

Cosmic Masks: Shrouds of the Night

CHAPTER

2



How beautiful is the rising of the full moon upon the Continent of Africa. Sounds in the bush by day are so vastly different to those at night. Ancient hunters have depended on the eerie light cast by the full moon, in guiding them to their prey.

Enter cosmic masks, or cosmic shrouds. The full moon itself is a mask, for it masks (or hides) myriads of fainter stars in our heavens above. In its brilliant light by which lions stalk their prey, only the very brightest of stars are seen.

In Roget's Thesaurus, we encounter the following definition of a mask: [noun] screen, cloak, shroud [verb] to camouflage, to make opaque, to disguise.

How vastly different do the skies appear in the absence of the full moon. When our mask of blazing reflected sunlight is no longer present, the skies show a breathtaking splendour of countless myriads of suns.

As with masks covering a human face (Figures 2–4), our perception of the night sky is inextricably intertwined by the presence of masks, or shrouds. Remove the mask – penetrate the veil or shroud – and behold wondrous, hitherto unimaginable, insights!

Our thoughts go back to hunters and gatherers in epochs past. What a breathtaking sight it must have been, in the absence of light pollution, for men and women of old to actually *see* the Milky Way Galaxy in all its grandeur and splendour.

In a book entitled *Bushman Folklore* by the late W. Bleek and L. Lloyd, there is a moving account of “The Girl of the Early Race, who made the Stars.” We share a section of that story here:

Cosmic Masks

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Shrouds of the Night
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Figure 2 [405]



Figure 3 [405]



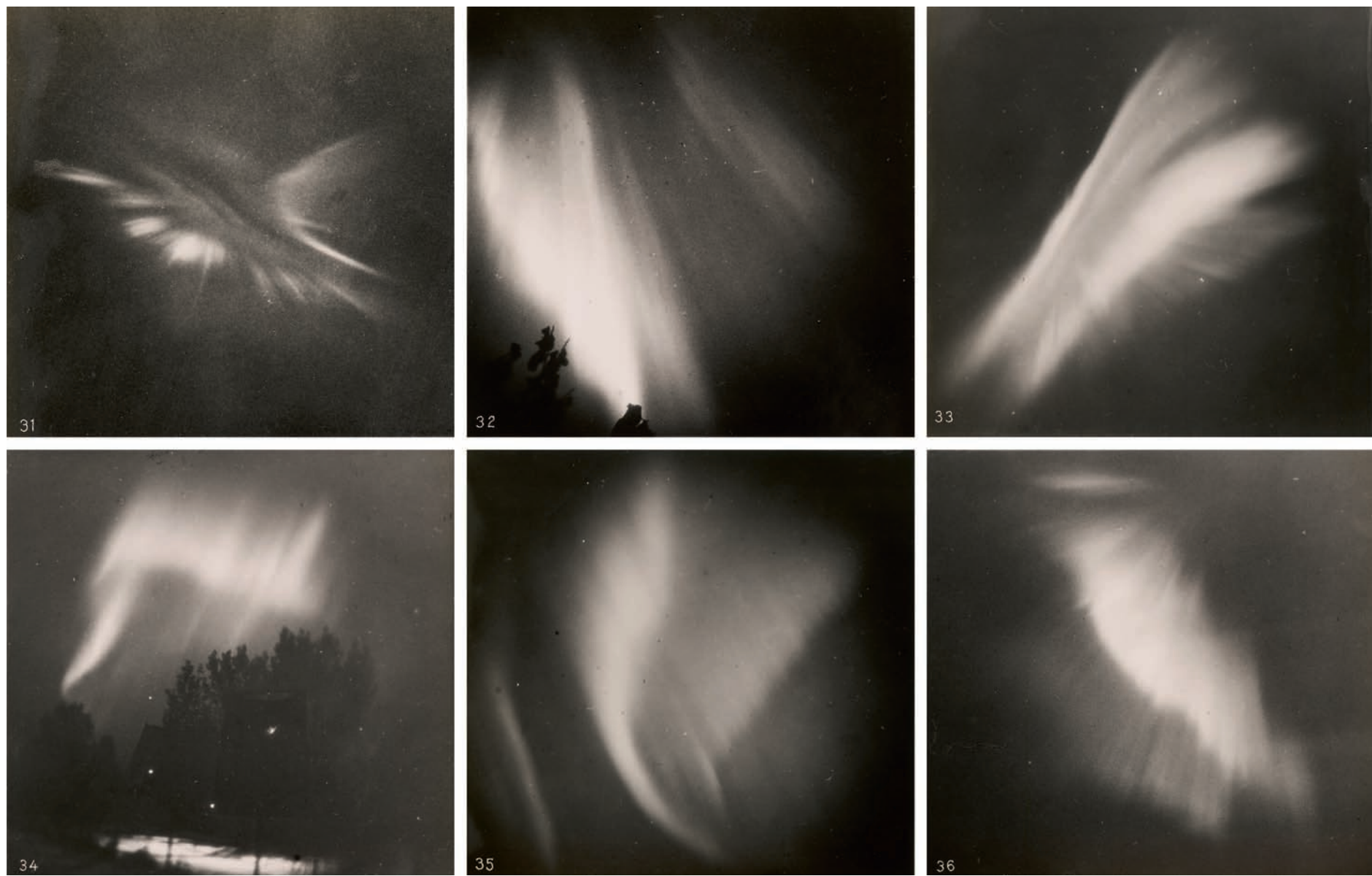
Shrouds of the Night
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Figure 4 [405]

“My mother was the one who told me that the girl arose; she put her hands into the wood ashes; she threw up the wood ashes into the sky. She said to the wood ashes: ‘The wood ashes which are here, they must altogether become the Milky Way ...’ Then, the people go by night; while they feel that the ground is made light. While they feel that the Stars shine a little. Darkness is upon the ground. The Milky Way gently glows; while it feels that it is wood ashes. Therefore, it gently glows. While it feels that the girl was the one who said that the Milky Way should give a little light for the people, that they may return home by night, in the middle of the night. For, the Earth would not have been a little light, had not the Milky Way been there. It and the Stars.”

“The girl thought that she would throw up (into the air) roots of the !hiun, in order that the !hiun roots should become Stars ... She first gently threw up wood ashes into the sky, that she might presently throw up !hiun roots ...” Bleek and Lyold elaborate: “She threw up a scented root (eaten by some Bushmen) called !hiun, which became stars; the red (or old) !hiun making red stars, the white (or young) !hiun making white stars. This root is ... eaten by baboons and also by the porcupine.”

One’s mind reflects back to the Middle Ages. What a foreboding sight the dancing Northern Lights, the Aurora Borealis (Figures 5 and 6), must have been, in an era when no scientific explanation was known. In Middle-Age Europe, the Northern Lights were thought to be reflections of heavenly warriors. As a sort of posthumous reward, the soldiers who gave their lives for their king and country were allowed to battle on the skies forever. The aurorae were believed by some to be the breath of these brave soldiers as they resumed their fight in the skies. The Old Norse word for the aurora borealis is *norðrljós*, “northern lights.” The first occurrence of the term *norðrljós* is in the book *Konungs Skuggsjá* (*The King’s Mirror*, known in Latin as *Speculum Regale*), written in 1250 AD, after the end of the Viking Age (the Viking Age dates ca. 800–1100 AD). In *The King’s Mirror*, the narration (as translated by L.M. Larson in 1917) between a Father and Son concerning the Northern Lights as seen by settlers in Greenland reads as follows:



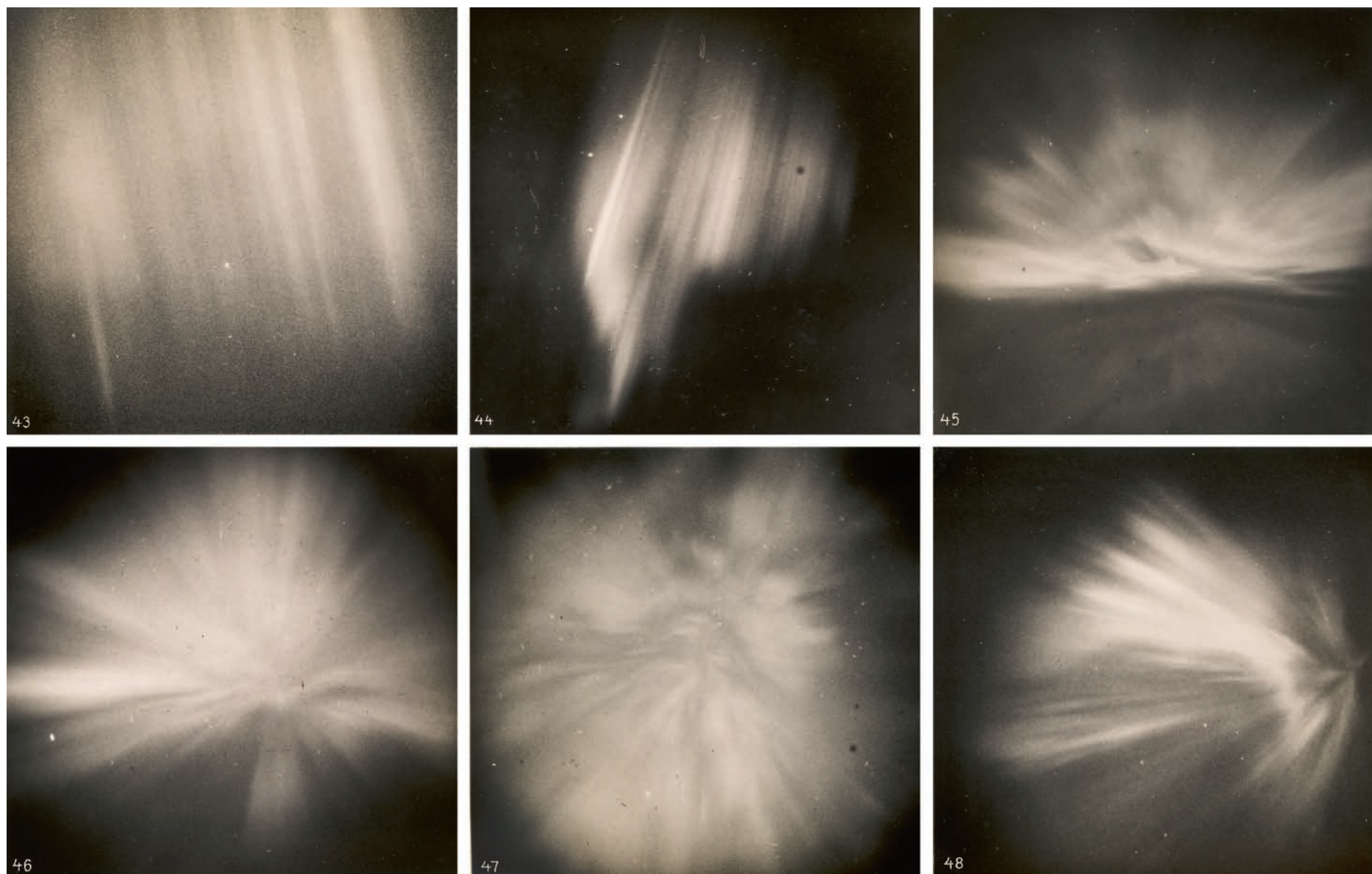


Figure 6 [405]

Father. *But as to that matter which you have often inquired about, what those lights can be which the Greenlanders call the northern lights, I have no clear knowledge. I have often met men who have spent a long time in Greenland, but they do not seem to know definitely what those lights are. However, it is true of that subject as of many others of which we have no sure knowledge, that thoughtful men will form opinions and conjectures about it and will make such guesses as seem reasonable and likely to be true. But these northern lights have this peculiar nature, that the darker the night is, the brighter they seem; and they always appear at night but never by day, most frequently in the densest darkness and rarely by moonlight. In appearance they resemble a vast flame of fire viewed from a great distance. It also looks as if sharp points were shot from this flame up into the sky; these are of uneven height and in constant motion, now one, now another darting highest; and the light appears to blaze like a living flame. While these rays are at their highest and brightest, they give forth so much light that people out of doors can easily find their way about and can even go hunting, if need be. Where people sit in houses that have windows, it is so light inside that all within the room can see each other's faces. The light is very changeable. Sometimes it appears to grow dim, as if a black smoke or a dark fog were blown up among the rays; and then it looks very much as if the light were overcome by this smoke and about to be quenched. But as soon as the smoke begins to grow thinner, the light begins to brighten again; and it happens at times that people think they see large sparks shooting out of it as from glowing iron which has just been taken from the forge. But as night declines and day approaches, the light begins to fade; and when daylight appears, it seems to vanish entirely.*

The men who have thought about and discussed these lights have guessed three sources, one of which, it seems, ought to be the true one. Some hold that fire circles about the ocean and all the bodies of water that stream about on the outer sides of the globe; and since Greenland lies on the outermost edge of the earth to the north, they think it possible that these lights shine forth from the fires that encircle the outer ocean.

Others have suggested that during the hours of night, when the Sun's course is beneath the earth, an occasional gleam of its light may shoot up into the sky; for

they insist that Greenland lies so far out on the earth's edge that the curved surface which shuts out the sunlight must be less prominent there. But there are still others who believe (and it seems to me not unlikely) that the frost and the glaciers have become so powerful there that they are able to radiate forth these flames. I know nothing further that has been conjectured on this subject, only these three theories that I have presented; as to their correctness I do not decide, though the last mentioned looks quite plausible to me. I know of no other facts about Greenland that seem worth discussing or mentioning, only those that we have talked about and what we have noted as the opinions of well-informed men.

Son. *Everything that you have told here seems wonderful to me, though also very instructive, and this fact most of all, that men, as you have pointed out, are able to leave the earth, as it were, and view for themselves the boundaries which God has drawn amid such great perils. Your last remark, however, suggests that there is yet a little matter to inquire about along this same line. In speaking of those three conjectures you said that you think it most likely that these lights have their origin in frost and ice; but just before in describing their appearance, you added that now and then fog and dark mist resembling smoke would mount up among these lights. But even if the cold should be so prevalent there as to give rise to these lights with their fire-like rays, I cannot help wondering whence that smoke can come which sometimes appears to shade and becloud the light till it seems almost quenched; for to me it seems more likely that the smoke is due to heat than to frost. There is one more thing that looks strange to me which you mentioned earlier in your speech, namely that you consider Greenland as having a good climate, even though it is full of ice and glaciers. It is hard for me to understand how such a land can have a good climate.*

Father. *When you say, in asking about the smoke that sometimes appears to accompany the northern lights, that you think it more likely that the smoke comes from heat than from cold, I agree with you. But you must also know that wherever the earth is thawed under the ice, it always retains some heat down in the depths. In the same way the ocean under the ice retains some warmth in its depths. But if the earth were wholly without warmth or heat, it would be*

one mass of ice from the surface down to its lowest foundations. Likewise, if the ocean were without any heat, it would be solid ice from the surface to the bottom. Now large rifts may appear in the ice that covers the land as well as openings in the ice upon the sea. But wherever the earth thaws out and lies bare, whether in places where there is no ice or under the yawning rifts in the glacier, and wherever the sea lies bare in the openings that have formed in the ice, there steam is emitted from the lower depths; and it may be that this vapor collects and appears like smoke or dark fog; and that, whenever it looks as if the lights are about to be quenched by smoke or fog, it is this vapor that collects before them.

We now have fully scientific explanations for the aurorae; they are generated as streams of high energy particles from our closest star, the Sun, enter the ionosphere of the Earth. The magnetic field of the Earth steers these particles toward the poles; hence the dancing cascades of lights in regions close to the poles, such as Greenland and Iceland. The brilliance of an aurora may be greatly enhanced when the Sun undergoes periods of increased sunspot activity. In earlier centuries, myths abounded as these foreboding aurorae displayed ever changing curtains of light and of glowing color.

So much in our heavens captures the imagination. From the aurorae dancing above the tundra, to our Galaxy – and to multitudes of galaxies beyond. Early drawings of the Night Sky show the arching Milky Way, with numerous cosmic veils or shrouds. While these were once believed to be vacant holes in the very fabric of space, we now understand that these veils contain matter, and are indeed enigmatic Shrouds of the Night.

Renowned Aboriginal artist Collette Archer (of the tribe Djunban in Far Northern Queensland, Australia) shares her thoughts:

Our people (Aboriginals) always use the stars to find their way on walkabouts during the nights. At the same time, this is also when all the bushtucker come out, Witchetty Grubs (high in protein), and honey ants (very sugary). Tracking of animals also best looked for on a night like this. Our people celebrate the full moon and dance with happiness. They always admire the stars as do myself.

From within the hearts of royalty (*The King's Mirror*) and shepherd alike, the canopy of the Milky Way has aroused the deepest of emotions.

One of South Africa's most celebrated veteran poets, Winifred Dashwood, vividly describes righteous souls triumphantly marching across the starry vaults of the *Via Lactea*.

Dashwood aptly utilizes the imagery of the Archer drawing his Bow amidst the rich star fields of Sagittarius, where stars appear as innumerable as the sand and where Shrouds of the Night abound.

Her poem is entitled "My Universe, My Home!" and reads as follows:

*Let no memory remain
Of the loved and lately lost.
Bury hope and joy and pain
In the grave where roses, tossed
From a tired and nerveless hand,
Bruise their petals on the clods.
Sullen clay or fickle sand
Hides the victim from the gods.*

*This is execution's stay.
Here must retribution end.
Prisoners freed on judgement day
Need no advocate nor friend.
Past the swinging stars they go,
Out of sight and out of mind
Past the Archer's blazing bow,
Leaving Betelgeuse behind.*

*Traipsing up the Milky Way
Swaying on oblivion's brink,
Dazzled by the rainbow day
Where new planets dance and sink.*

*Gliding down through fields of force,
Latticed by sidereal light,
Drink at Resurrection's source!
Burst the carapace of night!*

— (WINIFRED DASHWOOD PRESENTED THIS POEM TO COAUTHOR DAVID, ABOUT ONE YEAR BEFORE HER DEATH, AT AGE 84. THIS IS THE FIRST TIME THAT DASHWOOD'S POEM "MY UNIVERSE, MY HOME!" APPEARS IN A BOOK ON ASTRONOMY.)

Collette Archer's exquisite work on canvas, showing the setting Milky Way, with fiery meteors entering the Earth's atmosphere above, and the tracks of small creatures in the sand below, is seen in Figure 7. Let us now focus our attention on those smoky, black, dusty labyrinths permeating the space between those glowing heavenly jewels, the stars.



Figure 7 [405]



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Shrouds of the Night

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Galaxies

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