by the dog of Rasputin's great, great, great, great, great, great grand-daughter, who lives in a North Lincolnshire hamlet previously named, Gropecunt but now known as East Walkwith, a hamlet whose only street is known as, Grape Lane.

ζ' The Smoke. Since the introduction of smokeless zones into the great and worthy body politic that is the City of Glasgow, the sight of shivlings spunking smoke in varying shades of grey has become a vision extremely rare and almost nostalgic in its capacity to elevate hearts. Themed, circular flats will be built atop the remaining chimneys, to be sold, courtesy of the Lord Provost, as fifth homes to old rock icons at luxurious prices. From these apartments, djinn sculptors will construct channels, through which in a Brownian motion, detoxified smoke will coil and spiral and yea, like the first, the Greatest, David, Lothario of El Quds es Sharif and slingshot father of the Djinn-King, will harvest four thousand Levites who will form words, play ouds and sing metrical psalms to one another across the great vistas of the regenerated city 3,4. Daoud, of the magic eye, Daoud, up in the sky. High in a room in a house in a circle, there is some happiness.

H The Three Trumpets. The Era of Happiness will begin with the cornet solo (courtesy of Al Malik Israfil) from *(Yes!) I'm in the Barrel* which will transmute into the clanking sound of the flashing diamond incisor of Jelly Roll Morton as he bit into his last, wandering steak and finally, will wail stinking winter brass coats along the mud slops of the Clyde River.”

So saying, the beetle unfolded its wings, smiled at Milinda the Yunani and flew off towards the southern sea and the land of the Habashat. 5

Milinda got up and realised that he was naked. At some point during the time he had lain in an exhausted slumber, his clothes, sword and rations all had been stolen, he did not know by whom, or what. He ran his fingers down over his trunk, to make certain that his skin also had

not been feloned off into some dubious street-market. The sun was sinking rapidly behind the spine of the black mountains; he had to find shelter before nightfall, or risk being either eaten alive by swarms of flies who, with the rise of the moon, en masse would assume the forms of tiny sharks, or else frozen to death by the cascading temperature of the desert night.

As the shadows grew longer, turned into silhouettes, Milinda began to panic. It was getting colder, and beneath the soles of his feet he felt the grains of sand begin to shift, and from his long years of travel and combat, he knew that in these parts, night came down like the falling wall of a pyramid chamber. He remembered what had happened to his companions, seventy-seven men, the ones he had brought with him upriver while the rest of the army of Makedonia had been sailing in the opposite direction in preparation for basting their way westwards through the black wastelands of Makran. As the small group of soldiers had moved across the body of the western Hind, their armour had shone in gold upon the sand and they had been greeted as gods. How does one greet a god? Possibly by prostrating oneself on hot stone and averting one's eyes. Or else, by gazing into the pupils of the god and feeling the twin black beetles scratch over one's epidermic form. Or by becoming naked and copulating with the statue of the deity, or by opening one's mouth, protruding one's long, snake-like tongue and transubstantiating the stiffened flesh of the deva. Not that a deva was a god, of course. But to human beings, cursed as they were with the cycle of rebirth, almost anything that was not of themselves seemed to possess at least something of the quality of a deity. They had travelled, at first on horseback, later on mules and finally on foot, and the lands through which they had passed had bewitched them, one-by-one.

The soldiers had begun to imagine all kinds of things: lithe, black-haired dancing-girls, slowly peeling off their robes and pouring aphrodisiacs into densely calligraphed silver goblets; massed armies of elephants, lions and ebony goddesses grinning and charging towards them; the face of their Emperor, sweeping all before him, his skin turning to liquid as the horned god of the river replicated himself endlessly in coin; the infinite, glittering wealth of Persia, some of which Milinda's band had carried with them on the backs of mules and camels only to lose it by degrees on their increasingly desperate trek northwards. And through these visions, they would talk so fast, it was virtually impossible to understand what they were saying, the words would slip into one another and like the spokes of chariots, once above a certain speed the sentences would seem to run backwards. But just before they had become lost, each man had fallen silent and their eyes had glazed over with a strange, distant light and Milinda had known that they had been dreaming of home.

And all of these manifold and wondrous things happened to seventy-six of the seventy-seven, so that by the time they had reached the high wall of the black mountains, only Milinda had been left, apparently more-or-less intact. He thought that perhaps there might be a reason why he had been spared, denounced, cast into the wastelands. He had not come to any conclusions regarding this point, but during the long days and longer nights during which he had watched his compatriots sink into the cyanotic, indolent smiles of Hind deities, at times Milinda had risen to a state of awareness which hitherto he had experienced only at the moments of greatest abandonment (climaxing with a skilful, seventh generation courtesan; sensing, through index finger-pulp, the rapid, weakening pulse of a defeated foe's carotid artery; rising to the summit of a mountain and surveying the unconquered lands beyond; losing himself in some deep, verdant gorge of the music of the pandoura). Such moments gradually had become more frequent, until Milinda had begun to exist mainly, if not yet wholly, in this lucid state. It may be that the stark landscape had aided this process, or that the long years of marching, fighting, whoring and singing finally had wrought some kind of transfiguring

effect upon his brain, but whatever the reason, in recent days he had begun to feel as though he were somehow out-of-time, as though he existed independently of the mountains, rivers, deserts, sky and as though he might be able to move like music from one reality to another without changing his essential form. He would need to draw on all of that ability now if he were to escape a frozen death up here on the darkening plateau of Land of the Byltae. Here, he was beyond everything. He drew his arms around his torso. Where the fingers met, his back felt cold and flat like that of a corpse. He shuddered. He leapt up and down a few times, to try and garner the remaining warmth of the day about him, and then he walked on at a faster pace than before. He wondered who had stolen his clothes. He had imagined that these mountains, with their legends of giant afreets and ballooning bhoothes, not to mention invisible, singing djinns, would be uninhabited. He had not spotted any villages or even hamlets for at least three days now, and the further north he had travelled, the more barren the land had become. The backs of his calves ached from the long climb and his shoulders felt like water. The soles of his feet were covered in blisters and though the sand and dust were soft, yet to a man without a skin, even the naked air seems like fire.

The sun exploded slowly behind the High Mountains, casting its reddening light backwards across the sky. Just above the purplish line of the western horizon, the evening star had begun to flicker, but whenever he tried to look straight at it, the star would slip back into invisibility. The moon had not yet risen and soon, there would be no light by which to find his way. Gazing at the sky reminded Milinda of the home on the northern slopes of the Hyblaeon Mountains which he had left some ten years before, the land where the rivers were horned youths and where the dark mountain belched fire and music. He wondered whether it would be evening there as well, there, in the realm of Mother Cybele. He could almost taste the dark wheat and blood-red wine and smell the sweet, freshly-cut lemons, and it made his mouth water and then he realised that he was intensely thirsty and that he hadn't had a drink for ... how long? He had not brought much with him up the face of the cliff, but now even that had gone. His tongue felt like a pupating caterpillar in his mouth. He was on the point of seeking out a bush beneath which to spend the night, when over to his right, by a pyramidal-shaped rock, he made out a series of dark hollows, each one resembling the sail of a bireme. Where there are caves, he thought, there also might be water. He gazed up at the darkening sky which amidst that circle of peaks, seemed so like the womb of the Black Mother. He needed the Ibla Nera of Sikelia now, more than ever.

The first hollow to which he came turned out to be a false depression in the rock created by an effect of the twilight. He cursed, and moved on to the next one. By the time he got to the fourth hollow, Milinda was beginning to get the feeling that this place was playing tricks on him, or that perhaps he was beginning to go mad, to hallucinate like the others. Sikelia. The gnarled trunks of the olive trees, the rows of vines, the low houses by the sea, the pungent smell of fish, the tinkling sound made by the bells that were slung around the necks of goats; the slip of wine from cup to mouth and the lightness it gave to the day, and in the winter, the sweep of the rain across the mountain around whose summit the clouds gathered and whirled.

But where was home, really? It had been nearly ten years, and he had almost forgotten the tang of the fruit, the scent of the air, the songs of the birds which were quite different from those of the lands hereabouts. And he knew that on the long journey, having had similar visions of their various homelands, the men of his phalanx - those who had not turned to beasts or birds - had closed their eyes and drifted into a world of silent delirium whence there was no return. Yet tonight, Milinda felt the teasing presence, like the contours of a new lover, of these dreams of Sikelia and as with love, behind them, as yet unseen, he sensed the

overwhelming bulk of the darkness, and again, he shuddered and narrowed his eyes so that he would be able to see more clearly in the fading light.

The fifth hollow seemed to be deeper than the rest and as Milinda moved further in, his steps grew more tentative, he curled each toe slowly down on the stone, for the ground had turned from sand to rock and now it was as though he was treading along the sea-bed. By the time the light had faded so that he dare not go on for fear of falling down some hole or else banging his head against a projection, Milinda realised, with some relief, that he was in a cave. The breeze which had begun to swirl around his body had now dissipated somewhere to his rear, and he could hear his breathing echo in his chest.

He remained still for what seemed like the time it would take for water to empty itself through a pin-hole in the side of a goat-sized gourd, but he reasoned that it could not have been more than the span of a man lighting a large lamp; in the virtual pitch darkness of the cave, time seemed to have lost its grip; but at length, as his eyes grew accustomed to the murk, he was able to make out the vertical shadows of walls and of various rocks scattered about the cave floor. The roof, however, remained out of sight, though he deduced from the echoing sound produced by the clearing of his throat that it must have lain some fifteen to twenty pecheis above the crown of his head. The earth here was dry and powdery and though there was virtually no light, as he knelt and scooped some of it up into his palm, Milinda thought that it contained a hint of gold. It smelt of juniper smoke, and so hungry was he that gingerly, he extended his tongue and allowed a few grains to adhere to the tip.

The soil tasted of human bone.

It was much warmer in the cave than it had been outside, and Milinda lay down upon a large, flat-topped rock. The stone was neither cold nor warm; it was neutral, as though it was made of some material which would take on the exact temperature of whatever came into contact with it. It was not that the stone was draining the energy out of him; rather, it seemed as though it was in some way melding with him, so that after a while, he found that he could no longer tell where his own bone, skin and sinew ended, and rock began.

Together with the dust waves of sleep, there came confabulation. One by one, he had shed the accoutrements of both civilisation and war: the first to go had been his dreams, those great constructs worthy of Thales, Pythagoras or Heraclitus. After Megas Alexandros had returned to Babylon and had died there, the army had split into various factions; the sect of Seleucus, the magicians of Ptolemy, the battalions of Antigonas, the mountain-men of Cassander. Milinda had been a soldier in the first of these, and had been posted to the horizon of the Indikoi. But then, as always taking things to extremes, he had become one of the seventy-seven Men of Zor Köl, who, in their characteristic golden armour, had forged their way northward, towards the steep gorges of the Oxus. Yet everything had seemed to change after they had crossed the Sinthos at that point somewhat upstream where it turns eastwards. In an oleaginous slippage into a starry sleep, he remembered that it had been some quality of the land, of the trees, of the blades of grass, even. The smells had been of the vast eremia of the boreion places where the peoples of Scuthia dwelt and the music had been the wild music of bellowing, horned bulls. And every evening, as the sun sank beneath the black dust horizon, the figures of the bashali women had slipped out from the House of the Unclean and had danced perfect parabolas in slow, white linen Phrygian around the wizened trunks of ficus trees. And succumbing to these florid hallucinations, one by one, the last of the ex-soldiers (bereft of battle, men of war slowly lose their souls) had drifted off, either into pleasure or

drunkenness, or else into the singing caverns of the earth 3. And for weeks now, Milinda had been travelling alone. Or rather, he had travelled in the company of the massed and disparate platoons of nature, the peacocks, hud-huds, oolus and so on, and so his sacrifice, his armour, his clothes, his life, had come to seem dislocated and somehow inconceivable, and then, from somewhere – he knew not, whence – came a whisper: *I am just going outside and may be some time...*

He shuddered into wakefulness and to try and distract himself, he thought about what had brought him to this place, to this point of warm, naked darkness, in this deserted place and about what had made him sacrifice ten years of his life - his prime - to a military campaign which had gone on far longer than anyone could ever have predicted at the start. Anyone, that is, except the Megas Basileus. No, of course the emperor was not dead. Milinda was convinced that Alexander had wanted to become a legend, had wanted to feel the billow and pulse of the untrammelled power that issued from myth and tale, had wanted to feel that power swell and run like pus beneath his skin. And he had pulled whole armies with him across twenty-three thousand parasangai, over mountains, rivers and deserts. They had marched through the most advanced, sophisticated empires in the world and also through places, bereft even of birdsong. And all for... what, exactly? So that Makedonia could rule the world? And for how long? So many great empires had come and gone and left nothing, or almost nothing, a stone or two, perhaps, or some indecipherable, esoteric text. All those emotions, those great speeches, the rivers of blood and gold, the helmet of Menander, the mane of Bucephalus, in due course, of all this would be forgotten as completely as billows in the wind. The individual sacrifices of thousands, as well as the agglomeration which made up the collective soul of the army and which, month by month, had grown into a world, complete in itself, would slip beneath the level of awareness. The men would become spirits in some dark, forgotten well. Perhaps, quite simply, that was the way.

He took a sharp stone and began to carve his name, in large letters, into the rock wall of the cave.

Μένανδρος

A wave of exhaustion flooded over him and his lids grew heavy. He felt as though sleep would come, no matter what he did, and that this night would be the deepest, most intense darkness he would ever experience. It occurred to him that he might not emerge alive from this cave; if he couldn't find fresh water, he would be done for; yet this thought no longer alarmed him as it might have done, only a few sweeps of the sundial earlier. All men must die and turn to dust, he thought, and what does it matter, really, precisely when the transition occurs? He wasn't sure whether it was the rising wind outside, or some age-old shifting of rocks upon one another, that was producing a sound which took the form, now of a low whistle and now, of a ringing or a banging, but as he slipped into the cave within his head, Milinda thought he could hear the sound gather together into some kind of indefinable order.

He awoke into dream. The cave was filled with a white luminescence that almost blinded him. He had to shade his eyes until he grew used to the brightness. It was as though the torches of the entire Army of Makedonia had been touched simultaneously with flame, and then the whole, caused to turn towards a giant shield of polished bronze.

When, at length, he recovered from the glare, he saw that he was no longer in the cave, but in a large hall of marble pillars. At the far end of the hall was an opening, a window, through

which light was streaming, but Milinda was unable to tell whether a transparent curtain separated inside from out; he thought that he might go over and check, but then something else distracted him.

He shivered. He felt that he was still lying on the floor of what once had been the cave, but he remained naked and the marble was much colder than had been the rock. He got to his knees and then, a little stiffly, to his feet. He now realised that the noise, which as he had fallen asleep, Milinda had imagined to be some kind of barbarian music, was really a concatenation, from afar, of the sounds of a metropolis. Through the window, all he could see of this city was a nearby wall and a single vine which trailed up its side. Like the room, this wall, too was white and then Milinda saw that the light which shone upon everything was several times more powerful than sunlight and yet in spite of this, his eyes no longer hurt.

The chamber had an odd shape, its walls being neither rectangular nor circular, but something in between, so that the space created thereof most closely resembled an oval, with a funnel that narrowed towards its top. A cone, then, he thought. Not that I know anything about geometros. There is a certain possible symmetry in the life of a soldier, a simple trajectory of life and death. There is no more need for complex architecture than there would be, say, in the life of a goat. He laughed, several times, and then took a deep breath. He could tell from the quality of the air, from its lack of definition, and from the sense of expectancy it garnered that it was morning. It is a cipher, he thought. The last breath of the hero will be his deepest. But I am not a hero. I arise from the substrate, from whatever lies between the day and the night. I have marched some twenty-six thousand parasangai (feeling every stade) from Sikelia to the Land of the Byltae and then I have marched again, this time without armour, sword, companions, and finally without even clothes on my back, to this place where there is light but no weight. Perhaps, he thought, this is a house of the soul.

From the nature of the furniture – a bed, a klinê and a small table set before a metal mirror – Milinda realised that he was in the gynaikeion of a Greek house, the private interior, either of the lady or else of one of the maid-servants. Yet there were several discrepancies. First of all, set against the wall was a small hearth-shrine to Hestia, the goddess of preservation. Normally, Milinda thought, this would not have been found in a bedroom, but rather, amidst the colonnades of the prostas, the area which faced onto the peristylion of the house, the central courtyard that was open to the sky. So the presence of the shrine here in the bedroom meant that this was a place of refuge, asylum, safety. It meant that names would be given here, and celebrations of birth, marriage and...

Secondly, there was no smell of perfume, no scent of lilies, roses, anise or orris root, nor even of the carriers of such Egyptian fragrances, no olive or almond oil, nothing of the ambience one would expect in a woman's private chamber.

The other unusual feature of the cubiculum was that on the table next to the klinê, as well as the cylindrical vases stuffed with manuscripts, piled one upon the next, and gathered together most haphazardly with loose coils of goat sinew, were bundles of papyrus and tablets of clay and wax. It were as though whoever had begun to tie them up had been in a desperate hurry, so that bundles of papyrus had slid over one another, with the unwound leather sinews of the binding trailing like demented snakes across the whole. Milinda felt that if he were to pull on the end of one of these cords, whole edifices would disintegrate around him. There were so many bundles, he could find no empty space on which to lean his elbows. Some of the works were in languages familiar to Milinda; of these, there were those in which he was fluent, and

then there were those which he had come across, fleetingly, as he had marched eastwards with the rest of Alexander's army through the gilded satrapies of the Persian Empire, from Lycia all the way to the Hyphasis River. But there were others of which he knew nothing. Strange, beautiful, cursive figures, which, as he gazed upon them, rose almost into meaning, only quickly to recede again into impenetrable scribbles. Some seemed to have been inscribed vertically across the papyrus. How peculiar, Milinda thought, that some peoples should live their lives, from top to bottom rather than from left to right, from north to South, rather than from West to East. He rested his arms on two of the largest piles, and began to read.

As he pored over the manuscripts, it struck him that there was continuity to the handwriting, both within and between the bundles. Some of the dyes had faded, while others seemed quite fresh; the figures cut into wax tablets, in particular, looked almost modern. The other odd thing was that as he let his eye drift over the surfaces of the bundles, he found that he was beginning to be able to lift meaning from what previously had been indecipherable. First, the sequences of the letters of each alphabet came to seem familiar, and then the letters themselves, their sounds and their shapes, seemed to rise from the papyrus, wax and clay and to imprint themselves on his mind, where they assumed the twists and turns of an old dream, revisited.

He hesitated, undecided as to which pile to tackle first. Then he grabbed the one that lay beneath his left hand. The skin of his palm had grown warm, though not damp, and he began to read aloud from the top of the clay tablets:

This is the diary of the Most Inferior Priest in the household of Ptolemy Soter, Great Saviour of Rhodes, ex-soldier, ex-generalissimo, and possible Mystic in the Cult of Yusuf, now known as Pharaoh Meryamun Setepenre.

Milinda paused, and looked around. Sniffed the air. There was something wrong, something not physical, yet quite tangible all the same. It was not perfume, nor was it incense. He went on.

Following the death of the Great One...

He started at this, then repeated, more slowly this time and in a deeper voice, the words, *The Great One*.

Then he realised to whom it referred. So it was true. His dream, his confabulation, the stirrings of a certain dust within his mind, had given him a vision of the future.

There was no echo. Somehow, perhaps because of the cold whiteness of the marble walls and floor, Milinda had assumed, had expected, his voice to create at least one echo and possibly more. Without at least the possibility of a sonic architecture, one would not know where one was. Nothing would make sense. There would be no anchors. He slid his feet backwards and forwards over the surface of the marble. When he kept them in one position, the marble didn't exactly warm up as such; no, that would've been too strong an attribute for even this chamber; but at least the skin of his soles and the cold stone attained a state where no further heat passed between them. Any movement, though, would mean that he would slowly freeze. He felt a moment's irritation that his clothes had not come with him to this strange and silent place. He leaned back against the chair and stretched. Sitting there, naked, he felt like an athlete, about to engage in one of the pankration. And he found that as he settled and relaxed into the somewhat luxurious fabrics of the klinê, there, in the housemaid's cubiculum, since his foreskin remained untethered, he had developed a full erection. He decided that there was nothing for it, but to read on.

Following the death of the Great One, the horned emperor of the worlds, the lands over which he holds sway, will become divided into several parts: the first, Makedonia, will be governed by the murderer and usurper, Antipater; the second, Thracia, will become the kingdom of Lysimachus; the third, Asia Minor, shall be ruled by the cyclops, Antigonus; the fourth, Aigyptos, will be in the House of Ptolemaios Soter; and the last and greatest, the old empire of Persepolis and those lands which lie to the east, the territories of the Indikoi and Bactrians, shall be re-made in the image of Seleucus Nicator. The spoils of conquest; the palaces, the libraries, the silks and jewels, the maidens and wives and the ears of corn; shall be sectioned accordingly and the pandoura of Baltasar which was, before that, the oud of Daoud and the Nefer of Aigyptos, will be rendered up unto the court of Seleucus since it is unto these lands that the tribe of the Bani Israel have wandered in the night. This is the secret music of the oud. The sounds of the chironomos are both invisible and indivisible and cannot be heard, except by seven magical mountain goats and by those who are heinously cursed. The rest of this text will be written in the language of the Old Hebrews, since like a dream it cannot be told in any other tongue.

And sure enough, the lines of words turned from Greek to Hebrew, and the clay tablet gave way to papyrus. And though Milinda knew that he could not read the individual letters, yet he found that in this strange chamber of light, as he ran his eye from right to left, he was able to understand their meaning.

From a lost footnote in Herodotus, there comes the following account:

It is said that at the Court of the Great Xerxes, there was a pandoura player whose real name has been lost. It is known that this musician constructed his instruments with his own hands and that when he played, his music was as close to the divine as any mortal can achieve. Indeed, such was his reputed talent that he became known as The Spirit of Music. It is said by several, venerable, authorities that during his concerts, even the sturdiest warriors would swoon and lose their senses as surely as if they had imbibed strong Paskapuros wine and that the women of the Court would rise and glide like Spartans most lasciviously before the musician and would deposit at his feet, proposals of marriage and intricate details of night assignations, all of which the musician politely would decline.

It is thought that this rose of the Persian Court was a descendent of a certain nobleman named Irmia, who in turn, was begotten, through many generations, of the Great King Saul, and that this descendent of Irmia had come from the captivity either of Judah in Babylon or Israel in Nineveh (it is not known to this writer, which) to the eastern mountains in the wake possibly of the Great Cyrus, liberator of the Hebrews, and that thereafter he had worked in the employ of the august emperor Dareios The First. It is said that it was he, this scion of Irmia, who had brought the pandoura with him from the kingdom of either Babylonia or Assyria and that such creature had been in the possession of his family from time immemorial. Furthermore, it is written that he accompanied his master into the eastern satrapies that lie on the far side of the Choaspes River, the lands of the Aparutai, the Assakenoi and the Gandarioi, which indeed were the lands of his ancestors, and that he

had travelled further still, into the grazing pastures of the tribes of the White Mountain, and that there, in those lands which are known variously as, Arsarath, southern Bactria, Transoxania or Paktuiké, finally, in the shadow of the Rock of Aornos by the banks of the Sinthos, did he find a woman with whom he was prepared to match his life. This is a tale of the night in the Seventh Satrapy, the Land of the Aspasií, a night on which the pandouristes met his beloved, a night which beginning at the rise of the fourteenth moon of the Old Calendar, yet spanned many years, until the time when their story, their love, turned, as all loves must, first to words and then to flesh and then to dust and light.

In the Court of the local dynast, Isap, there was a dancer whose name has been lost to history, but who was rumoured to be the daughter of Scylax-the-explorer, who somewhat earlier, during the reign of Cambyses, had ventured even unto the mouths of the Sinthos River and who had left his mark, in both flesh and stone, in several places along the way. She was reputed to be the finest dancer in the town, if not in that entire section of the satrapy, yet indeed, it is stated that on the arrival of the delegation from Persepolis, she was a mere fourteen years of age. As a measure of goodwill between the Emperor and the local ruler, it was arranged that a troupe perform the whirling chorea common to those far-flung tribes, while accompanying music was to be provided by the aforesaid pandouristes and a local mirasi, a maestro of drums 6.

As the performance began somewhat slowly, the audience remained distracted, and the musician did not sense that there was any difference between this performance and a thousand others. Indeed, long had been his journey, and he was considerably fatigued and desired the repose of the bedchamber rather than consort with a dancing-troupe. Yet within a few minutes, the movements of the dancers had become faster, their long tunics, onto which had been woven flowers, trees and other, stranger symbols, began to swirl and dive and though the pandouristes was playing his instrument, he found himself distracted by the movements of their hands and legs, the twirling, circling shapes which their fingers drew in the air. He became entranced by one in particular, who moved even faster than her companions and who, through the entire performance, seemed to be keeping her eyes fixed on him. His head began to whirl, yet his fingers made not a single mistake upon the pandoura. In his mind, he saw nothing, save for this one, lithe dancer and through the window, behind her serpent-like form, the full moon. The music played faster and faster, the drum-beats hardly managing to keep pace, until even the audience, alternately clapping their hands and drinking great wine-draughts from golden bowls, became breathless and began to shiver and sway with the excitement of the rhythm, and the palms of the musicians burned as though they were holding, not a geometros of music and silence, but the sharpened blades of swords. They had begun to play as the moon rose above the low sill and they did not stop till it had vanished behind the wall. Like the body of Mount Bazira, the music and the dancing reached a climax, upon which the pandouristes swooned and fell into darkness. Yet the story goes that even as he slept and the audience looked on, his fingers

continued to pluck the three strings of his pandoura. And that even as the other members of the troupe became still, the daughter of Scylax continued her whirling, dipping chorea. Such was the effect of this conjunction, that the entire delegation, together with their hosts, fell into a fugue. At that moment, she stopped dancing and clapped her hands, three times. At which, the pandouristes stopped playing his pandoura and awoke. All he could see was her lithe form as she stepped lightly upon the woollen rugs, and then, as she took his hand and led him to her bedchamber, all he could smell was the lily and anise of her perfume.

In the morning, he remembered nothing of the night, and he saw no more of the dancer, until many years later, at the moment of his death. As he fell into his last stupor, she again appeared before him, unchanged from the long-ago summer's night of the dancing reverie, whereupon in manner akin to a flood his memories returned, and there, she told him, in his own language, that his spirit would not leave this earth at once, but would enter into his ancient pandoura and that as his spirit changed form, so, too would the pandoura.

Milinda frowned. The rest of the scroll was blank. He ran his finger over its surface, just to make sure that no letters or symbols had been indented into the substance of the papyrus, but it was smooth as the brain of a newborn lamb. What was the purpose of this? he wondered. Perhaps I am dead. Perhaps I perished in that dusty mountain cave, and now am reading the scroll of the future. Have I sacrificed my life for this? For a mystery, a knot that cannot be cast asunder on the edge of a blade? Or could it be that I am dreaming, that the entire campaign, my whole life, perhaps, has been merely a reverie in the mind of a goat? That the steps of this body through the deserts and the fertile valleys, the rivers and the whorehouses, the wayfaring saadhus and illuminatory magi, the herds of singing goats of the high plateaux and the solitary, dreaming lions of the Sindh valley, have been merely the earthly manifestations of the notes of this unseen music? Is this the reason I deserted the armies of Alexander, Seleucus and all the rest? Or is it that I am mad? He drew his hand across the desk. And what about all these other scrolls, goatskins and ceramic jars? What wise idiocy might they contain? Milinda glanced up at the window. The light was growing stronger. It must be approaching noon, he thought. Soon, I shall rise and leave this room. Since there is no door, I shall have to climb out through the window. He looked back down at the desk. It was then he noticed that all the scrolls were blank. Even the papyrus which he had just read aloud to himself, now was as clean and clear as a palimpsest.

Placing both palms on the desk, Milinda arose. It is as nothing, he thought. I am the sacrifice, and someday, the foundations of a great building will be constructed using my bones for mortar. Or perhaps, I will become the roof of a barn or the walls of a sty. My dust will sift through the centuries, and will scatter like the tremulous notes of a pandoura, fated never to be played. It is the way. For the world to be as tangled and ineluctable as it is, there must be no reason. And after all, there were passages to truth other than the opening formed by a sweep of the sword. He let out a long sigh, and then went towards the window. In the distance, he thought he heard a swirling music of drums, flutes and massed pandourai. The air smelt sweet and clean and he felt as though he was fifty stades high. The music grew louder and he felt his head begin to spin. As he drew closer, the light grew stronger, until it was so bright, it filled the chamber.

1: *This journey is well documented in the shamanic diaries of General Demodamas, the soldier who took his army across the Jaxartes and headed northwards: 'The Voyages of Theodorus Datiaputra', Sapha Publications, Yarkand, Vol. VII, Chapter 3, pp. 173-185.*

2: *O God! The price of erudition nowadays!*

3: *In these theatres of Milinda's Mountain, the tragedies of Sophocles and Euripides were performed by troupes who toured across the lands of Bactria, Gedrosia, Arachosia, Peithon and the vast territories of the Indikoi, but they always maintained that pride of place was given to this place, the greatest of all skenai, which they called, 'The Queen of the Mountains'.*

4: *See <http://www.arts.gla.ac.uk/ScotLit/ASLS/SWE/TBI/>*

5: *The same creature, its lifetime extended beyond even the Biblically-credible, later was spotted tangled in the Emperor of Ethiopia's beard, following which it evolved into the Greek-speaking, re-usable clitoral stimulatory element in a Bombay brothel's cupboard of earthly delights and then much later again, was witnessed dancing around the seamless jitterbug pantaloons of long-toothed, deep reggae divers; indeed, such is evidenced in the anonymous, rock-steady tome, 'Dreams of a Duppy Dancer', Rockfort Rock, Kingston, Jamaica, 1967.*

6: *The post-house courtesans of Upper Gilgit are said to be among the most esoteric in the world, at least according to Capt. E. A. Bower who, in his book, 'A Triptych Campaign', describes in meticulous detail the ways of life of the various peoples of the Jutial Plateau. The evidence from recently-released documents of the Old Woodwind Imperium of Delhi demonstrates, however, the likelihood that the good Captain never actually visited these areas in person, but that he relied on the accounts buried in the angular, Kufic scrolls of long-dead travellers, on the residues of silence tangled within the ever-lengthening beards of cyanotic goats and on the axial, neuronomic cartographies of the Sufis of the Order of Gedrosia. In any case, it is possible that the Greeks believed the tales of the good British soldier, who visited them from the future in a communal dream by which they were possessed during the emptiness of Shub-e-qadar. This story has been confirmed to the author by the surviving relatives of the brave captain, some of whom, washed brown by the Ganges, now live in the great, Bihari city of Pataliputra.*