



# THESE THINGS LAST FOREVER. DON'T THEY?

THE SOMEWHAT FICTIONAL HISTORY OF THE WORLD  
PARTS ONE AND TWO. OF TWO.

— **ADRIAN DAWSON** —

## THESE THINGS LAST FOREVER, DON'T THEY?

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It felt like death.

And he loved it.

Not the kind that eluded so many of his subjects; the dark nothingness that they had no eyes to see, but the kind that could be touched; the kind that could be breathed hard through the nose, hard like summer. And just how good did it smell? It was the kind of delight that could be tasted in an empty mouth or heard embedded within the slightest breeze.

It was the kind that was... the only kind.

To a man such as Djoser.

When the heart stopped, it was known, the inner self was to be removed; raised into the all-enveloping curtain of night and placed alongside those of one's illustrious predecessors. To die was to live... eternally, forever seated in glorious company among the gods. To close one's eyes forever was to see the world and its inhabitants – those over whom one had been created to rule - laid out like endless sand and to hear every thought. To see truth. To sense indiscretion. To deliver judgment.

And yes, to hold the power of the gods and to use it as wisely – indeed as fiercely – as they.

Djoser held that power in his hands right now. He was a man alive; a man breathing - short, excited breaths trying hard to keep time with his heart - and yet he held within his own mortality the power over death. It had been sent to him, delivered down as a gift and the only reason could be this: it was time to judge and it must be done from within. Djoser was not just to play God, as so many of his forefathers had held reputes to do; Djoser was to become God. Even now he felt the power trickling through his soft fingertips like gentle electricity; invisible yet so supremely powerful that the earth and the sea and the sky and the stars could not exist without it. Djoser did not know what electricity was, and nor indeed would the world around him for many thousands of years to follow, but he acutely acquainted with the concept of power. It was an all-consuming fire constructed on the use of force; something so strong that it attracted all opposites and bound them together as one. It united the world at large and it was about to do the same for the one over which Djoser had always been destined to preside.

His blessed Egypt was about to get a whole lot bigger.

So much so, in fact, that later generations would look back in awe and fascination. They would hold the trophies through which thanks had been offered within the frailties of their own hands and pose unanswerable questions. What had changed so suddenly? Why had such rapid expansion in lands, knowledge and construction occurred - certainly when placed into the almost unimaginable context of the earth's existence - seemingly overnight? Why had everything about who we were and where we were heading changed so suddenly and so dramatically? There would be those who would muse that something had fallen to earth. Something from another world. Something alien. Of course, to voice such views in public would constitute social suicide - even those who did not laugh out loud would cast their glances - watching with scornful disdain as those to whom they felt so superior crossed the street or walked to the end of the drive to retrieve their copy of an Elvis-laden National Enquirer.

All of which might have seemed a little strange to Djoser, because in his albeit limited experience the truth of any matter was not something to be derided but something to be embraced and accepted. And the cold, hard truth of this particular matter was that something alien had indeed fallen to earth. Something from another world. Something so small and yet so enormously powerful that it could feed many lifetimes of pain into his earthly self like the first gentle breaths of a new life.

And it did.

## PART ONE – THE ANCIENT WORLD

Despite the best efforts of a seemingly eminent string of scientists, historians, linguists, paleontologists and geologists, the major portion of the earth's history is not the rich green and blue we have advanced far enough, technologically speaking, to see from space, but a very bland grey. The same grey that one might colour an idle thought. Vast swathes of the processes which have been involved in making us who we have become are as unknown as what lies at the furthest reaches of our universe or at the pinnacle of our inherent potential. The reason is clear - there is no record, and it is the advent of man's penchant for recording the events around him that have helped us understand, misunderstand and more often than not pay absolutely no heed to the vile errors of judgment made by so many of our ancestors.

We know very little about our history prior to the first detailed scribblings. As a group we construct and then believe assumptions, certainly, but proving that such thoughts were right or wrong was always to have been the task of our descendants. That is, had we been wise enough to offer them a world to inherit. We know very little about the impossibly infinite period which preceded the second full moon of the year 2734BC, the night when Djoser, second ruler of the third dynasty, sat in the rapidly cooling sand with his arms folded across raised knees and watched as a light as bright as that of day stole familiar darkness from the sky.

There were screams from among his people; those gathered in prayer below him. There were screams from his advisors, Ptolema included, seated protectively around him and there were screams from within the depths of Djoser's own thoughts. Young as he might be, however, he was already aware - as he had been taught by his father - that in his head is where such fears must stay. Djoser was pharaoh, and the task of pharaoh was to know, to act and to lead. It was not his calling to fear.

At this point it was not his life he feared for, of course, for there would undoubtedly be another existence to follow this, but he was suddenly very concerned for his reign; his autonomous rule across the known earth. Fire from the gods, as such an event must surely be, could not in any of the opinions voiced in his mind, be perceived as good news. Fire was heat, heat was anger and anger - not to put too fine a point on it - was almost certainly a precursor to some form of destruction. The gods, those who had carefully moulded this world from the most basic of elements, were vexed and, at the time of the lights, Djoser did not have the first idea as to why that might be. At seventeen years of age the pharaoh who would not live beyond his fortieth cycle anyway, ultimately passing 'amid a violent distemper', would never feel such fear again.

Indeed he would never feel any fear again. All he would feel would be wonder. He would feel awe and pride.

He would feel as though he, above all his predecessors, had been chosen. Selected. Blessed.

The very same night, indeed within the hour, thirty-seven of Djoser's ranking men were dispatched many miles to the south; the area in which the chariot appeared to have fallen to earth. Through the blue carpet of night and the searingly hot sand of a new day they made their journey, arriving some twelve hours later. Over the next eight days fifteen kelkooks (large open bags dragged manually across the earth) of material were collected. Burnt material. Melted material and very strange, very strong material. The kind of material unlike anything Djoser and his advisors had seen before. Gifts; or so Djoser had assumed. That was... until he had received the ninth batch of material and found within it something special.

Very special indeed.

The disk of Ra.

He had first noticed it within a pile of coloured ropes as he had watched the men fearfully opening out a further load onto the sand. It had caught the light momentarily - without moving - and it seemed to his eyes as though it had almost beckoned him forth. Not a man to perform his own tasks, however (a trait that only just fell short of taking his own breaths) Djoser instructed Tamal, second to Ptolemaia, to retrieve the disk for him. Tamal stepped forward, the lesser men parting like the cut of a ship before him, and reached into the tangled and charred remains brought from the fallen craft. He pulled it free, turned with a smile and took but two steps back before his face became contorted and he fell crushingly to his knees. Djoser could not be sure - and he would not mention it to those around him for fear of the kind of scornful thought that existed three thousand long years before Gladys and Vernon Presley ever got the fruity look in their eye - but he was convinced that the desperation evident in the man's face had changed for the merest instant - that it had offered a blue/green flash of the skull and sinew which lay beneath. As those gathered around stood open-mouthed; watching but not daring to touch the man for fear that they might contract his ailment, his breaths began to quicken and the disk rolled from his hand. It skittered slowly across the stone, then teetered and fell, its flattened surface angled directly at Djoser himself.

That was when he saw the image embedded within, and when he had his first idea - his beta copy, if you will - of exactly what it was that this disk might prove to be.

Tamal ultimately recovered, though it would be many months before anything less than torment inhabited the dreams which came to him, and during this time the disk was carefully removed from the temple floor and placed safely within Djoser's crude-stone 'palace'. It remained there for many sunsets and throughout this period only five people were ever instructed to touch it - to hold it. With good reason not one of those men was Djoser himself.

Ptolemaia, meanwhile, busied himself with the task of taking Djoser's beta-theory and ironing out the flaws until it became a fully functioning piece of logical thought. Three weeks after the craft had fallen to earth his explanation (DiskTheory v.1.0.0) was complete, and it was this...

Ra was the god of the sun - the god of light and day. At night Ra deserted the earth and left its inhabitants to sleep and to pray for his return. On many occasions, however, lights had been seen passing across the sky during this period of darkness. Some moved slowly, taking many hours to traverse the visible sky, whilst others raced at speeds many times that of even the fastest flame, darting through a stable. They were gone almost as soon as they arrived. To the modern world in which we reside (for now) these might be described as 'comets' or 'meteors' (perhaps even 'shooting stars' to the more romantically inclined), but to Djoser, Ptolemaia and the peoples of an extraordinarily ancient Egypt these were merely Ra's watchmen, passing over the earth in his absence to ensure that all was well.

It was the task of these night watchmen to keep track of the people whilst they believed that Ra was away. It was well known that the hours of darkness - the hours when Ra slept - were the hours in which evil prevailed. Unable to be seen by their god, difficult to be seen by their peers, these were the hours favoured by the robbers, the thieves, the murderers and, worst of all for Djoser himself; the would-be assassins. Those who sought to steal away his time on earth. Djoser knew that the watchmen were forever gathering evidence against the sinners; that they were collecting the sounds of evil that permeated during the dark hours so that they might deliver them to Ra himself in order for him to make judgment.

Somehow one of the watchmen had fallen to earth and, with him, he had brought the earth's very own error log.

Those who stole... those who killed or sought to remove Ra's servant on earth - Djoser himself - were disrespectful not just of Ra, but of all the gods. As such, they were to be punished and Djoser, if he were not to suffer the same fate, was to expand and consolidate Ra's empire on earth. He must remove those who did not hold the same beliefs as he and his people and he must do so in a manner that was swift and firm. He must be ruthless, brutally so if necessary for if he was not, then Ra himself would be ruthless and unsparing in return. The third dynasty, though it was not yet known as such, might ultimately become the last.

At the same time as he did this, Djoser must also call out to Ra and tell him that his message had been received, that the disk had been accepted and that Djoser and his people were ever-respectful of the power the sun-god wielded.

It was Ptolema's thesis regarding the nature of the image contained on the disk which showed Djoser just how he might be able to achieve such a thing.

Visible only when the disk was held directly toward Ra himself was a shape that was clearly designed to represent the sun and therefore Ra himself - a six-pointed star constructed from the careful overlap of two distinct triangles. As the man who had first calculated how many times it was that Ra visited the earth in a given year and who had mapped the stars as accurately as many others had detailed the lands, Ptolema suggested that this symbol had itself been carved by tools comprised only from light and heat. Its shape, he further deduced, showed that the power of the sun (and therefore the power of life itself) was composed from two very distinct sources - the wisdom of Ra and the will of his people. If the two worked in harmony then the world would be as it should.

So Djoser must build such a triangle on earth. Regardless of human cost, he would construct something so large and so prominent that it could be seen clearly by Ra as he passed overhead, illuminated by his own divine light. Ra would then know that they believed in him; that they respected him and that, most importantly, that they understood. Inside that triangle - the pyramid - he would place the disk for safekeeping and Ra would know that all was well.

The Egypt of the 26th Century was certainly not the Egypt we know now, but nor was it the one so carefully fed to us by the history books. There were no such things as 'pyramids'; neither the splendour of the limestone coated wonders at Giza, nor even their precursors, the crudely constructed 'step pyramids'.

That was all about to change.

On hearing and approving the thesis, delivered across forty-eight straight hours of intensive conversation, Djoser smiled, gave the orders and then gave the disk a new name - 'Aton': the Disk of the Sun.

Three weeks and two days after the chariot had fallen to earth, civilisation (as we mistakenly refer it) was born. Like all new babies it looked sweet, innocent and bouncing with the prospect of exciting achievements.

It would grow into a monster.

Six months into the third step-construction, with hundreds of men still carving stone and many thousands more making headway into the lands to the south and brutally accepting new members to their cause, Djoser woke from a restless sleep. Despite the latent heat existing in the mortal world surrounding him he felt desperately cold. Something in his spirit was lacking and he could not reason what it might be. His only thought was that it had grown worse since he had taken possession of the disk and that somewhere within its fabric was another power; one that might assuage his craving.

Lingering in his head for too long had been an idea. One that he cursed himself for, if only because - if it were correct - then it would directly contradict Ptolema's theory and, more importantly, should have occurred to him a long time previously. For reasons he could not explain he felt that the answer might be delivered to him if he could only - if he dare only - lay his fingers on the disk's smooth gold surface. Though it was by no means true gold, of course - Ptolema's experiments with heat had proved that much.

Accident.

Ra did not have accidents. He did not create the world whilst messing around with hazardous chemicals in some spectral laboratory at whatever point the more reasoned gods had their suede-jacketed backs turned to him. He did not use words like "Shit", "Wow" and "Cool" as some highly unexpected explosion created some funky looking piece of residual gunk. No, Ra created the world - Djoser's world - with clear purpose. He created subjects within it because it was his will to do so and every event that washed across the planet did so because it was guided only by Ra's own desires.

So why was it that one of Ra's very own trusted watchman had 'accidentally' fallen to earth?

What if he did not? What if he had been sent to earth? Of course, to fall from the heavens was a journey only a god could survive and so, like the construction of the pyramids themselves, a suitably 'expendable' servant must have been chosen. If that were the case, then surely the disk of Ra was now what Djoser had somehow hoped it might be - a clear and open gift from Ra to his most trusted subject - the Pharaoh himself.

And yet the Pharaoh had never held it in his hands.

Which was probably the ancient Egyptian equivalent of dissin' Ra's mama on Oprah.

He rose from his crude mattress, selected his two-man guard and visited the second of the step-pyramids, now some eight months old and in considerably better condition than the first - practice making better, if not yet perfect. With the guards waiting outside in the cool night air Djoser ventured inside the rough-hewn, low corridor and approached the slab of stone which formed the precursor to a thousand altars now seen in churches and on cable-TV stations worldwide. He paced the room for almost an hour, occasionally staring hard at the disk but more often than not staring harder still at his courage. The men who had laid their fingers upon this metallic surface had lived, certainly, but they had been changed somewhere within and few around them would suggest that in

the years which had followed their adaptation had been for the better. But then these men were not Pharaoh. They did not carry a Pharaoh's heart beating within their chest.

Which might explain why this disk was calling out to him. Personally. Without ever saying his name.

He could almost... hear it. A sound built from screams, and yet so very like... music. Sweet, soulful music which possessed the melody of pain and the underlying beat of dying heart. Was that so unreasonable he wondered? Surely any vocal intonation could be set to a tune, so why not the sounds of agony? Was music the sole reserve of joy and praise? Had it ever been? And were the joyous chants of the victorious soldiers returning with their slaves not borne of suffering and loss for things Djoser himself cared so very little about - the lives of lesser humans?

Eventually he reached his decision. He must listen to the truths he was being told, not by his ill-informed advisors on earth, but by Ra himself through the sweet lilt of music. He must hear it all, from Aleph to Tau; beginning to end. And to hear it in its purest form he must stamp hard on his lack of courage and take a firm hold of the disk.

At a little after 3am, surrounded by only the faintest blue light, he placed himself down on the cool stone, wrapped his fingers tight around the source of his anguish and closed his eyes, the dark strains of the screams filtering through more strongly with every minute that passed. It was not long before they filled every sense he believed he possessed.

Thirty-six hours, twenty-eight minutes and forty-seven seconds later he opened his eyes again, rose to his feet and stepped back out into the powerful glare of his worried followers on a bright North African afternoon.

His eyes narrowed.

A dark smile was carved deep across his face.

By 2620BC and the time of Khufu (fourth dynasty), each successive pharaoh had done one of three things. They had, on their accession to the throne, held the disk in their hands and heard the music play in its entirety - just once. Then they had commenced the building of their own pyramid to show that they too shared the deep respect of their forefathers. At the same time, they had sought out and crushed the people who, through continued expansion, had become their new neighbours - the indigenous peoples to the south and west, the Hebrews to the north and the nomadic peoples who held the peninsula to the east. Then they had adopted any survivors into their fold and shown them the way, the light and the truth of Ra and the other gods.

It was Khufu, the most devout and fervent of all the pharaohs, who had constructed the Great Pyramid at Giza - the lasting wonder to his commitment both to Ra himself, and to the disk which he believed to have had delivered and maintained his rule. On his death, his acceptance into Ra's astral kingdom, it was Khufu's son, Redjedef, who had finally decreed that the solar element should form a lasting part of the royal titulary. On the one hand this was to show his devotion, but on the other - and far more politically relevant to Redjedef - it was to show that the power of the sun belonged only to the kings. The purpose of the subjects was never to hold this divine autonomy; only to respect it.

Amenhotep I succeeded Redjedef and, fearful that clues to the power of the disk might reside within the fabric of his corpse, he began the custom of hiding his final resting place, so that his tomb might not be raided in the years to come. Thutmose I, his successor, was the first to construct

his tomb in the Valley of the Kings and this continued for many hundreds of years - through Thutmose II and III, Amenhotep II and Thutmose IV.

Consequently, the tradition and the respect for Aton; the Disk of the Sun, continued through a great many successive generations of kings. All had held it in their hands at their succession and all had felt the same strange sickness that Djoser had first felt and heard what had now been dubbed 'the Melody of the Sinners'. As such, each had not only respected the powers that the disk was known to wield, but had continued also to ensure that the dynasties were strong and the people respectful of their gods. Amenhotep IV even went so far as to change his name to Ikhnaton ('bearer') and abandoned Thebes, choosing to construct a new capital at Akhenaton directly in honour of Aton. It was from here that he preached the quasi-monotheistic religion of both the disk, and of Ra himself.

The disk, and the sense of ruthless autonomy it carried with it and instilled within those who held it, brought great success to all the pharaohs, from Djoser as far back as 2734BC through to Merneptah who desolated Israel in 1210BC. Through the new system of accurate records, another development inspired by the disk, it is known that Merneptah defeated wave after wave of the sea peoples; invaders from the Aegean who swept through the Middle East in the thirteenth century BC. It was Israel's complete destruction, however, carried through the high sheen of the disk's evil, that resulted in the displacement of a huge proportion of the Hebrew race that was, quite literally, of biblical proportion.

A displacement that - ultimately - one man would bring to an end.

Following Merneptah, Ramses III had equally brutal military victories, as depicted on the walls of his mortuary complex in western Thebes. These included his invasion of the southern areas of Mesopotamia and the conquering of almost the entire stretch of North African coastline. His victories brought new waves of slavery into his kingdom which resulted in the construction of many highly impressive tombs, huge carvings depicting Egyptian history and beliefs and the supposed cementing of the Pharaohs as true rulers of the known earth.

After his death, however, the kingdom of Egypt fell into rapid decline.

The reason? Well that was simple. The disk – the source of the power - was gone.

Like many before him, Ramses III had violently oppressed the Hebrew population who had been forced to reside in Egypt against their will. What made this particular Ramses' situation worse, however, was that five years before his death (unlike those who had preceded him) he had visited the Temple of Aton at Akhetaton and had held the disk in his hands for a second time. On this occasion, however, as he had felt the warmth in his fingertips and had listened to the dark strains in his mind, he had been delivered with a disturbing image; one which had engulfed the darkened recesses of his mind and had made him just as frightened, if not more so, than Djoser had been when the chariot had first fallen so many centuries before him.

He had seen a Hebrew. A male. Smiling and holding the disk. Smiling so broad that he could see the glare of his teeth, like those of a lion looking to a hyena waiting to pick at what might be left of a carcass. Then he saw that same male as a baby, as he himself had once been. Unknowing and unaware, but not unstoppable.

Like most humans, Ramses had endured his own birth carrying an undeveloped but powerfully dormant sense of conscience. Like the select few before him, however, he had held the disk in his

hands and as the overwhelming sense of power had fed dark life into him, so that much weaker sense of morality had drained out through his feet. He wasted no time in issuing his orders – every male child born to the Hebrews was to be slaughtered. There could be no risk of his vision coming to pass. Indeed, he decided, the very purpose of his return calling to Aton and of the vision it had delivered to him had been to issue a clear warning - not so that he might prepare, but so that he might prevent. No male Hebrew child would survive the sudden and swift removal of their presence from the world Ramses was so very determined to retain dictatorial control over.

And yet, as so often goes with the more hastily constructed plans, one did.

And one, with due deference to the years of cliché that such a sweeping statement picks up along the way, was enough.

The story of the Hebrew in question is well documented. It has been studied, analysed, dissected, told and then re-told with only slight variation more times than it would be possible, worthwhile or indeed sensible to count. For the bulk of his life; from his birth and salvation from the slaughter of his counterparts to his adult life as a trusted friend of the pharaoh (indeed the very selection of his name indicated that he was accepted by Ramses whilst his unfaltering religious beliefs suitably removed him from Ra himself), the legend is as true as recorded history will allow us to recount.

Born in Goshen, a small area in the north of Ancient Egypt, Moses was one of those people for whom greatness was very much thrust upon them in later life. Given that, after he had killed an Egyptian and fled to his homeland, only returning to free the Hebrews when over eighty years of age, and given the extraordinary circumstances surrounding his birth, one can only assume that his God felt it prudent to give him an octogenarian-style head start in the ‘getting used to greatness’ stakes.

Of course, it is that later flee from Egypt which was to be both the pharaoh’s, and ultimately the entire country’s, undoing – for it was during that Exodus (yes, that one) that one of the soon-to-be-emancipated Hebrews – a man by the name of Sariel - took a detour, tricked a guard or seven and made off into the future with the pharaoh’s most prized asset – Aton; disk of Ra; source of power.

When Moses and his disparate group reached the banks of the Red Sea a group of hostile Egyptian soldiers, as I am sure you will recall, approached them from the rear – pretty much with a view to slaughtering them all in as nasty a manner as could be dreamed up by minds whose fertility still had a way to go before they reached those of the Nile delta. Of course, the precise circumstances of what occurred are unknown but suffice it to say that a decision on ‘the darkness carried within the disk of Ra’ had already been reached within the group. The problem, as they saw it, was that the disk supposedly carried with it the power of the sun god and yet it seemed, in many ways, to have offered the same vile power to Sariel as it had offered the pharaohs. Indeed Sariel was now a man heavily consumed by sinister dreams and painful fits of ague and fever. Yet neither Sariel, nor Moses, nor indeed any one of the Hebrews following along with them actually believed in Ra. It was not that they preferred their God, it was rather that their God was the only God. So if Ra (in their eyes) did not even exist, then how could he possibly have sent his power to earth?

Unless the symbol – the bi-triangular image of the sun – was not an image of Ra at all. Perhaps it was something different altogether, they mused... like a sign to Moses and his people - a vision of a new land where both the resident Hebrews (triangle #1) and those who had been displaced (triangle #2) were brought together and merged in glorious and eternal harmony once more.

Sometimes inspiration comes from the strangest of places and it was, by chance, as Moses was analyzing this particular problem that the Egyptians were first spotted making their advance. Desperately, Moses looked to them first, seeing instantly that his own people were outnumbered, and then to the impenetrable expanse of sea which faced them. As traps went, this one was pretty well nailed closed and the number of available options had yet to make it above zero.

Unless...

As he stared at the image on the disk, and then to the waters laid out before him, Moses had one of those crazy ideas that people born of a deep faith seem to have from time to time. In the more successful Men of Faith – usually those who don't display a toll-free number at the bottom of the screen - these ideas can occasionally deliver the goods.

What if the disk itself were showing him the way? What if the two opposing triangles were pushing away from each other, rather than toward, and showing him that a true and unwavering faith in the power wielded by his God would actually do the same to the waves which seemed to stretch endlessly and impenetrably before him?

[Author's note: if you need to ask whether or not it was a successful idea, then perhaps you should either go back and re-sit your Religious Studies exam or - at the very least - put down the family-sized pack of Doritos you've been working on for the last few hours, switch off the sports channel and venture outside to see if it's still sunny.]

The waves parted, Canaan was eventually discovered and, with a little bit of conquering here and there, 'Israel' came into being. It was not long before the symbol of the sun, the one etched into the disk which had been so instrumental in guiding the lost souls back home, was adopted as what we would now describe as a national flag. Of those who ruled these new lands, none were more respectful of the image than the great king from whose lineage none other than Jesus Christ himself was descended. Indeed to this day, the image is usually referred to as 'The Star of David'.

Israel flourished. In trade, in weaponry and in a great sense of personal stability – the kind that the Egyptians had enjoyed for many centuries before. What differed however, was the fact that rather than successive rulers bringing the disk out of retirement and listening to a full rendition of the song contained within it, not-one of the Hebrews had even been aware of this ritual. As such the disk was eventually transported to Tyre, in Phoenicia, during and after which time few people ever laid their hands upon it. Those who did were known to fall sick, inheriting dark thoughts and, on at least one occasion, throwing themselves headlong from the roof tiles of the tallest tower just to make the visions stop.

It did not conquer and yet - with quiet menace - the power of the disk continued to serve those who safeguarded it.

Phoenicia was not a unified state as such during this time, but rather a large group of city kingdoms of which Tyre (naturally in hindsight) was the most powerfully stable. Others included Simyra, Zarephath, Byblos, Jubeil, Arwad, Acco, Sidon, Tripolis and Berytus. There were minor efforts toward expansion during the disk's reign, but this was limited to small colonies founded in Utica, Carthage and on the islands of Rhodes and Cyprus.

In the 7th Century BC every one of these city kingdoms fell like pins to the advancing forces of a new emergent superbowl – Persia.

With one notable exception: Tyre.

But then, in 356 BC, many miles from the dark stability over which the disk presided, a man was born who would succeed where the Persians had failed. A man who would not have greatness thrust upon him, but who would actively raise his sword and go looking for it – refusing to stop until every living person on earth had the good grace to tag it onto the end of his name. Presumably so that, like those with doctorates in philosophy, it made his business cards look that little bit more impressive.

Alexander the Great was a born commander, and born ruthless. Delivered in Pella, the ancient capital of Macedonia to Philip II and Olympias, princess of Epirus, he ascended to the throne at only the age of twenty following his father's assassination. His first task was to order the execution of all the conspirators and domestic enemies he found himself surrounded by.

His taste for autonomy, power and death suitably whetted, he then descended on Thessaly and restored Macedonian rule before re-establishing his position in Greece and leading them in a campaign against the Persians.

His own war against Persia, whose lands now surrounded Tyre, did not begin in earnest until the spring of 334BC when, after speaking with a slave enlisted from his earlier battles, he became aware of the 'Persian Secret'. Tyre, they said, was blessed. There was talk of a powerful presence embedded within an object secreted somewhere within the city, one that had consistently protected its inhabitants and thwarted the innumerate Persian attempts to breach its walls. The thought stayed with Alexander, weighing on his mind and building steadily in strength until it ultimately left him with only one clear aim. He had to prove his capabilities, and to do this he must refocus his attentions and storm this 'Protected City'. In order to do so he must wage his own war with Persia so that he could cut through their lands.

Which is exactly what he did.

Along with a trusted commander by the name of Xavius Celsis, Alexander crossed the Hellespont with 35,000 Macedonian and Greek soldiers, attacked an army of Persian troops and Greek mercenaries beside the river Granicus, succeeded and, in the process, lost only 110 of his own men. Following the battle of Issus in 333BC where he defeated the Persian King Darius III, his path was cleared and he made his way to Tyre. By this time the image of the disk - as subsequent rumours had confirmed the object in question to be - was consuming his mind. Whatever dark power it had held, there was even talk that this disk had formed the binding force of the Egyptian empire – a dynasty that had only ever been surpassed in Alexander's visions of his own future. Whatever force this object represented, he knew only that he needed - desperately - to gain control of it. Like Djoser many thousands of years before, he could almost hear the dark music calling out to him in the gentle winds which blew inland from the Mediterranean coast.

It took seven months to conquer Tyre; by far the longest single attack that Alexander mounted throughout his leadership, and it would seem that two things were responsible for this: the first was that something within the city held no desire to relinquish its power; and the second was that something was making Alexander refuse to give up. Something with the kind of magnetic draw that would pull a man so close to the arms of defeat that he could taste the bitterness of his own death, only for him to steal breath and keep trying at all costs.

Eventually the city fell and there, held tight in its arms like that of a doting mother, was the disk. A small temple had been constructed by the Phoenicians on a tiny peninsula with high walls and the vast expanse of the Mediterranean to three sides. The disk was seated within a much larger slab of

stone, a millimeter-perfect recess having been carved specifically to house it. Making the wily Xavius and the rest of his men wait outside - standing beside the slaughtered bodies of the Phoenician sentinels who had been charged with guarding the prize to their inevitable death - Alexander entered the room and prised the disk from its home. Like many before him the music of which he had dreamed, endlessly of late, began to build within his senses until he felt he could no longer release his fingers from its surface. The timing was exactly the same – thirty-six hours, twenty-eight minutes and forty-seven seconds, during which time Alexander remained completely motionless, sweat from the day’s heat bleeding into his leather undertunic only to cool as close as it dare to ice come the fall of night.

Embedded within the music – subtly, yet audible to those with ears tuned to listen for more somber tones - were a thousand of the most heart-rending screams imaginable; innumerate cries of pain and the gentle, almost pitiful sobs of those who might have witnessed the loss of a loved one. And yet, when combined, these awful sounds created an overture so horrifyingly perfect in its construction that it sounded like a host of angels singing blessings for the gift of creation itself. Even the learned ones who sought to advance the art of melody in the outlying areas of Athenia and Thessaly would never be able to create something so damningly beautiful. But then, if this disk told Alexander only one thing, it was that this was no product of man; only of man’s fears. And fear, like everything else in his world, was something which could be conquered.

Once Tyre was settled under the command of his troops, Alexander moved south to Gaza and then, in late 332BC, he founded one of the many cities which bore his name at the mouth of the Nile. From there he moved west and decimated Cyrene, the capital of the North African kingdom of Cyrenaica in present day Libya. His victories were swift, defiant and brutal. In many respects they were also the easiest of his campaigns to date and they brought with them a true sense that the disk, carried in an armoured pouch hanging permanently from his right hip, was everything that rumour, speculation and myth had told him it might prove to be. He had always felt unstoppable in his ascent before, now he felt truly invincible. Guarded and strong. Godly. It was becoming increasingly apparent in his psyche, not only that the known world would soon bow down under his rule, but also that it needed to - for its own salvation.

Alexander’s herniaic ego told him that it was his destiny to succeed where his father had failed. Carrying the disk brought the added realization that he would succeed where his father had never even tried.

Even in his own eyes, the disk was a product of somebody’s God – that was a given - and, as long as it served him now, he no longer cared which one. There were far too many derivative faiths spreading across the lands already. That said, the only way to ensure that it adequately served him, he figured, was to create the impression that he served them. It was for this reason that in the spring of 331BC Alexander commenced a pilgrimage; one that would lead him back into Egypt where he had been made aware of the location of the Great Temple and Oracle of Amon-Ra. Early Egyptian pharaohs, he was informed, believed themselves not merely to be the servants of Ra, put perhaps even the sons of Ra, and suddenly nothing grasped more of his desire than to be recognized as the same.

On leaving the temple at Amon-Ra - having spent another thirty-six hours sealed within its cold stone walls, kicking back his heels and meditating to his favourite tune - Alexander decided on the course of his next campaign. Convinced now that he was not only protected, but also of divine descent, he would once again move north, back to Tyre. Here he would re-group his men in preparation for an assault on his ultimate prize... Babylon.

In the meantime, as part of an ongoing reconnaissance exercise, he dispatched Xavius and his men to Rhodes to survey the Phoenician stronghold still resident there. When he had captured Babylon and the lands to the east, he would form another western campaign, swiftly crushing the fledgling Rome and moving along the coastline through Gaul and Spain.

At least, that was the plan.

In Tyre, Alexander gathered together 40,000 infantrymen and 7,000 cavalry. With the knowledge that all victories would swiftly be his he continued north, crossing the Euphrates and Tigris rivers. Here, for the second time, he came up against Darius II. The battle was bloody, costly for both sides (far more than Alexander's expanded ego had ever expected) and closely fought. It lasted for almost three full days, leaving even the most battle-hardened men weakened and desperate. Eventually Alexander triumphed, though the sheer length and ferocity of the battle had left him stunned and confused.

Scarred and wounded he climbed away from the bloodied battlefield with only a few men. High on a hill overlooking the bodies of the slaughtered - drained and disbelieving - he opened his armoured pouch and removed the disk which had promised him all the swift and decisive victories of which he had ever dreamed.

The disk was stone. A fake.

Somewhere between his vigil in the temple and the battle itself, the original had been lost to him. Worse still, it had been stolen from him - probably by one of the infidel Persians remaining in Tyre - and that would negate any southerly expedition in a bid to retrieve it. Rather than simply losing more of his men than he had hoped, Alexander now felt as though he had lost his own life; the breath from his lungs. In a fit of rage he took his remaining soldiers and wreaked savage revenge on the Persian capital; Persepolis. Here he looted all their treasures and razed the city to the ground in a drunken binge that lasted for nine complete days. The act might not retrieve his own treasure for him - the one which had taken a seven month assault to attain - but it had effectively fulfilled one of his other aims - it completed his destruction of the Persian Empire.

From the point he lost the disk, Alexander and his campaigns weakened in strength. He was troubled by strange visions and no longer felt the surety of conviction he had maintained whilst the treasure was by his side. In 328BC, following a heated argument, he killed his friend Clitus in yet another drunken fury, claiming that the man had been in on the deception all along and that the disk had been 'sold like pigs' from beneath his nose.

Steadily failing in health and becoming increasingly paranoid about those who surrounded him, Alexander returned to Babylon in the spring of 323BC. Here he rapidly contracted a fever and, even more rapidly, died.

It is written that, for the first time in his life, he looked scared.

In 146BC (at the hands of Lucius Aemilius Paullus), Perseus (son of Philip V) was defeated in battle and the Macedonia that had been mighty under Alexander's rule became little more than an outlying province of a burgeoning new Empire; that of Rome.

On July 13th forty six years later, back in Rome itself, a man by the name of Gaius was born into a wealthy and ranking family. At 22 years of age, however, Gaius was proving himself a painfully inexperienced and feeble man, unable to affect the hearts and minds of the people over whom his father had hoped he might one day govern. His father had held undue high hopes for the boy, long before his conception, but he had grown with a distracted mind, a wandering interest and a pronounced stammer that often made him a source of ridicule during public speaking. Unable to gain office for his son within the senate, his father sent Gaius overseas to study.

He did not return until some five years later. When he did, he was described by various members of the Roman Senate as: 'A voracious orator. A man bearing great weight of courage and persuasive speech.'

During his time away, it seems, young Gaius - as he was still known - had undergone a remarkable change. Certainly he had become learned, having studied philosophy and the great military campaigns of the past, but it was more than that. He had returned with a steely glare in his eye, a hardened attitude and a fiery temperament. Even the stammer, the bane of his life since infancy, was nowhere to be found. There were those who said that Julius, as his father often referred to him, had become prone to fits of violent paranoia. He claimed to anyone that might listen that he had been born into an empire that had both the facility and resources to be a great power, but that it was sadly lacking in defiant leadership. As part of his studies he had taken a deep interest in the campaigns of many great leaders, Alexander included, but had focused heavily on the methods of those who had advanced the lands and prosperity of bygone Egypt.

Whatever change the young Gaius had undergone had been as swift and as brutal as any of the campaigns he had studied. It had been sudden and unexpected to all who knew him and, more importantly, it had occurred during his time on the island of Rhodes.

Gaius Julius Caesar came back to Rome not to educate, but to lead.

There was talk that this new Caesar carried with him an amulet which he had purchased at great personal (his father's personal) expense from a trader on the island. If the story attached to this talisman was to be believed then it had started its own life in Egypt, having been stolen from no less than Alexander the Great by a man named Xavius - a ranking man - whose descendants on Rhodes had endured generations of wealth and prosperity. It was following the death (more specifically following the stabbing of his own head 'to release the vile crowd from within') of Xavius' final descendant, a man named Greckus, that the trader had come into possession of the disk. He considered it lucky (though it could hardly be classed as such for Greckus) and never did it prove more so than when the young Gaius (Julius) sent for enough funds to secure both its immediate purchase and the trader's immediate retirement.

Like Lieutenant Columbo's wife in later years, nobody close to Caesar ever saw this talisman, but they knew it to exist. They claimed that it carried curdled anger within its fabric and, on the rare occasion when Caesar could not locate the charm, curdled anger was exactly what everybody saw. Or death, dependant solely upon which side of whose bed he had climbed out of that morning.

From his return to Rome, Julius' ascent was not as swift as it might have been (given the complexities of the Roman Republic - an ongoing problem that Caesar would later dispose of) but it was no less forceful and no less brutal than those whose possession of the disk had preceded his own. After testing his dictatorial powers as Governor of the unfortunate inhabitants of Spain, he returned to Rome yet again and formed a Triumvirate with Pompey the Great (a man who liked

Alexander's surname so much, it seemed, that he 'borrowed' it) and Marcus Licinius Crassus. In a bid to edge closer to ruling Rome itself he then became governor and all-round oppressor of Roman Gaul. During this time he took it upon himself, for no good reason, to march into Celtic Gaul, defeat the Helvetii (and not in a nice way) before crushing the Germanic forces under Ariovistus.

At this point, convinced that he was being guided by (and indeed becoming) an unstoppable force, Caesar then decided to launch an attack on Rome itself. Whilst Caesar stood at one side of the Rubicon, Pompey was sole consul of Rome. The minute he crossed the river, however, and started marching southward, Pompey bolted like a scared rabbit. He ended his days, ironically enough, in Egypt.

For a man with the disk in his pocket - figuratively speaking, of course, because the simple beauty of pockets in garments had yet to make an appearance - taking Rome really was that easy. It seemed as though everything that Caesar might want, Caesar might get.

But at what price?

Because the one thing Julius did not know was exactly what the disk he carried was, or indeed how it came into being. Like many before and after him, certainly from Djoser's successor onward, he succumbed to one of the world's other great tricks... questioning an unhealthy power only when you are on the wrong side of it.

More specifically, when it's too damn late.

Given his new-found admiration, respect and complete lack of understanding for all things Egyptian, the first thing Caesar did on his accession to power was to install Cleopatra, daughter of the late Ptolemy XI as queen. A wise move at the time, perhaps, but it would not prove to be one of his better longer-term strategies.

At this juncture in Rome's history, dictatorship was a position to be held only in dire emergency and only for six months at a throw. Caesar, however, had a stronger pitching arm. He had noted that Sulla had ruled in a dictatorial capacity for several years commencing in 82BC, and decided that if it was good enough for him...

He also sought and attained Sanctity of the Tribunes, making it illegal for anyone to harm him. He took to wearing a robe, a crown and carrying a scepter. He also adopted the title 'Imperator'. To all intents and purposes, the man had gone mad.

Powerfully so.

Julius Caesar had risen from nothing and, with the strength of the disk's voices guiding him forth, had continued his ascent until he became an unscrupulous tyrant with an insatiable lust for yet more power. A man responsible for the demise of one of Rome's more socially aware creations - the Republic. On March 15th (the 'ides' to all you Shakespearean fans out there), thanks to Gaius Cassius and Marcus Junius Brutus he was quite literally stabbed in the back and swiftly went all the way back down to nothing again.

Having no male heirs his rule passed to his grand-nephew, Octavius, who ruled Rome as the Emperor Augustus.

The disk, it seems, did not.

Worried that the enemies of his grand-uncle would become enemies of his own, the weaker Augustus decided that it might be a wise move to surround himself with only the most loyal personnel. None were more so, in his eyes, than a man by the name of Marcus Antonius. Alongside Marcus Aemilius Lepidus, the three men set about forming the second Triumvirate.

Marcus Antonius (or Mark Anthony as we know and love him) had served under Julius Caesar in Gaul and had become Commander-in-Chief during the advance on Rome itself. He had commanded the left wing of Caesar's army in the battle of Pharsallus in 48BC and had shared consulship with him for a time in 44BC. As such he was more aware than most that Caesar's power was perhaps not all his own work, so to speak. There was the lingering question of the amulet (now more commonly referred to as the missing amulet). Cassius and Brutus, it seemed to him now, had stolen just a little more than Caesar's life.

Mark Anthony was aware that for many years Caesar had suffered dark dreams and nightmarish visions, and they had talked at great length about them whilst Caesar still drew breath. The conversations had also included the fact that these visions seemed to stem from the disk Caesar had purchased in Rhodes – a possession he could not explain and yet dare not relinquish. He had even admitted on occasion that the item might be haunted, and felt deep inside that he might be nothing without it. Long before heroin and crack cocaine had even dreamed of implementing its plan of social cleansing, here was something that – once in the system - killed from within and was impossible to be without.

As sure as Caesar before him, Anthony wanted to roll his sleeve, tourniquet his arm and score a hit big-time.

Stage one was to retrieve the item from Brutus and Cassius which, after a bloody battle in Philippi, he did. Neither man had ever held the disk in the cold sweat of their own sweaty palms it had seemed. Stage two, which had never actually been planned, was to return the disk to its natural home - Egypt. Indeed this turn of events occurred quite by accident when Anthony summoned the former queen Cleopatra to Tarsus so that she might explain why her support for the triumvirate (the natural successors to her late husband) had been lacking. Anthony fell in love with her, they returned to Egypt and started about the difficult task of having a life so chock-full of tragic events that one day somebody might choose to write a play about it.

Potted history: Disk is lost; Anthony and Cleopatra fight battle with Augustus at Actium and that too is lost; Anthony loses heart; is deceived into suicide by being told that Cleopatra is lost and she, having lost Anthony, loses the ability to commit suicide in anything like a sensible fashion. Enter asp, exit Cleopatra and yes, in the end... all is lost.

For a time.

## PART TWO – THE MODERN WORLD

On the surface Egypt was knackered. Despite playing the major role in the pre-title sequence of the movie version of civilisation as we know it, by the 1920s it had descended into one of those characters who stands in the background and nods but is not allowed to speak because their lack of Equity card simply does not warrant it. A role which, once the United Nations were formed many years later, it played without ever deviating from the script. In fact, had it been offered the part of 'Ensign Egypt' in an episode of Star Trek, then you could bet the guy next to you a tub of popcorn and a large Coke that the first thing it would receive from the costume manager would be a red shirt.

The country had no oil - it had no money because tourism in the British Empire had yet to advance beyond the annual trips to India in order to abuse tigers and shoot locals for sport (and yes, I did get that the right way round) - and it had no real identity because it was not really the Middle East and yet it was not really Africa either. It was not really anything.

On the surface.

And yet below the surface, under constantly swaying waves of yellow-orange sand, were treasures just waiting to be discovered by anyone whose sole concern was the preservation (and/or the highest-bidder sale of) such age-old relics. One such man was George Edward Stanhope Molyneux Herbert, the 5th Earl of Carnarvon – a man best remembered for his discovery (along with Howard Carter) of the tomb of Tutankhamen who had reigned in the 4th Century BC.

Carnarvon's first visit to Egypt had been in 1903 but it was not until four years later that he started his first excavations at Thebes. An account of his (and Carter's) findings was published five years later under the somewhat uninspired title of 'Five Years Exploration At Thebes'. Most tellingly, however, was the fact that this work was also published in German under the similarly uninspired title (for those who cannot spot that it is a direct translation) of 'Aushölung Fünf Jahre in Thebes'. The reason this was so telling was because it demonstrated that Carnarvon and Carter had a strong association with the Germans. Not that this is surprising, of course (certainly not to anyone who has seen the uniforms worn by the bad guys chasing Harrison Ford in 'Raiders of the Lost Ark'), but the fact that in a later work by the two men (c.1921) a whole portion of an excavation was omitted from both translations certainly is. Despite the fact that something had been found – something important - it is still something that is missing when it comes to the transcripts of the two archaeologists' notes. And the reason for that might just have been German.

Austrian, if you want to be picky.

In fact, the only pleasant way to describe the man responsible for that is to say that he possessed a rather silly moustache.

Adolf Hitler was born to be an artist. The only stumbling block on his route to the all-out Picasso-like fame that he craved was that he was extraordinarily bad at it. His works would be described as bad even if somebody else had sketched them out and very considerably placed numbers in boxes to aid him with the colouring. Still, art and all its treasures held a strong fascination for the man, so when word reached him in 1920 of a discovery in Egypt made by two English gentlemen... the discovery of a tomb containing no body but the relics of a queen – quite possibly Cleopatra herself – Adolf was salivating all over his moustache and using the excess drool to constantly flatten his hair down at the front. Whatever had been uncovered, he wanted it.

Whatever the cost.

Carnarvon, however, had no desire to sell. Whatever the cost. He had now reached a stage whereby he was uncovering treasures faster than a lotto winner uncovers new friends and for many years, to Hitler's chagrin, he held on to his find.

There are some that say he held on a little too long.

After being refused entry to the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna for lack of talent (which was presumably the primary –and perhaps only - pre-requisite for gaining acceptance), Hitler had stayed in Vienna until 1913, living on an Orphan's pension. During this time he read as voraciously as he would slaughter later. During the first World War he volunteered for service in the Bavarian army, and though he proved himself to be dedicated and courageous he was never promoted above Private First Class. This was because, in the eyes of his superiors, Adolf 'lacked leadership ability'. Hmm.

Like the pre-Rhodes version of Gaius Julius Caesar, that was a trait that was about to undergo a substantial change.

In September 1919 Hitler joined the Nationalist German Worker's Party, a strange move given that the man had barely done a stroke of work in his entire life. In order to put this right, presumably, he went to work full time for the party in 1920. By this time somebody had played musical chairs with the name and it had become known as the 'Nationalist Socialist German Workers (or Nazi) Party'. In 1921 he was elected Party Chairman and had his first, though by no means his greatest, taste of dictatorial power.

What joining the party had done for Hitler was to open up two sources of funding in his quest for attaining the world's most precious art and historical treasures. The first, which he never used, were his own and the second, which he raped incessantly, were those of the party itself. This he did from day one and, as such, it was not surprising that he should be introduced to many men working in Egypt at the time. Sir Flinders Petrie was one, Carter was another and Carter ultimately led to Carnarvon. It was from the 5th Earl that Hitler made most of his early purchases. His later ones were sourced elsewhere, given that Carnarvon, thanks in no small part to the burgeoning Führer, was dead.

It was in Thebes, a full three years before he uncovered his most famous tomb - that of 'The Boy King' - that Carnarvon and Carter uncovered what might once have been Cleopatra's resting place. It was situated some way from the main dig and would not have been uncovered at all had it not been for one of the Egyptian helpers performing the unenviable task of burying his dog. Carnarvon had a dog himself (a three-legged bitch named Susie who resided at Highclere Castle in Berkshire, England) so he understood the man's grief and allowed him time off to perform his own personal ceremony.

When the man returned, waving his arms frantically and screaming in Arabic about 'a buried stone', the site was moved and they started digging...

Inside the tomb were a great many important treasures, but none more important or darkly inspiring than the disk. Carter had served for many years as Inspector in Chief of the Antiquities for the Egyptian government and knew full well of rumours surrounding the disk. To hold it was 'to feel the power of many and taste the death of more'. This was knowledge that he had shared with Carnarvon and, as such, a pact was reached between them that neither man would ever attempt to hold the disk directly. As part of an ongoing experiment, some of the lesser valued men did (on their behalf), but not one of them lived beyond a week before taking their own lives in some quasi-comical fit of madness or other. Nevertheless, this was an artifact that was to be prized and, as such, they decided that they would not sell. Ever. They would keep.

And Hitler, meanwhile, would keep on trying.

At least... until he got bored.

Three unsuccessful years later, a man by the name of Dieter Kraus visited Carnarvon in his room at the Hotel Continental in Egypt. Dieter was a thick-set man with a jaw sharp enough to remove the fingers of any fist stupid enough to hit it and a beige-velour buzz-cut of which both Action Man and the people who manufacture the seating for trailer trash coaches would have been proud. To all intents and purposes he looked like a hitman, walked like a hitman and he possessed that all-consuming sneer that seem to be worn most prolifically by those employed to kill. It was no surprise then that by the time he left, Carnarvon was gone and so was the disk. It was probably being delivered to Herr Führer before the week was at an end.

At the time of Carnarvon's death it is said that all the lights in Cairo went out and stayed out for several minutes. It is also said that his dog, Susie, started to bark wildly back at home before keeling over and dying like a bad actor. There are those who blame these events on the curse of Tutankhamen, as prophesied by the inscription reading 'Death will come to those who disturb the sleep of the Pharaoh' (a more to-the-point precursor to 'Please knock before entering'), and this was further backed up by the fact that the only visible mark on Carnarvon's body was a mosquito bite situated precisely where it had been on Tutankhamen's own body – the cheek. In hindsight, it would appear that all Carnarvon had really been bitten by (given that he carried the disk with him at all times) was the desire for power and that it was that which had turned around and bitten him - not on the cheek, it must be said, but quite firmly on the ass.

The lights did go down in Cairo and Susie did indeed die in terror, but the reason was clear. Kraus, who died his own painful death not three weeks later (which involved the careful positioning of his service Gloch directly in front of his right eyeball), had not had the good sense to keep his grubby paws off the disk. A disk that had been dormant too long – that had built up a reservoir of power and been offered no outlet for almost two thousand years. A disk whose power had already grown since it had arrived on the earth - each time it had listened to the screams delivered to it by its new masters and added them to its constantly expanding audio library.

A disk that was ready to explode.

Power takes whatever guise the bearer wants it to take. It adapts itself nicely to whatever inherent ideas those who attain it already possess. As such Djoser saw the symbol as that of Ra and his unification with his loyal Pharaoh, not least because its golden hue was exclusively the colour of Kings. The Hebrews saw the etched image as either a symbol of their own reunification, or the parting of the Red Sea. Or both. The Israelites saw it as a symbol of their new world and adopted it as their national flag.

Hitler had his own ideas.

Gold. As in 'yellow-gold'. The colour of the people he reviled the most – the Jews. Those who, in his eyes, were the conspirators behind the Great Depression. And there, embedded within a disk bearing the very symbol that adorned their flag was the sound of many deaths. Hundreds. Thousands. Perhaps on a good day (at least as far as might be concerned) millions. The message he received was clear. The Jews must die and, just as it had been Djoser's place to inform Ra that he understood, it was Hitler's place to ensure that this mass genocide came into being.

Thanks to the disk, and to the evils residing within it – evils which seeped into weaker hands and fed them with thoughts of victory, domination and an end to their own mini-oppression – that's exactly what he did.

The rest is history and, like many things that fall into that particular category, it was far from pleasant.

By December 1944, given that by this time Herr Führer was losing the war, many previously devout and trusted Nazis had lost all faith in their leader and they fled – many to South America. Somehow, though the circumstances are unclear, one of them managed to take the disk. They

believed that Hitler had gone mad; that he had lost it and - in the case of the disk at least, he had. Soon after this theft he did indeed lose the war and, at about the same time, he also lost his life.

One more crazed madman vacates the planet without actually destroying it first.

Heck, there was time yet.

Three years after Hitler had purchased the disk, using only Lord Carnarvon's untimely death as payment, José Efraín Ríos Montt was born in Guatemala. Doted on by his mother, verbally and physically abused by his overbearing father, Montt was a gangly boy with a wiry frame and sinister, deep-set eyes. As he grew toward pubescence those qualities stayed resolutely with him, creating the face of a man who would not have looked out of place as the bad guy in a cheap action flick (had he ever mastered the requisite British accent) or indeed receiving an iron cross from Herr Führer himself.

After a series of schooldays far too mundane and unremarkable to ever have been recorded, Montt ultimately left to join the Guatemalan Military, a group never once classed as the 'finest fighting force in the world'. Within a few years he had ascended the ranks until he made General. At this point it is worth noting that the only two requirements for such a meteoric rise, at that time, were the ability to follow orders and/or to have the aptitude to tie one's own shoelaces. Montt, presumably, had worked very, very hard until – finally – one day - he had mastered both.

During his military service he studied at the U.S. Army School of the Americas which, in the free-speaking world, was often referred to as 'The School of Assassins'. He also advocated a robust, fundamentalist faith and therefore cultivated ties with a number of U.S. Christian Fundamentalist organizations. Though he might have suspected it at the time, he could not have had any clear knowledge as to just how much this would work in his favour later on.

There are two clear camps in one sector of our human evaluation... there are those who believe in happy coincidence and there are those who are not actually as stupid as they might look. The former were the ones who, in 2009 (just six short years before civilisation came to an abrupt end) were happy to tell anyone who would listen that the invasion of Iraq and the deposition of Saddam Hussein (now there's a man who we should all thank God never held the disk) had nothing whatsoever to do with oil. That the fact that George W. Bush's home-state was Texas (sorry, what's that area famous for again...?) was a happy co-incidence. The fact that George Dubyah and all his advisors were major shareholders in oil corporations? Coincidence numero trois.

In 1980, however, the 'happy coinciders' were too busy telling the world that Montt's visit to Bolivia, his meeting with a number of Nazi war criminals who had sought asylum there and his negotiations to purchase some of their stolen 'treasures', had nothing to do with the fact that in 1982 the aforementioned Montt managed to seize control of his country. They were also happy to stress that Montt's three-member Junta which annulled the constitution, dissolved parliament, suspended political parties and cancelled the election law, bore no resemblance whatsoever to Julius Caesar's Triumvirate. Or that Montt disbanding the Junta not three months later and assuming sole, dictatorial rule could not be related in any way to Caesar's successful hand-that-feeds attack on Pompey the Not-So-Great-As-He-Made-Himself-Sound.

Happy coincidence? Methinks not.

The main protagonist of the group Montt had visited was a man bearing the name Andreas Carlsson. A man who had worked in the Nazi torture hospitals, who had served under no less than

Mengele himself, and who was being hunted the world over for a string of atrocities far longer than any of the arms he had severed. He had escaped Germany with his life in January 1945 but, rather than living the life of a desperate fugitive, he had lived a positively exuberant lifestyle in a pseudo-palatial home overlooking Bogotá. During his time there he had employed in excess of fifty servants, most of them still working their way through the wrong side of their teenage years. The bodies of fifteen were never found.

The 14 months following Montt's visit to Carlsson were the bloodiest in Guatemala's history, surpassing even the horrors endured during the Spanish invasion some 400 years previously. Mayans suspected of sympathizing with opposing guerrillas were subjected to mass (holocaust-style) killings which included the raping of women and girls and extensive use of torture. The kind of torture of which Carlsson and his former employer might well have cocked a smile of admiration. Whilst taking detailed notes. In total, 440 Mayan villages were razed to the ground and the estimated human cost was somewhere in the region of 70,000.

Thanks to the ailing Carlsson, Montt had a new toy to play with. It was small, it was circular and it played him a great tune. A tune that told him to kill, to keep on killing and then, for good measure, to curl his lip and kill some more. Like Hitler many years before, it told him he might one day rule the world, though it never once specified just how many others would be left by that time. One, probably: Montt himself.

Despite these atrocities, El Dictadoré maintained a certain degree of protection, not only from the disk, but also from the bonds he had forged with the U.S. aligned, right-wing fundamentalist church. Because of this the United States, purportedly the most powerful nation on earth at that time, supported both his regime and his policies. Indeed, in December 1982, no less a man than Ronald Reagan was referring to Montt as 'a man of great personal integrity'.

But then, I guess we all have differing definitions of what 'integrity' actually is. Personally, playing second lead to a chimp in a film called *Bedtime for Bonzo* is about as far removed from integrity as one human being can get.

One of the things that comes with power is the complete inability to ever see beyond it. Once a person has it, especially in an all-consuming quantity, they are completely unable to envisage a day where it is no longer theirs. Whether the domination be personal, corporate or global, it is there for good. At least, that's what they all think. The first thing to disappear, however – long before the power itself – is the memory of where it came from. Power consumes to the point where people actually forget that it is something they have, and start believing that it is something they are.

Which is why, in order to keep his new-found friends as placated as he could in the misguided belief that it was just another rung on the forged-steel ladder of global domination, Montt gave the United States a present. A special present.

And it was at this point that his ladder broke.

In 1986 the 40th President of the United States, Ronald Reagan, launched a number of F-15 warplanes against Libya. It was not the first assault of its kind in history and, despite the limited timeframe in which the world was now working, it would not be the last. What did separate it from the others, however, was the fact that it marked a clear transition into a new world. A technological world. Unlike any other assault before or since this raid was scheduled (almost to the second) to coincide with the precise moment that the networks opened their national news programmes. It was, in every sense, a brilliantly staged media event.

It was the new way of doing things, and it had absolutely nothing to do with acquiring the disk from Montt.

Nothing whatsoever.

At which point I would like to say goodbye to the happy coincidences, whom I suspect are leaving in droves.

Of course, with such widespread media coverage and the need to maintain the false pretence that democracy was alive and kicking (to get out of the box they had locked it in, no doubt), there had to be a reason for this raid. Reagan might feel the power of Caesar and the Pharaohs feeding his hand (and weakening his mind) on a daily basis, but he was unable to just go all-out on his supposed enemies without a fairly convincing and desperately international reason. So... the one he used was that the attack was a retaliation for the Libyan bombing of a Berlin discothèque ten days earlier.

As is so often the case with 'brilliantly staged' media events, by the time the world learned that Reagan and his advisors had somehow managed to blur the line between suspicion and blame, the voices of the German investigators who were pointing out the true facts of the matter were being drowned by the uneducated cheers of global rejoicing. Fortunately for Reagan, the cheers were long and loud enough to cover the whispers coming from Central America that tens of thousands of murdered, tortured and mutilated victims could also be charged directly to the accounts of Reaganites and their accomplices.

The beauty of technology generally was that so many more 'enemies' could be slaughtered with a single stroke, or a button press. Whilst the rest of the world only tuned in vaguely - given that their attention was pretty much being engulfed by a succession of entertainment devices such as Compact Cassette, Betamax, VHS, CD, DVD, MiniDisc, DAT, DVD, PS/2, PS/3, MP3, DV-3, DV-3+, MP/x and, ultimately, TriLine - the deaths went on. What made the charade all the more spectacular was that it could be hidden better now than ever, as all the while the world laboured under the misguided impression that nothing could be hidden - that it was all open. The simple rule of thumb was this... if it was not on TV, then surely it did not exist?

Which scared the crap out of some of the kids when 'The Munsters' came on.

After all, civilisation did not exist until the day we began to record it.

Right?

Despite attending one of the most exclusive establishments of its kind, Josh Carlin III was bullied heavily at school. This was partly to do with the fact that his square jaw and large ears gave him the appearance of a four-wheel drive with the doors left open and partly because his family's wealth was something we now refer to as 'New Money'. Techno-money. His father had founded (and still controlled) Carlin Technologies, the company which had occasionally developed earth-shattering products, more often than not stolen them and, if rumour were to be believed, had been heavily involved in strategic campaigns to ruin any company which even harboured thoughts of forming any serious competition.

One day Josh would show the kids who had made his childhood hell. Too damn right he would.

Having already made millions from the development of BlueNet™ wireless computer technology and GPW FatBand Cellular Tablet PCs, Josh's father made an absolute killing with his company's introduction of the TriLine digital recording process - the only device capable of recording three specific frequency sources per output (Hi, Mid and Lo range). In the standard stereo version this

equated to two sets of three but worked its way up to SuperSix Surround which recorded and played back on eighteen separate channels (and boy did it make the buxom Miss Monroe sound like she was whispering those words in your ear now!). The dollars rolled in. Lots and lots and lots of them.

Enough to put young Josh (Anthony Joshua Carlin to remind him of his given name; the 'III' was added as part of a repackaging deal which involved numerous additions and amendments to his personal history) through naval college. From there he entered the grubby world of local politics, working his way up to becoming Governor of Washington State. After that... Senator and... with a great deal of financial help (and dirty tactics dependent upon whose manifesto and campaign literature you choose to believe) he was duly elected and became President of the United States.

The forty-sixth.

The last.

It was no secret that, like Hitler before him, Carlin held an inherent dislike for immigrants, though his spleen was vented most often at those who were unfortunate enough to herald from the Far East. Since the 1950's, through careful use of extraordinarily long-term consumer tactics (to the point of going many millions of HKDs or Yen into debt in order to achieve their objectives) the Japanese, Malaysian, Taiwanese and the Chinese corporations had all-but bankrupt the United States' manufacturing sector. Carlin aimed to teach them a lesson; to show them which country was born to rule the world. To kick ass U.S.-style. Far from being despised as the racist he undoubtedly was, Carlin was lauded by the people. Through careful manipulation of the media and a series of impressive contortions of the truth, his whole campaign had been built around the promise that he was, in fact, nothing less than the Saviour (capital 'S') of his home economy. Of his people's economy.

His. People.

As such, Carlin was suddenly a demi-God and a huge population of the United States were rapidly and blindly joining the ranks of his disciples, seeking only to perpetuate the global spread of Uncle Sam's message – burgers, theme parks and car advertisements that promised 'any colour you like as long as it's made somewhere near Detroit'.

Somewhere along the unkempt political streets Carlin (like Reagan and Dubyah before him) came across the disk. Based on the fact that he instigated a crippling trade embargo with seven Far Eastern countries only three months after coming to power (a move that would almost certainly lead to direct conflict in one form or another), one can only assume that somebody brought it out and polished it off fairly early on in his presidential career.

Becoming President, controller and all-round chief wizard of a global superpower served Carlin not just on a personal and an egotistical level (and how!), but on a corporate level also. Like the control of the oil and the rebuilding of Iraq (and a few years after that; Syria and Iran) in years gone by, the control of the purse strings during and after any global crisis was as powerful a weapon as any which might be launched during its course. It was something which meant that Carlin Technologies were uniquely placed to ensure that their own products found a way into every level of government. A lot of contracts came up for grabs and a lot of them (for which, of course, read 'all of them') went either to Carlin Technologies or to associated companies in which father and son were shareholders to an almost vulgar degree. FBI offices, the Pentagon, the State Department, the Armed Forces (all of them) and even NASA's shuttle program – all did away with whatever recording devices they had acquired over the years and they all took delivery of TriLine™ systems (CarlinTech). A long stream of IBMs were systematically removed from government buildings and replaced with ShureFire™ models (Shure Computer Inc., a wholly owned subsidiary of CarlinTech)

and even the sandwich deliveries in one hundred and twenty-eight state offices went to BagelBoy™ (The Carlin empire was nothing if not diverse).

Any happy coincidences still left in the room? No? Then allow me to proceed with the end-game...

Carlin was arrogant, he made the United States arrogant with him and, God bless them if they didn't love him for it.

What Carlin specifically did not like about the FECs (the Far Eastern Conglomerates) – or rather what his father did not like - was that these countries could manufacture American products far cheaper than America itself could. Great from a cost point of view, certainly, but not from one of control. And power, as the tyre adverts are so keen to remind us, is nothing without control.

He had to control the companies. To do that he had to control the countries and to do that... he had to fight them on muddier ground than the boardroom and win. George Dubyah did it with the oil and now Carlin wanted to do it with the kind of chips that nobody ever fried in it.

It started with the embargo.

It got worse.

Regardless of what may or may not be going on in our world, it always manages to look serenely calm and stunningly beautiful from space. At least, that was the considered opinion of Lieutenant Colonel Peter 'PeeDee' Davison, veteran of three shuttle missions. The first two were fairly short and involved painfully mundane satellite repair work. The third was longer, but only because of worries concerning the re-entry system which required extensive checks and repairs.

The mission Davison was on at the point Carlin launched his offensive proper, however, was just a little different...

Under Carlin's watch and with Carlin's budget allocation, the United States was spending a great deal of its trusting citizen's health fund refurbishing 'Sadie' (SaDI – Satellite Defense Initiative). Sadie was a good girl. She watched and she listened, but she was no dumb blonde. She also had enough technology hidden beneath her voluptuous and not altogether unsexy exterior to understand every word she heard.

On every channel. From every country.

She could recognize over three million sets of two, three and four base phonemes and use a complex series of four-channel matrices to recognize and isolate an individual from a broadcast picture. It may well have been an urban myth but there was talk that, as well as listening to radio, television and cellular signals, Sadie could also (quite literally) catch the word on the street. She had been recording and transmitting those words to her dotting team of analysts in Washington for almost ten years. Now though, with Carlin at the helm, she would be recording with CarlinTech systems, including the new TriLine base stereo DV-6 system.

Along with 'Jay' Andrews (Systems Engineer) and 'Chopper-D' Dave Gleeson, PeeDee Davison's task was to lure Sadie into the shuttle's cargo bay, rip her clothes off and give her a damn good seeing to.

Pulling her in had been the trickiest move so far. Like any girl she wanted to be wined and dined first and she put up a decent, albeit futile, fight. Eventually she relented and the makeover was underway. Washington, however, was far from happy. Conflict was looming somewhere in the

green/blue beauty of the world below and Carlin and his advisors wanted it all on tape. In a creatively edited form the words and pictures Sadie recorded might just come in handy if everything went up the creek.

Andrews was on his back, underneath the main console and using a special screwdriver to reseal the final plate. Of course, his correct orientation was anybody's guess, given that he was floating in space and it didn't really matter which way up he did it - there was no gravity present to tell his body to care. Whichever way Jay was, Davison was the other way up and he looked more and more weird with every glance. Gleeson was in the forward hold, checking and re-checking the systems in preparation for re-entry.

"There was nothing wrong with the old system," Andrews offered, reaching forward and grabbing a bolt as it floated like a glistening bubble away from his face.

Davison shrugged. It looked like an odd frown when it was upside down. "Ours is not to reason why, my friend..."

Andrews gave the last screw on the plate a final turn, then pushed himself gently away from the console, turning himself the right way round (if that's really what it was) when his body gained room enough to do so.

"I don't even know why she's got her own recording mechanism up here anyway. I mean, everything gets sent down to ground and recorded there anyway."

"Back up, I guess," Davison said without interest. His mind was focused on one thing and one thing only - making it back to earth in time for his wife - Katie's - birthday. And that was a rapidly looming Saturday. As such, he could not care less. If there was time beforehand he would help little Gemma bake her mother a cake, a single red candle lighting her angelic face as she made a wish and blew hard.

If she was anything like him then she would be thinking long and hard. Life was pretty damn good from where he was sitting (or, more accurately perhaps, floating) and there weren't many wishes left.

"Yeah, but the MP/x disks recorded 20,000 hours of audio and video and the TriLines also record 20,000 hours. I doubt anything we're listening for is being transmitted in three-channel... so where's the advantage in fitting the new system?"

Davison smiled and pulled a blank disk from the tissue-like stat-bag taped to the master console. "Carlin owns the company... there's your advantage. Besides..." he turned the disk over in his hand, its smooth surface glinting in the uninhibited light of the sun. "...from what I hear these things are made from a braco-titanium alloy. Toughest material on earth, barring the one you have to get down on one knee to give as a gift, of course..."

"So they'll outlive our scrawny asses then?"

"Many times over, I guess. I mean, these things last forever. Don't they?"

A statement only a few syllables short of prophetic genius.

He pushed the disk, 'CarlinTech Gold' in colour (a hue added purely for aesthetic purposes), into the player until it caught and disappeared. The internal lasers built to full power and the recording process began. Three frequencies (Lo, Mid, Hi) on two channels (Left and Right). Each strip was being written in a straight line diagonally across the disk, with each strip at sixty degrees to the first. As such, each channel formed a triangular pattern and, because there were two channels being recorded, there were two triangles.

Which interlocked.

A disk fully laden with sound and vision would have created a completely packed texture and the individual lines that had been written would be lost. A partially written disk would not. 'Carved by tools comprised only from light and heat' and barely visible on its surface would be an image that, if one held it to the light, might have looked like the sun.

Like two pyramids intertwined.

Perhaps even like the Star of David.

Unsurprisingly perhaps, Carlin's America had initiated the first strike. Not nuclear weapons of course (at this point Carlin was stupid, but by no means that stupid), but very, very destructive Trident-Threes all the same. China retaliated (as one might expect) and then, somewhat surprisingly, North Korea launched an offensive of its own. Just because one is not involved does not mean that one cannot feel suitably threatened. Or bored.

Carlin panicked. He felt sure they were firing nukes.

So he decided to fire some of his own. You know? Just in case.

Fifteen members (of fifteen) of his closest advisory team vehemently disagreed with the move. Fifteen members (of fifteen) were reminded that their entire careers were resting on the decisions they made that day and eventually fourteen (of fifteen) relented.

God bless the lone voice. Never quite loud enough to be heard.

At the point the disk slid silently into its housing, Carlin was already preparing to press his own little 'play' button many miles below. It wasn't red (if you think it ever was, then you watch way too many movies) but he pressed it all the same. Had he known specifically where it was at the time, he might even have rolled the disk through his fingers like a lucky coin.

Thirty-six hours, twenty-eight minutes and forty-seven seconds later, the magnetic properties of the combined pressure wave spreading from seventy-two retaliatory nuclear warheads as they detonated across the earth's surface hit the Orbiter containing SaDI and froze the internal mechanisms of the machine solid. The disk survived, as did Davison, Andrews and Gleeson. For now. Their loved ones – like the vast majority of the world's population – did not. Katie lived only three miles from the Pentagon. Her candle had already been blown out.

The world below was already dead and blowing with the kind of grey dust that clung to the human respiratory system like sand on sweat, its poison slowly and irreversibly seeping into once rich blood. All that was left of a million dreams and ambitions never voiced were the screams of panic and inevitability that had been broadcast via TV and radio along with millions of 'honey, pack up the kids and get outta town' cellphone messages – recorded forever onto a tiny little disk; golden in colour.

A little over three million years later, Sadie's remains finally lost their grip on the orbit which had held them steady for so long and she started a long and fiery descent to earth, her occupants so long dead that they were unrecognizable as bone. What she hit was a planet that was a deep, dark technological void; one in which the straggles of mankind had somehow managed, against all odds, to keep their species alive but had only just managed to reinvent fire. And how they might regret

that later. All that had once been - was lost. All that was left was the game of hope, waiting patiently to see under whose rules it might be played this time around.

At the point that she finally struck the barren earth from which she had once risen and 'stole the darkness from the sky', Djoser (watching from the north) felt afraid. Something alien had arrived. Something from another world. A world he would ultimately play a part in creating, and yet one that he would never be able to experience. One with consequences he could never – and would never - understand.

Of course, he just thought the gods were angry.