


Utopia's Children



Ferggus

Angus and Tanah

The future is a distant planet from which we may, with greater clarity, observe our present follies.

The flying carpet is being directed by Dhurba's parents, and they've aimed it to fly over the vast flood plains that extend from the sea deep into the interior of Utopia's largest continent, named by The Settlers as Arcadia. Dhurba himself is settled comfortably in Tanah's lap. "So this is your favorite story is it, Dhurba?" says Tanah's husband Angus, ruffling the boy's hair. Dhurba's eyes keep half closing, on the verge of sleep, but he manages a nod and a sleepy smile. Angus looks deeply into Tanah's eyes: she blushes and glances down, still unable even after all these years to hold his gaze when, as it does on this occasion, his eyes blaze with the intensity of his love for her. "I think it's everyone's favorite story, love," Tanah murmurs. Angus comes to her side and she clasps one of his arms in hers, and they begin a finger dance with each other's hands.

Still holding her hand, Angus smiles at the group of kids sprawled in the middle of the carpet and begins the oft told story. "Once upon a time there were two horses that hated one another with a passion, though for different reasons. If driven beyond sanity, as the two horses often were, they would fight with the intent to kill, or attempt by whatever means to have the other expelled from the herd. In that harsh environment, where wild cats and large bears abound, this would mean certain death within a very short time."

As the carpet speeds across the open sky the children peer over the edge and one of them interrupts Angus by asking, "Is this where the horses fought each other?"

Angus replies, "No, my dear, though it is very similar: they fought out their duration on a distant planet where no living things survive now." The child persists, "But why were they fighting, why did they hate each other so much?"

Later that night, as they talk, lips occasionally touching, Angus says, "That's the hardest question to answer. However many times I tell this story, I still don't know why we fought so viciously, why we hated each other so much, then." When he notices a fleeting sadness and uncertainty in her eyes he pulls her to him. "Never again, love. Forever seems so easy between us: we must have exhausted every ounce of anger and hatred in all those lives we shared, those years ago." She smiles, placated, though whenever he tells the story of their past lives, when they both loved and hated to the extremes of passion, her heart tightens a little, and the sense of guilt she can never quite expunge, would resurface.

"But how do we know for certain it really happened like that? So many people don't believe in reincarnation, in rebirth of the energy that transcends our physical existence." She believes but she likes to argue the point, to test each other's belief and the logic of their arguments. Angus says nothing, allowing her to answer her own question.

In the far north of India, on the border with China, the herd is running across a broad savannah, more than five thousand metres in elevation, where the air is thin of oxygen, and to run takes an extreme effort. As the rest of the herd trail to a standstill, neither of the still racing horses will give any

quarter as they continue their gallop across the flat hard ground. For what reason? Really, what horse needs a reason to run full speed, mane flying in the wind, neck stretched, and hooves pounding? But these two have reason, and it is always the same: to beat, in every way possible, the other. After so many lifetimes of unrelenting conflict you might have thought that they'd have realised that neither of them would ever beat the other conclusively. But when a mind is confined by hatred, an obsession to defeat, but not just defeat they must crush the other into the dirt, then has logic flown, and emotion holds complete control of their minds.

They have no need to tell each other the distance mark, instinctively they know. As they approach the finish she, a little smaller, gets close and under him, causing him to stumble. But he is more powerful than her and she'd been impatient to win, her strategy for victory executed a little early, so he has time to recover and beat her by some lengths. She doesn't take defeat well, so as they cross the finishing line she takes a great chunk out of his rump. Angus turns, eyes blazing, bites her hard on the neck, and she reacts by spinning around on her forelegs and kicking him as hard as she can, catching him in the stomach, which draws a low groan from Angus. Enraged now, he rears up, and she matches him, climbing onto her back legs and trying to make contact with some part of his body with her hooves. He neighs, a deep, earthy sound that reverberates through his chest, whilst hers is high pitched. She doesn't like the sound of her voice, but when fighting she can't help it, and her high pitched neigh is as distinctive to the rest of the herd as the sound of a certain bird, or the call of the wildcat. After some minutes Angus tires of the fight, his anger having subsided. He gives her a short kick in one of her rear legs, numbing it and making it impossible for her to continue to fight. As she hobbles back to join the herd, who have long given up interest in their battles, plans for revenge form in her mind. But she discards them all for they do not inflict enough pain to match the bruises to her pride at the loss of the race, and to her body, which has started to ache all over.

Angus has already joined them by the time she gets back to the herd, where they've halted at a broad patch of grass a little greener and sweeter than the rest. The stallion and the mare ignore each other completely, as if the contest never took place. In truth neither of them take defeat well, but it is rare that one would beat the other two times in a row, as happened on this occasion. However, this was only a minor contest, nothing that would influence their primary objective. The war between them is for the position every stallion in the herd covets: to be the leader of the herd. However, no one, not even the oldest mare of the herd, has ever heard of a mare commanding the pack. But if she overheard anyone question her right, Tanah would lash out, biting and kicking at any horse that denied her, until all of them assured her that she had an equal right to pilot them. Whilst all the stallions, to some degree, sought this role, there were really only three horses in this particular race: Angus, Tanah, and a huge black stallion, Erik. All were determined to claim the mantle but so far none had yet proved themselves superior to the other two. However, the previous day circumstances had put the leadership of the herd within Tanah's grasp.

Yesterday a number of yearlings were found dead, their heads stove into the ground so as to be almost unrecognisable even by their mothers. "I saw Angus running away from three stallions from the other herd. They want to take some of our best pasture because areas of their land are drying out and some of their watering holes are becoming undrinkable. There seems no explanation for these changes, but man is sure to be responsible in some way: he is so ignorant, so careless with the land, as if we have an infinite supply and can squander it without concern. Getting back to yesterday. When I saw Angus the yearlings were still alive, but as soon as he ran away, when he should have been protecting them, it was inevitable they would be killed." Tanah went on to recount in detail all she claimed to have seen the previous day.

Many of the herd look incredulous, knowing Angus to have demonstrated his courage a thousand times since he was a young colt, even in the most dangerous of situations. Some go so far as to voice their disbelief, and question Tanah about her own actions over the incident. She responds angrily, "You don't need to take my word for it, Erik was there too. He fought gallantly alongside me but was knocked out and was in danger of being killed himself."

Erik, the black stallion, steps boldly into the centre of the circle formed by the herd and, staring accusingly at Angus, who appears nonplussed, he confirms Tanah's version of events. "No horse that allows our yearlings to be left defenceless should be permitted to stay in the herd. Angus should be banished: who agrees with me? Step forward!"

"Wait! Let the truth guide the decision of the herd, not some version of it which suits your ends. It is true one of the stallions of this herd ran without putting up a fight to protect the yearlings, even before the horses from the other herds had approached them, or even given any indication of attacking. But as soon as those horses saw the yearlings left defenceless they took the opportunity. When we saw what was happening, I and Tanah did our best but by the time we'd made it to where the foals were, there were at least ten of their stallions attacking our youngsters, and almost immediately we were forced back by the sheer weight of their numbers. Then we could only watch helpless as they tormented and tortured the yearlings before trampling them. Yes, that stallion should be banished, but it was Erik, not I."

Erik sneers, "A clever version of events Angus, but it is your word against ours. Who is the herd to believe?" Angus roars back, "We are all aware you seek the mantle, and with me gone who is there to stand in your way?"

Erik pounces, taking the opening he's been waiting for, "I do not seek to lead the herd. Even though it is unusual for a mare to lead the herd, Tanah is the natural choice."

What was the herd to do, who were they to believe? If Erik had no motive, then which version were they to believe other than that of his and Tanah. The decision is quickly made, though not without remonstrance from some who still believe in Angus, who is immediately forced to leave the herd. Without their protection, like any horse he is easy prey for the wildcats that roam the mountainside looking for an easy kill. The remains of Angus' decomposing carcass are discovered only a few weeks later.

But Tanah's plan, which had appeared flawless when first conceived was in fact doomed from the start. Largely because Erik who had, over the previous few months, sowed the seeds of doubt in the minds of the horses. In fact he'd begun his campaign the day he agreed to conspire with Tanah to rid the herd of Angus. She would never be leader, and he knew that when he agreed to put her forward. It was unheard of, none of the herds in the valley were led by a mare. If nothing else they would be a laughing stock, and worse, might encourage the other herds to attack. The horses refused to accept Tanah, just as Erik had planned. And, against his protestations he accepted the demand of the horses that he should lead them.

Tanah had felt she held a trump card, knowing it was in fact Erik that had been the coward, and could at any time reveal his weakness. But at the crucial moment she realised the herd would believe Erik over her, and in consequence she most likely would suffer the same fate as Angus, and so she kept quiet.

Several months later Erik accused Tanah, in front of the entire herd, of desiring to take him for herself exclusively. The other mares don't hesitate to respond. The next day, as the wild horses are crossing a narrow pass the

mares force her off the path, sending her tumbling down the mountainside, and to her death.

For Tanah the frustration has been building over several lifetimes. It is her right, as much as any other horse in the herd, to lead them. In her opinion it should not be based on gender, but measured against a combination of strength and intelligence. Times past brute strength might have sufficed, but these were unusual times, and strange stories were circulating about the arrival of a new breed of man. For Angus it was his karma to die so ignominiously, an outcast, since in their previous life he had raped Tanah, taking her whenever he chose as his right as the leader of the herd. And when once she had resisted he'd reared up and brought down a great hoof, smashing her skull in an instant. He had only intended to subdue her, knock some sense into her, but violence is not neat or easily measurable and so the outcome is unpredictable, and so the consequences often fail to match the intention of the perpetrator.

Through these lives of incessant conflict, as enemies, they have come to know each other well. One might say better even than lovers might have done. For in their contests they would test each other's strength, to find its limit, and press their weakness. Always, always, looking for an opportunity to inflict a decisive victory over the other, or make note of a weakness, to be recalled at the most opportune moment. He knows she is fearless and, except in conflict with him, virtuous. And though she would mask it, especially in his presence, she is full of love and kindness. She would spend hours playing with the foals, particularly the young mares, teaching them to be strong and assertive, any match for the young stallions. In turn she recognises Angus' right to lead, for the natural qualities he possesses in abundance: but she would not relinquish. Why? Because she sees just the same qualities in herself, and in at least the same degree. Though she

conceals her kindness, as a sign of weakness, he sees it clearly in her, and considers it her greatest strength, the redemption for her failings, and true weaknesses.

Two horses stand close to one another, heads touching from time to time as they compete for the sweetest blade of grass. A large fir tree, which shades them from the midday sun, stands on the top of a broad ridge which overlooks a wide plain where in times past a vast river must have flowed majestically through it. The ridge, which rises a few hundred metres above the plain, is sparsely populated with a wide variety of trees in full bloom, for the season is early spring. The grass covered plain extends for mile after mile, empty save the several herds of wild horses that count it as their home. Each guard the boundary of their territory ferociously, and many are the decomposing remains of horses defeated in one of the border conflicts that regularly flair between the warring herds. This is how this part of the world has existed for many tens of thousands of years. Into this finally balanced ecosystem stepped the first men. They moved with caution and perception, guardians of the land they considered theirs, but as a resource shared: shared equally with the native animals of the plains. They were mindful of the natural environment, which they considered themselves a part of, not its master. These men made little impact on the balance of nature, and coexist for thousands of years without damaging it.

Later stumbles clumsily in the Whiteman, a wholly different breed of human, whose aim was to dominate his environment and make advantage of it. With such ignorant intentions calamity was inevitable. In order to exploit the land to its fullest extent he required transport and horse, strong, agile and docile once broken were ideal for the purpose. There being no place in this particular wilderness to purchase such an animal the white man

was forced to capture and, by any means they preferred, to bend the will of the horse to their own.

For reasons unknown to the herd, some months previously the white man had established his presence in the valley where the herd of Angus and Tanah belonged. At this period Tanah was a young mare only just reached maturity and Angus was the leader of the herd. Unusually he allowed a select group of stallions to take the other mares, which included Tanah, whilst he had only a single female, jet black in color and of a sweet temperament, who had recently borne him a foal of the same color, bearing a white star on his forehead.

Despite the well established order of things, in this lifetime Tanah was a constant thorn in Angus' side. She had not forgotten her previous lifetimes and whilst she could readily accept Angus as leader, having some admiration for his ability to guide the herd through whatever obstacles obstructed their path, she saw not one of her peers, her generation, having attributes of leadership superior or even anywhere near equal to her own. She was therefore determined, in this lifetime, to fulfill her ambition, to become leader of the herd. And Angus, having also recalled their earlier existences, saw no impediment to promoting her on his demise. Of course, at first the herd resisted this unprecedented arrangement but as they saw her, and when they listened to Angus, it became obvious to all, except those jealous colts who'd assumed the role as theirs by innate right, that she was the natural choice. Brave, resourceful and wily, the young colts were no match for her. They more resembled children alongside her: carefree, irresponsible, and unwilling to be tested. In the races and other challenges Angus set to reinforce Tanah's position as the heir apparent she beat them hands down, every time, even when they conspired against her. And then, invariably, they only managed to make greater fools of themselves and therefore enhanced Tanah's standing amongst the adult horses even further.

Whilst Angus saw advantage to the herd in promoting Tanah he did not trust her personally, nor in fact did he particularly like her, for he readily recalled his death and the cause of it. But in leadership one must often stoop to such means for the greater good of the group, and he was certain that Tanah, above all others, would best ensure the survival of the herd in these rapidly changing times. He had no qualms with breaking with the tradition of a male leader. These were new times, the white man was intruding on their idyll, threatening everyone and everything. It was a time for both strength and ingenuity, and whilst Angus possessed an astute mind he knew Tanah's to be superior, as she had demonstrated in numerous competitions. Based on strength alone he should have beaten her soundly but her cunning was unsurpassed and she would confound him with ruses that later he could laugh at but at the time would drive him to frustration. For example, in a contest of strength to move a boulder, as one might find in the herd's path, whilst the others had tried and failed with brute force, she'd dragged a fallen tree trunk and placed it as a lever under the boulder. Once in place she'd simply sat on it, sending the huge rock tumbling down into the river below. At the sight of this the colts fumed with frustration and anger, claiming a foul, whilst she was nearly choking herself with laughter at the expression on their faces.

The stallions were generally wary of her, and avoided contact with her. But one of the older ones, of the same generation as Angus, and a friend of his, had taken to her and she had acquiesced. He had little to say, but had a reputation for courage and loyalty. These were both traits she admired above all others, though she would admit to lacking in the latter herself. He adored her and she came to love him. After some time she bore him a handsome young filly, strong and full of life's energy. His father was justifiably proud of his daughter and to the two stallions' immense pleasure Angus' colt and Tanah's young mare were soon inseparable.

The herd had lived like this, in peace, for close to twenty years when the white man came in search of new blood. One day they arrive, early in the morning, on broken down horses that are no match for the wild mustangs. Whilst the rest of the herd escaped with ease, one of the young colts managed to get himself outnumbered and trapped in a dead end gulley, and was duly captured.

The foals, at that time numerous for it was still spring, were safely hidden high up on the ridge in caves whose whereabouts only Angus and Tanah knew, for only the leader of the herd was privy to this information, which was handed down through the generations. And it was the duty of the anointed, Tanah in this case, to take the foals and yearlings up the mountain at night and bring them down safely the following morning. It was on pain of exclusion from the herd, which meant certain death, if any other horse was to attempt to discover the location of the caves. Yet The Colt, hoping somehow to use the information in his quest to usurp Tanah's position, had followed her and learned The Secret of the Caves. Foolishly he'd bragged about this knowledge, and this had filtered back to the adults, who in turn informed Angus. Learning of his imminent expulsion, it was in fact The Colt's intention to be captured by the white man. Better that, he concluded, than being ripped to pieces by a pride of wildcats.

Several weeks after The Colt's capture, with the morning mist still being burned off by the rising sun, Tanah came galloping down the mountainside into the densely wooded area where the herd had camped the previous night. She came into the clearing calling out the warning signal that all horses know, and immediately it was clear to Angus when he heard her call and saw her, what had happened. The mare was covered in hoof marks and blood was oozing from a hole clean through her neck, a sight the horses had never seen the like of before. The Colt had led the white man and his horses straight to the caves where the foals were concealed. Tanah, alone, had fought valiantly and, the cave having a narrow entrance, had managed to

hold them off for some time, and might have continued to do so indefinitely but for the shot which distracted her attention sufficiently to allow one of the horses to rear and knock her out with a well placed hoof. Coming to a few minutes later she found all the young horses gone. When she tried explaining the firing of the gun none of the horses could comprehend her story.

That evening, almost approaching midnight, Angus leads the entire herd into the white man's camp, which consists of rather decrepit looking tents staged around a large camp fire which is still burning when the wild horses first arrive. They wait until the white man has staggered off to bed, some it seems almost incapable of walking. The horses wait patiently a further half hour, until the camp has descended into complete silence, before galloping into the clearing around the fire and trampling on all the tents, with the intent of killing the occupants. Unaware that the white man had posted sentries, who begin firing the weapons Tanah had described, a number of the wild horses are killed before the sentries are overcome, to be either killed themselves or forced to run for their lives into the forest. The foals are quickly found: most are unharmed, but one is almost dead from exhaustion and lack of food and water. The wild horses tear into the mounts of the white man, who are tethered and anyway are no match for Angus and the other stallions. But The Colt somehow managed to escape.

The next day, taking no chances, the herd moves to the far extent of their territory. All is quiet for the first few days but one of the scouting horses reports to Angus that he's seen, high up on the ridge, the Whiteman in the company of The Colt, and they had shown considerable interest in the movements of the herd. Angus posts more sentries, in even closer formation, but neither the white man nor The Colt was seen again. Gradually, as days turned into weeks, the horses relax. After all, the number of Whitemen that survived was few: the scout had only spotted two or three on the ridge with The Colt, and it became accepted they had decided

to leave the plain. Still, no chances are taken, the scouts still patrol the boundaries and the foals are always safely established in new hideout caves which The Colt has never seen.

Normally the herd only use this section of their territory at the height of the dry season since, whilst the other lakes and ponds might dry up, there is on a flat section half way up the hillside a small pond fed by an underground stream, which ensures it never empties. Apart from this the area holds little attraction, mainly because it is next to the border with the land of the most aggressive herd in the valley. Also the grass is not the best and there are few trees, except around the pond, to provide shade.

One morning, though still early spring, the heat appears especially strong and the herd is drawn to the small lake where the air is always a little cooler. All the foals are there, a little older now, and so bolder, gamboling, pushing the distance between themselves and their mothers, but only to the point where she would call out a stern warning for them to return. That is, all but one, for Tanah's foal is still recovering from her mistreatment at the hands of the Whiteman, and therefore spends her days in the mountain cave.

The horses fringe the lake, some nibbling at the rich grass which extends a short distance from it, others have their faces buried in the sweet tasting water, occasionally letting out a low whinny, of the pleasure of the day, and a general contentment with their life amongst the herd. In the shade the sun provides a pleasant heat on their backs, food is plentiful, and by now the Whiteman has not been seen for over a month. Angus has even allowed the scouts to rejoin the herd, only occasionally being required to make an extended reconnaissance of the boundaries.

The first sign of anything untoward is one of the young foals who, after taking a long draught of water, begins staggering, then falls to its knees unable to carry the weight of its body. Its eyes start to roll, and then it begins

frothing at the mouth. Before long the same symptoms can be seen in another, and another. Within an hour every horse in the herd is dead, their bodies strewn about the lake. This is the scene Tanah and Angus find when they return from scouting the ridge for new caves, and making a short inspection of the boundaries, to make sure the humans had not returned.

The pair stand stock still for some minutes, trying to absorb what they are seeing. Then Angus walks slowly over to the body of The Mare, the mare he'd loved above all he'd known in any of his lifetimes. What need was there to rush to her? Death has already taken her, and time is therefore an immaterial measure. Even in death she'd sought to protect her foal, with her body shielding it. His young colt had obviously died in an extreme of agony: eyes staring wildly, mouth wide and teeth bared, letting out an endless silent scream, legs stretched out rigid and its back arched, as if trying to outrun death. Angus nuzzles The Mare's face for some time, his eyes vacant, recalling memories of their life together. Tanah seeks out the old stallion: unlike the other horses he is contained in death, and has the appearance of having merely fallen asleep. So much so that for a second hope briefly flares in Tanah's heart when she first sees him.

Over the following days the pair are forced to remain in the area as Tanah's young foal slowly recovers. Every day they have to pass the watering hole where the remains of the herd lie, now little more than bone and strips of fur since the big cats came down off the mountain and gorged themselves, after the pungent smell of carrion had drifted up on the wind to their lair. Within a few hours their own trail of death leads back up the mountainside, but here the tragedy finally expires, for the other cats would not eat their own, and the bodies of the dead simply dry out in the powerful heat of early summer.

In this time Angus and Tanah are able to console each other in their grief and shared loss. All prior conflict is forgotten, all hatred dried up in their

breasts, as again and again they see the look of utter despair whenever some small event evokes a memory of their lost loves. Such is the spirit of the soul, we cannot hate when we see such tragedy. Even our worst enemy we can at first pity, setting aside all prior feeling, and eventually come to love. The sharing of grief, and we the witness of it, is enough to make the irrevocable shift, and so it is with Angus and Tanah. Angus even comes to trust Tanah, for the first time in all their lifetimes. At the start he didn't care whether he lived or died, yet she took no advantage. And, to his surprise, he saw how much she had loved the old stallion. Her sense of loss had even surprised her, a great void appearing in her heart which she had no means of filling, even with the love she felt for her young foal.

Angus, in his despair, wanders aimlessly up and down the mountain, first to The Graveyard of The Herd, then back up to the hideaway, where Tanah's foal has by now regained her strength and is the very essence of life, champing at the bit to be allowed out of the confinement of the cave. Tanah had expected with the foal's recovery to leave the area, but Angus cannot. Tanah talks to him, quietly, comforting, but insistently trying to shift him into action, but eventually impatient anger gets the better of her. "Stop this, there's nothing to be gained by hanging around here. The other herd has found out what happened and has started to roam across our territory. If they find us they will surely kill us. And if not them, the wildcats have a sixth sense: we need to move and join a friendly herd, there's many would have us."

Angus knows she's right, but he is guilt ridden, and by leaving it feels like the final betrayal. "No, I can't leave. We failed them. This was the Whiteman's doing in revenge for an attack I ordered. I should have anticipated this outcome and taken greater precautions. I don't know what he did, but I know he's responsible. They have ways of harming us that we have means of defending against. They, though they look puny and ugly with their sticklike limbs and ball of a head, have a power over us, and they

always will. It doesn't matter where we go, they will find us and destroy us. Tanah, in our next life we must become human, and make them change their ways."

Tanah says nothing for some time, absorbing all that Angus had spoken. There is truth, a bigger truth, in some of his words. But what is the point of giving up and simply trusting in a better life next time around? After all, it could be far worse. Reflecting, she is in no doubt that you must make the best of this life, and learn whatever lessons you can along the way, not live in improbable hope.

The three wild horses are standing outside the mountain cave: the cool evening breeze has begun to sing through the tunnels and crevasses carved out of the solid rock by the winds of a million years. Angus, his eyes vacant, is staring blindly down the hillside, playing over what he could have done to save the herd, and the consequences of his failure. The young mare is running races with herself over a short track she's mapped that starts and ends at the cave entrance, taking in a stretch of the ridge that extends a few hundred metres in either direction.

Tanah, her manner decisive, nuzzles his faces insistently, determined to attract his attention and release him from his stupor. "My dear, she is gone, let her go: she has moved on to her next life, as has your child. Don't hold them back, you will only cause them pain, by your despair you draw them back to this existence, and make it difficult for them to move forward in their next."

Angus at first gives no indication of having heard her words, or even is aware of Tanah's existence, so absorbed is he with thoughts of The Mare. But the sense of what she said captures his attention and, for the first time since the tragedy, Tanah sees him smile. He gathers himself to his full height, lifts his head and allows his gaze to take in all of their surroundings.

"You are right, Tanah, I must let them go, not only The Mare and our child, but all of the herd. More importantly, we must find safety for The Foal, we are in grave danger here. The wildcats will find us soon, we must leave, leave now, and join the herd by The Great Lake. They will take us."

Two horses with a young foal to protect are easy prey for a well organised pride. The big cats, having over the last few days become aware of the pair's vulnerability, are already approaching the cave. For twelve fully mature wildcats it should have been a foregone conclusion but one, a youngster eager to make a name for itself, is impatient. As soon as it sees The Foal cantering, on the homeward stretch of its race, it leaps after it, a little clumsily, but closing fast. Angus, alerted by its noisy approach, catches the wildcat in mid flight as it makes its final lunge, catches it with a hoof that comes crashing down on its back, shattering it instantly.

Tanah, with only thought of protecting The Foal, screams for it to run, and follows closely behind, leaving Angus to fend off the cats and give them time to escape. At the foot of the ridge, after a mad, headlong dash down the steep mountain slope, she finally pulls up beside The Graveyard, and looks back up the hill, for the first time thinking of Angus and his plight. The night is still, almost silent except for the chattering of the birds, a sound which pierces the failing light, clear peals which echo around her. There is no movement amongst the trees, to all appearances it's just another idyllic night, the sun settling below the horizon, and the sky a crimson flame. No sign of the cats, nor of Angus. Suddenly she hears the sound of beating hooves behind her. For a moment

Turning, hope dying as quickly as it is born, she sees the leader of the herd from the adjacent territory, with several stallion and younger colts fanned out behind him. He slows to a canter, stops a few lengths from her, before walking slowly around her, as if measuring her for some purpose. The Foal tries to get under Tanah, but she's too big and instead can only press against

Tanah's flank. The stallion makes a move towards Tanah, and she stiffens, bracing herself for the inevitable attack. He lets out a huge roar, rears up and as he comes down lashes out, killing The Foal instantly. Tanah is forced to join his herd as one of his brood of mares. For the remainder of this life she has a constant image in her mind of Angus' expression the moment she turned to escape the big cats. Without hesitation he'd placed himself between her and their attackers, a look of fear mixed with determination on his face.

In their next life, building on the tender feelings that grew as they comforted each other in their mutual grief, the two become lovers for the first time. They are inseparable, even as yearling mare and colt they can always be found together, playing, laughing, and talking incessantly. The other horses, when they can be bothered to listen, are unable to fathom the topic of their conversations: it sounds complete rubbish, madness even. "In our previous lives we were enemies, can't you feel that a little still? The energy of it?" Angus asks her querulously, in his mind pleading with her to recollect.

As is invariably the case she does recall, and a deep frown will form on her brow, at the implications of all that she remembers. Angus laughs, "Really, you still feel guilty about what you did with Erik? You shouldn't, because that I can forgive. It was about power, and in its pursuit all is justified: all's fair in love and war, or let's just say, in war."

Tanah shakes her head, "It wasn't that I was thinking of. When you gave up your life to protect me and The Foal I didn't stop to think of you, not until I knew we were safe. And by then you were already dead, ripped to pieces by the wildcats."

Angus presses his forehead against hers, then like jousters roll their noses over each others, occasionally allowing their lips to touch as their conversation turns in different directions. And so they will remain preoccupied all morning, to spend the afternoon frolicking near the broad river which flows through the herd's territory along a narrow plain bounded by steep mountains on both side.

"It was my choice to stay, though yes, you might have given a little more thought to my sacrifice: but The Foal, you had to protect her. What kind of mother would you be if you didn't?" He tries his best to comfort her, however the look of dejection remains, as if she'd not lived up to the expectations she had of herself. But she could never remain unhappy for long. Not when the sun is high in the sky, and Angus is teasing her, and claiming she could never beat him in a race to the other side of the river and back. Without thinking, or perhaps to clear her mind of the unpleasant memory of the morning, she gallops headlong down to the water, Angus trailing her, and doing his best to close the distance between them. In this life they are of similar size and strength, so he can do no more than maintain distance, and when he finally reaches her he finds her standing in the middle of a patch of grass, casually tugging at a few blades. As if what they are doing is the most normal thing in the world. She stops in mid chew, staring at the water's reflection, mesmerised by something she sees within it.

Angus calls out, "I was only joking about the swimming race, you know we're not even supposed to come this close to the river, it's full of snakes here." The riverbank, except where narrow paths have been cut through it, is bounded by thick pampas grass that extends to shoulder height of a full grown horse. Which means that the two yearlings are completely obscured, and invisible to the rest of the herd. Tanah replies, "No one's going to know, are they? They can't see us. Swim across and back and they won't even notice we've been gone. Come on!"

Tanah spins around in the middle of the path then, just as she's about to step into the water, Angus cries out a warning. Straight ahead, exactly in her path, is a nest of Tiger Snakes, the most venomous of all snakes. The babies might look innocuous but they're just as deadly, for their venom is of the same strength as a fully grown adult and there are enough of them in the nest to have killed Tanah several times over. She steps back in alarm, one hoof still raised, but just at that moment two adults appear, parents of the babies in the nest, and Tanah is surrounded without any means of escape. The snakes approach: whilst most snakes will generally only attack when cornered, Tiger Snakes are renowned for their highly aggressive behaviour, attacking without provocation. Their bodies slide silently over the grass, the only sound the hissing of their tongues. Tanah stares around wildly, her mind blanked by fear. In another second the pair of Tiger Snakes will be upon her, their teeth clasped into the soft flesh just below the knee, bringing her down with the first bites, and then attacking her body again and again as she weakens. In death they would wait for the flesh to putrefy, then strip it off the bone and either feed it to their young or gorge themselves. "Jump! Jump! Into the water!" Angus cries.

Her legs feeling like jelly; she's not sure if she can make it but, she's nothing to lose, there's no other means of escape. Gathering herself she leaps out as far as she can: well clear of the nest, she lands full in the fast flowing water and is immediately carried away, from the bank, and into the midstream. Breathless, still shaken, she's unable to resist its force, dragging her along, further and further away from the safety of the riverbank. Still recovering from the ordeal with the Tiger Snakes, it takes some moments for her to realise that the current is so strong there's no way she can swim against it and recover to the bank; if she tried she'd certainly drown. At that moment she hears a loud splash: looking over her shoulder she sees Angus swimming towards her. As he approaches she can see there's something wrong: his eyes are glazed over and his head is flopping loosely from side to

side. There's nothing she can do to close the distance, except slow her own progress, but after a few minutes he reaches her. In that time he's weakened even further, and it's immediately obvious to Tanah he has no strength left. "Quickly, swim with the current but also heading towards the shore. Don't try to swim directly against it, you'll just wear yourself down, and drown." His voice is weak, slurring a little.

It's evident to Tanah that without her help Angus is sure to drown. She cries out in anguish, "No, I'm not going to leave younot again." Somehow, summoning strength she didn't know she possessed she does as Angus instructed, swimming with his body draped half over hers. Slowly, ever so slowly, they creep towards the bank, but they're being pulled down the river, getting closer and closer to a two hundred metre waterfall, located only a few kilometres downstream from the herd's camping ground. With the very last dregs of her energy she manages to make it to shore, barely a hundred metres from the falls. Here the bank has leveled off to a sandy beach, which makes it easier for Tanah to drag Angus out of the water. He lies inert on his side, eyes rolling, and breath shallow. Tanah, heart pounding, gallops back to the other horses, and minutes later the herd leader, accompanied by several of the stallions and an old mare, return to find Angus completely lifeless, his breathing ceased. The mare studies him closely, scanning his legs until she finds the tell tale signs of the puncture marks from the snake's teeth. In her mouth she has a bunch of yellow flowers which she's just started to chew. "Cut this hind leg open along the vein," she instructs the stallions tersely, her attention fully focused on Angus' condition, "then piss on it." She is known for curing ailments that regularly kill horses in the other herds, so the horses follow her orders without hesitation. Moments later blood is oozing feebly from Angus' leg, the last beats of his heart, spilling his life out. She rubs the poultice along the length of the wound then stands back. In only a few minutes, as if by a miracle, Angus is on his feet again and, albeit walking a little gingerly, he manages to rejoin the herd. Their parents are simply glad the two are safe,

so they avoid the rebuke they so justly deserve. Anyway it's quite obvious they've learned an important lesson which has been taken fully to heart.

With their incessant companionship and adventures such as this binding them closer, it's a surprise to none that they become lovers. Which they display openly and freely if they have no option, but they prefer to share their love in private, at a secret pool, deep within the bush. They will lie side by side, necks intertwined like swans, or kissing passionately, biting into each other's necks, or she into the white blaze on his forehead. She will stand beneath him as he mounts her, turning her head at the moment of death to bite him, drawing blood from his face or neck, while he will sink his teeth into the soft flesh of her shoulder. Their cries of pleasure can be heard across the forest, sending the birds screeching into the sky. At other more tender times she will lie on her belly, legs tucked beneath her, and he will gently lower himself onto her, embedding himself deep within her. They will remain like that sometimes for hours, their heads close, kissing and biting each other. She can feel him jumping inside her and he, whenever he feels her muscles tighten around his penis, will smile at her languidly and she coyly return with a pursing of her lips which turns up the corner of her mouth. Theirs is an easy love that developed over considerable time, really from the days of their birth. It came naturally, and was never forced, except when she hesitated to explore feelings so strong she was sometimes afraid to release them. In these instances Angus would indulge her for some time, then gently push her off the cliff and both of them would then watch her soar. He would not allow her turn away or slow the progress of their intimacy.

Into this Utopia, a world of almost complete perfection, one day idly sauntered a large grizzly bear, of slightly disheveled and roguish appearance. This occurred one morning as Tanah dozed by the pool, replaying images of her recent love making with Angus, who had only recently left to join the other stallions. "You desire, above all else, to

become in your next life a human being. I can grant your wish, in return for a small fee of course." The Bear smiles knowingly. Alarmed at first by the bear's unexpected appearance, despite herself Tanah is drawn to this mischievous fellow, finding him amusing, appealing even. She replies somewhat haughtily, "If by a fee you mean to use my body, it is not for sale." Apart from Angus she's never experienced another horse and has no desire to share herself with any other, certain any coupling would be a mechanical exercise, paling beside the intimacy, and sensual passion with Angus that is sometimes almost too much to bear. Between them their intercourse is the most pure and intimate expression of, a reflection of, their feelings for each other.

In a low voice he responds, "Bravo my dear. But, no, it's not your body I want." He leers, and laughs inwardly. "Oh, and please, call me Balthazar."

Tanah shudders a little, picturing quite graphically how this rogue could and no doubt frequently did fulfill whatever sexual cravings overcame him, and did so whenever, and with whomever he wished. She also sensed that these desires would involve the most perverse and disgusting acts, some beyond the scope of her imagination.

"Very well, Balthazar, what is it that you do want in return for what I can't deny I would give anything to experience." She smiles, inviting, provocative, rather enjoying the mental joust, and in the process letting her guard down a little too much. Her voice has taken on a rather languid drawl, stretching out the words, for effect.

"Those were just the words I needed to hear, my dear," the crafty bear purrs in reply.

Countless are the hours Angus and Tanah have discussed what they will do if ever they have the good fortune to take on a human existence. They both

recall the lifetime in which the Whiteman, by some magic, was able to injure them, though positioned some distance from them. Furthermore, had killed an entire herd by infecting the water. Hours are spent, which afterwards are recognised as a fruitless waste, trying to fathom how karma might be bent in their favor, in order to realise their dream. The more they talk about it, the more they crave it. Of course these discussions only ever take place between them, never do they discuss such matters with another horse in the herd. For they know they would think them crazy, which might possibly lead to their expulsion from the herd. Already some of the young colts, who'd overheard their conversations, had started making snide remarks. Comments which they mostly ignored, though from time to time Tanah would lash out, catching one a painful blow to the knee, or some other vulnerable spot, which would cause the other to squeal with pain, and a fight ensue. As the biggest mare she was far superior in combat to the other mares, and more than a match for the stallions of the herd. Even so, until this day it had remained nothing more than a fantastic, fascinating topic of avid conversation.

Yet now, all of a sudden, here is this thoroughly untrustworthy bear, calling himself Balthazar, dangling the golden carrot before her eyes, and within the easiest reach. For Tanah there isn't a moment of hesitation. "What then should you have of me in return for this truly priceless gift you offer? I cannot think of anything of sufficient value to tender in exchange."

"Oh, I will be fairly recompensed, I assure you. All I ask is that you say nothing of this to Angus." Balthazar settles himself on a large fallen trunk, and crosses one leg over the other. In one paw he's idly tugging at the head of a large salmon he claims to have drawn from the river, though Tanah is certain no one has ever seen one in their stretch of the water. Engaged in intimate conversation at The Secret Lake for some considerable time by now, she up to this point had been idly circling the log on which Balthazar's plump posterior rests. At the mention of Angus' name Tanah's step falters,

and then she comes to an abrupt halt. Balthazar smiles slyly, momentarily looking up into the sky and whistling a rather pleasant melody. Tanah's expression is first one of guilt, for since Balthazar's arrival she hasn't thought of Angus for even a second, not even when he made his irresistible offer connected to their most common topic of conversation. And then a look of great sadness descends, for she glimpses in a flash all that's expected of her, of a betrayal, and how willingly, knowingly will she commit it. And she would do it again, ten, a hundred times over, if it meant the fulfillment of her dream, her destiny. What makes it even worse she senses, without a shadow of doubt, that Angus though he craves it no less, would never betray her in this way. As if he can read her mind, Balthazar, in a rather off hand tone suggests, "Oh, Tanah, of course he would do the same in your shoes. Don't you both want it just as much as each other? Wouldn't you do anything to get it?"

Tanah, her mind now fully alert to the situation, responds acidly, "Then why are you only offering it to me, then? Why me, and not Angus? Is it because, in fact, you know no one and nothing would induce him to betray me?"

Balthazar releases a tinkling laugh, a little incongruous for a very large grizzly bear, "My dear, don't be absurd. And don't underestimate yourself. I could not make this promise to Angus simply because I could not fulfill it. Karma is a powerful force, and though I have some abilities," he pauses to feign modesty with an excess of theatricality, "but there are limits. Darling, you are ready, being a little more advanced in intellect and wisdom in the ways of the world than Angus. His time will come."

Tanah's anger flares and she moves quickly, bringing herself within striking distance of the bear. "Be careful my dear, we are alone." the bear warns, in a flat monotone.

She screams at him, "But it won't will it? That's the deal isn't it? I get to become a human many lifetimes earlier than karma judges me ready, and in return I must agree that Angus will be prevented from ever experiencing the human condition. That's it, isn't it? And you know I'll agree, so why are you sugar coating it like this?" A look of disgust flits across her face.

Balthazar rises to his full height and looks Tanah coldly in the eye. "My dear, forever, poor ever. Forever is a very long time, I'm sure in time karma will allow Angus the privilege of a human existence, he is after all thoroughly deserving. And as I said, my ability to prevent this is limited, my powers are of only finite duration." He pauses, allowing only just sufficient time for the sharp edge of Tanah's indignation to be dulled by his soothing words. "Right ho, so it's all agreed. Now comes the rather fun part, well for me at least."

The bear, has sidled a little closer whilst Tanah was preoccupied with her thoughts: of how, once again, she will willingly betray he whom she shares the greatest love it is possible to own. Well placed and within easy striking distance Tanah has no time to react. With a single practiced movement, claws extended, the bear's paw opens an artery in the horse's neck and her lifeblood spurts in great gushes onto the ground. She tries to rear up, to defend herself, but immediately her hind legs give way and she collapses onto the ground. To expend the last moments of life by the lake where, for countless hours, she had made the most abandoned love with Angus. Where they have talked of the changes, together, they would make to the world. Never had it crossed their minds that one would experience it without the other. Her emotions contain a mixture of desolation, at her betrayal and the sudden realization she will see Angus never again, but also an extreme of excitement, almost of orgasm, at the prospect of the fulfillment of Balthazar's promise. It is with these two thoughts, in conflict with one another, that her life ends, by the water whose reflection has mirrored the happiness and contentment they created. And of course love, in all its intimacy, tenderness and raw passion.

Balthazar was a liar.

Tanah, at Karma's direction, would spend the next several lifetimes as one of life's downtrodden, giving her more than ample opportunity to reflect on Karma's calculation of the loss of merit accrued through the betrayal of one we claim to love. Frequently would she be a lowly beggar, kicked by everyone from one corner of her miserable existence to another. Or a street prostitute in the poorest and most violent cities of the world, where sailors might use then discard her once their momentary pleasure was satisfied. And then as a wealthy heiress, forced all her young life to obey the demonic demands of a psychopath of a father, and an even more sadistic husband whose clutches she was driven into in order to save the family's waning fortunes. This might be followed by a sojourn into the world of political intrigue as a diplomat for one of the weaker and more corrupt of the South American countries. Or preceded by a brief period as a criminal lawyer pandering to the more brutal of the criminal classes. In instances such as these a lost case would signal the end of her life by some grisly means, or by her own now practiced hand. Countless were the times she had, in despair at her circumstances and still guilt ridden, committed suicide, only to be thrown back into an equally awful, or even worse existence.

Angus, meanwhile, had not been forced to remain for time eternal in the not unpleasant surroundings of the animal kingdom. Karma had, in fact, already determined that both Angus and Tanah were more than ready to make a positive contribution on man's stage. Balthazar knew this, but more importantly he knew Tanah's weakness and his only desire was to exploit it and in so doing destroy something beautiful and delicate, as the finest crystal. Such a thing, love, should never be taken for granted since, like glass, though containing great strength, once broken it can never be repaired. It will be melted down and form the love others will share. We should revel in love, but be ever vigilant of anyone that might usurp it. But

mostly we should reflect upon ourselves because we will at times become complacent and not appreciate the riches beyond measure we hold in our hand, and then we may let it slip through our fingers. Or not cherish it sufficiently so that love cools and distance forms between us, through misunderstanding or disappointment in our lover's actions. We must guard it with our life if it means anything to us, because it is more precious than life itself.

It would be several lifetimes, on a planet called Utopia, before Angus and Tanah would meet again.