

BBC

DOCTOR WHO

COMBAT ROCK

MICK LEWIS



When 400-year-old tribal mummies inexplicably return to life and begin murdering tourists on an exotic alien island, the Doctor's initial urge to investigate lands himself, Jamie and Victoria right in the middle of a jungle holocaust.

Ferocious cannibals and deadly beasts stalk the swamps, mummies lurk amongst the trees and the peaceful, civilised locals are reverting to long-forgotten head-hunting practices. Something is giving a clarion call to savagery, something that can only be found in the deepest darkness at the heart of the hostile rainforest.

It could well be the end of the river for the TARDIS companions as they find themselves involved in a horrific jungle conflict between desperate guerrilla tribesmen and merciless colonial forces. Cannibalism could be the least of their worries as evil stirs the pot and the dead reach for the living...

This adventure features the Second Doctor, Jamie and Victoria.

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DOCTOR WHO

COMBAT ROCK
Mick Lewis

BBC

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Contents

Mercy

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

No Mercy

About the Author

Acknowledgements

For Wina

Mercy

‘Where is the man?’

Power-rifles glint in the jungle sunlight, dappled by leaves, spotted with sweat. Birds shrill and animals boom and rustle. A Kassowark nods through the bushes, comical coxcomb erect and purple, eyes staring with odd madness. It sees the men and is undecided whether to flee or attack. Its three-toed claws could unravel a man’s stomach with one kick. It stalks off, elusive, shy, deadly. The men do not even sense its presence. They are focusing on...

The woman, beside the stream, where it bends through the clearing, knotted with ripples, dancing with Crouch-flies. She washes the primitive crockery, keeping one eye always on her baby son, giggling on a tussock within arm’s reach. Her face is broad and brown, her eyes large, dark and always curious. There is a beauty in her that is reflected in the stream, the jungle, the colourful birds that stitch through the overhanging boughs. She is naked but for a grass skirt. She isn’t smiling, but her thoughts are warm and dwelling on good things.

Good things come to those who wait.

The soldiers emerge from the trees, weapons dangling casually, green combat clothes stained with their sweat and the sweat of the jungle. The leader swaggers forward, a loose grin on his face. The woman sees him now and instinctively gathers her son to her as the man approaches.

She stands. The soldier pushes her down on her haunches again with the muzzle of his power-rifle. He gestures with his head and the others make for the round thatch hut nestling on the far edge of the clearing. The leader waits patiently, eyes never leaving those of the woman. He is different from her, features more delicate, bone structure sleeker, similar to his men. His moustache glistens, as do his eyes. The men return

and the leader is displeased to see they are alone.

‘So where is the man?’ The question is to the woman. She stares back without answering, clutching her child. She is too proud to beg for mercy. The jungle is with her. The mountains beyond, are with her. The leader looks disappointed that she will not ask for mercy. He shifts the muzzle from her breasts to the forehead of the child, the child that has begun to cry. The question hangs in the air. He will not ask it again. She will succumb to his will.

The woman is silent. Slow tears track down her cheeks, but her eyes never flinch from those of the leader.

‘No mercy’ the leader says hollowly, as if pretending he has beaten her in this game, and, pushing the trigger with cold fury, knows he has lost.

Chapter One

‘How much further? My underwear is *dancing* with creatures.’ The plump woman in the garish Earth fashions scratched at her crotch demonstratively and lifted one leg in the air like an effeminate Sumo wrestler.

The guide rawked with laughter. ‘Not far, not far. But see all the lovely things along the way.’ He pointed at a yellow bird twitching on a branch above the narrow trail, its beak long and crimson and twice the size of its body.

The rest of the small group of tourists paused to marvel at the bird, which blinked stupidly at them and cocked its head to one side. It made a sound like a balloon deflating and then shifted to another branch with a delicate hop.

‘Didn’t come all the way to this sweathole of an island to see no *bird*,’ shrilled the Earth woman. She wiped sweat and mosquitoes off her brow and pulled her straw hat lower.

‘And I not bring you here to see birds,’ the guide said, leading the way forward again. He wove through the clutching leaves, hacking here and there with his machete where the jungle encroached too invasively for plump Earth woman passage. He paused frequently for his group to catch up. Seven of them in all. Earth woman and her companion – fat too, balding, dogged by a bad cough, both of them stomping through the rainforest as if determined to frighten every exotic creature from their path so as to be able to remain comfortably unimpressed by their journey.

The others: a rich Indoni businessman and his sinuous wife, exchanging the air con wrestling of corporate charades for the skinslick steaming of the most unexplored rainforest on Jenggel; a couple of satellite aliens with expensive cameras and the complacent air of born tourists – never seeming to be excited by anything, but restlessly snapping, snapping, as if

their lives depended on what they took home with them, stolen forever from the jungle and captured on holofilm; the last, a tall, silent man whose race or planet of origin the guide could not determine, but who seemed the keenest wildlife observer in the pack. The guide warmed to him the most.

‘Here be Kassowarks,’ he said dramatically, gesturing around at the broad green leaves and vines that surrounded them. Of course, the huge flightless birds were all long gone, thanks to the Fat Stompers, but it did no harm pretending.

The tall man’s eyes bulged with excitement. ‘Where?’ His blue jungle suit was obviously straight from a city, but he was genuinely interested in the flora and fauna the guide was trying to offer them.

‘I’ll kick their asses, if’n I see one of ‘em,’ Plump Lady boomed and her husband tightened his belt as if in aggressive agreement. ‘Where’s the bloody village?’

‘We there,’ the guide said slowly, and stepped under a fat snake zigzagged with migraine colours that arched down from the vines above. The businessman’s sexy wife saw it and gasped. The guide was tempted to hold her small brown hand to comfort her, but something deterred him. Instead he prodded the snake with his machete until it rolled further up the nearest bole and disappeared into green. He stepped aside and ushered the tourists to precede him. They did so, albeit gingerly, as if expecting the snake to drop around their shoulders like a fat, colourful arm.

The clearing revealed a small cluster of mushroom-like thatched huts, embraced by a circular wall of bamboo. The guide led them towards the gate, and stepped inside the compound.

‘Oh my God, will ya lookit that,’ the woman rasped and squealed with laughter. Two men were emerging from the largest central hut to welcome them. The reason for the woman’s amazed delight was obvious to all the tourists: the men were completely naked but for long, thin, hollow vegetable gourds that were tied around their waists by string and positioned securely over their penises. Their features were similar to those of the guide: broad, animated, their hair tight and curly where it showed under net-like hoods. The delicate

Indoni woman backed away a step as the two villagers approached. The guide met them warmly, embracing each in turn.

The two tourists with the sophisticated holocameras commenced snapping rapidly but dispassionately. The plump woman was still giggling. Her fat spouse stood with his belly heaving over his belt and said nothing. He was probably dreaming of somewhere cool and distant, maybe even dreaming of what he could do with the Indoni woman, or maybe what he could do with his wife and a machete. The guide surveyed them with a mischievous smile. Then he relented, and gave them what they had come to see.

The two villagers retreated back inside the large hut, to re-emerge a moment later carrying a shrivelled figure perched on a wooden stool. The plump woman wobbled forward, sunglasses slipping down her beaky nose as she stooped to peer more closely. The villagers set the black figure down on the earth, its withered knees drawn up under its hollow chin. The arms, thin as rope, hung down on either side of the stool. The mouth hung open in a deathless scream, a tunnel without teeth. The eye sockets were dry and huge. The net hat looked bizarre on the corpse, as did the penis gourd rearing up from the bundle of smoked skin and bones.

‘Mumi...’ the guide said proudly.

The cameras clicked and whirred.

The plump woman reached out an inquisitive finger to touch the desiccated mummy, gingerly though, as if fearing it might reach out an inquisitive finger to touch her too.

‘Mumi...’ the guide said again.

The woman turned round to grin at her husband. Behind her, a twitch. A twitch of one leathery hand. Then stillness again. Somewhere a bird shrieked with jungle alacrity.

The cameras.

Klick. Whirr.

Red sand, and purple sea. On the beach a box. Tall, odd, battered and blue. A light on the roof winked and faded. It should not have been there, this time and space-weathered thing, but it was, and no doubt had been in more incongruous

locations than this crimson shore. The door was opening, and a young man emerging. The young man was stocky and healthy-looking, with a slight stoop and a rather incurious expression beneath the long, slightly unkempt hair. His initial suspicious look evaporated when he saw the sea, the sand and the cluster of palms nodding in a slight warm breeze just behind the box. He was wearing a tartan kilt and a slightly frilly shirt and gave off a general impression of being ready for just about anything. He turned and called to someone inside the box.

‘Victoria! Come an’ have a wee paddle.’

Another face appeared around the door, but not the one the young man had expected. This face was lined and contoured by a life beyond strange, a facial map bursting with character and mystery. The eyes were dark, benevolent, childlike and slightly scary all at once. They were the most remarkable eyes that Jamie had ever seen, although it was not something the young Scot thought about too often, his attention span not being overly long, or his observations overly detailed. The ruffled black hair that topped the face lifted slightly in the sea breeze and the short, comical-looking man stepped out, exuberant in frock coat and baggy checked trousers, his shoes crunching joyfully in the sand.

‘Well, I must say, this makes a most welcome change. Wouldn’t you say so, Jamie?’ The Doctor looked around him with obvious satisfaction, as if the choice of location were entirely down to him.

‘Where are we?’ This was a new voice, and a new face, peering around the door of the TARDIS, like the Doctor’s a moment before. This was a pretty face, although maybe not beautiful. Long, full hair framed intelligent features and bright, inquisitive, although slightly wary eyes. She followed the other two out onto the scarlet beach, dainty in thin silken skirt and top. Jamie grinned as the breeze lifted the skirt to show her shapely thighs.

The Doctor smiled expansively and managed to look almost stupid as he struggled to come up with an answer. ‘Well, it seems almost to be... er, it could be –’

‘Och, he doesnae know,’ Jamie finished for him helpfully.

‘Well, let’s find out, shall we?’ the Doctor said, undeterred

by this lack of faith. He gazed up the beach past the palms towards a line of buildings in the near distance. The others stared in the same direction. The buildings looked inviting, even from this far away. Gaily coloured awnings flapped in the breeze, terraces were bursting with plant life of striking hues. They could see figures moving to and fro before open-fronted establishments.

The Doctor was already marching briskly over the sand towards the signs of life. Jamie shrugged at Victoria, glanced back once at the wine-coloured sea, endlessly shushing the beach, and followed.

Klick. Whirrrrr.

The plump woman barged past the two satellite photographers and posed in front of the mummy. ‘Hank! Take a shot of me in front of this thing, will ya!’

‘The Mumi four hundred rain seasons old,’ the guide was saying, eyeing the plump tourist with a slight smirk. ‘He celebrated chieftain of this village and so preserved by his children in honour of his name.’

‘Preserved how?’ This came from the tall man in the blue safari suit, his eyes bulging with fascination. With his white hair spindling up at odd angles, bright, protuberant eyes and hooked nose, he resembled one of the exotic birds he was so keen on observing in the jungle.

‘Smoked over fire,’ the guide replied with a grin. He was standing behind the ring of tourists and smoking a cigarette imported from one of the nearer satellite planets colonised long ago by Earth. Illegally imported, as cigarettes had been banned hundreds of years earlier on all Earth colonies, although Jenggel held out against such restrictive laws, and was likely to do so for some considerable time now that the Earth-Indoni war had run its course. One of the villagers was smoking too, standing proudly behind the Mumi, his penis gourd jutting out bizarrely from his brown body.

‘He preserved to give spiritual guidance to his people in their dreams,’ the guide continued. Plaintive bird cries drifted from the jungle pressing around the village. The guide took another drag on his cigarette.

‘And to provide lucrative tourist income as well.’

The guide’s eyes widened slightly. It had been the Indoni businessman who had spoken. He did not turn to the guide but continued staring at the Mumi as the plump woman posed for her husband to snap her.

The guide sucked deeply on his cigarette before replying. ‘It is lucky for us your people colonised our lands and provided opportunities for such welcome prospects.’

This made the Indoni turn. He was a good foot taller than the guide, his clothes well cut and strong, unlike the worn garments of the local man. The Indoni smirked. ‘You Papuls would be lost without our civilising influence, it’s true.’

The guide smiled slightly.

‘It moved!’

The scream made them all jump. The fat Earth woman backed into her husband’s belly so abruptly he dropped the holocamera. The Indoni businessman began to laugh. The plump woman turned to him, her face incredulous and scared. The Indoni stopped laughing.

The Mumi’s withered black hand was flexing its fingers. The head was lifting from its slumped position on the knees.

The woman screamed again.

The bazaars and cafes thronged with people. The Doctor and his companions were in a market square, gazing about at all the activity as if at a loss what to do next. Street hawkers had already tried to sell them a bewildering combination of items, from sunglasses, watches, seashells, to drugs, women and even men, that they had seriously begun to doubt the wisdom of venturing from the safe haven of the empty beach.

Evening was beginning to settle over the market town, although the temperature seemed to show no real sign of dropping. Shadows stretched across the dirt and litter and rotten fruit strewn around them. Jamie was eyeing a nearby bar with some interest. ‘What about a wee dram?’ he suggested eagerly. He was eyeing the girls inside the bar with even more interest. They wore pleasingly little clothing, and their dark skin looked smooth and inviting. He hoisted his kilt and turned to the Doctor.

The Doctor was surveying the array of nationalities and races milling around the square with as much interest as Jamie had displayed towards the bar and the girls inside. While there was a variety of travellers investigating the bazaars with an inquisitiveness that marked them as off-world, the majority of the population seemed to be thin-framed and dark-skinned. It seemed a safe deduction that the latter belonged to the indigenous race as all the bars, stalls and shops seemed to be manned by people with these traits. Black-haired and fine-featured, they filled the pavements and streets, generating a constant hullabaloo of activity and noise as they pursued their trade, or their pleasure. They wore a mixture of Earth-like apparel – old jeans, T-shirts – and vibrant blousons and loose silk garments, obviously more suited to the exotic locale. The girls that had caught Jamie’s eye and who were dancing inside the nearby open-fronted bar were more provocatively dressed. Victoria blushed at the lengths of thigh and cleavage that were revealed by short skirts and plunging tops. Jamie caught her reaction and nudged her, grinning.

‘Come on, let’s see if these lasses can show an old-fashioned matron like you a thing or two.’ Victoria pushed him in the back indignantly and turned to the Doctor for help, just as she always did when the young Scot was teasing her. The Doctor glanced over at the noisy bar and then smiled placatingly at Victoria.

‘Perhaps we’ll go somewhere a little more... er... quiet to have something to eat, Jamie,’ the Doctor said.

‘Och, Doctor...’ Jamie’s face fell. Now it was Victoria’s turn to smirk.

The Doctor patted his shoulder. ‘You join us later if you like, Jamie. Maybe you can find out exactly where we are while you’re about it, eh?’

Jamie beamed brightly, and then just as suddenly looked a little disconcerted. ‘But where are you two going, then?’

The Doctor looked around the busy square. Then he pointed to a terraced restaurant festooned with exotic plants. ‘Well, what about over there for something to eat, Victoria?’

Victoria followed his gaze. It didn’t look as exciting as the venue Jamie was planning on visiting, but at least her modesty

wouldn't be affronted. And she was more hungry than she'd realised too. She nodded her head and then frowned at Jamie as he waved cheekily before striding off towards the bar.

The Doctor called him back. 'You won't get very far without these...' Jamie looked at the small pile of coins the Doctor had fished from his voluminous pocket and took them from him eagerly. Then he paused as a thought struck him.

'Are you sure these will be all right?' He examined one of the mould-blue coins a mite dubiously.

The Doctor treated him to a conspiratorial smile. 'Have I ever let you down before, Jamie?'

It was a stupid question. 'Aye, loadsa times!'

The Doctor's face fell. 'Well, if you don't want them,' he said petulantly, reaching for the coins.

Jamie moved his hand so the Doctor couldn't retrieve them. 'Och, no. I'll trust you.' He turned towards the bar again.

'We'll be waiting for you, Jamie!' the Doctor called after his retreating back. Jamie waved again briefly and practically ran up the steps into the bar.

The Mumi's shrivelled head swivelled, staring at the tourists with no eyes. One bony arm lifted, pointing at the plump woman. For a moment the other tourists were convinced the keening scream was coming from her, despite its horrifying unearthliness. But the woman's mouth was closed for once, her ample bosom pumping up and down in her terror. An object flew from the Mumi's mouth – the tourist in the blue suit saw it clearly. It flashed across the space between dead thing and fat woman and then connected, coiling around her throat, an emerald green snake the width of a man's finger. Its fangs sheathed themselves in her bolster-like neck.

One of the satellite tourists dropped his camera and toppled backwards. His friend thought it was just from shock until he saw the snake hanging from his face, clinging to his forehead by its teeth. Another snake whipped from the Mumi's open mouth, fastening itself to the beautiful throat of the Indoni woman. Her husband caught her as she fell.

The plump woman was writhing on the ground, and her

skin had already transformed. Her face looked like a carnival mask – lurid green as if smeared with Halloween greasepaint, her mouth a clown grimace. Her wobbling husband wobbled over her, gut heaving, until a snake latched onto his bald patch and he followed his spouse to the grass.

The guide was already running. As he dashed for the gate leading out of the compound, he couldn't resist one look back, and saw the Indoni businessman screaming, screaming, then swallowing a snake that hurled itself from the Mumi's mouth. He went down, no longer screaming but choking. Blue Suit lay next to him, hands the colour of leaves that spasmed violently, and were still.

The surviving tourist backed away and tripped over the green-fleshed corpse of his friend. But the Mumi seemed to have finished its macabre attack. The villagers were on their knees before it now, quaking in terror. Others had emerged from the huts upon hearing the screams and chattered animatedly in their fear, staring from the scattered bodies to the Mumi, unmoving once again on its stool.

And then it spoke to them.

Hollow, echoing tones, as if dragged down the dusty halls of centuries, it spoke and then was quiet again. *'Children of the Papul. You are free. Free to kill. Free to regain what you have lost.'*

The head slumped forward on the skinny knees. From the jungle a bird shrieked endlessly.

Chapter Two

Jamie couldn't help smiling. He had just walked upstairs into Heaven.

Women everywhere. *Gorgeous* women everywhere. Jamie had never seen such exotic, beautiful creatures. Brown skin, perfect figures, long black hair, flashing eyes, white, white teeth glowing in the special lighting. Dancing, dancing. Jamie was looking, looking. He didn't know where to look next. There weren't many men with brown skin in the bar, only those who served the drinks, but there were a few obviously alien men with white skin, some with yellow, and one or two with scales that they'd obviously tried to tone down with foundation cream, now beginning to evaporate in the sweat of the nightclub.

Jamie leaned against the bar and wondered what to drink. He could see what looked like a bottle of whisky on a shelf above an array of fearsome-looking beverages, at whose alcoholic content he wouldn't even dare to make a guess. He gestured at the bottle and the barman pulled him 'a wee dram'.

The barman took the coin Jamie offered him and frowned at it. Jamie frowned too. Then the barman shrugged and tossed it into his till.

Jamie turned and watched the girls dancing. Thanks Doctor. He raised the glass to his absent companion. He'd actually done something right for a change and brought them somewhere decent. He wished Victoria were here so he could tease her about the lovely lasses cavorting around the dancefloor.

Cavorting wasn't the word. These girls knew how to dance. The music was unfamiliar to him, maybe a marriage of Earth-type rapid beats with more exotic alien instruments – och, he was no expert – but he had to admit it formed a

perfectly potent backdrop to watch the ladies perform their gyrations.

He sipped the drink and was even more satisfied to find it really *was* whisky.

He caught one of the girls, who was dancing like no-one Jamie had ever seen before, looking at him. She saw him notice her attentions and flashed the Scot *the* loveliest smile. He choked on his whisky, then regained his composure enough to smile back. The girl continued flinging herself around, almost flying, she was that agile.

Paradise.

Jamie felt more contented than he had in a long time. He couldn't take his eyes off the lithe girl on the dancefloor. She wore black trousers with a provocative, deliberate slit on one thigh, allowing a glimpse of smooth brown skin. She was wearing a tight black top, albeit more modest than most of the revealing clothes the other girls were sporting, and perhaps that was what drew his attention to her more. Her bare arms shone under the subdued lighting as she twisted. Her long dark hair flung itself around her face as she smiled at him again, and then she was beckoning to him.

Come and dance, Jamie, you gorgeous hunk of a Scot.

That's the message she was giving him; Jamie positively smirked back, drinking in her perfect features, the long face with cheekbones that made him ache, the dark, dark eyes promising delights that made the whisky glass shake in his hand. He put out one leg, lured by her, then withdrew it as self-consciousness returned to mock him. He couldn't dance to this stuff. He'd just make a show of himself. This wasn't clan music. He wouldn't know what to do. The girl would end up laughing. Just like Victoria always did.

The girl was waving at him again, her feet barely touching the floor as she danced. Jamie waved back, shaking his head; then, struck with inspiration, beckoned to her to join him at the bar instead. The girl laughed and continued dancing.

She'll come, he told himself. How could she resist? He was certainly the most eligible male specimen in the dance bar. He inspected the other masculine patrons and his complacent grin widened. Fat bellies, bald heads, spots – and

that was just the humanoids! His attention was arrested by a white man, maybe from Earth by the look of him, who was standing at the bar not far away, talking to a local girl. He was dressed in combat fatigues, had hair that was short and spiky, maybe in his late thirties. His nose was prominent with flared nostrils set below piercing eyes, both features giving him a distinct devilish appearance. He noticed Jamie looking at him and returned the compliment. Jamie glanced away hurriedly. He felt burned by the emptiness of the man's glance. A soulless stare, yet rampant with naked menace. Jamie felt sorry for the girl in a leather mini-skirt who was clinging to his arm, staring up at the man with a dazzling smile and a toss of her shining hair.

Jamie concentrated on his whisky and the dancing girl. He almost choked again when he realized she had stopped dancing and was walking towards him.

She stood beside him, not facing him. Waiting for him to make the first move.

'Er, hello,' the Scot spluttered. She immediately spun to confront him and her beauty made his heart stumble.

'Hello. What your name?' she said in halting English.

'Er, Jamie.' The words came out barely recognisable.

'Hello, Erjamie. Where you from?' She was extending a hand for him to take. He noticed the way it flexed backward nimbly and held out his own stiff and clumsy hand.

'No, just Jamie,' he corrected her, enjoying the feel of her soft, small hand as he shook it, and conveniently forgot to answer her second question – although judging from the number of obviously alien visitors to this planet, it wouldn't confuse her too much. Apart from maybe the bit about spinning through the cosmos in a police box. 'What's your name?'

'Wina,' she said softly. She seemed a little shy, and turned away from him again, while staying deliberately close to him and obviously waiting for him to make further conversation. He could tell from her proud expression that she knew she was beautiful, but was not arrogant or conceited about it. She was gorgeous in an entirely natural and innocent way. If only Victoria could see him now, he thought, and wondered how

long a man could remain grinning before it became a permanent fixture.

‘Would you like a wee drink?’ he asked her, and chuckled at her frown. ‘I mean, can I buy you a drink?’ She nodded happily and told him what to order.

At the bar he noticed the white man in fatigues had moved to stand next to him while he ordered his own drinks. They swapped glances again. The man’s eyes were green and the pupils huge. There was a violent madness there that made Jamie flinch away for the second time. The man chuckled, sensing Jamie’s weakness, and that made the Scot bristle. His never-ending grin faded.

‘You want see the rope bridges of Tangma? The grisly Mumis kept for hundred years, yes? You want see the tribesmen with their penis gourds?’

The man was of a different racial background to the majority of tradesmen and hagglers in the square, one after the other of whom had pestered the Doctor and Victoria as they sat on the restaurant terrace and tried to eat their meal.

The Doctor smiled warmly at the young man, handsome with his distinctive broad features and piercing eyes. He was obviously a rogue – the Doctor could tell that from the twinkle in the large, brown eyes and the too-wide grin, but he had a charisma that demanded attention.

‘The what?’ squawked Victoria. She looked from the haggler to the Doctor with saucer-wide blue eyes. The Doctor’s eyebrows lifted and he shovelled another forkful of some unidentifiable but very tasty sea creature into his mouth instead of replying.

The haggler seized his opportunity ‘Penis gourds, lady.’ His smile was one big flirt. ‘The people of my land wear them to – to show power in bed.’

Victoria was now a violent purple shade. She gaped at the Doctor in horror, waiting for him to defend her modesty against this rascal. The Doctor swallowed his mouthful and hastily intervened. ‘These Mumis sound rather interesting, don’t you think so, Victoria? Would you care to tell us about them?’ He gave the dark-skinned man one of his most

charming smiles.

‘Maybe you want Wemus show you them...’ The man was a born salesman, and was already taking an empty seat at the table, fishing a battered pack of cigarettes out of his pocket as he did so. Evening had descended and the square was alight with candles and strings of gaudy lights set above the stalls and shop fronts. ‘I promise strange sights and marvels.’

‘I wonder,’ said the Doctor with a childlike look of curiosity on his face. Victoria frowned, sensing trouble ahead. ‘Are these marvels far from here?’

Wemus grinned even more widely, and Victoria was amazed at how that was possible. ‘Mumis are in Papul, my homeland,’ he said proudly. ‘It is only a few hours journey by sea. We can go first thing tomorrow. I am official Papul Guide.’

‘Indeed,’ said the Doctor ingratiatingly. ‘And Papul is very different from, er, from... here...’ Victoria looked down in embarrassment. He was obviously fishing for some clue as to where in the Universe they were.

‘My... Uncle... is a hopeless amnesiac,’ she interjected quickly, as if the guide with his stained Earth-style T-shirt, old jeans and halting English would understand such a term. ‘He doesn’t know where he is half the time.’

Wemus sat back, pulling contentedly on his cigarette. ‘How you get to anywhere if you not know where you are?’ The idea seemed to amuse him. ‘But everyone know when they in Batu. It is island of pleasure.’

‘Batu...’ the Doctor repeated ruminatively. He was about to ask another question when he noticed two soldiers approaching the table.

They wore dark-green combat fatigues and had what appeared to be advanced pulse rifles slung over their backs. They were finer-featured than Wemus, though their faces were far less friendly as they stopped next to the guide. One of them shoved him on the shoulder quite brutally and said something in a language the travellers could not understand, but which was obviously antagonistic. Wemus spread his hands appetisingly and replied in a rather cowed, apologetic manner. The soldiers surveyed the Doctor and Victoria with hard,

mistrustful glares and then carried on across the square.

The Doctor watched them depart, noticing the obvious change in Wemus's demeanour. His smile had gone, and he was sitting slumped and subdued in his chair, gazing at the end of his cigarette as if he had forgotten the two travellers were there.

'I take it they are not friends of yours,' the Doctor asked gently.

Wemus looked up and there was a momentary hardness in his eyes that soon evaporated as he caught the Doctor's grave expression. Once again he was all smiles and charm.

'Oh, they are just Indoni military. No worry. So you want come Papul tomorrow, see the Mumis? I give good price.' It was evident he was hiding something under his false cheer.

'Indoni?' The Doctor was not about to let the subject drop. And what might they be exactly?'

Wemus looked behind his shoulder. A surreptitious gesture that might have meant nothing. 'They are the people of Batu and Javee and the other islands, except my island, Papul. But even there they rule. But come, meet with Wemus by the quay in morning. He take you good journey to see his home. You like very much, I think.'

'They didn't seem very friendly.' Victoria too had grown curious about the soldiers and their behaviour towards Wemus. He was trying so hard not to be concerned that he only drew attention to the matter more keenly.

Wemus smiled blandly. 'They invade Papul with their army.' Again, a quick glance over his shoulder. At the next table, a dark-skinned couple of the same race as the soldiers and the majority of the people they had seen were eating quietly. They didn't seem to be taking any notice of the Doctor, Victoria and the garrulous guide. 'But is not so bad. Some of us make good living. Tourists come to Batu and from Batt also to see my home land. Races from the skies too. Papul has much to offer the curious, and the Indoni allow them to come see.'

The Doctor leant forward. 'From the skies? Well, yes, I had noticed. I suppose many aliens come to Batu and Papul?'

'Aliens? You mean the Different Ones?' Wemus smiled,

and the twinkle had returned. This was obviously a disingenuous attempt to act parochial and unsophisticated. The Doctor wasn't fooled for a minute. 'Many strange peoples from the skies come. Some also come see Papul, to see primitive peoples and animal, so my people can make honest money from them. Like you come. You want see Papul, no?'

'We'd love to, wouldn't we Victoria?' The Doctor clenched his hands together and sat back, his face a picture of innocent delight. 'But first of all we'd like to know which planet we are on.'

Victoria winced. However, Wemus seemed only amused by her companion's eccentricity and not at all put out. 'You are on Jenggel, my friends.' He threw his cigarette butt away and patted the Doctor's arm. 'So maybe you want buy Wemus a drink and we discuss tomorrow, yes?'

The white man was looking at Wina.

Jamie could sense it as he handed the local girl her drink, and tried not to let it annoy him. It was natural the man should stare. Wina was the most beautiful girl in the club, and while the girl the older man was with was also very sexy, she was not in Wina's class.

The man was obviously aware of this, and did not like it. Not one bit.

Wina accepted her drink with a smile, looked down for a moment coyly, then caught his eye again, waiting. Jamie groped for words. He was not normally so inadequate when it came to chatting up the lasses. There was something about Wina that made him feel bashful. 'So what d'ye do here, Wina?' he asked in an effort to take control.

'I work in shop furniture,' she purred in reply, and Jamie melted at the way she rolled her R's. His rapture was pierced as he glanced sideways. He could see from the corner of his eye that the man in combat dress was looking at *him* now, and not in a pleasant manner. His female companion was trying to attract his attention and he was blatantly not listening. She tugged at him, and he slapped her. Not too hard, just a little cuff to make her stop. Jamie tensed. He did not want to stand by and watch that. His clan pride would not let him.

‘Wait a wee minute,’ he said to Wina and handed her his whisky glass to hold. She looked puzzled as he turned away and marched over to the spiky-haired man.

They confronted each other. The stranger did not look surprised to see Jamie approach. He smiled cruelly and contemptuously.

‘Yes, boy? What in Whore’s Hell do *you* want?’

He wore his sadness like a cloak. It went with him wherever he travelled. He didn’t know what he’d done to deserve this fate. Maybe it was because he’d killed. Let’s face it, he did precious little else. And he enjoyed killing; or at least, he always had done. So why should he be sad?

He remembered the boy he once was, and the first kill. Some hole of an educational institution for rejects in a carbon monoxide-saturated suburb on Earth. That was when he roamed with gangs – leader of the pack, of course. But his first kill (the best) had been in the institution itself. Dinner time behind the hover cart sheds. Smoking crack and feeling up the post-pubescent girls – he’d only been fifteen himself. One of the boys made some slur. Tried to fasten onto the whore he’d chosen for himself. Bad move. He’d used his cigarette lighter on him – the one with the flick blade. Burnt him and cut him. Let the other boys and girls see of course. Worth the stretch he did. Because he was bad.

Everyone had to know: he was bad.

From prison he’d worked space trawlers for a while, mainly so he could satisfy his penchant for whores of as many different racial and planetary origins as he could find. Whoring was his life. Apart from killing of course. What else was there? Whorin’, drinkin’, killin’...

Whores. Bless ‘em.

But inside there was always the sadness.

The man’s voice was brick-hard and tinged with an accent Jamie vaguely recognized. Somewhere from Earth. Maybe south-west. It didn’t matter.

‘You shouldnae treat the lasses that way.’ Was he mad? The man looked like he could tear Jamie apart with just his

thumbs. He knew Wina was watching, and that spurred his courage. Now the other girl was staring at him too, her hands still clutching the Earth man's arm. Her eyes lit up when she sensed the trouble that was obviously brewing. Her lips parted with excitement, showing perfect white teeth. Jamie tried not to look at her, attempting to stare out the taller man... who was laughing.

'Boy! I like your spirit. You've got balls. Now go on back to your mummy before I hurt ya.'

Jamie stretched himself to his full height, which was still a good few inches shorter than his opponent. 'I'm just asking you to be a bit more careful with yon lass here. That's all.' He was damned if he was going to back away. The skein dhu in his ankle sock suddenly felt very reassuring.

'Pan, he just a boy.' This was from the girl clinging to the older man. Jamie glared at her indignantly.

'I'm no boy, lass!' he boomed with as much machismo as he could manage.

The man called Pan scratched his chin with a mocking smirk on his face. 'You don't want me to kill him?' he asked the girl, never taking his eyes off Jamie.

The girl caressed his arm soothingly. 'He only trying protect me, I think.'

'All the more reason to strip him down to the bone, cheeky young cock.'

'I'm no' scared o' you, ye bully!' Jamie retorted, clenching his fists.

'Please no fight. Jamie, come dance with me.' He turned and Wina was beside him, mirroring Pan's girlfriend by putting her hand on the young Scot's arm. Jamie looked at her uncertainly.

'Hey, whore!' Pan growled at Wina. 'You want to try out a real man and not just a kid in a dress?'

Jamie would have swung his fist, but Wina threw herself between the two. Pan was laughing again, and the laugh followed Jamie as he allowed himself to be dragged reluctantly to the far side of the nightclub.

'I should have whacked the sassenach!' he grumbled furiously. 'He had no right to call you that.' His anger abated

slightly when Wina took his hand in hers. 'Please no trouble with this man. Not good man. Always fighting, fighting. Always with bad women.'

'Aye, well, he'd just better watch himself,' Jamie said, flexing his shoulders defensively and glancing back across the club as Wina led him to a table. He sat down with his new-found companion opposite. Just looking at her made him regain his good mood. She was a rare beauty and no mistake. He wondered again what Victoria would make of her, and if the two would get on. There was something ageless and mysteriously exotic about the dark-skinned girl, although she couldn't be that much older than Jamie himself. Maybe in her early twenties. So natural and unselfconscious as opposed to the propriety and mannered behaviour of poor old Victoria. Not that he held it against his travelling companion of course. He loved her like a sister. She couldn't help her strait-laced Victorian upbringing, and she'd certainly been through so much personal hardship and tragedy that he'd never in a million years begrudge her her slightly prim ways. But Wina was such a refreshing change...

Pan flung his companion's arm away as if she was diseased and furiously strode over to the bar. He should have torn that little sprat apart. And then dragged the boy's whore off to his own bed. Now he looked stupid, as if he'd let the younger man get one over on him. His girl followed him to the bar. He rounded on her.

'What d'you *want*?' he bellowed. 'Always following me like a dog. Go find yourself someone else to worry, you hooker.'

The girl's dark eyes flashed dangerously. 'Santi no working girl!' she spat. 'Why you say like that?'

'Get away from me before I do something you'll regret.'

'Big man! Always the big man! Santi knows you not so bad really. You love Santi.' Her face was hard with her own anger now. She was only small, but a wildness flared in her features that made Pan hesitate from delivering the blow he was about to dole out.

'Love? You stupid whore... listen to yourself! I've only

known you a week. I love what you do in my bed and nothing more, and I can easily find plenty of that elsewhere.’ He spun away from her, and lo and behold, further along the bar to his right a cute Indoni girl with a short, stylish haircut was giving him the eye. He grinned back and raised his drink. Santi watched helplessly as he marched up to join the girl, fighting back her tears of shame and fury.

Jamie saw it all. He was trying not to look over at the older man, but Santi’s theatrical actions were hard to miss. Wina was watching too, and a slight smile played across her lips when she saw Pan approach the new girl.

‘Bad man,’ she said to Jamie pointedly.

‘Aye, an’ she’s better off without him, I’d say.’

Wina looked a little put out. ‘Why you care? You like this girl?’

‘Which girl?’ Jamie scratched his head in puzzlement, feeling as though he was missing something somewhere. ‘Och, no. I just don’t like bullies that’s all.’ She frowned at the word and Jamie laughed. He decided to buy them both another drink rather than get involved in a laborious explanation of the expression. As he got up he could see the rejected Indoni girl make her way desolately over to a seat at the far corner of the long bar from where she watched her former companion flirting with his new consort.

‘You Mafiaaaa...’

Pan lit his cigarette and looked at the girl. She wasn’t as pretty or as sleek as Santi, but what the hell. She would keep his bed warm tonight, and maybe without so much constant jabbering as his last woman. She had big eyes and big lips and a round face with a slightly flat nose. Cute, sexy, but no real prize. Not like that other one... the one with the boy. He dragged on his cigarette angrily and realized the girl he was with – what had she said her bloody name was? Oh yeah... Kety, not that it made any difference to him, he would have forgotten her by tomorrow – was saying something to him.

‘You Mafiaaaa...’

‘What?’

‘Mafia number one,’ she hissed, gazing up at him with

something like awe.

‘Yeah, whatever. Why d’ya think I’m Mafia?’

‘My friend say you Mafiaaa. Maybe bad man.’

He grinned. ‘And you like bad men?’

‘Bad men pay well’ Her turn to grin.

He caressed her bottom. ‘Depends.’

She cocked her head on one side, and Pan could see Santi sitting dejectedly at the bar gazing at him. He chuckled and drew sensuously on his cigarette, just for her benefit.

‘I not understand.’ Kety helped herself to a cigarette from Pan’s pack. He considered cuffing her for her forwardness, then relaxed and grinned again. And hell, here he was actually *lighting* her cigarette. Perhaps he was more of a gentleman than he’d ever figured. Or perhaps he just liked whores.

Bless ’em.

‘Depends how much and what I get for it.’ He smirked at Santi and put his arm around the prostitute.

‘You Mafiaaa...’ she repeated, scrunching up her nose in an expression half cute, half ugly.

‘Yeah,’ he said and dragged her towards the door, feeling Santi’s gaze on him all the way across the club. ‘I’m a bad man all right.’

Jayapul. The town that when it does sleep, always has bad dreams. Shanty town blues, and curfew misery. The Indoni army patrolled the filthy walkways and squares looking for sedition, or anything they didn’t like the look of. Power rifles slung on their backs, boots clacking demonstratively. Anyone with sense got out of their way.

The streets were dark, the stars buried. A child cried somewhere in the stacked hutches the local Papul used for houses. One of the soldiers flipped his gun down off his shoulder, swung it towards the origin of the sound, playfully wondering what might ensue if he let loose a pulse into the grubby iron shed where he knew a family was cowering at that very moment. He smirked and did a little trot forwards, swinging the weapon clownishly. His friends watched him impassively, bored of the nightly routine. He’d kill something, that was for sure.

Tonight it was a Hortog. Squealing red livestock belonging to some Papul farmer who'd probably brought it to the troubled island's capital in the hope of trading it. The soldier saw it leashed up outside a shack that was tipping over into the river behind. He snorted with glee, sensing the animal's fear. The creature was half the height of the soldier, covered with red fur. One long tusk reared up from its prominent snout. Its hooves clicked nervously as it strained against its leash, foretelling its own doom.

The owner emerged from the dark of the falling-down shack. A native Papul, wearing only filthy shorts imported from Batu. He was terrified, but knew he must make some effort to save his beast – and the potential source of food for his family back in the jungle for at least two, three weeks.

He said something in the Papul language, and placed his hands together in a universal gesture. The soldier turned to his companions as if silently conferring with them what he should do. They simply stood there looking bored. The soldier levelled his pulse rifle at the Hortog and sent a searing, lightning-coloured bolt between its eyes. It hit the dirt, kicking.

The Papul looked up at the soldier, face inscrutable. Slowly he unclasped his hands. The soldier nodded at him slowly, as if moving his head to some silent music. Then he slung his weapon over his shoulder and ambled off, followed by the rest of the squad.

Dawn. The beasts that welcomed the coming of the sun, did so now, and did so noisily.

So noisily, they woke up Pan.

His eyes flicked open. For a moment he thought he was back in the tattoo parlour. Now why in Whore's Hell would he be thinking about that? There were no garishly coloured artist examples on the walls. No sound of laser needles. Only drab hotel-room walls and the animals yodelling at the breaking of day.

He felt warm, naked skin next to his own, and turned around. There was a whore sleeping next to him, snoring slightly. Then what had happened to Santi? He trawled through

his drunken memories and the result tipped his mouth into a grin.

Oh yeah.

He fumbled at the side of the bed for his cigarettes, lit one and piled the pillow up behind his head while he smoked it. Only just dawn, and it was already stifling in the small room, which stank of sweat and sex. The puny fan turned desultorily on the ceiling. The whore – what was her name? (did it matter?) – stretched out a sleepy foot to rub his leg. He moved his leg away, irritated. Wasn't it time she took off? He always hated the morning after. He tried to remember the lines of an old song he'd always loved. 'Stay with me, stay with me, tonight you better stay with me. Just don't be here in the mornin' when I wake up. Or something like that.

His head ached. He was hot. He was bothered. The whore smelt slightly, and she wasn't as sexy as Santi. Still, she'd amused him last night. When he'd got her in bed and demanded how much she wanted, she'd blinked up at him with those big eyes of hers and told him, 'You Mafiaaaa... I like your face. I do for free.'

Yeah, that had been amusing. Last night, anyway.

She was stretching. Blinking sleepily at him, rolling over to face him. He could smell drink on her breath and cigarette smoke. Santi didn't drink or smoke. But that didn't make her much of a better prospect.

Why was he always plagued with whores?

She stretched out a hand to touch his. He shook it off, as it was the one holding the cigarette. He inhaled deeply. Just don't speak, bitch.

'You Mafiaaaa...' she croaked, smiling in what she obviously thought was a seductive manner.

Pan turned to her. Looked her in the eyes for a moment.

'You said that once too often,' he said, and reaching down to his jacket slung on the floor beside the bed, pulled a Pulse Luger from its pocket holster and blew a neat hole through her forehead.

He stepped into the shower, which spat intermittent gobs of cold water at him. The tattoos on his arms ran with grime from the jet. He cursed and left the stall dirtier than he'd been

before he entered it. He climbed into his combats, laced up his boots and stuffed his Luger back into his jacket. Sweat was already shifting in his hair as he climbed down the stone steps to the hotel reception.

Santi was waiting for him there. She fixed him with a baleful stare.

‘So,’ she said as he dropped his keys off at the counter. ‘You go with other girl?’

He frowned at her, as if trying to work out what she was saying, or why she was bothering him with such stupid talk at this time of the morning. Did he need this shit? The sun was already up and blasting the exotic, palm-bedecked courtyard of the hotel. He pulled his sunglasses from a pocket, fitted them gratefully over his eyes.

He patted her cheek and snorted derisively. ‘I like your face,’ he said in a cruel imitation of Kety’s pidgin English, ‘I do for free.’ Santi cracked a hand across his cheek with instant fury. His sunglasses flew across the pavestones.

Pan’s face reddened. His hand snuck inside his jacket. Santi stood her ground, obviously realizing she’d gone too far but refusing to back down. He forced himself to regain his composure. After all, the Hotel Manager was watching timidly from behind the counter. He turned round to scan the courtyard, checking whether anyone had seen the incident, then bent to retrieve his shades. He smirked, winked at his former girlfriend and strode out of the foyer into the street.

‘I think we really should go and look for him, Doctor. He’s been gone for hours.’

The Doctor sipped some imported tea and blinked up at the early morning sun. ‘Only a few actually, Victoria. They seem to have very short nights here. But even so, you’re absolutely right. As soon as we’ve finished our breakfast we’ll go and find him, although if I know Jamie, he won’t appreciate being hunted down when he’s enjoying himself.’ He smiled apologetically when Victoria gave him an affronted look. ‘I’m sure he’s capable of looking after himself, especially when there are young ladies around.’

Victoria huffed and drank some of her tea.

‘Morning already is it?’

She looked up, startled. Jamie was standing just behind her, looking a little bleary and more than a little drunk. A dark-skinned local girl was next to him, returning Victoria’s incredulous gaze with proud stoicism.

‘Ah, Jamie, there you are!’ the Doctor greeted him happily. ‘Victoria was worrying about you.’

‘Och, well she’s no need. I’m perfectly capable of looking after meself.’

‘Yes,’ the Victorian girl said icily. ‘I can see that. Well, are you going to introduce us to your... friend?’

Jamie grinned at Wina bashfully, a grin which became rather more sheepish under Victoria’s indignant stare. ‘Er, this is Wina. I met her upstairs in the dance bar. Wina, these are my friends: Victoria and the Doctor.’

‘Hello my dear!’ the Doctor said warmly, rising from his chair and giving her a dazzling smile. He looked so comical with his disarming grin and childlike, impish eyes under the ruffled mop of hair that Wina couldn’t resist giggling as he shook her hand.

Victoria received the Indoni’s hand decidedly less enthusiastically, both girls exchanging mutual wary glances.

‘Well, I’m glad you’ve finally turned up, Jamie, because we’ve arranged to go on a little trip that promises to be very interesting indeed. I – ‘

‘A trip,’ interrupted Jamie, waking out of his sleepy haze rather quickly. He could tell from the Doctor’s barely subdued excitement that his companion was up to something. Whenever the Doctor got excited about anything it invariably meant trouble. ‘What have you got us into now, Doctor?’ His exasperation was all too evident. He had been looking forward to spending a few days here in Wina’s company, now that the Doctor had actually pulled a rabbit out of the hat, or even the TARDIS, and brought them somewhere appealing.

‘I would have thought you’d show a little more interest, Jamie!’ the Doctor retorted grumpily, his face falling like a child whose party game is not being appreciated. ‘And especially after we’ve been waiting all night for you. Ah,’ he said, standing up and turning to greet a broad-featured man

dressed in stained white T-shirt and jeans who was marching towards their table. 'Here's Wemus now.'

Jamie shook hands with the guide warily. As he did so, Wina twined one slender arm around his, which improved his mood considerably. 'All right, Doctor. Ye'd better tell us what we're in for now.'

While the Doctor informed the Scot of the details of their imminent expedition to Papul, Victoria watched Wina closely. The local girl obviously noticed the scrutiny because she flashed Victoria a 'back off' glare that only made Victoria more determined to interrogate her.

'Do you work in Batu?' she said with a tight little smile. Wina smiled back with an exaggerated friendliness that telegraphed her refusal to be intimidated only too well. 'Yes.' She evidently wasn't going to give too much away. But then, Victoria wasn't going to give up that easily either.

'Are you from this island?'

Wina looked decidedly wary at this question. She was quiet for a moment and then, obviously coming to a decision, replied: 'No. From Javee. It is next island west of Batu.' Her gaze held Victoria's steadily and there was a defiance in the set of her jaw as if she was ready and willing to argue the point, which Victoria frankly found puzzling.

Wemus overheard the conversation. He spoke to Wina briefly in a native tongue. What he said obviously upset her because he subsequently gave her a placatory grin and held his hands up in an apologetic manner that was bordering on the obsequious.

'What's the matter?' Jamie turned away from the Doctor, noticing the change in Wina's demeanour.

'Oh... I sorry,' said Wemus, smiling, smiling. 'I say wrong thing to your friend. Not all girls from Javee bad, I very sorry.'

Victoria pounced on this. 'Girls from Javee are bad? In what way?'

Wina was furious. She turned away abruptly and when Jamie tried to put an arm on her shoulder she shook it off angrily. He pointed a finger at Wemus, angry himself now 'What was that all about?' he demanded.

Wemus looked as though he wished he'd kept his mouth

shut. 'I sorry, I sorry.' he repeated hastily.

'Many girls from Javee come to Batu to find men with money.'

It was Wina who had spoken, still with her back to them.

'But I never like that. I just like dancing, dancing.'

The Doctor came forward to try to alleviate the situation. He took hold of Wina's hand gallantly. 'I'm sure Wemus meant no harm, my dear.' She turned slowly, won over by his charm. His childlike smile coaxed one from her too.

'Aye, well, he better be careful what he says next time,' Jamie huffed, eyeing the small guide threateningly.

'Perhaps Wina would like to accompany us on our little expedition,' the Doctor continued, releasing her hand and clasping his own two together. The Indoni girl glanced at Jamie, then at the beaming Doctor again.

Jamie, who had still not been convinced up to this point of the need for any expedition, leapt at the idea. 'Aye, lass. Would ye no care to join us?'

He could see from the happy smile that flitted across her face that she was only too happy to accept the offer, but before the Indoni girl could answer, a cry interrupted them.

Jamie didn't understand the language, but the intent was obvious, because a large rotting vegetable followed the shout, both coming from the same direction. It missed his head by inches and splattered on the stucco wall of the restaurant behind him. He gaped as the girl from the nightclub came hurtling after the vegetable, obviously intent on doing him severe harm with her long nails. He caught her by the wrists and held her away from him while Victoria watched in amazement and the Doctor hopped from one foot to another.

She was still wearing the same revealing clothes as the night before and obviously, like Jamie and Wina, had had no sleep, which only served to intensify her rage. She screamed at him in a local tongue, writhing like a snake in his grip.

Wina snapped out of her shock. She advanced on the struggling girl, shouting back in the same dialect.

The Doctor tried to intervene. He stepped towards the furious Indoni, offering a small purple fruit from the table. She finally managed to get free from Jamie's clutches and

smacked the fruit out of the Doctor's hands. She followed this up by smacking Jamie, hard, across the face. Jamie reeled backwards, at a loss what to do. Wina then smacked Santi, equally as hard, and the two Indoni girls launched into each other, tearing, pulling at each other's hair, snarling, yelping.

Victoria's mouth gaped open as she watched.

This time the Doctor was more effective. He pulled at Santi's skirt from behind until she fell backwards into him, sending them both sprawling in the dirt. Jamie managed to grab a hold of Wina's arms and clung on manfully until her struggles ceased. Victoria noticed with some embarrassment that a crowd of early-morning tradesmen had gathered, with no little amusement, to watch the spectacle.

The Doctor regained his feet, brushing dust off his baggy checked trousers. Then he bent and helped Santi up, wary of another burst of volatility. But the fight had gone from Santi now. She held onto the Doctor's hand and her face crumpled. Whining sobs emerged from her.

'It looks like you had a very successful night indeed, Jamie.' Victoria said rather smugly, taking a sip from her tea.

Jamie looked at her in obvious confusion. 'I just tried to help yon wee lassie, that's all.' He looked to Wina for support. She merely shrugged and turned her head away haughtily.

'There, there, my dear.' The Doctor was doing his best kindly uncle act. It wasn't helping the inconsolable Santi. He frowned, and then brightened as an idea struck him. He withdrew his recorder from a pocket and began tootling imbecilically on it. At first, Santi stared at him incredulously as if he were mad. Then her face split into a broad grin and her eyes lit up with joy.

'Aye, well, that thing obviously has its uses sometimes, I suppose.' Jamie commented grudgingly. He approached Santi, who gave him a filthy look. The Doctor put his recorder away. 'But why did ye attack me, lass?'

Santi looked as if she were in danger of whining again, but resisted the urge. 'You make Santi's boyfriend leave her,' she hissed. 'Now Santi all alone.'

'Well, Jamie, it seems like you enjoyed a very busy little Highland fling last night, doesn't it?' Victoria was delighted at

both her own wit and the look of embarrassment on her companion's face. She was suddenly struck with inspiration – and was even more delighted at the mischievous impulse that drove her to ask: 'Perhaps you can make up for causing so much misery by inviting your *other* friend to accompany us to Papul?' She resisted looking at Wina as she spoke, but knew the girl would be bristling. Which was, of course, exactly why she had made the invitation.

Jamie looked helpless; the Doctor dithered for a moment, glancing between Santi and Wina, but then his innate chivalry came to the fore and he beamed at Santi.

'I think that's a rather splendid idea. Would you care to join us on our little expedition?'

Santi wiped drying tears from her cheeks and looked at these strangers – this very odd bunch of people who had interrupted the flow of her life so dramatically. She thought about the offer for a moment. She thought about Pan. If she stayed here, she would see him every night, and that would only make her feel worse. She saw the amused faces of the slowly dispersing crowd. They would remind her of her humiliating outburst only too often in this small community. Lastly she looked at Wina. The Indoni's expression positively dared her to accept the Doctor's offer.

She smiled.

'Santi come.' she said, and there it was. As simple as that. It was so easy to change your life.

Chapter Three

It was hot. Sweating, headache, dry-throat, no-air hot. But then it always was on Baru, apart from the rainy season, and even then the rain only lasted for approximately one hour every day.

It was so hot, he could barely think.

He staggered towards a cafe where a bright-red awning promised some little relief from the evil sun. It looked private enough as well: he was the only customer. He ordered a beer from the Indoni waiter and when the little man had disappeared back inside the dark bowels of the cafe, he took a small device from his pocket and thumbed a stud on the side.

A small screen blinked up, a repeated message rolling across the surface. He grunted softly, but he had been expecting this. It had only ever been a matter of time.

Locate and terminate.

No problem, he grinned to himself and killed the message.

‘You’re late. Sabit the Rabbit’s got a brief for us.’

Pan frowned at his colleague as he entered the stationary cruiser. He swung himself into a cabin seat and lit a cigarette. He didn’t bother answering Clown, who really didn’t care either way and merely stepped towards the cabin console and flicked the intercom on.

A monitor popped into life and the face of the Indoni President appeared. The image flicked with recorded abstractions, but the voice was clear.

‘Special operations on Papul are urgently required.’ There was no greeting, but then not one of the seven men seated in the sweaty cruiser had expected one. ‘An incident has occurred involving an expedition of tourists,’ the President continued, his moustache lifting slightly as he sniffed. His was

a face you could easily dislike, and if Pan had been a stupider man, he would have wondered how such an eminently untrustworthy-looking man as Sabit could ever have been elected President of Indoni. But then Pan was certainly not stupid, and well versed in the corruption of Jenggel's biggest superpower. Election? Democracy? Not today, thank you. Something for which Pan was not a little grateful; it helped him fill his boots nicely.

President Sabit's eyes were black and very small, made to look smaller by the predatory beak of a nose that hooked down towards a lizard mouth. He was every inch the picture of an evil dictator. He was a living cliché; but a very dangerous one, and one Pan and his colleagues had learned not to underestimate. Pan exhaled smoke towards the screen while the rest of his wild bunch listened with casual interest.

The Wild Bunch. The Dogs. The Kill Crew. The Pack. They went under many names.

There was Clown: the right side of his mouth curled up into a permanent smile by the knife scar that gave him his name. The scholar of the bunch, he tended to distance himself from his colleagues by immersing himself in philosophical texts. Rimless eyeglasses gave him a distinctly demented appearance.

There was Pretty Boy: bisexual, deadly, always wore black lace over his shining black leather; eyes underscored with just a little touch of liner. But call him effeminate and it would be the last thing you ever did. And yes, he *was* pretty. Dyed black hair thick and wavy, cheekbones raw but sleek, a sensuous mouth, and not a scar on him.

There was Bass: light-brown hair slicked back with oil, cigarette tucked behind one ear, always wore dated sleeveless army shirts; quiet, polite, could take a man's head off with one slice of his Bowie knife.

There was Twist: psychedelia and psychosis were his thang. The least stable of the bunch, thanks to his predilection for every psychoactive drug he could get his fingers on. He was a liability, and he was the only one not to know it. His hair was falling out on top, lank and long around this warning sign of baldness. When he wasn't babbling incoherently, he

took to staring vacantly. But he could kill, so he was still useful. For now.

That left Saw and Grave. Saw was a big monster of a man, bearded, face a mask of scars. One of his eyes had been dislocated by a Burster, and thanks to what was obviously the cruel humour of a plastic surgeon, it was now situated halfway down his cheek. Of course the surgeon had not lived long to enjoy his little joke. This Dog's weapon of choice was a chainsaw.

Grave was always in black.

'The expedition was apparently attacked while visiting Akima village,' Sabit continued. 'The military will be deployed to suppress any rebel activity in the area. We have heard an account of what happened from the only tourist to survive the attack. You will doubtless hear something of its content, and you will ignore it. The man is suffering from trauma and this has coloured his memory. Mummies do not come to life, and there's an end to it. This is obviously an elaborate Papul Resistance trick to engage local and maybe offworld support. I have instigated measures to ensure word of this does not spread: I do not want lucrative Papul tourism to suffer as a result of this affair.'

Some of the Dogs sniggered. They had not heard anything about the attack. But Sabit being apparently concerned about 'mummies coming to life' was enough to earn him a derisive toss of a cigarette butt that bounced off his face on the screen. Sabit was continuing to talk on the recorded message and Pan yelled at his colleagues to shut up.

When Sabit had finished relaying his particular instructions concerning the mercenaries, the message ended abruptly without any farewell.

'How many whores this time, Pan?'

'Uh?' Pan stirred from his reverie and grinned in a way that could almost have been construed as sheepish if he hadn't been so obviously proud. He fingered his pulse Luger beneath his jacket as if it reminded him of all the female flesh he'd pressed during his stay on Batu. It had been Clown who had asked the question, and he was not alone in having shown no interest whatsoever in discussing Sabit's message as soon as it

had ended.

‘Enough,’ Pan finally answered.

‘I thought you didn’t know that word: Pretty Boy cut in, blowing him a kiss.

Pan pulled his Luger and aimed it at Pretty Boy’s head playfully. ‘Save all your kisses for the little boys, freak.’

Pan was maybe the only man alive Pretty Boy would take that from. ‘You know that’s Twist’s territory.’

Twist looked up from his daze for a moment. ‘Kiss this,’ he said, scratching his backside.

‘Thing is, Pan,’ Clown said, rolling some hand tobacco, the sunlight filtering through the cabin windport filming his glasses and obscuring his eyes completely ‘You always gotta pay for it.’

‘So? Whores is whores. You always gotta pay.’

‘Paying ain’t a conquest. So what’s to boast about? Now if you had loadsa women ‘cos you were a real frogmagnet, then I’d be kinda proud of you.’

‘Clown, you’re sailin’ close to earning yourself a fresh new smile, baby. ‘Sides, didn’t have to pay last night. The whore done me for free.’

‘You mafiaaaa... I like your face.’

For a moment Pan’s grin wavered. There was a touch of emptiness on his soul. He shook it off. Holstered his Luger again.

‘You’re all man,’ Pretty Boy told him.

‘Ever think to yourself what you’re doin’ to those women?’ Clown cut in, obviously looking for a fight. ‘Whores are people too. They got feelings, want to live a better life. You, exploitin’ ‘em for your own sleazy benefits, just keep ‘em right where they are. Enjoyin’ women’s misery. Degradin’ ‘em. Degradin’ yourself. You think they like livin’ the way they do? Being poked by the likes of you just so they can eat and pay the rent? You think that’s the Good Life for them? Don’t that spoil your fun?’

Pan nodded morosely. ‘You’re right: I gotta mend my ways. Just can’t live with my conscience any longer.’

‘Serious. You ever ask yourself those questions?’

Pan caressed the grip of his Luger, but didn’t pull it. ‘You

asked me do I think they like living the way they do. Personally I don't really give a shit, but I know that some of 'em do. The ones I do business with only approach marks they like the look of. They get good money, I get a good time. And so do they – you should see some of 'em begging me to service them. I'll tell you something, Mister: they always look happy to me, drinkin' and smokin' in their whore bars. They don't like it, they can always work in a shop, serve in some caff. Don't preach to me about things you know nothin' about. And don't make the mistake of thinking I care one way or the other.'

'Like I said,' Pretty Boy repeated. 'You're *all* man.'

'Yeah, well, I got better things to do than swap funny talk with a bunch of gays,' Pan said and lifted himself out of his seat.

'Lookin' for more frog?' Clown threw at him as he popped open the entry port. 'Don't forget to use protection, son' There was a burst of laughter and the port zipped closed on Pan's parting gesture.

The cruiser was parked outside a filthy, but importantly anonymous and sequestered hotel. Pan stepped across the weed-clutched courtyard towards the lobby, sun pounding him. He needed a drink.

And Clown was right: he also needed more frog.

Victoria was already rather wet, much to Jamie's amusement.

'Och, it's only a touch of sea water. Don't be such a wee wet English lassie.' He obviously found this very amusing. Wina seemed to understand the joke and joined in his laughter, which only made Victoria sulk even more.

They were sitting in a long, slender motor canoe which was heaving through the ocean towards the dark hulk of Papul, visible on the horizon. Wemus was steering the canoe, the rather dilapidated engine emitting dense gusts of smoke that occasionally obscured him altogether. Sea spray doused the travellers on a regular basis as the canoe cut through the choppy waves at a surprisingly swift pace.

The Doctor was studying the huge outline of Papul. It was obvious the island was considerably larger than Batu. It

extended across the horizon to east and west as far as the eye could see. Mountains reared up from the forest which crept from the shore to strangle the peaks.

‘Have you ever been to Papul before?’

The Doctor turned at the question and blinked at the young Indoni merchant who had spoken. He had quite forgotten about the extra passengers Wemus had managed to enlist to join the little expedition, so excited was he about visiting the jungle island. Jungles had always fascinated him, from the purple rainforests of Kolith, replete with monitor lizards the size of buildings, to the golden swamps of Aerny Dhu, where it was said the Juices of Everlasting Life could be squeezed from certain leaves. And now the unexplored wildernesses of Papul beckoned, teeming (according to Wemus) with the richest flora and fauna to be found anywhere on Jenggel.

‘No. Why, have you?’

The Indoni had introduced himself as Ussman. He was small with a tall head and a tousele of hair. He had rather mischievous eyes that betrayed his playful nature. The Doctor had warned to him straight away. His friend Budi was more serious and good-looking, although his charm had so far been completely unsuccessful on Wina, Victoria and Santi, upon whom he had tried to use it repeatedly. The Doctor liked him too, despite his insistent flirtatious attempts. The third new member of the party, however, he had taken an instant dislike to.

This was Drew. He had messy blonde hair down to below his collar, a pubic whisp of a moustache, a thin, weak face and watery eyes. He was from Magnow, an Earth colony satellite just outside the Jenggel System. He was slippery and unpleasant, and tried to mask his objectionable nature by minimally shaking hands with whomever he was talking to. The fact that his palms were always slick to the touch didn’t help his case at all.

‘Never,’ Ussman replied, forcing the Doctor’s attention away from the looming mass that was Papul. ‘But I like a good adventure.’

‘Is that what you’re here for?’

Ussman smiled, but it was Budi who answered.

‘No, we’re here to see if there’s anything good to buy.’

‘And then sell,’ Ussman added.

The Doctor smiled. ‘Ah, I see you are entrepreneurs of a kind’

Budi obviously didn’t know that word. ‘No, just merchants, looking to make some money.’

‘You speak almost perfect English,’ Victoria cut in, trying to ignore the spray that had mottled her clothes.

‘It helps us to be convincing to tourists,’ Ussman said with a cunning but endearing smile. ‘It helps us to be better... entrepreneurs’ He emphasised the word for Budi’s benefit.

‘What do you think you’ll find in Papul that you could possibly trade?’ queried the Doctor.

Ussman smiled and stared out across the red-coloured ocean towards the island. The palm trees were becoming more defined now as they approached. The mountains varied from titanic peaks to a peculiar succession of mounded protuberances bulging from the greenery like warts on a toad’s back. The trader grinned. ‘Things the civilized people of Batu and beyond would pay good money for, believe me, Doctor. Accoutrements of a primitive society that would look very good on the wall of an affluent Indoni businessman’s house.’

‘If you not get eaten first.’ This came from Santi. She was sitting next to Victoria and as far away from Wina as the canoe would allow.

‘So we have voracious wildlife to look forward to, do we?’ smiled the Doctor, almost eagerly.

‘Not just animal,’ the girl replied. Her eyes were wide in her broad but attractive face – broader than most of the Indoni people the travellers had met, although she actually came from Javee, albeit a different part of the long island to Wina. Her shoulders, well muscled from much exercising, hunched up into her small frame. ‘Cannibal...’ she added.

Wina stared at her fearfully. Jamie, ever the protective male, put a hand on Wina’s.

‘What do you mean, cannibal?’ asked Victoria timorously.

The Doctor leaned forward. ‘There are anthropophagous tribes inhabiting Papul?’ His eyes narrowed and his brows climbed into dark arches. Jamie noticed the give-away signs

immediately.

‘Och, there’ll be no stopping him now.’

‘There *are* reports of man-eating natives, yes,’ Ussman admitted. Before he could say anything else, Wemus interrupted quickly, obviously fearful that his expedition would be frightened off before they’d even arrived on the island.

‘Only on south coast,’ he said, lighting a cigarette and grinning in what he obviously hoped was a cheery and encouraging manner. ‘And we go to north coast. Many, many miles apart.’

Santi narrowed her eyes into slits and directed her next words to Wina purposefully. ‘Cannibal... eat only nice little girls who think they beautiful...’

Wina wasn’t having any of it. ‘You OK then. You not nice or little. You have face of servant and body of babi.’

Wemus sniggered. Santi went for Wina. Luckily, Jamie managed to catch her midway and hauled her back into her seat. ‘What’s a babi?’ he asked as Santi spat in Wina’s direction.

Wina was laughing, haughtily defiant of this further demonstration of Santi’s low upbringing. ‘Pig! Babi is pig!’

‘Um, yes, well, if we could all try to get along,’ said the Doctor appeasingly, rubbing his hands together as he turned from one Indoni girl to the other. He frowned at Victoria who was positively beaming. Budi chuckled.

‘Don’t worry, I don’t think you look like a pig,’ Drew slimed, putting a hand on Santi’s bare thigh. She removed it instantly and pulled her leather mini-skirt as far down over her legs as the brief garment would allow. Drew smiled at the rebuff and shrugged. ‘Suit yourself. Just remember I tried to help when the cannibals are coming for you.’

‘We soon there,’ Wemus announced, effectively ending the bickering. The Doctor looked up and the coastline was indeed tantalisingly nearer. He could see a long white beach dotted with what looked like fallen coconuts, caressed by the dark red surf.

Distant jungle birds called from the seemingly impenetrable wall of vegetation behind the beach. Eerie,

vibrant, alien sounds. Every one of the mixed group of travellers heard the calls and felt the same beat of what could have been excitement, but could just as easily have been fear.

The usually bustling Jayapul market square was now almost completely hushed. Save for the subdued sobbing of a few women and children, the throng of traders, customers and general townspeople was bullied into silence. Everyone's attention was on the line of Papul men standing against a bullet-pocked wall, smeared with market vegetables and darker stains.

The men waited, as if indifferent to their fate. A woman started to cry more loudly in the crowd, her voice lifting into defiant fury, and an Indoni soldier barked out a harsh command in the Papul language. The woman was plucked from the crowd and positioned next to the husband whose imminent fate she had been bewailing. Now too shocked to cry again, she shivered against the wall and waited alongside her man.

The leader of the Indoni squad gestured to his subordinates. A clatter of safety catches being pulled back. Pulse rifles were shouldered. The leader scrutinised the unreadable faces in the crowd. To show any emotion was inviting death. Satisfied he had their complete attention, he gave the order to fire.

The hot afternoon became abruptly hotter still, as fifteen pulse rifles sang together as one.

Sabit watched the execution on a monitor fixed to the arm of his plush leather chair. He adjusted the volume and wriggled back into the leather like a child seeking the comfort of its mother's body. A cup of hot, spiced tea steamed on the other arm of the chair.

He watched the line of Papul locals fall into the dust of the market square. Seared clothes smoked lazily. The soldier filming the execution panned across the faces of the audience for the benefit of the President, to allow him to see for himself if there were anyone amongst the crowd who should be joining the heap of the seared. Now the cameraman focused on a large

projection screen situated at the north end of the square, focused on Sabit's giant features themselves as he began to address the populace in a recording he had made earlier that morning.

'I, President Sabit of the Indoni Republic, entreat you, the law-abiding citizens of Papul, to betray those who would betray you. The OPG are not your friends. They are not sabotaging our utilities, and by definition, *your* utilities, to create a more beneficial society for you to live in. They just want to disrupt the Indoni attempts to bring you a better way of life. They want power and they don't care if you die or suffer as a result of their cowardly actions. If you know anyone who is an agent of this despicable organization, reveal their identity to us now, so that Indoni people can live hand in hand in peace with their Papul friends. We will not tolerate sedition or any who would sympathise with those who commit it. Terrorism will not be suffered in a democratic society. I hope you will join me in defeating those who would threaten the right of every individual to enjoy a peaceful and secure lifestyle.'

It was marvellous stuff of course. And would be beamed across the system and beyond, justifying the much-criticised Indoni 'expansion' into Papul as a peace-bringing crusade into a troubled land. Military presence had to be accounted for in the eyes of offworld hostility.

Of course the video of the executions that had preceded the speech would never see the light of day outside his palace. But his loyal cameramen would most certainly be on the streets of Jayapul to record what would undoubtedly follow it – local civil unrest that would be sparked off by *agents provocateurs* in the President's own employ, thus justifying even more the urgent need for the Indoni army's stabilizing presence in an uncivilized, violent corner of Jenggel.

A servant had entered his private rooms nervously. Sabit had been too preoccupied to hear him knock. He looked up with irritation, wondered what the fool would do if he ordered him disrobed and his buttocks beaten in front of his daughters. 'I'm sorry President...'

'Yes. What is it?' He was too professional to allow

irritation to show in his carefully controlled voice.

‘It... it’s your mother again, President. I’m afraid she’s very ill.’

Sabit said nothing. He stared at the armchair screen, longing to be able to immerse himself in the pleasure of the day’s politics again, but family, always family, got in the way.

‘Remind my mother that I delivered a food container to her a few months ago. If she needs medicine now, it can be sent.’

The servant fastened the top button of his tunic nervously, as if that humble act of propriety might somehow protect him from the lizard glare of Sabit’s dark, dark eyes. ‘She... she...’

‘Mmmm?’ Sabit prompted in a not unkind manner that the servant knew only too well belied the venom underneath.

‘She doesn’t want food or medicine, President. She simply wants to see you. She said it... it might be for the last time.’

‘Did she?’ Sabit hadn’t taken his eyes off the screen. He straightened the right cuff of his embroidered tunic.

‘Send her food. And send her medicine. And also make sure I’m not disturbed again.’

He scanned the faces of the Papul crowd on the small screen for any possible signs of sedition, or maybe even for disapproval.

Late afternoon in Jayapul, and Sabit’s predictions were fulfilled. Indoni-managed factories were attacked and burned down. Rocks were hurled at Indoni army barracks. A policeman was brutally beaten up on his way home to join his wife. Indoni journalists reported the news faithfully. What they didn’t report were the episodes of vicious retaliation against the ‘acts of terrorism’ that ensued. Papul men and women were torn from their homes, their businesses, summarily executed in the streets, tortured, raped, brutalised. The executioners’ pulse rifles were to do a lot more searing before the evening began to fall and curtain the scenes of carnage.

Sabit’s democracy was efficient and all-encompassing: the Papuls would be protected whether they liked it or not.

The creaking of boards was constant, an unnoticed backdrop to Father Pieter's life, he'd grown so accustomed to the sound. The small Papul shanty town of Agat was situated on the fetid south-coast swamps of the island and its streets consisted entirely of wooden walkways raised above the tides. Throughout the day, the clunking of planks as bare feet rocked them in their fastenings combined with the musical chattering of the locals to form a distinctive cacophony that was all Agat's.

But today Father Pieter was actually listening to the boards, and hoping each creak announced the imminent arrival of Father Tomas. Staring through the grimy window of his wooden cottage, he saw only local Papul people, however, and the occasional Indoni trader. He forced his attention back to his report; Father Tomas would not be coming today. *Would he be coming ever?*

He pushed the thought away. He trusted in his God, and God would bring his friend home safely. He re-read what he had already written. He had listened to Sabit's broadcast earlier that day, and heard about the supposed riots in Jayapul on a tinny radio he possessed (there were no viewing monitors in this back-of-beyond place). Father Pieter was intelligent and informed enough to be able to see through the hype to the humanitarian crisis that screamed behind the Presidential cover-up.

Father Pieter was not only a missionary sent by his Church to this Godforsaken spot to preach Christianity; he was also here to garner information about possible crimes against humanity in an outpost where the Papuls actually felt isolated enough from Indoni rule to be able to talk freely. And he had gained more than enough evidence so far for his Church to pass on a bruising indictment of Sabit's practices. Earth authorities would be forced into taking more action, whether in the form of heavier sanctions or even a resumption of military intervention.

Where are you Tomas?

He couldn't concentrate. He felt edgy, vulnerable. Alone.

He was, after all, not just the only missionary in Agat, but the only person from Earth as well.

A hunchbacked beast was watching from across the walkway directly outside his window.

He started and dropped his pen.

Then he laughed softly, leaning back in his chair. It was only Bagire, the large, tame Horrakbill bird that hopped regularly around the dirty town, its grotesquely oversized beak nuzzling at passers-by. It lifted its head and stared him in the eye. His grin faded.

He was so tired of being alone.

The first hut puffed into flame as the beam of energy pointed like a finger from the hovering cruiser, touched it briefly, and then withdrew.

The silvery, albeit battle-stained and filthy cruiser looked completely incongruous against the backdrop of green jungle and primitive collection of mushroom-shaped grass huts. Sleek and streamlined, it floated like a mutated metal insect above the compound, its blunted nose spitting forth another gob of energy.

And another hut bloomed fiery petals.

Villagers were already beginning to emerge from their homes and scatter like ants. Twist was guffawing as he fondled the control stick, strafing them as they ran, watching bodies glow white and crumble into the grass.

Pan watched the gunner at work and would have smiled. But he realized death didn't really amuse him that much anymore. Maybe he was too old.

This one or that one, the skull, or the woman with horns?

He could always be perverse and have 'mother' tattooed on his arm. Then when anyone ever asked him about her he could just laugh. But no, that would get tiresome.

Then inspiration came, and it came from the oddest of sources. There was a tattoo picture of Winnie the Pooh eating from a honeypot displayed next to a half-naked woman with tarantula legs.

'Wind in the Willows,' he told the bearded biker who emerged from the parlour looking at him expectantly without greeting or smile.

'Ya what?'

'Piper at the gates of Dawn. Access it on your web. I want the original illustration of Pan.'

'Don't follow ya, mate.'

'Pan,' he repeated patiently. 'God of nature.'

Peace. No torment. Pan meant leaves chuckling in an autumn breeze. It meant a rustling of small animals in a dark copse, the only one for miles around not polluted by humans and their stinking debris. It meant trees creaking in the purple night and the singing of the celestial mushrooms in his soul.

It meant one time in his life he actually believed in something instead of death. It made him think of her too, because she was wild and natural and gave him...

The touch of Pan.

It had almost saved him that night on Earth, as the psychoactive fungus whispered to his brain and told him of a quieter way.

Another hut wisped and then erupted. Several semi-naked Papul villagers managed to make it into the protective fringe of the jungle.

Pan continued to watch Twist playing the Exterminating Angel and then allowed himself that smile. *You Mafiaaa, baby... and nothing could ever save you.*

While Wemus, with Jamie's assistance, pulled the motor canoe firmly up onto the beach, the others peered expectantly into the dense wall of jungle that waited for them, perhaps daring them to enter.

'How on earth does he expect us to make our way through there, Doctor?' Victoria asked. The jungle seemed completely impenetrable. Birds called to them, as if mocking their impotence.

Wemus joined them with an ever-present grin, having overheard Victoria's comment. He gestured at a section of the jungle where a dead palm lay in the sand, poking out across the beach like a finger. He didn't say anything, merely began walking towards the tree. The others followed.

As they got nearer, it became obvious the fallen tree

marked an entrance of sorts into the green inferno. A hollow space amongst the trees, like a cave entrance, and Wemus was stooping beneath dangling blossoms, teased by huge, pastel-coloured butterflies, and Ussman was directly behind him. Budi followed.

Victoria glanced nervously at the Doctor. This was her first experience of a jungle and she didn't look too elated at the prospect of venturing inside the moist, dark wilderness, bursting as it was with unusual sounds and smells.

The Doctor put an arm around her shoulder and squeezed her encouragingly 'Don't worry I'm sure Wemus knows where's he's going.'

Jamie peered into the depths of the jungle. 'Aye, well, let's hope so.'

'Jamie scared?' Wina put her hands on her hips and pursed her sensuous lips in a half-smile. Behind her, Santi said nothing, merely glaring at her fellow Javeenesian as was her habit whenever Wina spoke.

Jamie bristled. 'Och, I'm no scared of a few midges and snakes. Come on!' He pushed forwards into the opening. His shoulders danced with butterflies for a second, and then like the others, he disappeared from sight.

'Snakes?' Victoria turned to the Doctor with a horrified expression.

'Don't worry my lovely. I'll take good care of you if anything nasty and slimy should make a move on you.' Drew patted her backside and grinned with dark-stained teeth.

Victoria spun away with a cry of disgust. The Doctor eyed Drew disapprovingly, until the tourist held up his hands and took his turn at entering the jungle.

Budi chortled and shrugged meaningfully at Santi and Wina. Santi giggled back, flashing her wall of glistening teeth.

Budi was the last to leave the beach, taking up the rear directly behind Santi, watching her brown arms and legs moving through the undergrowth appreciatively. He was taking a bit of a shine to her, and if he could just keep that snake Drew out of the way, he could foresee fun times ahead.

He heard a cry from Wina, then an expletive from Santi.

'What's wrong?' he called. The denseness of the hanging

vegetation prevented him from seeing too far in front, but he could just make out Wina's lithe figure as she stopped in the middle of the makeshift pathway.

Santi turned to flash him another grin. 'She tear nail on finger. Now she must go home.'

Wina turned to give her an acid glare, but said nothing. Ahead of them came Jamie's voice. 'Och, are you two lassies fighting again?'

Then the Doctor's face popped into view from around a thick bamboo stalk. 'Don't worry. Wemus says it's not far to the Mumi village, and that we are meeting a friend of his on the way.' He beamed like a delighted child. 'And apparently these jungles are home to a wonderful species of exotic bird that is absolutely breathtaking to behold.'

'Yeah, well, don't that make me feel a whole lot better.' Drew barked from somewhere ahead of the Doctor.

They carried on along the slight path. As they progressed further inland, the path became a little wider, and soon Budi could make out most of their party, apart from Wemus who always seemed to be just a little further ahead than any of the others. Vibrantly coloured birds with bizarre bills watched them from trees and jabbered at them like naughty children as they passed. None of them seemed breathtaking to behold in Budi's opinion, but then what did he know? He was just a local Batu fisherboy with ideas above his station of becoming a fabulously wealthy merchant. At least that's what Ussman had told him he would become. And Ussman always seemed to know what he was talking about.

It was sweltering in the rainforest, and soon Budi's clothes were drenched with sweat. He consoled himself by watching the similar effect the heat had on Santi, in particular the way her tight top stuck to her body, but then felt immediate contrition as he realized he was beginning to act just a little too much like Drew.

At least the heat took the two Javee girls' minds off quarrelling. Still, that had been rather fun in its way too. He heard Victoria give an outraged yelp as a twig snagged her, and grinned. This was the most unusual group of people he had ever had the privilege to be stuck with. It was promising

to be an interesting trip, all right.

The rain had just stopped as Julius left his hut and made his way along the gangplanks towards the museum. His friends smiled at him or hailed him with the traditional afternoon greeting. Agat almost smelled good after the rain. Almost. The filthy swamp tide had retreated beneath the walkways revealing trenches of mud, but the sun was comfortably warm on his back and he found himself thinking of his wife; Silla. She was one of the most beautiful Papul girls in Agat. All his friends had been jealous when she'd agreed to marry Julius. Some of them had insinuated it was only because he had a good position in the town as the museum curator; others said it was because he was so well in with the missionaries. Julius didn't care what they said. He had Silla, and he loved her. She loved him too, he knew that.

He stopped for a brief chat with his brother who was on his way to do some fishing, then continued along the plankway, the constant thumping of the loose boards comforting beneath his feet. He remembered the first time Father Pieter had arrived in Agat, when Julius was no more than a boy. How he had laughed at the look of horror on the missionary's face when he saw the primitive state of the shanty town with its tin and wood shacks and dangerously unstable walkways – had laughed even more when Father Pieter first tried to walk along the plankways, almost ending up in the swamps below when he trod on a loose board. They had quickly become friends, and Father Pieter had done a great deal for the Papul man. Perhaps sensing a strong natural intelligence in Julius, he had concentrated on teaching him not only English, but also the word of God. Julius had accepted Christianity gratefully, unlike many of his fellow Papuls in the area who had moved to take the hand of the Lord somewhat more grudgingly and suspiciously. He had recognized the need to embrace civilisation, and if a belief in some alien God meant he secured learning and a good job, then Julius was all for it.

And now of course, he believed. Many of his fellow townspeople were coming round too. Father Pieter and his

colleague Father Tomas were very convincing, very persuasive. Julius had even begun to instruct some of the Papul children in the ways of God.

Agat was not such a bad place to live after all, despite the squalor, and the mosquitoes.

He unlocked the door of the museum hut, one of the longest buildings in Agat, and one for which Father Pieter and Julius both felt a great deal of pride, albeit for quite different reasons.

He entered the building, closing the door behind him, and collected his duster from the table next to the window.

Of course he felt proud of the building's contents. It housed the relics of a dying belief system, it paraded the heritage of his people, and for all his new-found Christianity, Julius would never feel ashamed of the nobility and courage his forbears had displayed in forging a life out of the hostile swamps and forests, even if that life did revolve around head-hunting as an essential element of their culture.

He also knew why Pieter was proud of the display of obsolete accoutrements of a barbarous age; to the missionary, the museum was an accolade to the victory of reason and organised religion over primitivism; it was a tribute to his and Tomas's efforts to overcome the savage and warlike people they had been sent in to educate.

Julius could understand that viewpoint of course. He was a living example of that success story, and very grateful to his missionary friends for giving him the opportunity to advance himself.

He made his way past the various necklaces of Kassowark feathers and bones worn by warriors as they crept into the night on head-hunting missions, and strolled down the aisle between stuffed reptiles and huge, flightless birds. He stopped for a moment next to the bizarre suit of 'armour' worn by his wild ancestors in times of village warfare. It was a full body piece made of woven hemp, including a fierce and odd-looking head mask that, when placed over the head and face, imparted a truly frightening aspect to the head-hunter wearing it. It always gave him a little thrill of fear, propped there in the shadows of a dusty corner, as if waiting patiently for

something, or someone.

He followed the aisle to the end of the building and readied his duster with a smile of satisfaction. The skulls were waiting for him as they always were. Strangely enough, he had never been frightened of these relics of true barbarism. The skulls were lined along a shelf, the eye sockets stuffed with red wax and seeds, the craniums adorned with straps dotted with the same seeds and tufted with Kassowark feathers. These were the true legacy of Agat: the trophy skulls belonging to former victims of his cannibalistic forefathers. Why should he be scared of the past? It had helped shape the noble, pure Papul townspeople of today.

He arranged the pile of human jawbone necklaces neatly next to the trophy heads, and swept the duster over the first skull, tickling a naughty cobweb from inside the hole on the left temple – the entry wound of the killer’s spear, and the point from where the brains would be scooped out and devoured – and moved on to the next skull.

He was just about to flick the duster along the top of the cranium when the first skull spoke to him.

Akima, and the cruiser was parked cheekily in the centre of the compound as if it was a visitor from the gods.

But these boys waved the banner of God spelt backwards and they certainly hadn’t come to offer the hand of blessing and peace to the villagers of Akima, and its infamous talking Mumi.

The Mumi was dragged from the elder’s hut by Clown and Pan. Clown kicked it from its stool, and watched it roll onto its skinny side as if daring it to come to life and curse him.

‘See,’ he bellowed to the cowering Papul villagers who were held at gunpoint by the rest of the Dogs. ‘It’s just a pile of black skin and bones. It ain’t got no magic. It can’t do no voodoo on the Clown and his boys. Believe it: this is nothing. The only gods you have to fear are us,’ he gestured at the rest of his wild bunch, ‘and these,’ he hefted his own pulse rifle demonstratively.

Pretty Boy and the others were already beginning to herd the men of the village against one wall. The semi-naked

women moaned and sobbed as they anticipated what would happen next.

'You've got to believe in what is real,' Clown continued, his eyes invisible behind the sunlight dancing on his eyeglasses. He kicked the Mumi. A moan of horror lifted from the villagers.

Clown walked away a few steps, enjoying the reaction he was getting from the crowd. Pan decided to take his fun away from him and fired first, his Luger spitting a neat lance of energy at the Mumi's feet, engulfing them in flame. Clown shrugged as if he wasn't fussed about being deprived of his sport, and that's when Grave seared the headman. Clown looked over his shoulder, saw the naked man drop, his penis gourd a shaft of flame, and sauntered off towards the cruiser.

Pretty Boy and Bass followed, clearly not savouring the carnage that was going to ensue. Thoughtfully, Pan watched them go.

Grave and Twist were flaming the men, Saw was revving his chainsaw and wading in, his rifle purposefully left behind in the cruiser.

Screams and blasts of power mixed with the sputtering engine of Saw's tool.

Pan pulled a cigarette from his pocket and watched the Mumi burn.

'People of Agat, warriors of Papul. You are free. We are free. Free to kill. Free to regain what we have lost'

The voice was husky and hollow, as if forced from a throat of bone, not of flesh.

You are free.

We are free.

Free to kill.

Free to kill.

Free to kill...

Regain... what you have... lost.

The hell of the south coast, all his colleagues called it.

So what if all the other missionaries who had ventured into those untamed swamps never came back again?

Tomas was different. Resourceful, confident, well supplied. He would not take risks that his own common sense and faith determined were not worth taking. He was no fool. He was the best of them, and even Pieter who had achieved so much in this small heathen pocket of Jenggel, had learned a great deal from him.

Father Tomas was a credit to them all. He was a symbol of what could be done.

And now he was a bloody martyr.

He cut the thought out of his head. Tomas would return.

It had been a good thirty rainseasons since he and Tomas had arrived in Agat, two young men just out of theological school, intent on preaching the word of God to the cannibals. Earth's missionary influence had spread far indeed, and after the Indoni war had ended, it had seemed the ideal opportunity to send more troops, albeit soldiers of a different kind, into the wilderness of Papul, to cement the civilising foothold of Earth with the stabilising foundations of the Church.

That had been before the Indoni 'invaded' Papul, of course, but even they couldn't stop the word of God from being spread. Missionaries were tolerated in Papul for the same reason Sabit fabricated the truth for his interstellar broadcasts: he didn't want to alienate Earth and its Coalition.

It had taken thirty rainseasons, but Tomas and Pieter had done the seemingly impossible, and teased the locals of Agat away from their previous bloody, albeit colourful, lifestyle. Head hunting was now a thing of the past in the region around the shanty town, and with the bravery of people like Father Tomas, the Kirowai region further along the south coast would be next to succumb to the benefits of civilisation and Christianity.

The hell of the south. The Kirowai. The most savage and unrepentant cannibals in Papul. He's not coming back and you know it.

He poured himself a glass of red wine and sat back in his armchair. He could see the populace of Agat trudging past his window, the boards trembling beneath their myriad feet as they went about their daily callings. Men, women, children, all dressed in at least some items of Earth origin – T-shirts or

trousers, shorts, skirts – even if they were a little ragged and torn. And all contributed by those indefatigable soldiers of God, Fathers Tomas and Pieter.

They had achieved oh so much in those thirty years. Father Pieter could afford to sit back and take it easy now, if only for five minutes. Relax, drink his wine, his report on Sabit completed, and ready for shipment to the Church on Earth.

But God, he felt alone.

He could see his reflection in the window across the room. Grey hair, thinning at the top, grey beard. An earnest, strong face, but one lined with worry and loneliness. Life among the cannibals could do that to a man.

His reflection was obscured. A figure was leaning against the window. A bulky figure, the head obscured by something.

The glass abruptly flew inwards, scattering across the floorboards. Father Pieter was scrambling up from his armchair as the figure groped its way through the shattered window, but the shock of what he saw pushed the missionary back in his seat.

The man was wearing the hemp tunic from the Agat museum, although now it was smattered with blood. The head-piece masked the features, alien and horrible with its gaping circle of a mouth and pierced mini-shields sewn over the eye holes. Kassowark feathers nodded from the pointed apex of the hemp hood. Around the neck, the figure wore a human jawbone necklace, dirty and stained with age.

The figure was naked below the waist-length body-piece, and in the right hand, a stone axe, also plundered from the museum, like the necklace and the tunic. In the left, a severed head swung by its hair, the neck oozing blood that pattered onto the boards. The figure was silent, apart from its husky breathing.

Pieter tried to form words in his throat but all that he could produce was a frog noise. He tried again, while the figure waited for him to grope his way through this nightmare.

The missionary could see the man's white teeth behind the mouth piece, and a glimpse of bird-mad eyes behind the pierced tiny shields, but nothing else.

'What... what do you want?' he finally managed, fear

locking him in his seat. He felt gripped by the knowledge that he was going to die, and felt that it was all so meaningless and inexplicable, and of course, oh so horrible. To die like this. To die at the hands of the godless, when he had lived with them for thirty years, matured as they matured, suffered with them, felt their pain, their joy, their...

It was all so horrible to die like this.

The head was flung at him. It struck the arm of his chair and rolled at his feet. Pieter gaped at it speechlessly. He recognized the man (the man? the head!): an Indoni trader whose name escaped him. The figure was moving again, approaching Pieter who pushed himself back in his chair, still semi-paralysed by shock and fear.

'We are free,' the figure whispered and stopped again, no more than three yards away from the missionary. And now Father Pieter was reeling from more shock, because he knew the voice, knew the man to whom it belonged, and that was even more inexplicable, even more godless, because it belonged to a man Pieter trusted, respected, *loved*.

'Julius?'

His voice was small, like a child's.

This could not be.

This could not...

'Free to kill. Free to regain what we have lost.' The words, like the entire incident, made no sense to Pieter. He put out a shaking hand, but whether it was to stop his friend from approaching, or to seize him and shake some sense out of him, even he didn't know. The bloody figure backed away, and then was clambering through the shattered frame.

Father Pieter remained in his armchair, staring vacantly at the window as if expecting the glass to flip back into place, for the entire incident to rewind, never to have happened.

But of course, the head was still there at his feet, like a gruesome pet, to remind him that it had.

He had often thought about marrying an Indoni girl. They were so beautiful after all, and he'd never found a Papul girl that appealed to him in quite the same way these slight, sinuous beauties did. Especially the one not far behind him

now. Wina. Yes, what a rare beauty. Was Wemus deluding himself or had he actually caught her sending him some interested glances throughout the day, first of all in the canoe, and later as he occasionally stopped the group to inform them about the various wildlife that scurried, slithered and hopped incessantly around them?

No, he was fooling himself. Although he prided himself on being a handsome Papul man, he also knew that it was rare indeed for one of the haughty Indoni women to ever look twice at the thick-bodied, heavy-featured islanders. Perhaps that was what made him want one so much. But then, the young man from Earth with the peculiar skirt obviously had something going on with her. The other girl was attractive too, in, a somewhat coarser manner. Her clothes, her body, face, voice, all were less refined than Wina's. He'd let that slimy Drew character continue to make advances on her, it really didn't bother him. Of course if he made any more moves on Wina...

Then there was the white girl. Companion to the Doctor. No. He didn't like white. Too blotchy, too bumpy, too... too *white*.

He hacked at a hanging vine until it dropped neatly at his feet. The Doctor was right behind him, slightly out of breath but obviously taking a great interest in the journey. Wemus grinned at him and the Doctor smiled back, mopping sweat from his brow.

'Wemus can carry coat for you?' he offered, puzzled as to why the alien should want to continue wearing the garment in the steamy temperatures of the rainforest.

The Doctor shook his head. 'No thank you, Wemus. I wonder,' he looked around him at the dense, glistening vegetation, 'are there any particularly dangerous varieties of wildlife we may be likely to encounter?' He clasped his hands before him, his face full of a childlike wonder. Was he really as simple as he liked to make everyone think? Wemus scrutinised him with interest before replying. The alien was definitely strange, but there was something about him that generated respect too. There was a strength and a great sense of compassion about him that was unlike anything the Papul

had ever sensed in anyone before.

Before he could answer, and as if to validate the Doctor's question, a violent smashing of vegetation came from their left.

The others had all arrived at the same spot now, and they too paused as they heard the noise.

Leaves and vines rustled again. A hand, a brown hand, appeared around the trunk of a bamboo plant taller than two men. Wemus raised his machete. A face followed the hand, peering around the trunk. A bird called, a shrill warning, the white girl put her hand to her mouth, but the scream came anyway, echoing the cry of the jungle bird.

Chapter Four

Wemus lowered the machete again and an expansive grin lit up his face. A Papul man clothed in faded T-shirt and khaki trousers stepped out onto the trail and seized Wemus by the arm, returning the guide's warm and welcoming smile.

They spoke together in the Papul tongue for a moment. The conversation sounded urgent, the newcomer impressing something important and rather frightening upon Wemus, judging by the guide's incredulous reaction. The Doctor waited patiently for them to finish, mopping his brow intermittently. Jamie flashed a cheery grin at Wina and Victoria, as if to assure them that he never doubted for a minute the rustling bushes would hide a friend. Santi slapped Drew's hand away from her buttocks for the third time that day and stepped forward to look at the new arrival.

He was looking at them too now, smiling slightly, carefully, as if to reassure them. He was taller than Wemus, his hair longer, and he had a small beard and moustache. His nose was flat like the guide's, his face more obviously intelligent. His eyes were wary, and tinged with sadness.

'This my friend Kepennis,' Wemus said. 'He guide too, and he see some terrible things.'

The Doctor stepped forward. 'And what terrible things has Kepennis seen?' His face had lost the childlike qualities, replaced now with keen intelligence and gravity.

Wemus paused before answering. He did not want to scare his tourists away, but at the same time he had a duty to warn them of what Kepennis had just told him.

'It is beyond my understanding,' he said at last, searching for the words in his broken English that could describe the incredible events.

Kepennis came to his aid. 'The gods have spoken to their

people.'

'Oh?' prompted the Doctor. 'And what did they have to say?' A bird whistled from the bushes behind him, making Victoria, who was standing next to him, start agitatedly. He gave her a brief and reassuring smile before returning his attention to Wemus and Kepennis.

'The Mumi come alive, and he kill visitors to his village.' Kepennis spoke slowly, his English halting and imperfect like Wemus, but the gravity of his voice and the look on his face left the travellers in no doubt that what he was telling them was the truth.

'Och, you're tellin' us a dead thing came to life and scared ye?' Jamie was obstinately pragmatic as usual, but the Doctor put up a hand to hush his impetuous friend.

'Do go on,' he said encouragingly. 'Tell us everything that happened.'

So Kepennis told them. He told them about the troop of tourists he had led to Akima. He told them about the Mumi spitting snakes at the off-worlders – at the Indoni businessman and his wife too. He told them how he had run to hide in the jungle – and here he looked a little shamefaced. Shamefaced enough for Jamie to intervene again.

'You mean they're all dead? Every last one? Are you sure?'

Kepennis shrugged. 'One may have survived. But I in jungle all night and today and not see anything. Only the killers.'

'The killers?' The Doctor pressed. 'And what might they be?'

Kepennis looked wary 'They come to village today with guns and hate. Aliens like you, paid by Indoni.'

'Paid? Paid to do what?' the Doctor asked, frowning.

Kepennis glanced at Wemus, as if unsure how much he should trust this stranger. Wemus nodded. Kepennis hesitated for a moment longer, and then spoke.

'It is not safe in jungle now Indoni soldiers will come. The killers come. Indoni think we Papul to blame for deaths in Akima. Now all Paputs in danger. Maybe you too.'

Victoria had been trying to concentrate on what the guide was saying, but a rustling, as of some small animal, in the branches just behind her kept pulling at her attention. She glimpsed a flash of vibrant, unearthly plumage, and gasped softly. Feathers more luxuriantly coloured than anything she had ever seen in her life lifted as a bird the size of a cat hopped from one perch to another. She could just make out a slender, sapphire neck and then the bird had moved, further into the jungle, tantalisingly just out of sight. She turned to nudge Jamie, but he was too far away, standing next to the Doctor. In front of her, Ussman and Budi were concentrating on Kepennis, worried expressions on their faces. She considered briefly what she was about to do, knowing it was foolish: this was dangerous jungle after all. Then decided.

She pushed her way through the foliage, stepping as quietly as she could. She had to see that magnificent bird one more time. It truly was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen in her life. She could still hear the low murmuring of Kepennis, and as long as she kept the guide in earshot she would be all right.

There it was again: a crimson plume rose from the head, which was cocked, watching her. It danced along a bough, then popped just out of vision again.

Was it playing games with her? She stepped around the twisted bole of some alien tree, and the bird made a series of odd beeping noises at her, followed by a mocking whistle.

She was in a tiny clearing now, and could study the bird closely. She smiled, heart filling with wonder.

And a hand closed over her mouth, stifling her breath, stifling her scream.

The Doctor was frantic.

‘But you must have seen her, Jamie!’ He stumbled around the clearing where they had lost Victoria, while Jamie watched helplessly.

‘Och, I thought *you* were keeping an eye on her,’ he threw back defensively. He glanced anxiously around, searching for any traces of broken branches to indicate which way she might have gone.

Ussman said, 'She was right behind us for a while. When we were listening to Kepennis's story. That was the last time I saw her.'

The Doctor bounded forward, searching the spot behind the trader. And sure enough, there was a small area of crushed grass, leading into deeper jungle. Jamie followed him as he ducked into the foliage. Kepennis and Wemus looked at each other. Then the bearded guide moved swiftly to follow.

He was just in time. Jamie's mouth was open, and he was just about to let loose a highland bellow. Kepennis dapped him hard on the shoulder, pulling him around and placing one finger on his lips.

'Do not call out,' he said quietly. 'There are many you would not like hear us.'

The Doctor looked at him like a child who's lost his parents. 'W- well, we can't simply do nothing.' Then he pulled himself together. He faced Kepennis with a determined look on his face. 'How far is the Mumi village from here?'

'Not far. Ten minutes' walk.'

'Then the most logical thing to do would be to go there and look for her. Maybe she got lost and...'

'Och, we should split up and continue searching,' Jamie interrupted.

'No, Jamie. I think for once we should let common sense hold sway over our emotions. Splitting up will only get some or all of us lost.'

'We have two guides now,' the Scot argued.

It was probably the only time he could think of in his chequered history with the Doctor when Jamie actually realized it made perfectly logical sense to split up. But the Doctor was determined.

'We check the village first. If she's not already there, maybe there will be somebody left alive who can tell us if they've seen Victoria. If not, *then* we can split up.'

Jamie looked undecided. But the Doctor was already signalling to Kepennis and Wemus to lead the way. Reluctantly he followed. When he saw the slinking smirk on Drew's face he briefly considered smashing it off, but that would only be wasting more time.

Of course, there was no sign of Victoria, and no-one left alive to ask. Akima was a dead village.

The Mumi was still burning.

The flames had reached the preserved corpse's neck now, the rest of the body an outline of ash against the earth of the village compound.

Kepennis raced forward, hands stretched out to retrieve this relic of revered ancestry from immolation. The Doctor was not far behind.

Budi, Ussman and Santi were staring at the bodies.

There were a lot of bodies. Some merely charred heaps, others relatively unburned, but just as dead. Men, women, children. An entire community. Drew stood back, a little smile on his face, as if he was at a particularly entertaining village fete. Wemus was quiet, standing to one side, not looking at the bodies, not looking at anything. Wina approached him and, without saying a word, put a small hand on his bare shoulder. The Papul guide turned and there were tears tracking silently down his cheeks. He shook his head and pulled gently away from her.

Wina saw Jamie looking at her, and she smiled a painful, sad smile. He nodded and went to join the Doctor.

'Now, this is very interesting.' The Doctor was fiddling with the mummified head, trying to remove something from the base of the skull, just at the point where the head would have joined the spine.

'We've nae time for this now, Doctor,' Jamie said, 'We've got to look for Victoria'

'Of course we must, Jamie,' the Doctor said, as if to a child. 'And we will, but first I simply have to -'

'What have you found, Doctor?' Budi interrupted. The rest of the group had joined them to see what they were looking at. Like Budi, they all looked aghast and frightened, and were obviously having deep regrets about coming on this trip. Santi pulled a disgusted face as she saw what was in the Doctor's hands.

'Well... well, I'm not altogether sure...' the Doctor said pensively. 'Yes. Very interesting indeed... I wonder...' He noticed Kepennis bending over him anxiously 'Oh, I don't

think we're in any danger from our friend here any more,' he reassured the guide. 'Ahh, that's got it.' He raised something from the back of the shrivelled head, scrutinising it curiously. It was a waxen horn of purple-coloured soft material, the size of a snail. 'Now what have we here? Looks like a fungus of some variety.'

Kepennis said nothing, his eyes large with fear. Wemus was the one who answered the Doctor, his face grave and hard, the ubiquitous grin long gone.

'From swamps.' the usually amiable guide said slowly 'I never see, but hear of it. From south coast swamps...' he paused and gazed meaningfully into the Doctor's eyes. 'Where weird things grow.'

Chapter Five

The headman grumpily tied his penis gourd into position, the jeans he'd been wearing a few minutes before slung into a corner of his hut. He was tired, and although tourists meant money, it also meant more soldiers. Since yesterday there had been a constant military presence in and around the small village whenever off-worlders turned up.

What were they scared of?

He left the hut still fiddling with his gourd and glanced at the group of tourists huddled just inside the compound. As he had expected, a squad of Indoni soldiers had accompanied them. The commander barked something at him in Indoni which he didn't understand. He stepped forward humbly. He was scared of these soldiers. Of course he was; he was an intelligent man.

The commander barked again, and this time he guessed what the man was saying. He gestured to Etna the husband of his sister, and together they entered the sacred hut.

The hut was dark, but they knew what they were looking for. Jikora was the most tourist-frequented village in Papul, thanks to its proximity to the popular market town of Wameen. As a result, the headman and his brother-in-law were required to enter this hut and collect its occupant many times a week.

The Mumi was waiting for them on its sawn-off tree trunk pedestal. Without speaking, they bent and picked it up. Outside, the commander was waiting for them with three soldiers. All their weapons were, if not exactly levelled, then not far from it. The commander was saying something in Indoni, staring at the headman with narrow eyes and a stern expression, the green cap pulled low over his brow giving him an even fiercer countenance. The headman and Emul put the

Mumi down for a moment.

It was Emul who answered the soldier, in halting Indoni. He sounded a little puzzled and there was a grin on his face. The headman asked his brother-in-law what had been said. Emul turned to him, shaking his head as if he didn't really understand. 'He wants to know if our Mumi has been acting strangely.' Well, what could the headman do but laugh? It was such an absurd suggestion.

He regretted it instantly. The commander pistol-whipped him savagely. He almost fell, the blue, blue sky whorling above him for a second before tilting back into place. He touched his brow where the barrel of the pulse Luger had struck him. Blood daubed his fingers. He stared at the commander guardedly, but said nothing. The commander said something else in an abrupt tone. Emul nudged the headman and stooped to pick up the Mumi on its tree trunk pedestal.

They carried it over to the centre of the circular village compound. There were more soldiers around the gate, pulse rifles at the ready. The headman really didn't understand what was going on, but knew it must be some ploy by the evil president of Indoni. Still, what did he care as long as he got more moolah out of the sheepish crowd, who were gaping at the Mumi with holocameras as omnipresent as the soldiers' guns.

The headman watched the tourists in their gaudy clothes and silly hats. There were about ten of them, and they all looked as puzzled and uneasy about the army's presence as the villagers of Jikora themselves. One or two of them had gasped when the commander struck him, and he knew that had been a rash error of judgement on the Indoni's part. They could not afford to lose off-world goodwill. He heard Juma, one of the younger and more aggressive men of the village, muttering to his friend about stories of Indoni craft attacking Papul villages deep in the jungle interior. He shouted to him in Papul to shut up. These were dangerous times, and they could not afford to stir Indoni wrath. Jikora was a nice little money-maker, and while Sabit took the majority of the proceeds, there were many ways for the villagers to cream away some of the profits without being discovered. A thought struck him, and he didn't

like it: perhaps that was why the soldiers were here – to prevent any more ‘fraud’. Fraud! It was *their* village and *their* Mumi. They had a right to make all the money out of it for themselves. But even thinking like that had a habit of getting Papul men killed, so he concentrated instead on providing a good pose for the tourists’ holocameras.

He positioned the Mumi on its log so that it faced the semicircle of tourists, brushing a fly away from the silently screaming maw. He was proud of this Mumi. It was a direct ancestor of his, of course, and maybe when he died, he would be revered enough by the villagers to be smoked and preserved for all time. But somehow he didn’t think so.

It was certainly a gruesome object. Its hands were clenched around its withered knees as if in agony. The head was thrown dramatically back, accentuating the impression that the three hundred rainseason-old chieftain had died horribly. Perhaps he had, but the headman really couldn’t remember the stories. There were so many other things in this modern world to think about.

The Mumi’s eye-sockets were pooled with sunlight now as the holocameras whirred and clicked. The commander stepped up to the Mumi as if judging it and then moved aside slightly for the pictures to be taken.

When the scream came, the headman was sure it was an animal, a Babi maybe, from the village compound. But the look of horror on the faces of the tourists in front of him was too excessive for that to have been the cause. The soldiers looked startled too, and raised their weapons nervously. The commander whipped around and glared at the headman and his Luger was level with the Papul’s head.

The scream came again, and this time it was so obviously eerie and unfamiliar that the headman wondered how he could have thought it was an animal in the first place.

It was coming from the Mumi.

Something else came from the Mumi too, as the headman and Emul remained locked in their shocked tourist-friendly pose beside it. A deathsnake, thin as a Babi tail, green as the jungle. It flailed across the three yards separating the Mumi from the commander and clasped onto its prey.

The commander's gun fired at the same time as the tiny fangs sank into his adam's apple, the attack throwing his aim off so wildly it was Emul's head that received the Luger blast. The headman watched the soldier and his brother-in-law flop into the dust of the compound simultaneously. The commander writhed, his face darkening into a leafy green, his eyes bugging, veined with green too. Emul didn't move, his head blown apart like an egg smashed by a spoon.

The Indoni second-in-command was rushing forwards, barking orders to the stunned squad of soldiers. He readied his pulse rifle but a snake got him first as the Mumi moaned again. With the reptile fastened to his left eye, he fell back into a soldier behind, causing the scared trooper to fire, blasting the arm off a nearby tourist.

Screams. Pulse rifles began to spit and blaze. Although quite what they were firing at the headman wasn't sure, as he dashed panic-stricken towards the safety of his hut. He threw a look over his shoulder and the Mumi was a squatting torch of flame. Tourists were scattering like a herd of Babi frightened by a berserk farmer. He could see a couple of tourists burning on the ground, their wriggles fading. They'd obviously been hit in the wild fire, and the headman thought that was probably a good thing: Sabit would certainly have a lot of explaining to do.

Another thought struck him, and this one wasn't so good: there would be nobody paying to see Jikora's Mumi now. Then something else struck him, and he hit the dirt ablaze with Pulse energy, one arm stretched out towards his hut as if seeking the assistance of his pregnant wife, his mouth a screaming maw, his eye-sockets pooled by fire.

The soldiers retreated, letting Jikora burn.

The hand was gone from her mouth. It wasn't the first time this particular indignity had been forced upon her, and Victoria was sure it wouldn't be the last while she was in the company of the Doctor; but it was becoming increasingly tiresome. Although at least this time the man responsible seemed to pose no immediate threat. He was a soldier after all, and weren't they supposed to be gallant and chivalrous

towards ladies?

Then again, he was an Indoni soldier, and Victoria remembered the look of fear on Wemus's face when the Papul guide had been approached by the two soldiers on Batu. Yet she was being treated well enough so far. Admittedly the leader had shoved a rather large muzzle at her when he had first removed his hand, and his face had been stern and uncompromising. But after he had made sure she was not going to scream he had lowered the weapon and explained (in unbroken English) that she was in a very dangerous situation here in the jungle with cannibals, bloodthirsty rebels and voracious wildlife all around her, and that it was in the interests of her own safety that she be escorted to a location more harmonious to her well-being. This despite all the protestations on her part that she was being led away from her friends and that she must rejoin them immediately. The officer had been adamant, however, and her declamations had fallen upon decidedly deaf ears. Victoria was not a stupid woman; it did not take her long to realize that she was unofficially a prisoner of the Indoni army.

One part of his story seemed to be verified, however, by the obvious wariness the squad of soldiers displayed as they moved through the steaming jungle. And it was steaming: wisps of condensation lifted around them, sometimes revealing lengths of garishly coloured reptile that bore a passing resemblance to the snakes Victoria had seen in books at home: that is, if the snakes back home had been blessed with heads like the business end of a gardening rake – flat and wide and eyeless. Such grotesqueries apart, Victoria saw little to be really frightened of during the journey. There were some ominous crashings in the undergrowth, and the twitchiness of the troopers bore witness to the potentially threatening nature of their origin, but really it was only the oppressive heat and the insects – forever clouding her vision and biting, biting, biting – that she had to contend with.

After their first sweaty introduction, the officer in charge proved to be exceedingly polite to her, which came as something of a surprise, after seeing Wemus's reaction to the soldiers. He spoke astonishingly eloquent English (she had to

keep reminding herself that he was an *alien*, and not just a foreigner). He even offered to hold her hand to steady her progress, but of course she wasn't going to allow *that*. His brown face was angular and, with the clipped moustache and dark, intelligent eyes, she had to admit, rather handsome. But then, as her father had constantly reminded her, she always did have a bit of a wild streak, and had always had a penchant for people and things that were rather out of the ordinary. Well, she'd certainly got to satisfy *that* particular whim since encountering Jamie and the Doctor, she reminded herself ruefully, and wondered exactly how panic-stricken they must be right now, once they had realized she was missing. They would find her, she comforted herself.

They always did.

Budi and Ussman were all for returning to Batu. The Doctor and Jamie were obviously just as adamant to remain, in order to search for Victoria. Drew said nothing, watching Wina and Santi's terrified reactions to the massacre with something akin to sadistic pleasure on his ratlike face. His blonde moustache lifted above his lips like a spiky caterpillar as he savoured their fear. Jamie resisted thumping him as he noticed the off-worlder's evident enjoyment. Santi was crying, but desperately trying not to do so in front of Wina. Wina was shaking as if gripped with some fever, and desperately trying not to in front of Santi. Wemus looked as worried as the rest of the group, including the Doctor, who was trying to assert some calm over everybody, but acting increasingly like a nervous mother hen himself. It was Kepennis who took control.

'We must leave here,' he said slowly. His face was drawn and haunted-looking. He held his machete like a weapon and not a tool now. 'We must head into the jungle away from soldiers and Dogs.'

The Doctor held up his hands frantically 'We must find Victoria!' he beseeched. 'And the soldiers will be able to help us to do that!'

Kepennis smiled grimly. 'They only help you to die. We must move from this place. Maybe they return.'

'I want go home!'

The Doctor turned, and Santi had stopped crying, and was now endeavouring to assert some self-control. He held out a hand to comfort her, but she flinched backwards.

‘Santi must go *home!*’

Wina smiled rather cruelly. ‘Santi scared. She not care about your friend.’

‘Aye,’ Jamie added. ‘We must stay and look for Victoria. I’m no going anywhere until we do.’

‘Santi not scared!’ the Indoni girl hissed, glaring at the slighter, taller Wina. ‘I must go back Batu. Need money to live.’

Again Wina stepped in. ‘She needs meet new tourists. New men. Santi is working girl!’ A raucous snort of mirth came from Drew at this. Santi snarled and clenched her fists.

The Doctor stepped between the two girls. He could see beyond the surface of Wina’s spite and understood why she was provoking an entirely unnecessary argument: her shaking had stopped. She had something else to concentrate on, something she could understand that had nothing to do with Mumis that came to life and villagers being burned to death wholesale.

‘I think Kepennis is right about leaving here, Wemus,’ he said gravely. ‘But I must ask you to help us find our companion.’

The guide looked at him, then at his friend Kepennis. Kepennis was silent for a moment, then nodded.

‘We will search jungle around village until nightfall. After that, we leave.’

‘There’s still something I don’t understand,’ Jamie said. Everyone shut up for once and looked at him. He pointed at the smoking remains of the Mumi. ‘How do dead things come tae life like he says?’ He turned to Kepennis for an answer.

But it was the Doctor who gave him one.

‘They don’t, Jamie.’ He was still holding the purple fungus in his hands. ‘You should know better than that by now.’

Kepennis met his gaze. ‘I saw the Mumi move and talk, stranger. The gods spoke, and then they killed.’

‘Yes,’ the Doctor replied. ‘There seems to be rather a lot

of killing going on, doesn't there?'

His words were drowned out by Wina's cry of terror. They all whirled around to see what had alarmed her.

A bizarre and terrifying group of figures was emerging from the jungle. Their faces were hidden under balaclavas of leathery animal skin and fur, their dark torsos were naked, their legs covered by ripped khaki combat trousers. They were carrying machetes and bows and arrows. A couple even had old Earth-export rifles. They didn't look very friendly.

From the window of the first-storey landing, he could see all the madness.

Agat was awash with blood.

Civilisation had been discarded. Primitivism was restored. All the trappings of a modern world imported from Javee and Batu and even the worlds beyond were consigned to the flames of atavism. And while the clothes, the books, the papers burned and the technology fell apart under repeated blows, the bodies continued to collect. Indoni dead were everywhere; scattered like unwanted toys on the plankways; floating in the filthy waterways beneath. But there was one detail that wasn't right about the corpses, and it wasn't until Father Pieter peered towards the police but that he realized what it was: the small building was now guarded only by the Javee officer's severed head nailed to the door. A chilly wind played through him. All the heads were missing of course, apart from the special gift awarded him earlier – and this one, left behind like a trophy, like a warning to the authorities to ever dare enforce regulation on savagery again. Further along the main plankway, the Indoni traders' stalls were still manned by their prosperous owners, but now they were propped against their shelves of wares as if they were sleeping off a particularly heavy drinking spree – the blood marking their skin and clothes the only signs that all was not as before; that and the absence of their heads. The fruit trader's severed hands were stacked alongside the papaya-like vegetables he had sold for such extortionate prices; the couturier from Batu was crucified in the doorway of his shack, his dismembered wife scattered beneath his hanging feet, along with the tatters

of the imported clothes they had sold. Bagire, the hunchbacked Horrakbil bird, pecked amongst the bloody debris.

Blood stained the mud beneath the walkways.

Thirty years of education, culture and endeavour wiped out.

Thirty years of Christianity...

Gone.

Father Pieter could see it all. He would lose his mind for looking; he would lose his life if he stayed here. They would find him. The attic! Hide from this obscenity

Julius had been only the first; madness had spread like a virus through the once peaceful shanty town. The usually amiable and even rather docile Papul had become ravenous monsters, ripping away the clothes they had once been taught to be proud of, tearing away the layers of civilization Pieter and his fellow missionaries had spent so long insulating them with.

What had happened to the Word of God? Was it then so fragile to be rejected so suddenly, so savagely? A belief system refined and sophisticated was being butchered, and its initiator could do no more than cower and weep.

The way had been opened to barbarity. The jungle had reclaimed its children. Brutal gods reigned once more over their heathen domain.

How long would it be before They came looking for him?

Wemus and Kepennis looked terrified.

The aggressive-looking figures held machetes to the throats of the guides and shouted at them in a guttural local tongue. The Doctor made an attempt to communicate with the warriors, who were obviously Papul from what could be detected of their features under the fur balaclavas. A battered-looking rifle barrel stopped his progress.

‘Oh, I see...’ he said ruefully, raising his hands with a worried expression on his face. ‘Jamie, don’t do anything silly,’ he added, as the Scot began to protest vociferously behind him

The warriors encircled the little group of tourists, their

faces hard and uncompromising. Santi and Wina stood together, and the Doctor tried to smile encouragingly at them, guessing what would be going through their minds: they were two attractive Indoni girls trapped in the middle of the Papul jungle by a group of hostile guerrillas. It didn't take a great imagination to guess their possible fate.

Kepennis and Wemus turned around to confront the Doctor. The warrior who had spoken so aggressively to them now ushered them to communicate with the group they had led into such peril. His balaclava was of black fur and he wore a necklace of bullets and a bracelet of bone. His eyes were malevolent as he waited for the guides to pass on his instructions.

Wemus looked cowed. Kepennis had dropped his machete and although his face was tense, he also appeared determined not to lose face in front of the tour group.

'We are hostage of OPG now,' he said simply. 'Nothing we can do.'

'OPG?' asked the Doctor with obvious alarm. 'What might they be, and what do they intend doing to us?' His voice was full of stubborn indignation, but when the Papul with the black balaclava lifted his machete to prod at the Doctor's gangly bow tie, he wisely stopped his blusterings and backed away a step, his mouth dropping open with almost comical dismay.

'The Krallik order his men to take us to swamps in south. They will negotiate with Indoni President for our release.' Kepennis looked a little sheepish as he replied, as if it was all his fault they had fallen into this predicament. The real culprit, Wemus, seemed more interested in comforting Wina, who along with Santi, was looking rather wretched at this new eventuality. Jamie made an effort to aid in consoling the attractive Javee girl, but a guerrilla stepped in his way, bow and arrow raised meaningfully.

'But who is the Krallik?' demanded the Doctor, looking gingerly at the blade that still rested on his chest. 'This... ahem... gentleman here?' He made a grotesque attempt at a smile for the benefit of the guerrilla, who was obviously the leader of the pack.

Kepennis shook his head. 'No. Krallik only send instruction for tourist to be captured. He wait for us deep in swamp jungle far from here.'

Jamie had had enough. 'Look, can ye no talk to them?' he said exasperatedly, rounding on Kepennis and Wemus. 'You're Papul too: they'll listen to you. We have tae find Victoria!'

'Thank you, Jamie.' the Doctor shushed him, fearful of exacerbating the situation. 'I'm sure you could put in a good word for us, Kepennis, and tell them the Indoni President wouldn't possibly be interested in negotiating over us. We're of absolutely no value at all!'

'We are Papul too, you are right,' Kepennis answered bleakly. 'But these are OPG rebels who hate Indoni so very much.' He paused. 'And that mean us too, because we sell ourselves to Indoni for money, they think. To them, we betray our own people.'

As if to reinforce Kepennis's words, one of the warriors cuffed Wemus around the head with a rifle butt as he attempted to put his arm around the dejected-looking Wina. The guide yelped and backed off rapidly.

'The OPG...', the Doctor said ruminatively. 'I take it they are Independence fighters opposed to Indoni rule in Papul?'

'Operaki Papul Gallaki,' Kepennis said warily. The leader was listening to the exchange in English with some interest and the Doctor could see that the warrior understood quite a lot of what was being said. Kepennis would do well to choose his words with care. 'Freedom for Papul,' he explained. 'We are to aid them in their cause.'

The leader had clearly decided the hostages had received sufficient explanations. He barked an order to his men and the guerrillas began moving forward, corralling the tourists away from the burnt village and into the jungle.

The village smoked silently. A bird laughed and then the rain came. Hard and fast, pounding the leaves, pounding the hostages and their guards, turning the dirt to mud, the mud into streams.

The jungle welcomed them into its depths, closing around them like wet, slippery fingers.

Chapter Six

Heads.

Everywhere it seemed. A reed bed of heads, rising above the water, above the pink mist, mugging horrifically at the canoe of guerrillas drifting across the lake towards the island. Indoni heads mostly, but a couple of Papul faces joined the parade, traitors to the cause, or perhaps because they were simply too afraid to do what had to be done.

Wayun prickled with fear. He knew that was the desired reaction: the reason the heads were there, impaled upon the wooden stakes of the pier. Yet it was grotesque, horrible. Were the tales true, then? Had the Krallik indeed gone mad?

He tried not to look at the array of heads, gazing instead at the black lilies floating in the water all around the boat. Yet the faces stayed with him; savaged expressions, butchery sculpted into every twist of mouth, convulsion of brow, insanity of eye.

The others said nothing, grimly quiet as the canoe nosed in towards the dock, its dilapidated motor silenced. Great bubbles of volcanic disturbance broke the surface of the lake here and there, as if a giant were releasing his last gasps of air from below, drowning on the lake bed.

The prow bumped against the pier and Wayun looked up again involuntarily. There was a recently decapitated head banging directly above him, the ripped neck stump shoved rudely on top of the stake like a bloody glove puppet. The eyes locked with his, and he was staring into the face of his brother, Tumul.

He could hear the sound of swamp Kroons, he could hear the gentle lapping of water against the wooden sides of the canoe. He could hear the clatter as the men rose to climb out of the vessel. He could hear it all, but understood none of it.

Nobody spoke to him. He felt the light pressure of a hand on his arm, but that meant nothing to him either. He opened his mouth to ask a question, but there was no need. Tumal answered it for him, although Wayun was sure his brother's mouth didn't move. Maybe it was the unblinking stare of his brother that had communicated to him, telling him in a dead man's language all he needed to know.

Wayun rose to his feet, the canoe swaying madly. The others were waiting for him on the landing pier, their faces guarded, saying nothing. He stepped onto the pier, and one of his friends caught him as he nearly fell. Wayun stared at the man as if he had never seen him before. More guerrillas were approaching them along the pier, having emerged from the curtain of palms behind the primitive dock. One of them was watching Wayun carefully. He stopped in front of the guerrilla, his courage faltering at the last moment, his gaze falling away. Wayun reached out a hand, cupped the man's chin, lifted it until the rebel was forced to look him in the eye again. There was no need to ask anything.

'He opposed the Krallik, Wayun,' the man said slowly.

Wayun cocked his head slightly, saying... nothing.

'He protested most strongly about the Krallik's tactics. You know his orders: all tribes along the south coast must be tortured or killed if they do not concede to the Krallik's will and deliver Indoni traders to him. Tumal...' he hesitated, fidgeted with the machete in the belt of his khaki trousers. 'Tumal said he was a tyrant, no better sometimes than Sabit himself.' A great convulsion of water from out in the lake as some unseen beast threshed in battle. Then silence again.

'He believes in purity. There is no room in his philosophy for weakness. This is war, Wayun. We *have* to be as strong as Sabit to stand any chance of winning. There is a virus in our land, and to remove it, we must be pure in our savagery... he looked away again. 'That's the reply I received to my questions about Tumal. And Wayun... his eyes were almost beseeching now, 'I *did* ask. You must believe none of us wanted this. Tumal objected to the torture of an Indoni fisherman captured last week. The Krallik was inflamed. He referred to your brother as being a part of the virus weakening

and killing his people. His voice was so very loud in our heads.

Wayun said nothing. His eyes never left those of the man who had spoken. Now another guerrilla intervened, placing a hand on Wayun's shoulder. 'The Krallik may be a little mad,' he said slowly. 'But he will secure freedom for all our people. We have suffered, and will suffer more. But the Krallik will give us back our land if we stand together.'

Wayun walked away down the pier, ignoring them all. He passed through the fringe of palms, and there was the temple ahead of him, in a jungle clearing on the island. He stopped, gazing at the temple as if seeing it for the first time, although since joining the OPG, he had been here on at least a dozen occasions.

The temple was higher than the tallest palm tree, made of thatched grass, bamboo and broad, strong leaves. It was fashioned in the rounded shape of a huge, screaming head. Wayun's gaze left the snarl of the doorway/mouth and climbed past the two eye hole windows to the bulging forehead and the stakes emerging from the roof like spikes of hair. More heads adorned these stakes, rotting now, some merely dirty bone, the flesh scooped away by hungry birds. Just below the stakes, where there were no windows, where there would be no light, was the Krallik's lair.

Wayun entered the temple.

Inside the mouth, a large gloomy room. Logs carved into stools, benches and tables scattered around haphazardly. Hammocks of vine and leaf hung from the low roof like burst cocoons. There were maybe fifteen men in the hot, airless room. Their balaclavas of fur were stacked on a log against the wall as they busied themselves fashioning knives from animal femur bones.

Most of them looked up at Wayun. A couple, maybe ashamed, continued to work on their knives, as if Wayun was not there. Wayun chose them.

He took a bone knife away from one man, tilted it in his hands, examining the handiwork. Still, the man did not look up. Wayun handed him back his weapon silently.

The fear had left him.

There was only one emotion he could feel now.

The men in the room watched him carefully, apart from the shamed, the cowardly. They waited for some outburst, some sign of rage.

Wayun had never been a violent man, a bitter man. He was well liked amongst the OPG guerrillas. An amiable, thoughtful, polite young man, earnest and fair, strong but not overly skilled in warfare.

The men in the room looked at Wayun, and realized they no longer knew him.

A different man stood among them.

They wondered what this stranger would do.

The tourists thought they were lucky.

They'd survived the Mumi attack in Jikora, and fled to nearby Wameen, a teeming trading port in northern Papul. The soldiers who had also survived the attack duly followed them, and acting upon orders from the President himself, duly arrested them. Supernatural Mumi aggression would not be tolerated, was the buzz on the colourful, if grubby streets of Wameen. And nor would any tourists unlucky enough to witness the miraculous and terrible occurrence.

Soldiers were everywhere. They marched the streets, bullying the stall-holders, jeering at the Papul men in their traditional penis gourds, trigger happy, and rape happy. Jikora was closed. The Mumi would not be coming out to play with any tourists today. Or tomorrow for that matter. By order of President Sabit.

Sabit was being the jovial host, and entertaining those tourists who had witnessed the horror at Jikora. Or at least his men at the army barracks in Wameen were fulfilling that role for him. The off-worlders were all guests of the Indoni military, and if any of them were stupid enough to voice their outrage (oh, and of course they were; they were on holiday after all, and they weren't *Papul*, goddammit!), they were treated to a special kind of police brutality. There would be no leak to the tourist worlds beyond. Jenggel. Sabit had already prepared his press statement to explain their disappearance.

The OPG had murdered them. But not to worry, the

perpetrators had already been caught and executed, and any future tourists wanting to come to Papul should certainly have no fear of rebel aggression against democracy. But just in case, there would be special military protection for all parties interested in exploring the unique wonders that Papul, this exotic jewel in the Indoni crown, had to offer.

By the time Victoria arrived in Wameen, another 'guest' of the Indoni army, the tourists who had so luckily managed to escape the crazy horror of Jikora were already dead.

The Doctor had made several attempts to engage the guerrilla leader in conversation as they made their way through the wet jungle. It had stopped raining as abruptly as it began, and now the jungle opened its throat more vociferously than before, a cornucopia of strange noises and cries surrounding them, the rainforest truly refreshed and wakened by its late-afternoon shower.

At first the Doctor suspected the man did not actually speak any English, despite being obviously able to understand a good deal of it. He had tried to communicate with him via Kepennis, but the guide looked more concerned about the gun barrel jostling him from behind than interested in chatting to their captors.

At last the man yielded to the Doctor's incessant questions. He was walking behind the Doctor, a machete at the ready should the alien try any sudden moves. His face was weary, his eyes bloodshot, and the Doctor guessed that he had been travelling for some time with his squad of guerrillas. But despite the machete, despite the sternness of his expression, the Doctor could see a passion in the man's large eyes that was not purely fanaticism. He was handsome in the broad-featured, animated fashion that all Papul men seemed to share. He was undeniably powerful and fierce-looking with it, but a gentleness shone through that spurred the Doctor on in his persistent attempts at understanding the guerrillas.

Of course, the Doctor knew exactly the right questions to ask too.

'They different to us, alien. As different to us, as you.' His English was imperfect, but up to now the Doctor had not

known whether he could speak any at all, so that hardly mattered. 'You can see,' he lifted his machete to gesture at Santi's rounded rump just ahead of them, the object of more than a few of the guerrillas' appreciative glances, as indeed was Wina's. 'Indoni not look like us, so why they think we belong to them? Papul is independent country, alien. Our island separate –' he was searching for the words, his passion rising to confound his articulation, '– in geography, in culture, in flora and... and fauna. *Everything* different here to Indoni islands. We been invaded...' diplomatically"... and here he spat into the dripping undergrowth beside him as he walked. He was now level with the Doctor, and was staring at him intensely, his fury barely contained.

'Diplomatically?' the Doctor prompted.

'Democratic referendum, yes!' These words were obviously well known to the guerrilla. Presumably they had been rehearsed for just such an opportunity as this, when dealing with off-world parties. 'Democratic referendum rigged! Papul leaders from many villages offered choice: vote for Indoni...' integration"... or be shot.'

Jamie was right behind them, and until now had been largely silent.

'Och, I know what ye mean. I've fought against sassenachs who wanted to take my people's land away before. But we're not your enemy, you know.'

The Doctor knew he was thinking constantly of Victoria, and maybe assuming that the Doctor was not doing the same. But there was no time to explain to the Scot that in order to ever stand a chance of finding their companion, they had first of all to understand their captors, and hopefully get them on their side.

'Colonised in the most insidious way, I see...' he murmured, his voice almost lost under the weird ululation of an unseen jungle beast. From ahead, Wina gave an involuntary little cry of alarm at the sound. Some of the guerrillas laughed harshly.

'A strange sort of democracy,' the Doctor continued. 'But surely there are more peaceful ways of securing your people's freedom?'

‘There no other way. Violence only they understand. Only thing President Sabit understand. We take you to the Krallik and negotiate with enemy from there.’ He slashed at a vine that was blocking their way, but the Doctor could see the action was more of a demonstration to emphasise his next words: ‘If Indoni concede to our demands for an independent Papul, you released. If not, you killed.’

The Doctor uttered a little sound of alarm and threw a look of dismay over his shoulder at Jamie.

The guerrilla leader was still talking, having now well and truly got into his stride. ‘We fighting in the name of our ancestors, whatever happen. We know that now. Their ghosts have spoken and pointed the way for us to take. We must not surrender to Indoni rule. The Mumis have made the sign.’

‘Och, I don’t believe in ghosts any more, and nor should you,’ Jamie butted in. ‘Look, we’re on your side; we always fight against tyranny, don’t we Doctor?’

The Doctor sighed. ‘Yes, Jamie. If we’re given the chance.’

There was a slight commotion from behind them. The strange party halted to find out the cause. Ussman had tried to make a run for it upon hearing the leader’s pronouncement over their possible fate. One of the guerrillas had caught him and the blade of the machete he was shoving under the trader’s chin was leaving a trickle of blood that was already changing the pattern on the Indoni’s florid shirt. The leader barked something in Papul, and Ussman was pushed forward. His face was contorted with fear. ‘Doctor!’ he shouted, ‘Sabit will not listen to their demands. He will never be swayed by the lives of a few tourists. He has too much stake in Papul.’ The guerrilla guarding him pulled his head back by the hair to silence him, but the leader ordered his man to let the Indoni speak.

‘Sabit not only has control of a thriving tourist industry,’ he gasped, ignoring the blood trickling freely down his neck, ‘he also knows Papul is rich in valuable minerals that are currently being mined by Indoni and even some off-world companies. He will never relinquish such financial boons.’ He turned his attention away from the Doctor and addressed the

leader now, his intelligent face eloquent with the desire to impress upon him the inefficacy of the rebel's plan. 'Sabit will not care if we live or die. We are of no use to you as hostages.'

'Then you will die,' the leader said simply. 'As we have died. Suffering is nothing new to my people.'

He had an audience now, there on the jungle trail as the leaves drip-drip-dripped away the last of the afternoon rain. Santi and Wina were huddled together under the rustling vines purely through the need to seek out mutual female company, although still continuing their arrogant disdain for each other even in the face of such adversity; Drew, standing beside them, face bland with all the characterlessness of the morally weak; Budi, small and handsome, a fisherboy caught up in a terrible drama beyond his experience, face pale nevertheless from awareness of the seriousness of their plight; Ussman, eyes no longer dancing with their habitual mischief, but clouded by despair; Kepennis and Wemus, silenced by fear or maybe feelings of shame; Jamie, brow furrowed with concern over Victoria's fate and their own; and then there was the Doctor, listening carefully to the man wearing the black fur balaclava as he spoke of blood, evil and tragedy on a huge scale.

'We driven away from our spiritual homes: our holy mountains raped by the invader in search of ore. Our villages bombed, our men tortured, our women raped, because we resist...' His naked chest was rising and falling as his passion peaked, spurred on by Ussman's admission of Sabit's disinterest in the Papuls' fate. His fury, building for many, many months, many, many years, had found an outlet at last, and inevitably it broke. He marched forward, snatching Wina by the arm and pulled her to him, machete blade resting under her breasts. She struggled gamely, seemingly more worried about losing her almost regal composure in front of Santi than by anything the guerrilla might do. Her face was angry and contemptuous, as if outraged at being so rudely manhandled by someone she obviously considered to be her inferior.

'How you like to see *your* women treated like this?' the guerrilla hissed, addressing Ussman and Budi.

The Doctor and Jamie moved forward as one to rescue the

Indoni girl, and promptly moved back as one as a rifle and a machete, respectively, were thrust towards them by guerrillas.

Drew broke the tension. 'What are you talking about? These whores are treated like that all the time!' He was laughing at his own seedy little joke. Wemus had seen and heard enough. He shoved Drew out of his way, and ignoring a machete that lifted to intercept him, seized Wina by her free arm and twisted the girl free of the leader's grip. He held her to him protectively, meeting the rebel's angry gaze with defiance.

The guerrilla raised his machete to the guide's throat. 'So you are not always coward, huh? There are some things you will fight for?'

'You have no quarrel with innocent girls, my friend' It was Kepennis who spoke, lifting a hand to gently push the blade away from his companion. And surely enough of our people have died already?'

The guerrilla sized him up as if wondering whether to plunge his machete into this new target for his aggression. Then he was lowering the weapon, and the moment of imminent violence was gone. Weariness replaced the fury in his face.

'It is the army we hate. They beasts, led by the biggest beast of all. But if we cannot win against them, we must strike against whatever we can to save our people'

'Hardly a fair way of dealing with the problem, now is it' interceded the Doctor gently. He decided to shut up again when an arrow clenched in a guerrilla's fist prodded him meaningfully in the belly.

Jamie gave him an exasperated look. 'We're no gonna find Victoria with you antagonising them, are we?'

The Doctor was indignantly about to argue his case when a shout came from ahead. A guerrilla who had ventured forward to check the trail came loping back to join the group. He spoke excitedly to the leader in Papul and then the guerrilla was ushering the whole group onward again.

They soon found the reason for the guerrilla's excitement. A large metallic craft was embedded in the jungle undergrowth just around a bend in the trail. It was the size of a

London bus, windowless apart from a forward screen in the crumpled nose, and roughly the shape of a truncated cigar. The buckled casing, once silver, was now streaked by fuel burn and jungle juice. Trees, bent and smashed by its impromptu descent, clutched at the craft like wrestlers struggling for a throw.

The guerrillas thronged eagerly around this alien intrusion into their natural habitat, although when Jamie gave the Doctor a meaningful glance, silently suggesting this might be a good opportunity to make a break for it, it was apparent from the speed with which a machete appeared under his nose that the guerrillas were never too distracted to lower their guard.

Kepennis drew the leader's attention to some slimy trails along the bulkhead of the craft. Long green smears, thick and viscous. He spoke with the leader in Papul, but the Doctor, his curiosity aroused by the craft and by the smears that had so interested Kepennis, ignored the machete and pushed forward to find out for himself.

He touched the green ooze and lifted a trace to his nose. It stank of stale ponds.

'Jungle Snatcher,' Kepennis told him. 'This Indoni military craft; maybe fly too low over tree tops, pulled down by Snatcher.'

'Snatcher?' The Doctor was intrigued. But Kepennis's attention was already focusing on the guerrillas who were forcing open the dented forward port. The Doctor, ever conscious of the machete hovering next to his throat, stooped slowly to peer inside.

He could see someone sitting in the pilot's chair. Blood slicked the interior of the cabin around him, drying tidal marks rising up the metal bulwarks. One of the rebels was prodding at the slumped pilot, an Indoni in military garb, whose left sleeve was saturated in blood. The Doctor could see by the rough way the guerrilla shook the man that the Papul didn't really care whether the pilot was alive or dead.

The leader pushed past the Doctor and hauled himself into the cabin. The Doctor could still see the pilot's face, however, and that now the man's eyes were fluttering glazedly open, as though he was awakening from a long and particularly bloody

wet dream.

He looked as if he really wished he could return to it when the leader started shaking him brutally. The pilot groaned in pain; it was obvious he would not last much longer. Yet the leader was adamant he would make him speak and began cuffing the side of the Indoni's head.

'That man will die if you don't give him some aid soon!' the Doctor called angrily. The leader ignored him, bending low over the pilot.

'He is asking about one of the OPG guerrillas,' Kepennis explained: He was taken prisoner by the army a few months ago.

All the pilot could offer his tormentors, however, was a flower of blood that bloomed on his lips. The leader's patience was running out. He drew his machete.

'Give him water and he might be able to tell you what you want!' the Doctor shouted in exasperation at their stupidity. 'Can't you see this is what hatred reduces you to? You're no longer even thinking rationally. How do you expect to win your war if you're as brutal as they are?' He lapsed into grumpy silence. The leader glared at him from the port, then gestured to one of his men. A canteen was thrust into the Doctor's hands and he was nudged forward into the cabin of the craft.

While the Doctor poured a trickle of water over the dying man's lips, one of the guerrillas examined the cabin flight controls, testing power relays and booting the ignition system to see if it was still operable. A weak thrum of engines loading filled the cabin, wavered, died completely, then boosted again before finally holding. The guerrilla gave his leader a complacent smile.

The pilot was talking at last, and the leader turned from his smug lieutenant to confront the dying man again. He listened to a few spluttered words in Indoni, then put the edge of his machete against the man's throat and spoke briefly and menacingly.

The pilot answered, in between a bout of coughing that caused more flowers of blood to grow from his lips. The Doctor pushed the machete away and gave him more water.

On the third gulp, the man died.

Two guerrillas unfastened him from his pilot harness and slung the body unceremoniously into the bushes. The leader looked grimly satisfied. He climbed down from the cruiser and beckoned to Jamie.

‘You say you fight against oppressor before?’ he asked, measuring the Scot, his gaze faltering slightly as he took in the tartan kilt.

‘Oh aye.’ Jamie responded stalwartly, ‘I fought against the English at Culloden.’

‘So you can fight with us now. Or die. You go to Wameen with some of my men. You try escape, they tell me, and your friend here,’ he indicated an apprehensive-looking Doctor, ‘lose his head. He try escape and you lose *yours*.’

Jamie was looking a little less stalwart now. The Doctor was caressing his neck nervously. ‘Why do you want to take Jamie?’

‘We need all warriors to fight at Wameen. Our brother is there. Prisoner of army. This Indoni tell me. You stay with us, continue to south swamps.’

‘No!’ the Doctor protested. ‘We’ve lost one of our party already. Jamie stays with us or we go no further.’ His cheeks billowed with his passion.

The leader actually smiled. ‘You welcome stay here if you want. Snatcher maybe still here too. Indoni pilot tell me Snatcher pull cruiser from sky and devour all crew. They try run in jungle, but cannot run fast *enough*. You think you can run fast enough?’

The Doctor huffed in consternation but didn’t respond, looking around warily for any signs of a beast capable of sucking a large craft from above the trees and decimating its crew. The pilot’s chair harness had obviously saved him from being pulled out to join their fate; that and the fact that he was too injured to attempt fleeing into the trees.

‘You’ll never get that thing to move again,’ Jamie said hopefully, indicating the cruiser nestled in its cradle of trees.

The man who tested the controls smirked. He shook his head at the guerrilla leader. ‘We can leave in five minutes, after build-up of power.’ he said in good English, apparently

for Jamie's benefit.

The Doctor was searching for something optimistic in their predicament. 'Wameen is a large town?' he asked the leader.

'After Jayapul, largest in Papul,' the rebel answered. 'With army post. We must strike carefully.'

But the Doctor wasn't interested in that. He turned to Jamie. 'Then maybe Victoria has been found by the Indoni army and taken there: he said brightly.

'She dead already then,' the leader replied immediately. 'Or worse...'

The Doctor and Jamie swapped horrified glances. A sunset-coloured bird was laughing at them from the branches of a tree above.

Darkness was creeping in over the jungle.

Victoria was sipping a glass of wine, having just finished an excellent meal.

The officer was courteous and charming. And even though she knew she was a virtual prisoner, she could think of far, far worse captors. The cruiser ride from the jungle had only taken an hour or so, and although she had been full of trepidation and concern over her friends, the officer, who had informed her his name was Agus, had assured her a squad would be sent out first thing the next morning to look for them.

Wameen was a shanty town full of squalor, and animal markets run by naked Papul men with strange penis gourds and lined faces, old before their time under the harsh Papul sun. Victoria's cheeks had burned as the cruiser descended outside the barracks near the market square and the local men stared impassively at her through the windscreen. But the officers' quarters were a haven of civilisation and decorum by contrast.

Agus was watching her now, relaxing in a chair opposite her as darkness fell outside the window. She felt another blush rise in her cheeks. He was obviously attracted to her. But how could she be thinking of such things when the Doctor and Jamie were so far away in the jungle. And especially as this man was a... well, he was a foreigner, wasn't he? (*An alien!*)

Not for the first time she felt shamed by her closeted

Imperialist upbringing. Hadn't the Doctor opened her mind to a whole new universe of cultures and beliefs outside her straitjacketed Empire world-view, after all? Still, childhood prejudices and impressions were difficult to shake, even though she had made monumental strides to do just that since entering the TARDIS for the first time. Then again, she'd never been one to adhere to the norm in the first place.

Agus was handsome and dashing, and above all, intelligent. She finished her wine and listened to him talk of Empire, and despite the vast distance in space and time between herself and her beloved Victorian period on Earth, she felt curiously at home.

'We are not murderers, Victoria,' he was saying slowly, his dark eyes fixed on her unwaveringly, with all the conviction of a man who knows he is fighting for the right side. 'The Indoni Republic has brought about harmonious integration with Papul. We have not forced them to concede to our wishes. We bring rationality and civilization to a wilderness.' He poured Victoria and himself another glass of wine as he spoke. Victoria's gaze shifted from his handsome features to the portrait of the Indoni President on the wall behind the officer. The marked contrast between the two made her confused: Agus was the epitome of apparently sincere chivalry; the President looked gnawed by avarice and compromised by his own cunning. She thought momentarily of commenting on the distinctly unsavoury-looking appearance of the officer's revered leader, but Agus's words were sweeping her away, taking her back to a time of cosy security on her father's lap beside the fire while he told tales of derring-do and British Integrity in barbaric climes.

'You have seen the Papul yourself. Penis gourds, bows and arrows, grass huts. The indigenous people are little more than barbarous savages... and I do not mean that in a denigrative way at all: He leaned forward to emphasize that point. 'They are a good, honest people; just desperately in need of enlightenment. Cannibals and headhunters. When we arrived here, we were met with storms of arrows and naked savages who wanted to eat us.'

Victoria winced and Agus smiled apologetically.

‘We offer them education, employment, technology, finance – all the trappings of a modern, cultured world. Is that so wrong?’

‘Then why do they fear you so much?’

The officer sat back, a look of disappointment on his face. ‘You’ve obviously been talking to secessionists. These people cannot embrace enlightenment and a controlled economy that benefits all. They only want to make profit for themselves and keep Papul in turbulent anarchy. Strong leadership and direction will always upset the few.’

Victoria thought of Wemus. His heart-warming infectious grin, his humour and good nature. She sipped her wine and frowned. Agus smiled charmingly, while President Sabit smirked from over his shoulder. Victoria’s frown deepened.

Agus looked thoughtful for a moment, and then stood up as if reaching a decision. He finished his wine with a single swig and signalled for Victoria to do likewise. ‘I want to show you something,’ he said, and there was a gleam in his eye.

He led her from the officers’ quarters and into the central courtyard of the barracks. Featureless grey blocks surrounded them on all sides. A few soldiers were smoking lazily in one corner, but jolted to attention when they saw Agus. He ignored them, leading her out through the main gateway and past the line of parked cruisers.

‘Where are we going?’ Victoria asked. The tall officer gave no answer, leading her down an alley lined with stalls and souvenir shops filled with exotica culled from the jungles, ready to be sold to eager Indoni and off-world tourists. They were all locked now, the street emptied by curfew. The alley ended in a brake of wind-bent palms, and Victoria could hear the shush of waves on a beach.

The most desolate beach she had ever seen.

Crimson sand, similar to the beach at Batu, dunes piled in weird formations like fat bodies huddled on the shore. A shore which disappeared in either direction far, far into the night. It was like the last beach – she was about to say ‘on Earth’ and stopped herself. The wind blew warmly upon her face with a tang of salt and weed. Stars peeped down from unfamiliar constellations, sprinkling their glitter into the dark sea. No

moon, and Victoria guessed it was hidden under clouds – if there was one at all – and surely there must be. Did it matter? Agus was watching her, his face grey in the starlight, eyes twinkling. He took her hand gently, and she accepted, awed by the strangeness of the beach.

They walked for a while, saying nothing, and despite the loneliness of the place, its solemnity filled Victoria with a sense of peace. She realized she had not thought of Jamie and the Doctor for quite some time.

Agus was pointing at dark shapes ahead of them on the beach, and for a moment fear returned. She could hear a moaning, keening sound, and it was coming from the squat shadows. Had the Indoni led her here for some horrible purpose?

He led her closer, and reluctantly she followed. She trusted him, and she did not know why.

The dark shapes gradually revealed themselves to be hulks of twisted metal half-buried in the sand. Rusting turrets jutting from submerged vehicles, buckled and twisted by fire or detonation. Ancient military tanks, sinking into the beach over the centuries, like the carcasses of once vicious beasts. The sound that had scared Victoria had stopped now, but the dread it had kindled remained with her.

‘The Earth-Indoni war...’ Agus said quietly, watching the tanks with pride and patriotic fervour. ‘You probably didn’t know a lot of it was fought on the beaches of Papul. You see, the Indoni have a glorious history of fighting for what they believe in. This island is ours by right; we have shed blood on these sands, defending its people from your armies. We are more than ready to defend this land again – this time from the savagery within that would consume it’

A low sighing lifted from nowhere as if to echo his words. It was the sound that had frightened her earlier. She stepped back, pulling on the officer’s hand. The sigh was from the opening of one of the turrets.

The officer’s teeth gleamed in the starlight. ‘You are not the first to be afraid here. The ghosts of the long dead can have that effect. But maybe they are singing with us: with our cause’

‘Ghosts?’ Victoria glanced at him with trepidation despite the scepticism such proclamations automatically aroused in her.

‘Spirits of the men who died in those tanks, and who inhabit them still...’ His words tailed away as the eerie keening came again from the rusted turret. The ssshing of the waves was a mournful backdrop, and were those figures moving across the darkened beach towards them?

She squeezed Agus’s hand until he smiled again. But there was nobody approaching; it was merely the weird formations of sand that decorated the beach, not moving at all.

The wind played again through the wrecks sinking into the beach, and Agus’s smile was unreal, somehow made grotesque by the darkness.

The buckled but perfectly operable military cruiser had lifted off as darkness fell. It had taken Jamie and half the guerrillas with it. The Doctor was informed they would be stopping off at a rebel outpost for more weapons and reinforcements before storming Wameen, but that hardly made him feel any better. Now he was separated from both his companions.

They had moved away from the crash site to find somewhere to camp for the night; obviously the leader had not been joking about the continued threat of the Snatcher – whatever it was – in the area. The Doctor, Santi, Wina, Budi, Drew and Ussman were escorted unerringly by their captors through the darkness to the banks of a river frothing through a jungle ravine, and here they spent the night. The guerrillas proved experts in erecting makeshift shelters fashioned from saplings and palm leaves and when the morning brought with it another pummelling of rain that lasted for maybe an hour, the hostages were very glad of their captors’ adeptness.

The Doctor emerged from his canopy early to find glorious sunlight filling the canyon below. He considered bathing in the foaming water that powered along between the steep banks, but the speed of the water and guilt over what might be happening to his companions deterred him.

The rebels were stirring the others into grudging wakefulness. The Doctor declined some hand-rolled tobacco

from the leader, but seized upon this moment of hospitality to build a better rapport with the man.

‘Perhaps you’d like to tell me your name?’ he pressed. ‘I mean, we haven’t been properly introduced, have we?’

The leader ignored the Doctor’s outstretched hand, and squatting, lit his cigarette, machete tucked in his belt for once. He obviously believed the Doctor posed no threat to him, and was not foolish enough to try to escape.

‘Names are dangerous in these jungles,’ he replied dramatically, but seeing the Doctor’s disconsolate expression, relented. ‘Tigus. I suppose it no longer matter. Indoni already know me. And will kill me if they can.’

‘Well, Tigus, where do we go from here?’

The guerrilla smoked a little more without answering, and then gestured across the river.

‘Across there?’ the Doctor said dubiously, eyeing the tubulent rapids. ‘How do you expect us to do that?’ The others were collecting behind him now. Santi and Wina looked none the worse for wear after their first night in the jungle, although Drew looked grumpy and tired, his long blond hair tangled and straw-like. His weaselly moustache had some grass caught in it. Budi looked more self-assured and was trying to comfort Santi, who didn’t look as though she needed it, a defiant frown facing the world from under her luxuriant black hair. Wina was grooming her own hair with a nonchalance towards their situation that obviously amused Ussman, who had regained a little of his mischevius twinkle. Kepennis and Wemus had started a game of cards and were arguing over tobacco like a couple of children. Kepennis looked a lot more relaxed now, despite the ordeal of the preceding day. It became apparent to the Doctor that he and Wemus were inseparable friends and in many ways were both as childish as each other. Although Kepennis seemed to exude more authority, it was clear that Wemus didn’t hold any respect for it, and the two bickered and teased each other as if they really were on a holiday outing and not the captives of hostile guerrillas. The morning sunshine had filled everyone with fresh hope it seemed.

Tigus ignored the Doctor’s question, drawing hungrily on his cigarette, as if that were far more important to him. But the

Doctor was not to be deterred so easily ‘Tell me about the Krallik,’ he said, placing his hands together and assuming a very shrewd and interested expression. ‘Who is he, a king or chieftain of some sort?’

‘He is just a man,’ Tigus replied, face hardening with suspicion at the Doctor’s line of questioning. ‘Like any good man, he fight for right.’

‘But why does he wield so much power over your people?’

Kepennis looked up from his game of cards and answered for Tigus. ‘Because he has suffered more,’ he said simply. ‘His child shot, his wife raped and murdered. He captured and tortured before escape and hide in woods.’

Tigus leapt up and kicked the guide’s cards from his hands in an unexpected burst of fury.

‘You speak for us? You *dare*? What you know of Krallik with your greed and your treachery?’ In his anger he continued to speak in English, his eyes blazing, hand straying towards his machete.

Kepennis looked down at the cards scattered in the grass. ‘Everyone know the story in Papul,’ he said defensively, like a scolded child. ‘He is hero to us too, even you think we no good. We just try survive how we can. And it is difficult enough with Wemus’s cooking.’

His attempt at humour was so incongruous that the leader was momentarily speechless. It looked as though he was going to gut Kepennis with his machete for a second, then he actually smiled. Wemus smiled too, somewhat gratefully. ‘Why everyone pick on me?’ he said plaintively.

Kepennis calmly collected his cards and continued dealing.

‘So he formed the OPG?’ the Doctor hypothesised, addressing Tigus to prevent any further confrontation.

Tigus grunted. ‘Eight rain seasons ago this happen. Live jungle since. Deep in swamps. Deep, deep, where only Anibal and strange beasts live. Mothers tell children tales of Krallik to scare them to sleep. Fathers would throw away their lives for him. I not say truth before: I hear he is more than man. His hate make him more. His experience change him. He live only to secure freedom for Papul, by whatever means. No-one ever

see Krallik – he is mystery, that how he work. When recruit men, always mask, safer for him, more mystery. The Papul fear him too, yes.’ And now he grinned, almost savagely and raised his voice for the benefit of Budi, Ussman and the two girls. ‘But the Indoni fear him more...’ Then, as if angry at having said maybe too much, he rounded on his men and with guttural commands ordered them to break camp.

Soon the party was trudging along the precarious trail that topped the ravine, and despite the more relaxed atmosphere, the machetes and rifles were still very much in evidence.

It soon became clear exactly how they were going to traverse the river. Ahead of them a *very* insubstantial and frail-looking rope bridge hung above the torrent.

Tigus led the party to the two wooden poles that were the piers of the bridge. Santi took one look at all the missing rungs and folded her arms.

‘No way Santi cross *that!*’

‘It doesn’t look very safe, does it?’ the Doctor agreed. The bridge consisted of two parallel ropes at shoulder height spanning the river, and two beneath, the latter attached to each other by slats of wood or rungs that were supposed to provide effective passage across the ravine. Trouble was, most of them were missing. The bridge was suspended about thirty metres above the frothing tumult and didn’t look very inspiring at all.

Tigus nudged Santi’s backside with his machete. She rounded on him furiously, but the look on his face made her think twice about slapping him. Wina smiled with genuine pleasure.

When nobody made any move towards crossing, Tigus dropped the machete and snatched a rifle from one of his cohorts. He ratcheted the catch and placed the barrel securely against the Doctor’s head.

‘I – I think we’d better do as he says,’ the Doctor stammered woefully.

The river was everything in this part of Papul. It was the main road, the artery, the connection between isolated communities. It provided food, clothes, news, even civilisation of a sort. The seemingly endless Wildmaan meant life to all the lonely river

stations situated along its banks, separated from any town – and the nearest was Agat – in some cases, by hundreds of miles.

Right now it brought Indoni traders, on their monthly route to Agat from Meraowk – the only other town on the south coast and a good three-day motor-canoe trip away from the main missionary outpost.

The two traders were used to this lonely stretch of the river. They hadn't seen a human face since early that morning, when they had left the station that had put them up for the night. It could be hard sometimes, travelling the endless miles of wide river. Nothing to see on either side but weird vegetation, and towering trees whose branches and trunks were completely hidden by shape-hugging thick leaves, almost as if they were wearing mittens of green. Now and again they would pass minor tributaries, some no more than narrow tunnels leading off into the depths of the jungle, others broader, more defined. When the traders pondered about what sort of unexplored, hellish heart of darkness those smaller tributaries might lead to, and what sort of savage offshoot of mankind might dwell there, they would shiver inwardly and reach for a cigarette as the motor canoe pattered past the vine-tangled entrances. But most times, they simply did not think of such things. They were traders, not explorers.

The river station they were seeking was just around the next bend in the river, and the traders were more than looking forward to a hot meal and maybe a drop of something alcoholic made from local berries. Soley sat aft, guiding the motor canoe morosely through the murky water, eyes always locked on some unseen goal, rarely speaking, his features peaceful yet lost-looking, as if he were always dreading of some better place he knew he would never find. His friend Elan sat forward, impatiently waiting for the river station to appear, forever fidgeting, forever chattering, even if Soley rarely answered him.

Huge, graceful birds dropped from the trees around them, sweeping the river with immense white wings, long beaks dipping, seizing, the birds lifting again, all in one seamless move, retreating to the tree tops to watch the traders. Soley

barely noticed them, he was seeing things beyond the present; maybe his own future, maybe his own fate. His large moustache twitched as he sniffed – his only response to Elan’s continual monkey babble.

Round the bend, and there was the river station. Only two huts on stilts rising from the water’s edge, a little pier, a tin drum of benzine and a little stockade with a couple of Babi. That was the river station. That was civilisation in this wilderness along the Wiklmaan.

‘Where is the idiot?’ Elan said, shielding his gaze against the fierce sun and frowning at the pier. Baccha was normally waiting for them, sitting on the landing, big legs dangling like a child’s, face beaming happily. He knew when to expect them each month. This was the first time in ages the big Papul man had not been there to greet them.

Soley said nothing, steering the motor canoe in towards the landing, reducing the speed so the motor chug-chugged sedately into harbour.

He killed the motor altogether as Elan scrambled to his feet, calling Baccha’s name impatiently. The canoe bumped against the wooden pier.

There was absolute silence. The Babi in the stockade blinked at them with disinterest, not even eating their swill. The swooping stalkbirds ceased their swooping, watched impassively from the treetops. Even the river was quiet.

Elan’s world could not accept silence, which explained his slightly demented continual jabbering; he was in the wrong job. He abhorred a vacuum of noise and speech. It had to be filled. He shouted the Papul’s name repeatedly, each time with more urgency. He turned to Soley, his face twisted with puzzlement. ‘But he’s *always* here,’ he said, scratching his thin moustache.

While Soley tethered the canoe, Elan leaped onto the pier. ‘He better have some shavings,’ he muttered distractedly. ‘Counting on that stuff to get me through the next few weeks.’

Soley joined him on the landing pier. This was very unusual indeed. Normally Baccha would be more than eager to sell them a nice big bag of wood chips, and the traders would be more than eager to accept them. The shavings were used

extensively on Batu for incense, and fetched nice prices there. This was troubling, both for the traders' minds, and their pockets.

'Hey, Baccha, you fat tree-creeper!' Elan made for the darkened doorway of the thatch and sapling-constructed hut rearing up on stilts from the river's edge. Although Baccha had no children, his plump, huge-breasted wife should be in there at least, cooking some delicious repast for the weary traders.

The door was open. Elan stepped up to the threshold. And Baccha was there, emerging from the darkness of the hut. Or at least his huge black hand was there, reaching out towards them, clutching a stuffed bag of wood chips.

They couldn't see the rest of him. This odd coyness on the part of their usually jovial and straightforward contact moved even the laconic Soley to speech.

'Come out and play, Baccha. You want your money, come out and play.'

So Baccha came out to play.

All the preceding night and half the next morning, Wayun had sharpened his femur knife. He said nothing, concentrating on the long Kassowark bone like it was his world and nothing else mattered. He spoke to no-one. The other guerrillas in the temple left him alone, respecting his grief. Now and again his friends would glance at him, then resume playing cards, drinking what little whisky they had left. Some cleaned their old and barely useable rifles patiently. Others hunted. They were all waiting.

Waiting.

Wayun stood up. The others in the large central chamber turned at the abruptness of the movement.

Wayun looked at them, clutching the femur knife in his hands demonstratively. He was done with waiting. His eyes, small by Papul standards, moved to the ladder that led up through a hatch in the low ceiling. His intention was obvious. He began walking towards the ladder even as one of his friends rose to intercept him.

'No,' he said simply, pre-empting his friend's words. The

guerrilla opened his mouth to speak again, and again Wayun said the one word.

‘No.’ His young face had matured more in one night than in all the seven months he had been living and fighting with the OPG. He was ready.

For seven months he had obeyed orders from the Krallik; attacked military nests, raided trading posts, sabotaged mining equipment in the mountains. Yes, even killed. But only Indoni. He had never really understood what war meant until now. All the barriers had crashed. Naked whore war, bare to the bone, and he could stare right into her fleshless eye sockets and recognise the bitch for what she was.

This was evil. Unnatural. False.

This had to be cut out and burned.

This was cancer.

He put his foot on the first step of the ladder.

Baccha was wearing the best in cannibal chic: human jawbone necklace – very old, belonged to his grandfather – animal grease war-paint on his face, Babi tusks distorting his nostrils, leaves gummed around his penis. Baccha the jovial farmer and river station trader was gone. The past had taken him away. The new Baccha felt like a man for the first time in his life.

A warrior.

Beside him, squatting on the floor of the hut, his wife: huge pendulous breasts swinging over her busy hands as she stripped their meal, naked but for a skirt of grass.

Baccha raised his elaborately carved wooden axe with its sharpened green quartz ‘blade’ – this a hand-down from his father – and brought it down hard a few times until the sinewy bits rolled away from the round object he was balancing in the dirt before him. Then, pleased with his work, he pushed the axe away, stood up and signalled to his wife to help him. She promptly positioned a flat oval-shaped stone with a hole in its centre on top of the object. Baccha lifted a spear down from the wall of the hut and, measuring force and resistance, slammed the spear down repeatedly so the wickedly sharp flint head passed through the hole in the stone to pierce the flesh and bone beneath. When he had punched an abrasure roughly

corresponding with that in the stone, he grunted with satisfaction and reverently hung the spear back on the wall.

He knelt to examine his work. His wife was already rooting around in the mess on the floor for a bone knife, and finding it, began prodding the sharp end through the breach in the round and very bloody object that Baccha was now clasping between his knees.

She unspooled the grey matter from inside with great relish. Neither of them spoke.

Outside the hut, the bag of shavings drifted slowly away on the river.

Chapter Seven

The Piper at the Gates of Dawn.

'You look like 'im.'

'What?' He was still admiring his fresh tattoo, and scarcely heard the bearded biker's words.

'I said, that f'ing looks like you.'

Now he looked up. The biker finished stacking away his laser needles and colours and fished for a cigarette out of a packet he'd just sat on a moment ago.

'You tryin' to be funny?'

The biker shrugged without smiling or doing any of the things that usually signalled an attempt at humour.

He let it go. Gazed again at the tattoo – the half-man, half-animal relaxing in the black grass, clutching Pan Pipes to its naked breast, yellow horns sweeping back, sinister smile.

Yeah. He could see the resemblance himself now. He wondered what she'd think of it. She'd be here soon. He'd wanted a new tattoo and hoped she'd help work on it, but she was late. She'd be here soon and then she could see it and she would know he was wonderful.

Yeah... Looked like him. That was soulful, man.

Sensitive side y'see. It would show her that special him that once sat in the purple dusk 'neath a whispering tree while the musbies laughed and chuckled and distorted his fingers and his mind, and everything was natural, and everything was right, and to be lived for. All good stuff Elemental, man. She would recognise that, and she would love him even more.

His heart lifted, ran a few yards. She was coming. Could hear her opening the door. Footsteps down the short corridor, into the parlour. There.

Long blonde hair, nose slightly too large, but what did he care. Bluest eyes that took him in, smile so sexy just for him.

The biker ignored her face, but was looking at her breasts, fettered by the leather tunic.

She reached to touch him, caressed his face; he reached forward to kiss her but the biker put a hairy hand in the way, leaning it against the wall between them.

'Forty-five,' he said laconically.

That made no sense. 'Huh?' Anger at being prevented from kissing his woman took on an added dimension. Surprise. *He didn't like to be surprised.*

'You don't get discount cos you're stiffin' my staff. That'll cost you forty-five sweet ones.'

He was back in the tattoo parlour.

Back where it all went wrong.

Where it all went red.

The line between reality and absurdity was tenuous on the road with the Dogs at the best of times, but now Pan was sure it had dissolved altogether. Clown had decided to deck himself out in war gear of a particularly surreal bent. He was going into combat made up as his circus namesake and that made Pan want to laugh and cry all at once, because it just proved life was The line between reality and absurdity was tenuous on the road with the Dogs at the best of times, but now Pan was sure it had dissolved altogether. Clown had decided to deck himself out in war gear of a particularly surreal bent. He was going into combat made up as his circus namesake and that made Pan want to laugh and cry all at once, because it just proved life was *wrong*.

Everything was wrong.

But he had to carry on with it 'cos he had no choice. This shit had to be lived out. 'Sides, sometimes there were fun things to do. And while he didn't particularly enjoy killing any more – not like Grave and Saw for instance – it did pave the way for plenty of what he did enjoy. And he'd *never* lose his appetite for whorin'.

Yeah. Clown had discarded his eye glasses and was wearing white face paint, twisted red lipstick, red latex nose, a jester's hat with bells. Crazy tit. Still wearing his combat gear, and that made it all even more surreal. Juxtaposition of

laughter and death, was that it, Clown? Yeah, good that. Some kind of ironic statement? I ain't gonna laugh, ain't gonna cry. None of it's funny anymore.

Crazy tit.

The cruiser banked sharply, and Clown's bells jingled.

And Pan *was* laughing. Laughing so hard. The others were staring at him with disinterest as he laughed, sitting around him on cushioned benches that ringed the interior of the cabin.

Grave was dressed in black as usual. Evil-looking psycho with his shaved head, long black executioner gloves and noose around his neck. Yeah, Pan was with a real bunch of jokers, wasn't he? Release the freaks... How'd it ever come to this? There was Saw, the ugliest man that ever lived: big, fat and bearded, with grubby white T-shirt stained with old blood stretched over his huge belly, chainsaw attached to his belt. And let's not forget that eye, permanently lodged halfway down his cheek. A rare beauty. Yeah. Bass, hair slicked back with oil, handsome and cool, thought he was in some 1950s biker movie or some early 1980s punk rock'n'roll band – get a reality check, you tit. Pretty Boy preening as usual, dreaming up photogenic poses he could strike when they went into action, just for the camera that was in his head. Twist at the controls, juddering the vessel just to piss them off, make them feel sick before battle like he always did. Battle? Slaughter, more like. Pan didn't even want to look at them. They made him want to gush. So he laughed instead. Oh, did he laugh.

They'd lost it, hadn't they?

Twist brought the cruiser down next to the compound, nudging up a cloud of dirt and taking out a totem pole of some weird significance. The Dogs clambered out as the dust settled around them, Pan first, a Power Rifle lazy in his arms, cradled there like an ugly killer baby. The rest followed him, stooping under the low grass lintel and spreading out inside the village.

The village – Pan couldn't remember the name of it – was deep in the Papul interior. They would do what they'd done to two villages already: question the primitives about the location of the Krallik, get no answers, and then burn. Sabit's instructions seemed pretty pointless to Pan, but then wasn't everything really, apart from sex with some stranger?

‘These monkeys would rather burn than betray their revered rebel,’ Pretty Boy spat after twenty minutes of fruitless interrogation.

‘So let ‘em; Pan said.

They strolled away from the burn, Grave taking out the few stragglers who tried to make it through the narrow gate. Bodies choked the entrance as he continued to fire lazily, just as if he were fishing by a peaceful brook, and not layering beams of energy into naked human flesh while the village flamed behind.

Let ‘em all burn.

The cruiser took to the skies again, the seven Dogs loaded aboard, along with their seven different, splendid psychoses.

Of course Tigus made Santi go first along the bridge. Although he didn’t laugh as he prodded the slightly stocky Indoni girl onto the first slat, the decision was obviously prompted by some cruel sense of humour, the Doctor supposed.

‘Look at her go!’ Drew whooped as Santi’s arms flailed out to grip the shoulder-high support ropes, emitting a colourful curse in Indoni as she did so. Wina watched from the bank with arms folded and a regal expression of disdain on her face as Santi continued to scream obscenities. ‘She has no etiquette.’ she muttered to Wemus beside her. ‘Make me shy to be Indoni!’

The guerrilla leader waited until Santi had made it across three slats before ushering the Doctor to follow her. ‘Oh my word!’ the Doctor exclaimed as he took his first step onto the rickety bridge and felt it buck under him. He surveyed the dizzy plunge beneath his feet with a considerable lack of enthusiasm. There came a yelp from Santi; one of her high-heeled dancing shoes had plunged through a broken slat and she’d gone with it, her legs kicking frantically in space, short skirt made even more short where it was hiked up by one of the lower ropes, giving her audience a good look at her thighs and white knickers. She squawked and wriggled inelegantly, clutching the upper ropes for dear life. The Doctor wobbled alarmingly towards her in a rescue attempt, although her

struggles caused the bridge to oscillate even more wildly. He finally managed to clasp her waist with one arm, holding onto a guide rope with his other hand, and pulled her back up to safety. Wina shook her head at the entire spectacle, as if Santi were making a big fuss over nothing.

Santi regained her dignity, straightened her skirt again, turned to face the guerrillas, and hurled a string of foul suggestions at them that just made them titter even more. Then she lurched gracelessly forward onto the next, thankfully solid, rung.

It was Wina's turn next. She made as regal a progress over the rickety bridge as such an undignified means of crossing would allow. She didn't utter a sound, gingerly but coolly testing each slat with her foot before trusting it with her weight. Ahead, Santi exploded into expletives again as she was forced to spread her legs to shuffle along the foot ropes, there being a space of some three yards without any rungs. Wina followed far more elegantly: her legs being longer she was not forced into such an unbecoming posture, and couldn't help remarking to Wemus who was crossing directly behind her that Santi had the etiquette of a goat.

She had just finished smirking when something rose, fast as an eye blink, from the frothing water to quest the air above the bridge.

Wina had an impression of a long slimy rope, seaweed-green. A fleshy rope thick as a man's leg. The guerrilla directly behind Wemus lost his footing on a rung as the rope moved towards him, flash-quick. He was falling from the bridge – just managed to grab at a lower rope with one hand. Swinging above the torrent.

Tigus balanced himself on the wildly swaying bridge as Santi shrieked and Wina forgot all her etiquette and joined in. He steadied his rifle, waiting for a clear target. There was a deafening steam-like hiss from below, and something broke the surface of the rapids. A huge mossy green rock, that was not a rock but a featureless head. While everyone stared at this new horror, the slime rope went for the dangling guerrilla. What looked like long green fingers wiggled from the end of the rope, unclenching to reach for the rebel. They seized his

head, tweaked it like it was a nut and blood was jolting out from the crushed skull. The Papul let go of the bridge and dropped. The fingers caught him before he hit the water and snatched the corpse below the surface. The head lowered slowly beneath the river again, white water cascading over the bulging mossy forehead. It was gone.

Santi was crouching on the bridge, caterwauling. Wina was being comforted by Wemus. The Doctor put an arm around Santi's shoulder while attempting to keep his own balance.

'Snatcher,' Kepennis announced gravely, peering down watchfully into the torrent.

Tigus nudged him onward. 'Move,' he yelled to the others ahead of him. 'Fast.'

They didn't need prompting. Wina's successive progress across the bridge was considerably less regal.

She'd been told to wait in the officer's mess for her own safety, where a nice bed had been prepared for her and where she'd spent a disturbed and wakeful night. But then Victoria had never been one for doing as she was told.

Agus had taken her to her room the night before, and had made a big deal out of not locking her in – his sense of chivalry positively forbade it. But she knew she couldn't go far. Where would she go exactly? Agus told her there were soldiers out searching for the Doctor and Jamie, so all she could sensibly do was sit tight and wait until they were found.

But she wasn't always sensible either, and Agus hadn't locked the door.

That was asking for trouble.

So, after sitting patiently in her room all morning, watching the soldiers parading in the courtyard below, and only having one visit from Agus to distract her, she finally got restless beyond endurance and left the room.

The officers' quarters were quiet, the corridors empty. She tip-toed down the stone steps that led out to the courtyard, not quite knowing why she was tip-toeing, but sure it was the right thing to do regardless.

The soldiers had finished their drill. The courtyard was

deserted.

She had a choice: the large gate that opened onto the market square beyond was directly ahead of her across the yard. That was quite tempting. Although the naked Papuls with their grotesque penis gourds made her feel nervous and affronted her decency, the exotic bazaars and all the colour and whirl of a busy alien market town attracted her.

Her other choice was to enter one of the two arches on the walls to either side of the courtyard. The one to her left was closest, but the dimness beyond did not look particularly inviting. The other was too far away to judge, but the bleakness of the facade above the doorway was distinctly offputting. The small glass-less windows looked too much like prison cells, but then so did the ones above the nearer arch.

That settled it then: out! Explore the town.

She had to pass the entrance of the nearest archway to get to the gate, and as she did so the smell hit her, like a down-draft of human misery. It smelled of blood and fear, and was well married to the barely audible moan of utter agony that chased after it a moment later.

Victoria flinched, and froze dramatically in the middle of the courtyard.

Her bowels contracted at the smell and the sound. Her eyes watered with unnatural fear. The smell faded, then came again: revolting, flesh and faeces, and everything she did not want to think about right now, or ever.

Go, a voice told her. Get out, see the sights, maybe hire some craft to search for your friends. This place was not good, despite all Agus's assurances that the Indoni were fighting on the side of the angels.

She was going to listen to the voice, *her* voice, but then the cry came again, faint and awful, and that decided her.

She'd never been obedient, and she'd rarely been sensible; but Victoria could *always* be relied upon to get herself into a mess.

Because she was brave and, yes, noble, she did what she really knew she shouldn't do.

She turned and entered the dark archway.

Wayun had reached the top of the ladder. From the guerrillas' quarters it stretched up through a hatch-less opening in the ceiling, up through the next storey of the temple which was the provisions store, through another opening above and up to the Krallik's domain.

Wayun was now where few rebels had ever stood before.

Below him, the hole in the wicker floor leading to safety and reassurance. Ahead of him, a curtain stretching across the chamber in which he stood. There was nothing around him, no furniture, no windows: the only light slipping through chinks in the grass walls. The curtain was black and featureless, obviously stolen from some wealthy Indoni trader.

There was an absolute silence from behind the curtain. Wayun's fury was curdled by that silence, by the awful sense of wrongness about everything. Maybe the Krallik was not there? he thought hopefully, and that hope shamed him as he pictured his brother's head hanging above the pink mist rising from the lake. Of course he was there. The simple antechamber he stood in was literally Wayun's purgatory, before fate decided whether he should enter the hell of the Krallik's domain, or retreat below and pick up the reigns of his disillusioned life.

Wherever the Krallik was, he brought hell with him. Wayun knew that now. It had taken a long time, but he was certain at last. And now Wayun must enter hell too, and destroy whatever he found there.

Could he do it?

He had the bone knife in his hand, and of course it was sharp enough for the job. Hadn't he spent all morning sharpening it?

Could he do it?

Nobody had ever spoken to the Krallik in his temple before. Instructions had always been relayed in the Krallik's unique and frankly unnatural way. And if that was strange why had no-one ever commented upon it? Oh yes, it was unnatural too for everyone to accept it. So why was he different? Had the shock of his brother's murder freed him from the Krallik's witchery?

He remembered the stories of the Krallik's bravery in the

past, how he'd fought elusive jungle battles with his persecutors, the Indoni army; how he'd planned and executed decisive tactical strikes against the heart of the enemy with the help of his loyal band of OPG warriors – and Wayun reminded himself that that included him too

He remembered the tales of the Krallik's brutality and cruelty, the seemingly irrational slaughter, the whispers others had spread about the rebel leader always sitting up here alone in the dark, communing with his madness.

He remembered all this and fear held him rooted, like he was a plant growing from the floor of the antechamber.

They were fighting a war with the Indoni, and just about anything was acceptable in war.

Except madness.

Except evil.

He could do it.

He stepped towards the curtain.

Through the archway, the darkness at first complete then giving way to a faint glimmer, beckoning to her from down a long stone corridor, windowless, obviously to accentuate the despair anyone passing down here must feel. Why? A prison. Of course.

The glow was coming from around a bend to the left at the end of the corridor. She knew she shouldn't be doing this. Her feet were quiet on stone, but her heart was so loud. The smell was stronger. She could feel it entering her lungs, circulating around her body. She clutched her handkerchief to her nose, but still had to breathe.

Around the corner, and the glow was emanating from a weak lamp set on the floor of a prison cell. She could see through the bars in the steel door. A grotesque-looking man was doing something to a prisoner hanging against the far wall of the cell. Grotesque? No, that didn't cover it: the man might have been Indoni, but he didn't look like any soldier or civilian Victoria had seen yet; and he was certainly not Papul. He was dark-skinned, yes, but taller and lither of frame than the average Indoni. He was dressed in dirty overalls, and wore big, clumpy, metallic boots that made Victoria think of the

Frankenstein monster. His head was shaved but for a bedraggled crest of dyed red hair down the centre; one eye was gone, replaced by a metallic probe; his left hand gone too, a glinting, beak-vicious instrument forming a sinister substitute.

Victoria could only see his profile, but that presented her with enough of a view of evil, withered features, the face hollowed by depravity or by prolonged proximity to too much suffering; probably caused by himself, judging by what he was doing to the prisoner. The prisoner was undeniably Papul, and completely naked, shackled so that his feet hung just above the ground. He was groaning quietly now, barely conscious. Blood formed a sheen on his dark body. His torturer was poking at the Papul's right eye with the pointed instrument, fishing around in the socket as if trying to eject a recalcitrant pearl from an oyster. Victoria looked for just a moment too long.

She fell back against the wall, sickened.

'The Krallik... the Krallik will kill you all...'

Victoria realized the mutilated man was still conscious. His croaked defiance was ignored by the torturer, who continued his grisly work.

He didn't speak again

Victoria began to slide along the wall back the way she had come, barely registering as she did so that there were other cells that she had missed in the dark, and that faint pleas were issuing from more than one of them.

Shock propelled her around the angle in the corridor and then she was running, heading for the light, for fresh air.

There was the archway, framed by strong daylight – she was pelting madly for it – and there standing waiting for her, his arms stretched out to catch her – Agus.

And he was smiling.

She struggled in his grip, pummelling him frantically but the smile remained, like a fixed thing, a photograph of a smile that would never fade.

'You think we are monsters now, I suppose?' he said calmly, holding her still with ease. 'But what of the man we torture? You think he is a saint? He would cut all our throats if

he could. Already many of my men are dead, leaving grieving widows and children to mourn, because of his organization. An eye for an eye, you might say.'

'It's obscene!' Victoria shrieked, trying one last time to wriggle free.

'It's war,' Agus said, and dragged her across the courtyard towards the officers' mess.

And this time he locked her in.

Smoke from the burning village was curling through the jungle. Tigus halted the group. When the Doctor tried to ask what the matter was, the guerrilla leader ignored him. Then he was running, apparently forgetting his hostages, galloping along the jungle trail ahead until the foliage swallowed him.

The other guerrillas urged their captives forward from behind.

'What's rattled his cage?' Drew asked. Nobody knew, and even if they did they weren't going to bother answering the obnoxious off-worlder.

The jungle fell away to reveal a large clearing. A village compound had once taken pride of place in the centre of the clearing. Now only a large bonfire and a heap of bodies stuffed in the narrow gateway of the burning wall remained. Tigus was kneeling beside one of the blistered corpses littered around the outside of the gateway.

The Doctor turned to Wemus and Kepennis who were waiting silently at the fringe of the clearing, the guerrillas guarding them distracted and silent too.

'What has happened here?' he asked them. 'Is this the work of the army again?'

Wemus shrugged unhappily. He was probably wondering what consequences this new atrocity would have for them. Ussman and Budi were obviously thinking the same, judging from their worried expressions. Santi finally stopped cursing and grumbling. Wina rubbed her bare arms agitatedly, although this time the action had nothing to do with jungle insect irritation. Drew sighed, as if this whole scene were extremely tiresome.

Kepennis answered the Doctor, examining his hands as he

did so.

“This Tigus village. This work of mercenary.”

The Doctor advanced towards the smoking, crackling compound. The smell of burning flesh made his eyes run.

He put out a hand to touch the guerrilla’s shoulder. Then turned away from the close-up he was afforded of a woman’s face, a face of ash.

The guerrilla stood, turned to face the Doctor. He was smiling. The Doctor didn’t like the look of that smile. It was a wavering, insubstantial thing that threatened to break at any moment.

Slowly, Tigus withdrew his machete, as if he were intending to clean it. He looked down at it, turned it to let the sunlight bounce from its blade. He smiled up at the Doctor.

“You see what they do to our people?” he said quietly. And the Doctor didn’t like the quietness of his voice either. He hung his head in sympathy and feebly tapped the knuckles of both hands together.

“You see what they *do*?”

Then the Doctor was down on his knees, shoved there by the guerrilla leader, and the machete was sliding under his throat. The Doctor emitted a series of woeful sounds and his eyes rolled, but the blade pressed tighter.

“Perhaps I kill you all now. We can pretend to Indoni you still live. What we have to lose?” The crazy smile was still there.

“Leave him!” Willa called, and Kepennis was stepping forward, hands raised in an attempt at mediation.

“Sabit will never believe you – he will want proof they live!” the guide insisted bravely.

Tigus didn’t even answer. He raised the machete over his head.

Chapter Eight

‘Why are we back here?’

The Dogs’ cruiser was banking over familiar territory. The smoke from the village they had burned earlier hung in the sky, confusing their view of the ground below.

Pretty Boy repeated his question when Twist failed to respond.

‘Signal came then; weak, but it’s our man.’ The balding, long-haired pilot hunched over an instrument bank, a spliff drooping from his lips, nodding at a faint blip on a radar. ‘He hasn’t sent the positive frequency yet though so...’

‘So we’re wasting our time,’ Pan cut in. It was the first time he had spoken in hours.

‘Course, he could be dead,’ Bass offered, pulling a cigarette from its perch behind one ear and lighting it with a battered Zippo. He crashed the Zippo shut again dramatically. Pan glared at him with irritation. *You’re too cool for your own good, maaan.*

‘He ain’t dead, Clown was sure. ‘He just ain’t found the target yet.’

Twist flung the cruiser into a sharp loop and they all cursed as personal items dropped and rolled. Smoke filled the view port.

Tigus raised his head as he heard the buzz of the cruiser overhead. The machete paused before its ultimate downward chop. The smile was still there on his face, the lips curling back crazily from his teeth.

The Doctor closed his eyes and hunched his head back into his shoulders. ‘Oh my giddy aunt,’ he moaned and waited for the blow to fall.

A cry came from one of the guerrillas.

Budi was making a break for it.

He had seized the moment, as the guerrillas froze in confusion, their attention distracted by both their leader's fury and the cruiser in the sky above. The Indoni trader dashed forward, zigzagging across the grass in case one of the guerrillas took a shot at him with a rifle. He was small and thin, and not that substantial a target. If he could make for a clear spot free of smoke maybe he could signal for the cruiser. It had to belong to the Indoni army, and they were probably searching for them, he thought with shaky logic as he ran, smoke spiralling around him, flames rushing up into the sky ahead, a fierce orange wall of heat.

He was thinking of his old father, back in Batu, probably mithering about his waster of a son to his mother, as he dropped that morning's load of fish down on the rickety table before settling himself in his favourite chair, while the chickens clucked and squawked outside the little but by the sea and his mother with her wrinkled prune face said nothing, rolling up her sleeves to strip the fish, and Budi could actually *smell* those fish – and he could smell his old father's feet too as he stretched them out with a satisfied sigh after his long morning out on the choppy sea.

Something ploughed into him from behind. He hit the turf with everything knocked out of him. He forgot his father, his mother, the chickens, even the damn *fish* in sickened despair. Hands seized his hair from behind, dragged him up in a kneeling position.

He looked up, blinking in fear, and saw Tigus's face framed against the blue sky, a blue sky momentarily free of smoke, and surely the cruiser which Budi could still hear would appear in the clear space any minute now and would see them all down below.

'You want this?' Tigus roared in English so that everyone could understand. 'Is *this* what you want?'

The machete chopped down at the back of Budi's exposed neck. The blow left a raw pink slice inches deep that immediately welled with blood. The machete went up again. Down, with tremendous force. The thunk of flesh giving way to steel.

There was a stunned silence from the group of hostages.

The Doctor, still on his knees, could only stare, appalled, as Budi's body toppled face forwards into the grass, twitched and was still.

Tigus stood above the corpse, panting.

Santi began to sob.

It was a pitiful, miserable sound, and it carried with it all the meaningless horror of the act the group had witnessed. Wina had her hands over her mouth as if she would sob too, if she only could remember how... Ussman wobbled forwards a few steps, reaching out for his lost friend, then fell to his knees in grief, closing his eyes, awaiting the same fate to befall him too. Tigus was marching towards the Doctor, the bloodied machete held out as if its appetite was still not sated. Wina's mouth dropped open in horror, waiting for the Doctor to join Budi outstretched in the grass, leaking red blood into green.

Tigus stood over the Doctor again, breathing hard and fast. He looked elated, mortified, crazy and sad all at once. He glared at the Doctor as if not sure who or what he was. Then he looked at the red machete, and his hand shook slightly. He wiped it in the grass, suddenly disgusted.

'You see what they make us do?' he hissed at the Doctor as he straightened up, his lip trembling. 'We just want live simple life. Happy life. We spiritual people, want live in peace, have family, grow food.' His voice was dissolving into shaking rage. He shuddered and wiped his brow, the machete lifting with the action, catching sunlight. The buzz of the circling cruiser became a little louder. He tilted his head to shout at the sky. 'This is what they have made us! We carry their murder fever in us now. Now we *all* killers.' He looked down at the Doctor again, and he was crying.

The Doctor stood up. Santi and Wina needed consoling. Wemus moved to do the honours with Wina as the Doctor had felt sure he would. He himself put an arm around Santi who continued to sob. She pushed him away, and he shrugged helplessly. Behind them, a dull thud.

Kepennis was lying stretched out in the grass. For a sickened moment the Doctor thought one of the guerrillas had chopped him too, but then realized the man was simply in a

faint. Tigus prodded him distrustfully with his machete, then gestured to two of his men to drag him back into the jungle. He gestured at the hostages to move ahead of him, and not one felt like resisting. He turned to look back at the body of his wife, bits of her blowing in the wind, and then followed his captives into the undergrowth.

‘Nothing. I don’t see our man down there.’ Clown was leaning forward to peer through the front view port. The bells on his jester’s hat jingled slightly as he shook his head in irritation.

‘Signal’s dead again,’ Twist said, prodding the radar scanner with his finger, as if that would make it blip into life. ‘S’like he’s playin’ with us. Don’t wanna be found yet.’

‘He’s having that much fun?’ asked Bass.

‘I could have told Sabit this search was useless,’ Clown said, moving back to take his seat again as Twist flipped the fuel boost and tipped the craft westwards. ‘We might as well wait until we hear something concrete. Besides, I’ve got something to attend to in Agat.’

‘What’s that?’ Pretty Boy wanted to know.

‘Just a little chore for Sabit. Something that’ll make him a very happy bunny. You lot can wait for me in Jayapul.’

‘Jayapul!’ Saw said with disgust. ‘We gotta spend the night in that shithole?’ He scratched his beard, dislodging pieces of a fish he’d been eating earlier.

‘Yeah, the whores ain’t so good in Jayapul: said Pan.

‘And you’d know,’ said Clown without smiling.

‘That’s right,’ Pan said, giving the man a broad, broad grin for his part, just to show that he couldn’t be riled. Not by a man, anyway.

Saw was interested. ‘What’s wrong with Jayapul whores?’

‘The Indoni ones look good, but they’re imports, so they cost more,’ he answered, like he was explaining the rules to some card game. ‘They also got lots of diseases. Whereas the Papul women – forget it: they stink. And they ain’t exactly hospitable, either. I mean, you can *make* ‘em be friendly, which can be quite interesting, but if you use force you usually got to dispose of ‘em afterwards. Sabit don’t like us leaving messes behind.’

‘You really are disgusting, aren’t you?’ Clown said.

Pan spread his hands in mock indignation. The cruiser was heading north now, buzzing the interminable tree tops, heading for Jayapul. Not one of the Dogs had seen the tragedy unfolding beneath them beside the burning village.

‘Let’s go use some women:’ Pan said, and lit another cigarette.

He’d been frozen there, unable to pull the curtain.

Had some power exuded by the Krallik locked him there, or was it just his own terror? His own cowardice?

Whatever, he must have sweated there staring at the black curtain for maybe half an hour. Maybe more.

Eventually, it was his own shame that goaded him forward.

He fumbled with the curtain, looking for some parting, his hand trembling. His heart was an engine, and it was going to blow. He shuffled along the curtain in the semi-darkness, reached the wall, where feeble shafts of daylight chinked through, and pulled the curtain to one side.

Beyond, of course, was more darkness. Thicker darkness even than in the antechamber.

He’d hesitated enough, and passed inwards before his dread could stop him, and make a coward of him again.

The bone knife was clenched oh-so tight in his right hand; the only reassuring thing in his life at that moment. More chinks in the walls let cracks of light pierce the darkness, which was becoming not so complete now as he waited for his eyes to catch up.

Absolute silence.

He’s not here, Wayun told himself. Relief was like a draught of cool, fresh water. He’s not here. I don’t have to do this.

He could see more now. The room had nothing in it. Apart from three dark silhouettes occupying the centre of the room. None of them moved. The smell was fetid, and it reminded Wayun of the smell of the heads impaled above the landing pier. Rot. Death. *Wrongness*.

He’d been right to come then; the smell confirmed that.

This was the heart of their cause, and it was just a heart of badness. Of dark, and of wrongness.

But the Krallik wasn't here, so his bravery was all in vain. He would have to return, and did he have the courage and stamina to put himself through all this again?

He strained his eyes, focusing on the three motionless shapes. One was bigger than the other two, and it was placed in between them, as if in a position of command flanked by servants. A big shape, yes. Maybe something sitting in a chair. But not moving, so it couldn't be the Krallik, no. The shape was somehow *wrong*, like the smell. Irregular, not like that of a normal man. Or was that just down to the unnatural position in which it was slumped on what had to be a chair?

It was moving.

The dark silhouette of a head, raising itself, disjointedly, *wrongly*.

Run, boy. Run.

This was no place for heroes.

Run...

It had been an entire day, and only now Father Pieter began to think about emerging from his hiding place.

He had not heard any sounds of violence for some time now. His vision through the missing slat in the attic where he had hidden himself was limited; he could only see a slice of the plankway in front of his house, a couple of stalls beyond, a stretch of the harbour, a few smashed motor canoes belonging to Indoni traders, and the floating body of one of the owners, his feet nudging the stilts of the pier in the filthy swell.

He edged open the hatch to the attic, wincing at every creak the wood made. His ears ached with the silence. Composing himself further, he gingerly lowered the ladder down to the floor of the landing below, and levered himself onto the rungs.

He froze on the landing, ears straining for any indication of possible violence.

Nothing.

He crept to the window, back pressed against the wooden wall, darting a quick glance out through the pane.

A gorgeous sunset was falling over Flamingo Bay. Agat had the best sunsets in Papul. Better than any Father Pieter had ever witnessed on Earth.

A golden, pink-candy radiance emblazoned the landing. It gilded the walkway below, the corpses scattered across it (he would not look at those he would not look at those he would not). It burnished the bay, hand-painted the trees crowding down to the sea on either side of the shanty town. Normally, Father Pieter would have been transfixed by its beauty. Now it just filled him with horror. He had to get out.

Out of Agat.

They would kill him – he knew that. If they came back, they would kill him.

Maybe it would even be Julius, his old friend, the one he had entrusted with so much learning, so much responsibility. Was his God so easy to reject, after so many years, and in such a brutal fashion?

He risked another glance through the window, half hoping to see a boat chugging towards the shanty town. A boat carrying his beloved friend Father Tomas. Half-praying for this event, and half-fearing it, because although it might mean his own salvation, it could just as equally result in Tomas meeting the same fate that would almost certainly be handed out to Pieter. He couldn't let his friend see what had happened here, all their great work turned to blood and butchery. But there was no boat chugging into harbour.

There was nobody here to help him.

White man in jeopardy. The hell of the south, preacher.

He had to get out of Agat.

He moved to the top of the stairs, still straining his ears, moving as quietly as he could, but the stairs conspired to betray him, creaking with what seemed like hideous volume with each foot he placed on them. Down, into the living room of the small colonial-style house.

'Where is your God now, Christian?'

A head-hunter was sitting in his armchair, where so often before Father Pieter had pored over religious texts and doctrines, spending many, many evening hours in pleasurable toil.

Jamie had been watching the sunset too.

He was sitting inside the battered Indoni cruiser, flanked by Papul warriors with grim faces and determined stares, not exactly the brightest of companions. They had spent the entire day at a secret location, or at least that was how it had been described to Jamie by the guerrillas. To the Scot, it looked just like any of the other Papul villages they had passed over.

But he'd been treated well and fed well, which was some consolation for losing Victoria and being separated from the Doctor. They'd even entrusted him with a machete, obviously taking him at his word that he knew how to use one, and that he was in sympathy with their rebel cause. He hadn't actually *said* that, though, had he? Just that he'd once fought a load of English bastards who were trying to murder his people, but he guessed there was some kind of analogy here, even though he wasn't quite sure where to look for it, or even precisely what an analogy was. The Doctor had used the word when they were hiking through the jungle and Jamie had been holding forth on rebellion in general.

The Doctor... Aye, well, that was one reason why he wasn't going to use his machete on the Papul guerrillas accompanying him on the flight to Wameen. They said they'd kill the Doctor if Jamie tried anything, and he knew enough of their fervour to suppose that they would do just that. The other reason was, well, there were just too damn many of them.

The sun filled the cruiser cabin with pink light, suffusing it with a cherubic, unsullied atmosphere it hardly warranted. A hint of angels, the Scot thought ruefully, his heart yearning for kinder times. He glanced around at the unshaven, smelly, dishevelled warriors filling the cramped cabin and sighed. He hoped Victoria was in more amiable company.

Victoria...

How did they always end up getting into messes like this?

He couldn't blame the Doctor. Not really... Och, alright, he *could*, because he was the one that had brought them both to Jenggel in the first place and then to this godforsaken jungle. But blaming people didn't solve anything, did it? It just made him feel a little less grumpy, that was all.

He declined the offer of a cigarette from the guerrilla next

to him and sipped instead from a bottle of water.

All right, so the guerrillas weren't half-bad when you got to know them, he supposed. They'd actually treated him with some respect and a little kindness all day long. In the village, he'd been taken to a large central hut, apparently the chieftain's, and treated to some delicious soup cooked in front of him in an enormous pot. He guessed the reason behind their kindness was something to do with the fact that he would be fighting alongside them soon.

They'd been cruising above the treetops for a little more than an hour. The plan was obviously to attack the town at nightfall, and Jamie wondered, certainly not for the first time, what the hell he'd gotten himself into – just because he'd been stupid enough to open his big trap. He had nothing against the Indoni army, even if they did seem to be a bunch of murdering sassenachs every bit as wicked as the English redcoats. But they hadn't done anything to *him* yet. Or the Doctor, and hopefully not to Victoria either...

Now he was expected to fight, and kill, for a cause he didn't understand, and could feel no involvement with.

Still, here he was, heading into battle with a machete in his hands, as well as the Doctor's fate. He was a McCrimmon, and McCrimmons never flinched from battle.

'Craig a duir,' he muttered, and felt embarrassed at how half-hearted he sounded.

'You've come to kill me?'

An echo, a whisper.

Wayun *felt* it more than he heard it, like it was a shiver in his blood, a coldness of the bones.

He squeezed the bone knife in his fist for reassurance, for guidance. 'You're a monster,' he hissed, addressing the dark figure, whose head was still indistinguishable. 'You've gone too far.' He sounded like a teacher admonishing a naughty child and the ludicrousness of the idea robbed him of more of his dwindling purpose.

The Krallik was laughing. A distant, off-kilter laugh as if the Krallik were not here at all, as if he were removed from this time, this place.

‘This is war,’ the hushed echo came again. ‘Nothing can go *too* far. War is kill. Blood dribbling from the mouth of the victor as he tears the throat in his hands. It is dismemberment, it is total denigration of foe. It is to convert warm flesh to cold. To revel in fear. Instil it in all. Fear is control. Both sides must fear. Fear the Krallik.’

The words were barely comprehensible to Wayun, and he must dismiss them if he was to do what he had come to do. He had to fill his mind with the one thing that mattered.

‘You killed my brother!’ The words met no reply, as if the Krallik were thinking about them, or maybe he had gone? Had he ever been here? The shape was there, although the head had not moved since it had initially lifted in response to Wayun’s presence.

‘There was no need!’ He was shouting now, and the thought that the guerrillas below might hear him and come up to stop him made him lower his voice. But then they *knew* what he was doing anyway, and none of them had made any attempt to follow him. Why? Because they were so afraid of the Krallik – or because they *wanted* Wayun to do it? In a more controlled voice, he continued: ‘There was no need to kill my brother. He revered everything you stand for. He believed in our independence as much as you.’

A pause, then a shudder of words, sometimes faint, sometimes strong. ‘There was every need. He questioned an order.’ Now there was another laugh, more of a crackle as of a bonfire devouring twigs, and with a jolt Wayun realized he could see the Krallik’s eyes dimly in the semi-darkness. Pale bleached eyes, holding a thousand-yard stare that did not blink. Empty, empty eyes. The laugh was suddenly unnaturally loud and then cut off, and the hiss was back.

‘An order? Discipline in war.’ The figure was moving. It was beginning to rock gently, then more urgently, the head twisting from side to side as if succumbing to some meditative silent chant. ‘Rules. Morality. Sickness. How can there be rationality in obscenity? Obscene. Carnage. *Obscene!*’

This was an open display of madness, and Wayun needed no further prompting to carry out his purpose. He was moving forward automatically, raising the knife, hardly even thinking

what he was doing any more, only that he had to stem the flow of insanity, of wrongness.

The body of the Krallik continued to rock in the darkness and as Wayun reached for it, the face looked up into his, and then he could see it all.

And the Krallik was still repeating:

‘Obscene. Obscene.’

Obscene.

Chapter Nine

The head-hunter was Julius.

The museum curator had returned then, no longer a keeper of the past, but a living embodiment of it. He still wore the fierce body mesh and mask, one of the human jawbone necklaces was still around his neck, and a stone axe was in his hand. All relics from his previous vocation, now called into use in his new role.

Father Pieter could not see Julius's face through the mask, only the eyes, but he knew it to be his friend. Strangely, he felt almost calm.

'Have you come to kill me, old friend?' he asked, and his voice too was without fear, resigned, weary.

Instead of replying, the head-hunter lifted something for the missionary to see. A lump of purple fungus, the edible growth that had become so popular as a delicacy in Agat over the last year or so, thanks to the efforts of a few Papul traders from further east along the coast. Pieter stared at it in bewilderment. He had expected some new atrocity – another severed head maybe, but not this. Therefore he had nothing to say in response to the gesture.

'Eat it, Pieter.' the head-hunter said with no emotion in his voice.

The missionary remained where he was, standing in his own living room with the night pushing through the shattered window, and silence outside on the streets of Agat, as if the town had been deserted.

'You know I never eat it, Julius. You *know* that.' A deliberate attempt to remind Julius of their former closeness, but if the head-hunter understood the missionary's intention, he gave no sign of it.

Father Pieter continued: 'You remember how many times I

tried to warn the townspeople against it?’ He was trying to make the situation as mundane as possible, to make it safely everyday instead of surreally lunatic, and maybe then Julius could revert to his old, cheerfully pragmatic self. But even as he spoke, something was beginning to dawn on him, and the realisation filled him with a bitter new horror. ‘Brain deteriorating elements in it, Julius... and I thought you listened to my advice.’

‘I am Papul after all, missionary. I could never follow you in all things.’

‘It’s affected you, hasn’t it, Julius?’ Father Pieter’s voice grew more excited and anxious as he seized upon the only possible explanation for the madness that had consumed Agat. ‘You ate the fungus and it’s done something to your mind!’

The head-hunter lifted the axe as if thoughtfully. The green quartz stone was firm in the hollow crook of the wooden head. ‘Maybe that’s why we succumbed to faith in your...*God* so easily.’ He dropped the fungus. Now he was rising from the armchair and advancing slowly on Father Pieter.

The missionary retreated against the living room wall. The door was not so far that he would not be able to make it if he sprinted, but the head-hunter was easily the most agile of the two. There was more chance in appealing to the man’s reason and intelligence. And faith had always been the best tool.

‘Why are you afraid, missionary?’ the head-hunter said, and now he was drawing a rope from beneath the body-mesh. ‘Don’t you have your God to call upon? After all your words of glory, do you then fear meeting him?’

In three rapid strides he was upon the missionary, seizing him by the back of the neck and steering him towards the armchair, flipping a loop of rope over him and pushing him firmly down into the seat.

It didn’t take him long to tie Pieter to the armchair, and although the missionary tried to resist, he was old and weak, and the head-hunter was young and very strong. There was also the axe, and Father Pieter could see by the glint in Julius’s eyes that he would not hesitate to use it.

So he let himself be tied to the chair. But he wasn’t finished yet.

‘God loves you, Julius. He loves all of us, despite our sins. If you stop what you are doing, I can help you. It’s not too late:

Julius finished his work and stood back. ‘*Does* he love you, Pieter? Does he *really*?’

The head-hunter and the missionary faced each other in silence for a few moments. Agat was unnaturally quiet. No footsteps on the boards, no joyful shouts or angry curses. Not even any screams. The town had died.

‘Do you even *know* why you are doing this, Julius?’ Pieter said, when he could bear it no longer. ‘You’re an educated man...’

The head-hunter nudged the fungus on the floor with his bare foot. ‘We’ll just have to find you something else to eat.’ He crossed to the wine cabinet behind the armchair, and opened it.

Father Pieter tried to crane his neck to see what his guest was doing. The cabinet doors closed again and the headhunter re-entered the missionary’s field of vision.

He wasn’t holding a bottle of wine.

The curator had already knocked a hole in the temple of Father Tomas’s severed head. He tilted the head to show his work to Pieter.

‘Can you appreciate the craft involved? Instincts, you see. We are still savage, deep down. All my people have returned to the jungle. Skills once learned, no longer submerged. We remember...’

Father Pieter could not answer. A sickness akin to nothing he had ever felt before was crushing him.

The head-hunter was working at the hole in Tomas’s head with his stone axe, drawing out the contents. He proffered them for the missionary, clumped on the axe head.

‘Eat the flesh, drink the blood. Isn’t that what you taught us, Father?’

He grabbed the back of Pieter’s head and forced his mouth towards the grey matter.

‘Swallow, or I will slit open your guts and make you eat those also.’ He continued to force-feed his sobbing captive, and the jungle was wild in his heart, in his blood.

‘Where’s your God now, missionary?’

Where’s your God now?

Curfew in Wameen, and the market place was deserted as the dented cruiser dropped gently down in the parking bay next to the barracks.

There was no point coming out quietly. The rebels poured out of the port even before it had completely opened, and headed for the half-open barracks gateway at a mad run.

The guards had watched the cruiser with the Indoni markings descend, and despite being a little curious over the dents and green stains streaking the fuselage, hadn’t been overly interested. Now they jolted to shocked attention as the warriors streamed towards them, half-naked; bullet belts criss-crossing their chests; rifles, bows and arrows.

And a white man in a skirt.

They struggled to bring their Power Rifles to bear and managed to blast a couple of guerrillas into the dirt before they were overwhelmed, and the barracks breached.

The guerrillas were in.

It had to be a trap. There were so few soldiers in evidence. Those that were proved not much of a threat. Jamie rushed around a lot in the dark courtyard screaming dramatically, but not actually doing anything. Soldiers were firing from a few glass-less windows, but there didn’t seem to be many of them. The rebels swarmed up the spiral stairways, and soon most of the snipers were silenced.

Pulse fire from an archway across the courtyard. It kicked a cauterised hole through a guerrilla to Jamie’s right. He flinched as the body flumped steaming into the dirt at his feet, and then he was charging erratically towards the archway, emitting a hoarse war holler as he went, not sure what he was going to do, just trying to make it look and sound good. Three guerrillas followed him, rifles booming. The soldier jerked in the entranceway and fell inwards.

Another guerrilla whirled around in a mad dance, his head ablaze as a surviving sniper targeted him from one of the high windows. Jamie continued heading for the archway, carried along with the mad flow of battle, and actually realising it

might be better not to skit around in the middle of the courtyard when snipers were about, even if it was dark.

It's a trap. It's a trap! It's a –

He was repeating the words in his head now as he charged. Why was it proving so easy otherwise? There had to be a large battalion waiting for them inside this archway, lurking in the darkness, and then they would all be for it.

Through the archway, into that darkness, his breath rasping in his excitement, highland blood pumping deliciously, and Jamie was almost beginning to *enjoy* this. It had been so long since he'd gone into battle.

The corridor was deserted. A single bulb set high on a wall at the end, and it showed them nothing but cells, and those empty. Around the corner at the end, Jamie clutching his machete and expecting his head to explode with blaster fire any moment.

More cells, the dim light from the bulb barely illuminating them. Some of them contained Papul men, in various stages of dying. The guerrillas took out the locks with the blaster from the dead guard, but there was little they could do for the wrecks of humanity inside. They could hear sporadic rifle and pulse fire from outside, but it seemed to be petering off. The cell at the end of the corridor contained just one man, hanging from the wall, his eyes gouged out. The Indoni hadn't even bothered removing the corpse.

There had been a fury mounting in the guerrillas as they searched each successive cell and saw the extent of the torture committed against their countrymen. It reached a peak when they found the eyeless prisoner. Jamie leaned against a wall, catching his breath after the excitement of the battle, keeping out of the way of the guerrillas as they took the dead man down from his shackles and carried him outside the cell. From the look on their faces this was obviously the man they had come to find. Some high-ranking OPG rebel, he assumed. They hadn't told him too much on the journey here. Jamie had nothing to say. Judging from the guerrillas' grief and rage, keeping quiet right now was by far and away the best thing to do.

More gunfire from outside. The guerrillas began heading

back the way they had come, bearing their sad prize. Jamie followed, but his battle-adrenalin had pumped dry upon seeing the condition of the tortured man.

Maybe they had done the same thing to Victoria, if she was here?

In his despondence he almost missed the crack of light around the edge of a door in the wall to his left, and the rebels had clearly missed it too. He stopped. The door was ever so slightly ajar, allowing a faint green light to escape that made him feel sick and uneasy for no good reason – or might it have had something to do with the torture and death he had already witnessed in this dreadful place? He called to the two guerrillas ahead of him, and indicated the all but hidden doorway. They glanced at it, and then reverently lowered the body of their comrade to the floor in order to investigate further.

Jamie took it upon himself to go first.

He pushed the door inwards and it moved without grating. More of the queasy green light welcomed him, and there was a stone stairway falling away beneath him, spiralling down into green. He turned uneasily to the guerrillas, but their faces were resolute. Clutching his machete more tightly, he proceeded down the steps, making as little noise as he could.

They were slimy, and more than once he nearly reached the bottom more quickly than he intended. Once, a guerrilla snatched the back of his shirt to prevent him plummeting, and he was sure they were not too happy with his lack of stealth. Down and around, down and around, the green light becoming stronger, and at last he reached the bottom to be faced with another doorway, this one without a door, that opened into a large, low-ceilinged room.

The green light was from an array of dusty bulbs set haphazardly in the walls or dangling from string from the ceiling. There was a work bench in the centre of the room, one ratty armchair of gouged leather in a corner, a horrendously stained and filthy mattress next to it, a mug next to that. The workbench was piled with devices, some gleaming and new, some rusted – all quite horrible. They were gadgets of torture, Jamie could deduce that straightaway: sharp, vicious, cruel;

some pronged, some jagged, some big – obviously to be hefted – others small, like fitted attachments.

There was no-one in the room.

Scattered around the chamber were a number of short metal tanks, maybe five feet in length, most of them sealed. Jamie heard a guerrilla groan in horror from behind him at what lay within the open ones.

The metal tanks were too small for the men and women squashed inside them, their legs broken and folded up unnaturally to fit the confined space. They hadn't been dead for long by the condition of them. Some had bits of them missing, the wounds and stumps ominously cauterised. Some were white, obviously tourists, and in equally mutilated condition. This had been done for pleasure then, Jamie thought incredulously. Why else torture a holidaymaker?

While the guerrillas occupied themselves with forcing open the other containers, Jamie's eyes scanned the walls looking for any other doors, and found a curtain. It had probably been white once, but was now daubed with dried orange stains that could have been old blood. It framed an alcove, and didn't quite obscure the shadow behind it, the shadow that now burst through the curtain, coming at Jamie in a mad run.

Jamie saw the scythe first, but that was just one scary detail in a whole list of scary details. The scythe was wielded by a dark-skinned man in grubby overalls with a drooping red mohawk and a swivelling gadget where his left eye should be. The scythe was gripped by the right hand only, because the left hand was gone, and a serrated device emerged from the grimy sleeve to replace it. The man's huge metal boots clumped loudly as he charged at Jamie, and the scythe crackled as he lifted it; the Scot could see sparks of energy flickering along the edge of the blade.

The two guerrillas were behind him, too shocked for the moment to bring their weapons to bear. Jamie reacted faster, diving under the workbench as the scythe swept through the space he had just vacated. The blade hit the leg of the bench. A sonic frizz of energy and the bench was three-legged. Some equipment clattered to the floor. Jamie squirmed out from

under the table again in time to see the torturer go for one of the guerrillas. The scythe met the rebel's abdomen, bisected it neatly, the torso and legs falling in different directions, cauterised by the charged blade.

The remaining guerrilla was stupid enough to gape too long in horror at his friend's grisly fate. The power scythe arced, took away the rebel's gun arm and part of his head with it. Then he was coming at Jamie again.

Jamie was on his feet now, and met the scythe's attack with his machete. The machete became a jagged dagger in his hand – a haft and a shard of blade. He tried to ram it at the torturer anyway, and succeeded in embedding it in his assailant's right wrist. The scythe dropped, and the torturer locked with the Scot, grappling hand to hand.

The torturer pressed his bleeding right wrist into Jamie's face, momentarily blinding him. The jagged attachment on his left hand ripped at the highlander's belly, gouging viciously. Jamie felt his shirt rip and a flash of pain, and instinctively jerked his right knee into the torturer's groin. His kneecap didn't connect with what he'd expected – just a hollow of flesh – and his surprise robbed him of initiative. The torturer seized the opportunity and slammed the side of his arm implement against Jamie's temple, at the same time throwing his right leg behind Jamie's.

The highlander went down, the torturer on top of him, the serrated instrument forcing itself closer to the young Scot's face. He was staring up into the face of the monster, and the eye probe was buzzing as servos kicked in along with his obvious excitement. The torturer was talking now in what could have been an Indoni tongue as he locked one arm against Jamie's throat and pushed the instrument closer with the other, Jamie felt his strength sap away in his efforts to ward it off. The voice sealed it: Jamie gave way to the surreal horror of a woman's deep-edged tones growling from what he had assumed was a man's throat, and he would have given up the battle for good and all, had not a bark of energy sounded from behind him.

The head leering above him was reduced to molten slop. Jamie felt the heat of the flash burn on his own face. The

torturer collapsed on top of him, ousted brains seared and fused with flesh, blood and bone into a grisly ice-cream whip sculpture. Jamie rolled free, panting.

A guerrilla stood in the doorway, pulse rifle lowered, his face twisted with disbelief. 'Bornese Bitch-man,' he hissed. 'You lucky I come.'

Jamie patted him on the shoulder, and after both of them had checked to make sure every box contained only dead men and women, they left the room and all its horror and hurried back up the stairwell. At the top, Jamie offered to help carry the former prisoner, but the rebel shook his head slowly, obviously more clear-headed than the others Jamie had entered with. They couldn't afford to carry bodies now, there wasn't enough room in the cruiser for all of them.

As they emerged into the courtyard again, the last sniper's body was just landing, having been propelled from its vantage point by a shrieking rebel. The soldier's back broke with an audible crunch upon impact, and his head lolled sideways, eyes fixing upon Jamie's for an instant, then emptying with death.

A guerrilla barked something incomprehensible at him, and he followed the rebel, along with the man who had saved him, towards another arch, this one well lit and revealing a stone stairway climbing beyond. Jamie was well aware that after finding the dead rebel prisoner, any former warmth his 'comrades' had shown towards him had dissipated, almost as if he were to blame in some manner, and he was not stupid enough to tempt fate by arguing with them now.

Bodies lay in the stairway. Soldiers and guerrillas. Jamie stepped over them and made the landing. Guerrillas were coming towards them, pushing a single surviving soldier. He looked terrified, and a ragged cut was already in evidence on his cheek. As Jamie watched, a blow from the hilt of a machete sent him reeling.

As the two groups met, an emotive conversation ensued, during which the captured soldier waited silently and fearfully for the outcome.

Jamie nudged Tigus's second-in-command, who had led the assault on Wameen. 'What's happening?' He didn't expect

much of a response.

‘Skeleton guard only,’ the man replied with some satisfaction and not a bad grasp of English. ‘Large squad leave two hour ago. Jungle expedition. Search for OPG.’ Now he allowed himself a little grin. ‘They never think we brave to come here.’

Jamie gestured at the subdued-looking prisoner. ‘Can he tell us if my companion was brought here?’ He had already explained about Victoria’s disappearance, not that they had shown a great deal of concern over her possible plight. And why should they, Jamie supposed. That was not their fight. Just like this wasn’t his.

The guerrilla duly questioned the soldier, however, and then turned back to Jamie. The other rebels – and there were only a handful left – fell silent now. Their goal had been achieved. They had found the man they’d set out to find. He was dead. What else mattered? They could all return to the jungle before the absent Indoni squad returned.

‘She here,’ the rebel said, his face betraying nothing.

Jamie felt a huge surge of warm relief. ‘Well, thank God for that...’

The guerrilla shook his head. ‘No. She here before. Not now. Taken by soldiers into jungle.’

Jamie slumped again. He almost felt like laughing. The guerrilla’s pidgin English was to blame, and not the guerrilla himself. But he didn’t laugh. He felt far too sick for that.

‘Why did they take her into the jungle?’ he asked, glaring at the captured soldier. He was ready to bash the Indoni himself now.

The guerrilla translated the question curtly. The soldier lifted his head for a moment with something like defiance. While the guerrilla relayed his reply there was a silence from the others. ‘He say officer take her to show what OPG do. To show how... savage... we are.’

A guerrilla with a drooping black beard and one blind eye laughed. Two of the others joined in. The second-in-command turned away. ‘We go, he said simply, beckoning to Jamie.

There was a squeal from behind Jamie. He turned in time to see the bearded guerrilla taking his machete away from the

soldier's throat. The Scot blinked at the blood leaping from the severed artery. Some of it splashed his shirt. For a moment he was back on Culloden. A claymore sweeping across a Redcoat's neck, opening just such an orgasm of blood – the first time he'd seen a man die in combat. He'd been rooted, blinking, just like he was now.

The bearded man grinned at him and pushed the jerking body away.

'We go,' the assault leader repeated.

They were making their way across the courtyard when the blast of pulse fire flashed in the night.

For a second Jamie was sure the soldier had been lying and there was indeed a surprise party waiting for them. But it was only one shot, and that from a seriously wounded and very foolhardy soldier lying crumpled in the courtyard, a pulse rifle wobbling in his blood-soaked hands. The second-in-command drove his machete into the man's forehead. It seemed an unnecessary and foolish act to Jamie, especially considering the amount of time it took him to pull the blade free from the bone afterwards. Then he discovered the reason for the leader's ire. The lone shot had taken out their pilot.

That meant they were as good as stranded in Wameen.

There was some heated discussion amongst the guerrillas, and then a decision of sorts was obviously reached, because they were moving again, and heading for the cruiser, the bodies of their comrades reluctantly left behind.

Jamie's questions were ignored. They boarded the craft, and Jamie saw that it was the second-in-command who was taking the pilot's seat.

'Can he fly?' Jamie asked the man sitting next to him as the power relay kicked in and thrummed optimistically. The man didn't answer.

As if he'd heard him, the 'pilot' turned to flash Jamie a grin. 'We go,' he said for the third time and the craft suddenly lurched violently upwards.

The foul mood the guerrillas had fallen into upon finding the dead Papul prisoner had vanished. They knew they had achieved a fairly major coup against their enemy despite the bleak fate of the object of their search. The men were roaring a

melodic Papul song as the cruiser lifted drunkenly, clipped the top of a wall and jerked southwards. But even if he'd known the words, Jamie doubted he'd have felt like joining in.

'Jayapul's a hole all right,' Saw said, swigging from an imported bottle of whisky as the Dogs prowled the streets of Papul's capital. There was Pan and there was Pretty Boy, there was Saw and there was Grave. Clown was absent without leave, and Bass was asleep at the makeshift 'hotel' where they were staying the night. Twist was tripping somewhere on something.

The streets were empty apart from Indoni patrols who ignored them religiously, as if obeying some directive to do so. Rubbish clogged the oily river beneath the bridge to the night market, long since deserted. A gust of wind brought the fragrance of rot and sewage to their nostrils.

'Nobody here, Pan,' Pretty Boy said. He stopped to light a cigarette, and Pan took one off him too. Ahead of them the market was a muddle of locked stalls and clap-board shacks perpendicular to a terrace of more substantial but equally grimy concrete buildings.

The night market had once been the focal point of Jayapul. A centre of culture and entertainment, a thriving, happy spot, where you could get anything at any time.

The night market was empty now, and it was dark. A tin can bowled along one of the alleys, clattering like bones. Grave stomped it into silence.

'You don't look hard enough,' Pan answered Pretty Boy, heading for the concrete terrace. He nudged a corrugated metal door until it squealed open. Beyond it was a dark passage and a few steps leading down. They could just discern a glimmer of candlelight at the bottom, coming from beneath another door.

'Trust me. Old Pan's got a nose for whores.'

'Yeah, and Clown ain't around to spoil your fun,' Pretty Boy said.

Pan snorted. 'Sure you don't feel the same way? Don't wanna offend your delicate sensibilities, gay boy.'

Pretty Boy said nothing and followed Pan and the others

down the steps. Pan didn't knock at the second door, this one made of wood. He simply shoved it open and walked on in without hesitating.

Inside the basement room was a bar, a few tables and chairs and a few terrified Papul men playing cards. The bar owner looked more terrified than any of them. He advanced on Pan with his hands outstretched, eyes huge.

'Please mister. We do nothing wrong.'

Pan laughed, unholstered his Luger. 'Don't look that way to me. Looks like you got a bar set up here. Looks like you're drinking alcohol' He prodded the bar owner's large flat nose with the barrel of his weapon. 'Now you know that's against Indoni law in Papul. Looks like I'm gonna have to close you down. Close all of you down. And the prisons are all full I'm afraid.' He slipped the safety off, and the click filled the room with its significance.

One of the Papul men spoke urgently to the bar owner who responded by letting a sickly grin transform his face. He began lowering his hands.

'We know what you like,' he said with an awful attempt at bonding. 'My friend say you like girl. I have girl.'

Pan grinned. He was really enjoying this. 'What makes you think I want any disease-riddled whore *you* can provide?'

'No. No. Not whore,' the man said eagerly.

'What then? Your wife? I can imagine what she looks like.'

The man touched Pan's sleeveless combat jacket as if admiring the quality of the material. There was a sycophantic appeasing smile on his face.

'My daughter.'

Pan snorted, and flashed a grin at Saw and Grave. Grave said nothing as usual, staring vacantly with devil eyes. Saw licked his greasy lips demonstratively. Pretty Boy cleared his throat.

'I'm going back to the hotel,' he said. 'I got my standards.'

'You got nothing,' Pan said, dismissing him. He tapped the bar owner's cheek with the barrel of his Luger. 'Now why don't you show me what *you've* got,' he said.

‘He faints like woman,’ Tigus said, nudging Kepennis with his foot disdainfully.

The guide was recovering from his long bout of unconsciousness, and was now blearily trying to reorientate himself. The Doctor sat on a log watching the dawn rising thoughtfully. Drew and Ussman were snoring under the makeshift shelter the guerrillas had erected. Santi was waking up, the early morning chill affecting her more due to the brevity of her attire. She promptly elbowed Wina, who was spread out on her back like a starfish on the grass next to her. When the Javee girl didn’t respond, Santi nudged her again, more sharply. Wina rolled over, rubbing her eyes, her hair tangled alluringly.

Wemus tore his gaze away guiltily when he noticed she had seen him. He was about to approach Kepennis when she called him over.

He knelt beside her and instinctively reached for both her hands. She accepted them with a smile. It was the first physical bond between them and it had been a natural one. This was easy and right, Wemus thought, and couldn’t believe it even though she was smiling a lovely white smile, her perfect Indoni features shining in the first light of morning. He was obviously more handsome than he’d ever previously believed. Kepennis would have to stop his scoffing now.

‘Be careful of her.’ Santi said with a sour face. ‘She go with many men. I see her in bars. She do like this:’ and she interlaced her fingers and waggled them to demonstrate. It was an Indoni sign which alluded to promiscuousness.

Wemus frowned, but didn’t believe. Wina pulled a dismissive face at Santi’s vulgarity, as if Santi was beneath contempt, but the stockier girl hadn’t finished yet.

‘She go with man with skirt, friend of Doctor. Hey, Doctor!’ she called, and the strange little man with the expressive, child-old face looked up dreamily ‘Tell Wemus Wina no good. She go with your friend, now she want go with Wemus. She from Banuwang in Javee. Many women black magic there. Only way she can get man!’

‘Only way you get man is when they pay. No good man want girl with face like servant!’ Wina had been unable to

restrain herself any longer.

The Doctor coughed with embarrassment. 'Now then, shouldn't we all be trying to get along, considering our predicament?'

Some of the guerrillas were laughing now, as they set about cooking breakfast. Tigus merely flashed the girls an irritated grimace. He was nervously smoking. The assault force should have returned by now. They were at the assigned meeting point, and had been for most of the night. What was keeping them? If the Indoni had them, would any of the men talk under torture? It was a frightening thought that soldiers could be approaching them even now, creeping through the jungle.

'Hey! Santi not go with Papul man. You low girl!'

Poor old Wemus raised his hands appeasingly and decided he'd be better off talking to Kepennis after all, far away from the feminine war zone.

'Not listen to working girl, Wemus.' Wina retorted. 'Her mouth place for rubbish!'

He left them bickering. Kepennis gave him a woozy smile as Wemus joined his friend. He and Ussman had been forced to carry the guide through the jungle to the meeting place, so heavy had been his faint. He accepted tobacco off Wemus gratefully, and looked a little sheepish as he rolled it.

'You all right?' Wemus asked his friend.

Kepennis scratched his head. 'I don't know. Feel better now, but, you know... I hate the sight of blood.'

Wemus nodded. He wasn't exactly fond of it himself. They were two of a kind. Both cheeky and bold with the tourists, full of fast talk, wit and humour, always ready with the jovial quip and the naughty trick – and always happy to oblige tourists by drinking their whisky for them – even ordering it for them well before they left Batu on the tour, purely for the off-worlders' peace of mind, of course. Everything well prepared, that was one of their tour mottos. Yes, they were naughty, they were gamblers, they liked drinking even if they could never handle it, and they were always good-humoured to the point of seeming infantile. Together they were like the children that were always in

trouble with teachers.

But really, they were scared.

Because, underneath the facade of light-hearted simplicity, there was a lot to be scared of. They were Papul working in an Indoni-dominated society. They had to be careful. They were playing a dangerous game, on nobody's side, as Kepennis continually reminded Wemus. Other Papuls – especially the OPG – resented them for making money out of the exploitation of the island, and the Indoni looked down on them simply because they were Papul. On top of that, they would now be suspected of working with the OPG, and this was an especially disturbing thought for Wemus: even if they were rescued by the Indoni army, they'd probably be shot as collaborators. The Indoni would believe they'd deliberately led the tour group into the hands of their colleagues the OPG.

Still, they didn't really need to worry about the Indoni finding them. The OPG would probably chop their heads off long before then. Wemus remembered Budi and shivered.

It was ruminations like these that had helped rob Wemus of a lot of his sleep. It probably accounted for Kepennis's faint as well, he thought, as he took in his friend's tense expression. The older guide had always been a little more introverted and serious than Wemus, but the last few days he seemed to have lost all his sense of fun. But then, they weren't exactly in a fun situation, he admitted to himself ruefully. He hadn't been his normal self either. But maybe that was going to change.

'She likes me, Kepennis.'

'Huh?' the other guide was staring absently through the trees that fringed the clearing that was the meeting place. Dawn was wooing the wildlife; creatures boomed plaintively, ululated, chuckled, whispered, called with jungle-morning yearning. Softly, quietly at first, the sound swelling triumphantly as the day caught hold. The sky was the purest creamy pink, fractured by bloody breaks.

'She likes me – Wina?' Still Kepennis looked confused. 'The Indoni girl. She actually *likes* me. You know how rare that is: an *Indoni* liking a Papul. Normally they think we're ugly and inferior.'

'You are ugly, Wemus, you big-nosed brute. But you'll

never be inferior. Well, only to me anyway.’ Kepennis grinned at his friend fondly, coming out of his reveries. Then his face grew serious again as he took in the earnestness of Wemus’s expression. ‘Forget it, he said solemnly.

‘What do you mean?’

Kepennis sat up straight, the cigarette burning in one hand. His eyes were more grave than Wemus had ever seen before.

‘She’s Indoni. Forget her. This is not right.’

‘Why should I? Why shouldn’t I try for something better? Especially if she likes me.’

‘Have you heard yourself?’ Now Kepennis’s voice was hushed with a cold anger. ‘Something better? What are you talking about? What right have you got to say that to me!’

Wemus was frankly puzzled. He stood up, hurt and confused. ‘I don’t understand, Kepennis.’

‘Indoni will never be “something better”. You disgust me for thinking so little of your own people.’

‘I – I didn’t mean that. I just – ‘

‘You’re a Papul! And don’t you ever forget it:

‘My word! You seem to be rather more perky now, don’t you?’

Kepennis looked round, his anger choking him. The Doctor had approached them without the two guides even being aware of it. He was clasping his hands together and looking at Kepennis shrewdly, like he could see right through him. Kepennis nodded curtly and pulled on his cigarette.

‘Wonderful! Because we’re going to need your help to get us out of here.’

‘What do you mean?’ Kepennis asked suspiciously.

The Doctor beamed expansively with one of his winning, childlike smiles. ‘Well, you are the guides, aren’t you? I should think we’d have a very difficult time escaping on our own. Where would we go? Yes, I’m afraid we’re rather counting on you to show us the way home.’

‘Escape?’ Wemus whispered, ever conscious of the fact that OPG guerrillas were all around them.

‘I need a drink,’ said Kepennis bleakly.

‘Yes, well, as soon as Jamie returns, we will need your help,’ the Doctor continued. Then he turned away, tapping his

hands against each other playfully and looking innocently up into the dawn sky. 'That is, of course, unless you're too afraid to risk helping us.'

Kepennis's indignant reply was lost under the loud, splintering impact of something very large crashing through trees on the other side of the clearing.

There was a hubbub of excited chatter from the guerrillas. Wemus and Kepennis followed the Doctor to the edge of the clearing to discover the origin of the noise.

They hadn't heard the faint buzz of dying engines over the hullabaloo of the jungle's dawn orchestra. But there was the familiar dented Indoni cruiser, surfing the treetops which were snapping and shearing away under the uneven contact, and now the craft was nosing drunkenly down into the clearing.

Tigus shouted something and the guerrillas dived for cover. The Doctor rushed for the shelter, where Wina and Santi were still arguing, and told them to huddle into balls.

The impact came a moment later. A series of thumps and the ugly sound of metal buckling, then a skidding slide and a final wrenching thud as the craft hit something solid.

They waited for the explosion.

Nobody moved. Wemus was curled up under a fat bole, his nose pressed up unpleasantly against Kepennis's feet. There were a few muffled cries from the guerrillas, but still no explosion. Wemus raised his head.

The white man in the skirt was staggering through the stand of trees away from the craft, which was nestled against a big stump like a broken shiny animal. Behind him, a few guerrillas fell out of the port, some limping, others looking merely dazed.

Jamie saw Wemus and wobbled towards him uncertainly. Tigus rose to block his way, just as the Doctor emerged from the shelter.

'Jamie!' He rushed forward to clasp the highlander's hands delightedly. They shook hands speechlessly for a moment, two dear friends reunited and thankful for it. Then the Doctor's face assumed an anxious expression.

'Jamie... did you find Victoria?'

Jamie shook his head. 'She was there all right. But the

soldiers have taken her into the jungle. Maybe they're lookin' fer us.'

Tigus had no time for any of this. He was waiting impatiently for Jamie's fellow passengers to arrive. He lunged forward to clutch the first man into the campsite, and harangued the man in Papul. He didn't look too pleased by the tired response he got. Meanwhile, the Doctor was doing his own, albeit more gentle interrogation, as he led Jamie towards the fire prepared earlier by the guerrillas. He poured the highlander some soup from the battered cooking pot and asked him about the expedition.

'The pilot got shot,' Jamie explained, shaking his head with disbelief, 'so this other idjit flew us here. He couldnae fly to save his life. We're all lucky to be in one piece.'

The highlander related the rest of the story of the attack on the army barracks at Wameen, the Doctor listening gravely. When he had finished, the Doctor rose, turning his back on Jamie thoughtfully, both hands templed under his chin.

'If the Indoni are as brutal to prisoners as you describe, it's more important than ever that we find Victoria,' he said.

'So how do we do that?'

'Maybe we don't need to,' the Doctor replied, watching outrageously coloured birds tumbling through the branches in a courtship dance. 'The Indoni are in the jungle looking for us, remember. And Victoria's with them.'

'I get it. So all we have to do is let them find us.'

'Well, something like that, Jamie, yes. The only trouble is...' he hesitated and faced Jamie again, his expression dark.

'What?'

'Well, as you've seen, they haven't got a very good hospitality record, have they?' The Doctor's voice rose with his agitation. 'What atrocities are they likely to perform when they *do* find us?'

Chapter Ten

‘Your face more, more, *more* ugly than ghost.’ Wina said definitively, turning her back on Santi and following Wemus along the jungle trail.

‘In my village you hang from tree because you black magic thing,’ Santi replied promptly, tossing her locks with finality. ‘Banuwang *witch*.’

Wemus grinned at Kepennis; he was rather enjoying the Indoni girls’ constant fighting. He liked to think it was over him, although Santi had never given him any sign that she found him attractive. But why shouldn’t she? If the prettier of the two liked him, then surely the one Wina was heaping such disdain on would follow suit?

Or was he just being a vain, arrogant Papul idiot? He grinned at himself this time. Whatever. He was actually enjoying this trip now.

He thought of the red, red weal on Budi’s neck as Tigus dealt the machete blows and his grin slipped away.

A great smashing of undergrowth to their left.

The Doctor paused, Jamie coming to a halt behind him. A guerrilla nudged them forward with a rifle barrel and barked something nervously in Papul.

‘Snatcher?’ the Doctor asked Tigus as they resumed their progress.

The guerrilla leader was walking alongside him, and now he shrugged. ‘There are many beasts in these jungles. Many dangerous beasts... Not just Snatchers’

‘That’s very reassuring.’

The crashing moved away from them. The two Indoni girls had barely noticed it, immersed in their feuding as they were. Jamie was trying to engage Ussman in conversation, but the normally loquacious trader was still unable to forget the image

of his best friend kneeling under the blows, his body slowly toppling forward into the grass. Ussman looked cowed and miserable. Drew, as always, walked alone. Nobody wanted to talk to him. That seemed to suit him fine, although now and again he would try to touch one of the girls surreptitiously, and sometimes not so surreptitiously. This abortive lechery had nearly embroiled him in a bout of fisticuffs with Wemus, when he had once tried stroking Wina's long black hair. Tigus had swiftly ended the tussle with the intervention of his machete.

They continued southwards, sometimes trekking over foothills that brought them above the jungle, affording them vistas across the treetops to distant mountains capped by snow to the East, and a broad swathe of brown water that Kepennis claimed was the Schlachtenmoord River to the South. Then it was back into the trees, embraced by exotic foliage.

It was hot, and it was humid. Sweat dribbled between their shoulder-blades and nestled in the hollows of their chests continually. Insects bit and stung, forming a constant cloud around them as they walked. Plants and vines cut at their legs, plucking at clothes and flesh. Sometimes they would be wading through swamps up to their thighs, while large, unseen creatures entered the water around them with dramatic splashes.

In one such swamp, the trees all dead and ghostly white mirrored by the water below, the group encountered the cause of the splashes. Or at least, one of the guerrillas was unfortunate enough to do so.

Nobody even saw it. One moment they were traversing a broad jungle swamp, the leafless bones of the trees reaching up into the air and down into the reflection around them, bits of grass and twigs floating alongside the travellers in the eerie hush, and then one of the guerrillas was uttering a puzzled oath and abruptly disappearing under the water as if sucked down by an unseen apparatus of immense power. A widening pool of ripples and a fur balaclava marked the spot. He didn't re-emerge.

Needless to say the party wasted no time crossing the rest of the swamp. They were all very relieved upon reaching the

muddy shore to find nobody else had been plucked beneath the water by the invisible predator.

‘Now you can only charge small money for men,’ Wina resumed as they emerged from the jungle onto a grassy plateau that hung above the broad sweep of the Schlachtenmoord, ‘Because you look more like animal than woman.’

Santi looked down in dismay at her torn top, muddied skirt and scratched legs. Her hair hung in itchy clumps, and she knew her face must be a mask of mud and smeared make-up. She looked at Wina and then smiled, because her Indoni companion was actually trying to act superior while looking every bit as dishevelled as herself. So, instead of replying, she simply nodded and gave a dazzling ironic smile. Wina snorted and turned away.

‘The Schlachtenmoord,’ Tigus said, pointing at the wide but slow-moving river.

‘Interesting name,’ the Doctor puffed, brushing parasites from his bare legs below the rolled-up baggy trousers. ‘Of Earth origin I should imagine. Possibly Dutch. Has there been a substantial missionary presence in the area?’

‘The speakers for a meaningless God?’ Tigus said with some bitterness. ‘Of course they come here, make bad our culture, kill our traditions. But many perished at the hands of the Kirowai.’

‘The Kirowai? And what might they be?’ The Doctor took off his frock coat and hung it over one arm, sweat rolling down his forehead under the hot, exposed sun.

‘Cannibal.’ Tigus pronounced the last syllable to rhyme with ‘pal. He looked proud.

‘Oh. And are these cannibals prevalent in the area?’

‘South of the Schlachtenmoord is Kirowai country. They live in tree-house and have constant war with neighbour village. From here we must be careful.’ He seemed to be almost relishing the idea.

‘And you have no control over them, being Papul yourself?’ the Doctor asked hopefully.

Tigus laughed. ‘They kill and eat each other. Why should they spare someone from other tribe like me? Someone from other end of island? I am stranger to them just like you. We all

become bones in tree shrine if we meet them.’

‘Then let’s, er... let’s just hope we don’t meet them, shall we?’ the Doctor said nervously.

Clown was on the stilted walkway and he was looking at the blood. It was everywhere. No longer dripping but drying under the Papul sun. Bodies and bits of bodies were everywhere, in grisly displays outside stalls, hanging over the plankways, floating in the water beneath.

The bodies were all Indoni. And they were all headless.

Clown powered up his rifle and made his way along the planks towards the missionary house. He could hear his own breathing, the faint jingle of bells from his hat and the screech of distant birds. Nothing else.

Agat was empty of life.

He did not feel fear, because he was too deeply immersed in causing it. He was a Dog, a killer, a man of blood money. A bounty hunter, a mercenary – there were many names for what he did. He had seen death in all its faces, and he was too old and scarred to be frightened by it. It was just an end to things; he himself was an end to things. Death wearing a clown face and jester cap. Yes, he had seen many disturbing and horrific things in his time.

But this...

There was the missionary’s house, a simple two-storey clap-board colonial-style cottage, painted white and shining in the midday sun. Nice.

It looked like his job had been done for him, then.

But where were all the Papul locals, and why had they killed the Indoni inhabitants?

He entered the house anyway, because he was paid to be thorough.

Father Pieter was sitting in an armchair facing the shattered window. He held a severed head in his hands, and his eyes were staring across Flamingo Bay, his mouth wide open and smeared with blood.

Clown levelled his rifle at him with one hand, then lowered it again. The missionary was dead. His job was done without him having to pull the trigger.

He moved closer, puzzled by the grisliness of the tableaux. The head the missionary was clutching was white, or at least those bits of the skin not daubed with drying blood were white. There was a clumsily-made hole in the left temple, and bits of grey matter were slopped around the abrasure.

Nice.

Clown tutted and turned to leave.

‘I have eaten God.’

Clown swung around, the rifle level in his grip once more.

The dead missionary was looking at him. Eyes vacant, mouth now closed and Clown could see the flecks of grey upon the lips. He spoke again:

‘I have eaten... *God.*’

Clown lowered the gun. The missionary was a lunatic – that was evident – but still alive.

‘What happened here?’

Father Pieter looked right through him, and what should have been a disconcerting sight for any self-respecting missionary in his nice colonial house – namely, the sight of a mercenary with clown make-up standing in his living room pointing a gun at his head – seemed not to throw him at all.

He’d obviously seen worse shit.

‘I said, what happened here?’ he repeated when the Father said nothing.

The missionary looked down at the head in his lap. ‘You came home, my friend,’ he said in a voice weak with insanity. ‘You came home to find me... and how did I greet you?’ He was laughing now; a horrible, drooling hollow sound that almost raised Clown’s hairs. Almost, but no cigar. He was tempted to smoke the creep right now but he had things to sort out.

‘You’ve been a bad preacher man, haven’t you?’ He stepped past the armchair and its mad occupant, nudged the door to the hallway open with his army boot. Scanned the hall quickly. Nothing.

Looked like the preacher man was all on his own. ‘I said you’ve been bad: He returned his attention to the bizarre figure in the armchair. ‘Been writing a journal about the jayapul uprisings. Saying things the lovely President Sabit isn’t too

keen on. You been sending reports home stating Sabit's been staging the riots to discredit the OPG and justify Indoni army occupation... that's right, isn't it?' He was wasting his words. The man merely looked at him, drooling. Eyes not even clocking the Clown. 'The journal, you old fool. I want to know where every report you've still got is kept.' He sighed, and then smiled, although the expression was lost under the permanent garish lipstick grin already etched on his face. Sabit was worried about this sad sack of shit?

'You've really been a bad, *bad* preacher of the Word, ain't you?'

'I have eaten God.' The father raised the severed head until it was level with his own, and facing his own. 'And now I can never eat again. My old friend, what did they do to you?' He lowered the head and gave Clown a beseeching look. 'Kill me. Please.'

Clown shrugged. 'Well, what the hell else did you think I came here for?' He ratcheted the safety and was about to press the trigger when he stopped. 'No.'

The preacher implored him with bloody hands.

'I said no. I don't wanna do you any favours, you sick bastard. And I don't wanna do Sabit any either. He need never know I didn't carry out his "special duty". No... I think I'll just leave you with your cannibal buddies. Looks like you're one of them now.'

He ignored the drools and whimpers and left the house. Out on the walkways, there was still nobody around to explain what had happened, except for a black hunchbacked bird hopping among the carnage, and he wasn't talking. Agat was a ghost town. A Blood Town. He'd read enough about the place to know that it had started out as a missionary outpost in the utmost wilderness of the jungle. The first attempts at creating a town had been drowned in blood as the cannibals reacted violently toward this unorthodox intrusion into their natural habitat. It looked like Agat had reverted to form.

He shouldered the rifle and headed for his cruiser, parked next to the ransacked police hut.

Some things you just really shouldn't meddle with.

The canoes were where Tigus expected them to be, nestled on the north bank of the Sclachtenmoord, next to an abandoned river station.

The Doctor eyed the long vessels dubiously. They were hollowed-out tree trunks that looked like they'd been used for many years, judging by the state of them. He looked along the jungle's edge, where the tall, palm-like trees crept down to the muddy banks for miles in either direction with nothing to break the monotony, wondering if this might be an opportunity to escape. The same answer he always received came back to him, his own answer: escape to where, exactly?

'You won't catch me climbing in those,' Drew said, hands on hips.

'Then you die here,' Tigus said simply. He patted the haft of his machete where it jutted into the belt of his khaki trousers, and looked around at the group, at Santi and Wina, at Ussman, at the Doctor and Jamie, looking for any further signs of protest. There were none.

'Good. We go.'

Two guerrillas pushed one of the canoes out, and held it while the Doctor, Wina, Wemus and Kepennis waded out to climb aboard. The vessel rocked alarmingly as the guerrillas let go and Wina went tumbling into Wemus, emitting a parrot-like squawk. Wemus settled her securely next to him as the guerrillas guffawed with amusement.

Drew, Santi, Jamie and Ussman occupied the other canoe. Oars were thrust into the men's hands and they were ordered to start paddling. Jamie glanced over at the Doctor, whose canoe was already drifting away from the Scot's, and shrugged.

'Don't worry, Jamie!' the Doctor called. 'We'll find Victoria eventually.'

'Aye, well we don't seem to be going about it the right way, if you ask me!' he hollered back.

'Well, we... we don't appear to have a choice,' the Doctor muttered despondently, and gave Tigus a reproachful glare.

The two canoes were moving downstream fairly rapidly now, with Jamie's party forming the rear. Drew looked behind him and noticed that Santi had not been supplied with an oar,

and promptly stopped rowing himself. A guerrilla ordered him to begin again.

'Hey, if she don't have to row, nor do I.' he said, entirely satisfied with his point of view.

'If you not row,' the guerrilla said, lifting a machete from the bed of the canoe, 'what good your hands to us?' He sliced a line of blood along the off-worlder's left wrist. The blond man yelped and delved for the oars without further complaint. Santi folded her arms and smirked happily.

She was tired of walking.

It had been a long night, and Victoria had not slept at all well. She had spent it in a military outpost deep in the interior of the Papul jungle. The outpost consisted of a muddle of huts filled with hammocks for soldiers to sleep in when on patrol and a cache of supplies hidden away to provide for all their needs: at least, that was how Agus had described it to her as they flew in the night before.

Of course, the outpost in reality was nothing like that.

The hammocks had been taken, the food too, the huts burned by rebels. Agus had been half-expecting this, which was something of a relief, and had therefore brought emergency supplies, if no hammocks. Victoria slept on the grass floor of a temporary shelter erected by soldiers next to the ashes of the former huts. She had lain on her back peering up at the stars above the small clearing that housed the 'outpost', and wondered about the Doctor, about Jamie. She wondered about them perhaps bickering in their affectionate way: Jamie always exasperated and headstrong, the Doctor always seeming to be daunted by events but yet resolute under it all. She knew they would be desperately worried about her, and only wished she could let them know she was all right. If, of course, they were all right themselves.

Her thoughts had turned to Agus, the handsome Indoni officer, and how badly she had misread him. His graciousness, urbanity and thoughtfulness must all have been a sham then. He was a killer, as bad as the men he hunted, it seemed. And although he had not been cruel to her, or hurt her in any way so far, she knew that now she had seen him for what he was,

he need no longer keep up the pretence of a civilised man.

The strange thing was that since her discovery of the tortured prisoner and subsequent journey into the jungle, he had remained as polite as ever, despite the initial outburst at the barracks.

But she had seen through him and his philosophy, and both he and it were as shallow as... as the colonialism she was used to back home, she thought with something like cold shock. And what would her father have said to his beloved daughter harbouring such unfashionable, alien views?

Maybe – and this thought cheered her up somewhat – maybe deep down, under that Victorian oh-so-conservative veneer, he would have approved...

Her attention was brought back to the present by the sight of a thin serpent uncoiling from beneath a log in front of her. The soldier preceding her had clumsily disturbed it from its rest and now it was ready for violence, brown body tensed, small head regarding her intently. A hand drew her gently back and Agus took her place on the trail. His machete flashed up and down and the snake was two. He flipped the severed lengths into the undergrowth beside the path and smiled at her reassuringly.

‘You must be careful where you tread, Miss Waterfield.’

‘I don’t see the point of all this,’ she flashed at him angrily, her fury goaded by the fear the snake had woken in her.

‘I told you: President Sabit wants you to witness first-hand the barbarity the rebels are capable of. Then you might be more sympathetic to our cause.’

‘But what does he care if I am sympathetic or not? And after seeing what you get up to in your prisons, I’m hardly likely to ally myself to your...*cause*, am I?’

‘I can only apologize again, both for what you have seen in Wameen, and for having to bring you into such hostile terrain,’ the officer replied smoothly, attempting to unruffle her feathers with a smile.

‘Yes, well, I’m rather dubious as to the motives of a president who would want to inflict this kind of ordeal on an innocent outsider,’ she retorted, slapping away a winged insect

the size of a baby's fist that was attempting to drill into her bare arm with a lengthy proboscis. She shuddered as it smeared into a green mess on her skin, and wiped it away, not looking at the officer.

Behind her, the rest of the column of soldiers was waiting patiently for her to resume her progress, the trail being too narrow to permit more than one person at a time. And yet Agus had described it to her as a trail well-used by rebels, and she supposed the fact that the outpost had been destroyed nearby was a testimony of sorts to his statement.

Agus applied a tube of gel-like medicine to the bite, and rubbed it in gently, then he held out a hand for her to continue. There really was not much point in arguing.

It was after they had walked for another five sweaty minutes that Victoria was forced to stop again. The trail was hemmed in on both sides by tall and weird vegetation: tree roots fluted together like the pipes of church organs swept up into the tree tops; huge leaves as broad as barn doors flopped down from spiny boles; fronds exploded outward from plants like exotic punk haircuts. Insects seethed mindlessly in swarms of sudden sound, then cut off into absolute silence. It would have been thrilling, it should have been inspiring, but Victoria wanted none of it. She yearned only to be reunited with her dear friends. So when the company halted again, she eagerly hoped it was because they had gone as far as they had intended on this pointless mission and were about to return to the cruiser.

There was a chorus of shouts from further ahead. Agus pushed his way past the soldiers in front, and despite her tiredness, Victoria followed. Maybe they had found some sign that would lead them to the Doctor and Jamie.

What they actually found was a soldier with a face the colour and texture of green jelly, lying on the path. A small snake was wound around his neck, its fangs burrowing into the soldier's windpipe.

At first Victoria assumed it was similar to the one she had nearly fallen victim to, but then she saw exactly where it had come from. As another soldier, companion to the dead man, pointed into the thick underbrush, Victoria could just make out

a figure lurking in the green shadow. A parrot-sized bird was nodding on the figure's shoulder, its colourful beak tilting this way and that. And then a second snake was flipping from the direction of the figure, snapping into the pointing man's wrist and locking its lithe body around his hand. He screamed and tumbled back into a church organ tree. His face was already turning a shocking green. As Victoria watched, the whites of his eyes flecked green too, and then were completely subsumed by the colour. The man stopped gasping.

Agus barked an order and his squad levelled their pulse rifles at the shape dimly seen in the undergrowth. The parrot-like bird flapped away noisily into the interior. In the flash of flame that lit up the jungle, Victoria saw the figure belonged to a grotesquely thin black man, standing stiffly in the bushes as if propped there like a scarecrow, arms outstretched and withered by age, eyes – no, not eyes, but holes in dead flesh, and a mouth like a tunnel. Then the creature became a roman candle ignited by weapon blasts and the soldiers ceased fire.

A groan from a man next to her. The soldier twisted, fumbling for something at the back of his neck, something that had arced through the air from the opposite side of the trail to the first assault. He stared into Victoria's eyes as he died, as if seeking assurance from one so pure, so beautiful, so *white*...

Then he was twitching on the ground, and Victoria could see where this attack had come from: a second withered figure, squatting in the fork of a tree, long, muscle-less arms drooping down like black vines, knees tucked under the smoked jaw, net hat secured to the skull. The eye sockets gaped at her, as did the mouth.

'Mumi! Mumi!' a soldier shrieked, letting go to delicious, liberating panic.

Agus snatched his Luger from its holster and joined in the chorus of pulse fire that greeted this new attack. The Mumi was ripped apart, the head tumbling down the chute of melded roots like a coconut shaken out of a palm by hungry natives.

It landed in front of Victoria. A black seared thing, smoked first by preserving care, and second by furious Indoni blasters. Agus placed his right boot on top of the hair net and sent a bolt from his Luger to turn it into fragments of dried

skin and old bone that scattered into the bushes.

The rest of the squad were searching for more attack possibilities, weapons scanning the green pressing around them. When no further assault became apparent, Agus holstered his Luger and ordered them to continue.

‘Now you see,’ Agus said grimly. ‘This is an example of the black arts practised by the rebels and their tribal supporters. Or maybe that’s what they’d like us to think.’

Victoria looked down at the stiffening corpses that had once been soldiers. Every portion of exposed skin had become the colour of leaves, the colour of the jungle itself, almost as if... but, no, that was silly...

Almost as if the jungle had touched them and made them its own.

‘But don’t the Papul tribespeople believe the gods are on their side?’ she said, choking down the fancy ‘That’s what Kepennis said. The Mumis are their ancestors, speaking for their jungle gods.’

Agus shook his head sadly. ‘Please don’t be contaminated by their superstitious rubbish.’

‘But you saw! Those things killed three of your men.’

‘I saw a trap planted for us. Now we must find those who prepared it.’

‘Then you don’t believe the Mumis are alive?’ She could see by the fearful expressions on the soldiers behind her that they obviously didn’t all share their commander’s view.

‘If the gods *are* on their side,’ he said confidently, ‘then we’ll just have to hunt them down and kill *them* too.’ He patted her shoulder. ‘Won’t we?’

One minute the river was placid, a brown, slowly moving expanse, bordered by mossy trees and palms.

The next: scream from Santi. Guttural shouts from the men in her canoe. A spume of water as something emerged, and the Doctor whirled to look behind, and he could see the armoured purple snout, almost metallic in its hardness, breaking the surface and lunging. Massive jaws opening, teeth sharp as steel spikes, locking onto the guerrilla sitting in front of Santi.

Blood geysered over the Indoni girl. Jamie stood up in the

canoe, hands outstretched as if he could ward off the massive beast, the body of which crashed down onto the canoe, twisting and threshing viciously. A purple, plated beast, with a tail as long again as the four-metre body, and as thick as a man's. The guerrilla clamped between the jaws attempted to batter feebly at the pointed head of the beast, but there were no soft points on this colossus, no eyes at all, just nostrils that spat sprinkles of water as it chomped. With a shrug of its head, it squeezed the guerrilla's body like a tube of toothpaste and soon everyone in the canoe was red. Then the world was spinning 180 for Jamie, Santi, Drew, Ussman and the remaining guerrillas as the canoe revolved in the water and the beast was gone, dragging its prize with it under the surface. A widening stain of crimson, and the frantic former passengers bobbing in it.

A convulsion beneath them and then the empty canoe was bucking into the air, slapped by the emerging tail like a cricket bat hitting a ball for six.

'Go back! Go back!' screamed the Doctor, tugging at Tigus's shoulders, 'we must rescue them!'

Another guerrilla, thrashing in the water, his brown face an oval of horror inside his black fur balaclava, threw up his hands and then was gone, snatched below before Tigus even had a chance to answer.

Now he did, and it was not what the Doctor wanted to hear. 'They dead. We go!' He urged his oarsmen to work harder, standing up and aiming his rifle back the way they had come, as if its feeble pellets might be able to deter the beast.

'No!' cried the Doctor, scrabbling for a rope or something that would enable him to aid Jamie and the others. He could see the Scot bobbing in the water next to Ussman. Drew was making for the Doctor's canoe with hard strokes, and Santi was just behind him.

The Doctor reached out, seized Drew's hand. Santi was within feet of reaching the canoe, extending her arm to clutch the edge. Drew was panicking, his feet kicking out as the Doctor pulled him up and half over the side of the canoe. One of his feet clipped Santi sharply on the jaw and she sank beneath the water.

The Doctor paused in his rescue attempt, and leaned over the edge of the canoe frantically searching for the Indoni girl.

‘Hey!’ squawked Drew. ‘Help me! Help *me!*’

The canoe was already pulling away from the spot where Santi had disappeared. Wina joined the Doctor in peering over, and there was a look of anguish on her pretty face.

Jamie was making fast strokes towards the same spot when Santi’s bug-eyed face broke the surface again, gasping and spitting out muddy water.

‘Go back!’ the Doctor beseeched Tigus, ‘they’ll die if we don’t!’

Tigus wasn’t listening. He could see the wake left by the beast where the top of its flat head broached the surface, moving fast. It was Jamie and Santi bound, and there was no way he was going to risk his canoe for the sake of two hostages. He still had two left, not counting the useless Papul guides. And the Doctor seemed to be the most important of all.

‘Jamie!’ the Doctor bellowed. ‘Look out!’

Horror rooted him. There was absolutely nothing he could do. His dearest friend was thrashing in the water, an arm around Santi’s neck, struggling to make it towards the river bank. And the flat purple head was arrowing towards them.

The Doctor clasped his head in total dismay.

The river bank was ten yards away from Jamie.

The beast was seven.

The beast was six.

Five yards and closing...

Jamie did not look behind him as he continued to swim. Maybe he wasn’t even aware it was so near.

The reptilian beast’s eyeless head rose slightly to allow its jaws to dear the water, and they were opening...

Chapter Eleven

What happened next, happened swiftly.

A huge plume of water rose between Jamie and Santi and the pursuing beast.

A head three times larger than that of the reptile rose into view. It was covered in green slime, and there were no features discernible apart from a toothless maw, like a mossy cave. The armoured beast had no time to alter direction. A long tendril snaked out of the water, roped around its midriff to help it on its way. The reptile disappeared into the maw, which oozed shut so that only the tail remained visible, whipping madly. The slimy head lowered beneath the water.

Jamie and Santi had turned as the geyser of water splattered them, and were just in time to see the surreal episode. After the head had disappeared, three long green fingers groped up from the surface, searching for more prey.

They wasted no more time swimming towards the river bank. As if detecting their frantic movements, the fingers changed course to follow them.

Ussman lay panting on the bank. He had been oblivious to everything that had happened after the canoe capsized, beyond the obvious survival drive of making it ashore. That he had done, without being swallowed or molested in any way. Only now, after ten minutes of lying on his back pumping air into his water-logged lungs, could he begin to think about the preceding events.

He wobbled to his feet. The river was placid once more, only the floating upside-down canoe was present to mark the disturbance. There were no bodies in the water. He shaded his eyes with one hand and peered down-river. The other canoe was distant now. He was alone on the river bank. He was

alone full stop. He was no longer a hostage, but that prospect didn't fill him with much hope for his future well-being in this crazy jungle.

He thought of Jamie and Santi and a wash of sorrow struck him. He had liked them both. He thought of Budi, and was soon on the verge of tears. Only the good die young, someone had once told him. He couldn't remember who now, but it seemed they had been right. He had nagged Budi into coming on this trip. The fisherman's son had been pretty happy with his simple life until Ussman shattered it, and filled his head full of dreams of money. Now he was dead, because of him. How would he ever be able to face Budi's parents? And Santi – while not exactly a saint, was not a bad girl as such. Ussman had detected a warmth of personality behind the bickering front she put up for Wma's sake, and a wealth of good humour. Now she was gone too. Then there was Jamie: well, there was no mistaking the young man's courage, and generosity of spirit.

What was he doing, standing here performing a wake for his friends and feeling sorry for himself?

He was alone; he'd better start trying to do something about surviving. Maybe then he could make it up to Budi's parents in some way.

He had a purpose then. He was free, and he would survive.

The Doctor's canoe was too far away now for him to be able to distinguish events clearly, but he had not missed the Goliath head that had intervened in the imminent slaughter of his comrade.

'Oh, my giddy aunt,' he moaned helplessly, unable to see whether this new monster had claimed Jamie instead of the reptile.

'Snatcher,' Tigus said respectfully.

'Can't we go back? They may have reached the river bank alive.'

'They dead! Snatcher will have them now.'

'Ohhh,' the Doctor slumped despondently down onto the bed of the canoe. Wina put a hand on his shoulder, and he patted it distractedly.

‘I sorry for your friend,’ she said genuinely. ‘And I sorry for Santi too.’

The Doctor looked up. Her eyes were moist.

‘Yes, I can see that, my dear,’ he said, attempting to forget his own grief for her sake. ‘But you are still very much alive, and still have friends to care for you.’ As he spoke Wemus clasped her other hand warmly. She fell into the guide’s arms as the canoe rocked dangerously.

‘Row!’ Tigus yelled at Wemus.

Wemus ignored him, too busy consoling Wina, his hand caressing her hair as she sobbed openly now.

‘I said row, traitor, or you join friends in river.’

Wemus locked eyes with him for a moment, then shrugged and turned to face forwards again, reaching for his oar.

‘You’re a stupid man, Wemus,’ Kepennis said with a wry grin. ‘But not *too* stupid, I hope. Forget the Indoni whore and concentrate on staying alive.’

Wemus glared at him without smiling and Kepennis frowned at the unaccustomed anger he could see in his friend’s face.

‘Because you’re my friend, Kepennis, I will let that go. But Wina is not a whore, and the next time you call her one, I will no longer *be* your friend.’

The Doctor, picking up his own oar again, cleared his throat demonstratively. ‘Let’s concentrate on staying alive, and not fighting amongst ourselves, shall we?’

‘He speak good words, you listen to him,’ Tigus said, rolling a cigarette and scanning the river ahead worriedly. Snatchers always made him nervous.

The Doctor detected his anxiety. ‘Tell me about these Snatchers. Do they only live in the rivers?’

‘Snatchers more happy in water. But they move in jungle too. Never know where you see one. Cannot fight. If they want you, they get.’

‘I see. Then life on Papul must be very difficult.’

‘They only come out one month in dry season, like now. Rest of time mating. This not good time to journey.’

‘Then I admire your determination and fortitude,’ the Doctor said rather icily. Tigus ignored him and continued

scanning both the water and the river banks to either side. The Doctor followed his gaze. There was no telling where trouble might burst from next on this godforsaken island.

For Jamie and Santi, trouble came in the form of a Kassowark.

They had made the river bank in one piece, miraculously. The pursuing fingers had dipped patiently beneath the surface again as if the monster could bide its time. Jamie had helped the spluttering Indoni girl ashore, only to see the Doctor's canoe vanishing rapidly downstream. They'd been abandoned, then.

The Scot felt completely helpless for a minute. It was the feeling he hated most in the world. He was always a man of resources, of instant action. He left all the thinking to the Doctor while he himself took care of the practicalities. But right now, there didn't seem to be an awful lot he could do. He plucked a transparent leech-thing from Santi's muddy arm – he could see her blood filling the thin tube that was its body – and gave her what he hoped was an encouraging smile.

Her gasping became a series of exasperated oaths. He held out his hand to pull her to her feet but she slapped it away, standing up without assistance. Her legs were sleeved in the mud from the river bank, right up to her shapely calves. It looked like she was wearing thick, brown stockings. Jamie refrained from pointing this out to her, however, and concentrated on wringing out his shirt and kilt.

Santi merely stood there dripping, and watching him with complete misery etched on her face. 'Now what we do?' she spat finally, as if it was all Jamie's fault. She hadn't been able to bring herself to thank him for saving her life. And Jamie guessed her stubborn Indoni pride would not allow it. Despite their eternal quarrelling, Santi and Wina were very much alike, he decided.

'We follow the river, I suppose.'

'Which way?'

'Why, that way of course,' he indicated downstream. The second canoe was just a black dot on the point of disappearing around a bend in the mighty river.

'You crazy. That way more danger. We must go back way

we come.'

'No. We have to find the Doctor. He's the only one who can get us away from this mad planet.' She looked at him strangely. He wasn't about to explain to her all about the TARDIS now; he was hardly in the mood. 'I mean, he knows the way home.' And that was a lie for a start.

He reached out for her hand again, and reluctantly, this time she gave it. Her high-heeled shoes had been lost in the river, but to her credit she didn't moan about squelching through the mud of the river bank in her bare feet. Much.

They came to a section of the river bank where the jungle extended right down to the water's edge, thick trees and spiny bushes blocking their path, leaving them no choice but to turn north away from the river to try to find a more accessible path.

It was not easy going. They had no machete or anything to cut away the imposing undergrowth. But there seemed to be enough animal trails to allow them some progress, even if it was uncomfortable and strenuous, continually forcing them to climb over roots and push through screens of prickly fronds. Exotic blossoms nodded at them as they made their way forward at a torturous pace; gorgeous yellow flower combs, vibrant red horns of petal, fruits as big as Santi's head hanging tantalisingly above their heads. Better leave those alone, Jamie warned himself, despite his gnawing hunger. And all the time, he tried to make sure they were heading east again, following the progress of the river, although he could only see it infrequently to their right when the branches and shrubbery allowed.

It was then that they happened upon the Kassowark.

Or more strictly speaking, the Kassowark happened upon them.

Santi squealed, alerting Jamie, who spun around to see a bizarre, ostrich-sized bird-creature with a large, white horn rearing up from its back tip-toeing towards them from the undergrowth.

He should have been prepared for oddness on this world by now, but this comically angry-looking freak-bird still managed to put the wind up him. And it did look positively ill-tempered. Its mad eyes were large and yellow, fixing him with

an impatient schoolmistress glare, while the strange purple coxcomb swayed above its wedge-shaped head as the creature darted forward.

‘Whoa there,’ Jamie said foolishly, backing away from the huge bird, hands outstretched as if begging for reasonableness.

The Kassowark didn’t look particularly inclined to be reasonable. Its long neck swung from side to side, the head cocking one way, then the next, before plunging forward with its vicious beak to snatch at Jamie’s cheek.

He felt the flesh rip and unleashed a yelp of surprise and pain. Santi was eagerly searching the jungle floor for a weapon of some description, but wasn’t having much success. She looked up at Jamie’s cry.

‘Feet!’ she shouted at him unhelpfully.

‘What?’

‘Watch feet!’ her warning came again, and he realized what she meant when one of the Kassowark’s three-toed claws flashed out, just as if it was kicking a football. The claw tore away a patch of cloth from Jamie’s shirt front as he threw himself backwards. He landed on his back in a prickly bush and rolled quickly to one side as the claw shot out again, one toe gouging through his kilt to pierce his right buttock.

‘Ow!’ he shouted indignantly, rubbing the afflicted area. ‘That flamin’ hurt!’ The creature looked more comical than dangerous, but he was rapidly gaining a whole lot of respect for it.

Santi actually had a look of barely disguised glee on her face. ‘Bird kick your ass, man!’ she guffawed, forgetting she was supposed to be concerned.

‘Aye, very amusing, I’m sure,’ he said, glowering at her. The bird emitted a vibrating, almost metallic squawk and began mincing towards him again. He crawled out of the bush and managed to dodge the beast’s next attack.

‘Will ye no leave us alone, ye flamin’ great Christmas turkey?’ He was performing an odd dance of sorts with the bird, leaping back to dodge the foot whenever it launched a kick, ducking to left or right to escape the beak. He made a grab for the long neck, fully intending to tie it in a knot he was becoming so exasperated, but the beak beat him to it, nearly

severing one of his fingers.

‘Kassowark kill! Hati Hati!’ Santi shrieked, lapsing into her native Indoni in her excitement.

‘Hatty what?’ Jamie panted, throwing himself behind a tree bole as the claw flicked bark from the trunk where his bare knee had been moments before.

‘Take care,’ Santi translated for him helpfully. ‘Kassowark tear out guts of man with foot.’

‘Look, I’ve got a better idea than doing the waltz with you beastie.’ Jamie huffed, struggling to keep the bole between him and the Kassowark.

‘Santi not understand.’

‘Run, ye idjit! And I’ll follow.’

So, with a final despairing glance back over her shoulder, Santi did as Jamie suggested, and high-tailed it into the shrubbery. The bird swung its head to discover what had happened to its other victim, and Jamie seized his chance and punched the beast firmly in its right eye.

The wingless bird let out a squawk from hell; all its black feathers stood on end over its entire body. Jamie threw himself into the bushes in the direction Santi had taken while the creature was still shrilling in fury.

The screen held a close-up of Clown’s painted face.

Sabit frowned, and thumbed his remote for a close-up.

‘Crazy...’ he breathed aloud.

Was he supposed to laugh? Was there supposed to be an underpinning of irony in the Dog’s cartoonish get-up that was for the President’s benefit alone? He panned the tiny remote camera across the rest of the mercenaries, pausing for another close up, this time of Pan.

Yes... he thought, nodding his head slowly. You...

This was a man he could work with. More than any of the rest of the Dogs, Pan understood the purity of his vocation. There was no room in this man’s mind for self-doubt or *irony*. This man lived simply for the pleasure of killing, and the money that function provided him with. Sabit could be sure he would have further tasks for *him*. He had been wrong about the other one. No journal, no reports, nothing. That was what

the Clown Man had given him after returning from his solo mission to Agat: nothing. The missionary was dead, the Dog told him. But could he even believe that? Could he believe anything a man in a jester's cap said to him?

After this particular mission was terminated, he would show the Clown a joke or two.

Who would be laughing then?

But Pan... Yes, he was one very bad man.

Sabit could use more like him.

The rest could die for all he cared. He corrected himself as he scanned the faces of the other five Dogs as they sat in their hotel recreation room in Jayapul. No. They *would* die *because* he cared. He cared about stability. Authority. Sanity and order.

As long as he was responsible for it, and as long as it followed his philosophy.

He remembered his mother's dying words, as brought to him by her doctor.

You were never any good, my son. And I grieve for you, because you never will be. And a whole world shall mourn my birthing of you.

Hilarious material. If only he could use it in his off-world publicity drives.

He looked at Pan again, drinking whisky in a chair alone while the others played cards. He looked lost in a world of his own.

I wonder what you're thinking? Sabit zoomed the hidden camera, looking for the biggest close-up the technology would allow. Soon only Pan's eyes filled the mini-screen on Sabit's chair. It was a mistake. You could tell a lot from a man's eyes.

Pan's eyes were empty.

And suddenly Sabit felt afraid.

This man was cold. Colder even than himself. There was no love in those eyes. At least Sabit had faithfully loved one person throughout his life – himself. Pan's eyes were the window to the soul of one who couldn't even allow himself that weakness. This was one window nobody should ever look in.

Maybe he had underestimated the danger of this man. He would not hesitate to kill anyone, even the man who had paid

him. It was not beyond such a monster to seek out those who employed him, just for perverse kicks. No, he was surely being paranoid. What benefit would killing the source of his money bring the Dog? What would be the point of that?

Pan looked up then, right into the camera, and Sabit knew he had seen it. Pan *knew* Sabit was watching him.

And he also knew Pan would kill him

Just because he would enjoy it.

Just because he could.

Who was the crazy man?

Clown could see in their eyes that they thought it was him. They barely spoke to him now, dealt him cards without looking directly at him as if frightened his madness might be contagious; they could catch the circus insanity just by swapping glances.

No. He'd reached the further shore, waded through all the red madness and at the far bank he'd actually found clarity. He was on a knoll above the tide of corruption, standing alone and lucid at last, so battle-sick and weary of carnage and hate. Battle-sick.

So, so sick of it all.

No, he was not the madman.

Agat. Jayapul. Papul. Let it stop. I can make it all stop.

And the Clown laughed, without making a sound, without moving his lips.

Pan was looking into her blue eyes.

The biker had tried to be mean, tried to intimidate Pan into paying way over the going rate for his tattoo. He didn't seem to realize Pan was the meanest there was.

There was just no way you could out-mean him.

So Pan showed him. He took the tattooist's laser needle and he etched a Crazy Cartoon on the man's face, dotting the eyes with black full stops. Blood red was the main colour.

It was kind of poetic, he thought.

Then he looked up from the body lying draped on the leather tattoo parlour chair and into her blue eyes.

Where was the love? Where was the desire? There only

seemed to be horror now.

And that wasn't right, was it?

He loved her. She meant...

How did the cliché go?

Oh yeah... everything.

But she really did. More than the wild of the twilight grove and the mushrooms singing to him of good peace. More than that, yeah.

He sodding loved her, man.

She was looking at him with deep, deep horror, and more. She was looking at him with loathing.

What could he do but kill her, too?

‘Why you ever bring me to this hell of insect and animal!’

Jamie felt like ignoring her, but his irritation got the better of him. They had managed to lose the Kassowark, and in the process, managed to lose the river as well. They were stumbling along faint trails in the hope that they were heading in the right direction, it being very difficult to judge east from west when the sun was hidden from view by a thick ceiling of branches and leaves. But they could very well be going completely in the opposite direction from the river, and plunging headlong deep into the interior of the jungle, a thought that filled Jamie with horror.

This was actually exactly what they *were* doing.

So Jamie was no longer in the best of moods.

‘Och, you only came along to spite wee Wina,’ he bit back. ‘Because you wanted tae stop her from becoming too friendly wi’ me!’

Santi barked with laughter. ‘She soon find other man better than you! Man who not wear woman skirt!’

‘Aye,’ Jamie admitted forlornly, ‘Wemus.’ He realized Santi had won this particular battle. ‘The lucky wee devil.’

Santi was gracious in victory, however. ‘You lucky. Wina no good. She gila; like this,’ she demonstrated what ‘gila’ was by passing a finger diagonally across her forehead.

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’ asked Jamie, none the wiser.

‘Always angry, look for fight. It mean she crazy!’

Not unlike someone else I know, then, thought Jamie. They had emerged into a small glade spotlighted by sunbeams. Tall silver trees surrounded them, almost as if guarding this special place. And it *did* feel special; Jamie had an impression of timelessness, and of having reached a point in their journey that seemed like the furthest into this wilderness they could possibly go. Weariness consumed him at this thought and, choosing a tree free of surrounding bushes, seated himself comfortably with his back against the trunk. He pulled off his soggy shoes to air his feet, rubbing them morosely.

‘This place no good, Jamie,’ Santi said, facing him and speaking very slowly and quietly.

‘Och, what is it now? I just need tae rest my weary toes for a wee minute.’ Santi said nothing, while Jamie continued to massage his feet gratefully. After a while, he glanced up, puzzled by her silence.

She was gazing at the tree against which he was resting, a look of terror on her face.

Jamie clambered to his feet and turned round.

A long and very dirty bone was wedged in a fork of the tree. The knuckle joints were large and greasy, and while it resembled a leg bone, it didn’t look at all like it had come from an animal. His gaze travelled further up, and there, positioned bizarrely in another cleft in the branches, was a human ribcage. A skull was stuffed between the shoulder blades, and as he gaped speechlessly, a grub as white as cooking fat and thick as an obese man’s finger poked through one of the eye sockets to say hello.

Something glinted from amongst the dirty white bones, and in spite of his revulsion, he stepped forward to examine the gruesome tree shrine more closely. The spinal column dangled loosely against the bark, and the glint came from an object twined around the vertebrae. A rosary.

‘Preacher men always disappear in jungle,’ Santi said with a small voice.

‘Well now you know what happens to them.’

‘Hey, you shut up your mouth! Santi not like. Bad spirits here.’

‘I thought you Indoni were above all that superstitious

nonsense, remember?’ But he could see she was obviously frightened, and patted her comfortingly on the arm.’

‘*Cannibal.*’ She pronounced the last syllable to rhyme with ‘pal’, just like seemingly everyone else in this damn jungle, thought Jamie, a little unnerved nevertheless.

‘We must leave here. This place no *good!*’

‘I know: hatty hatty.’

Santi was already marching across the glade, heading for a gap in the trees across from where they’d entered. She was just about to push aside a large leaf bending outwards like a huge green tongue when a hand beat her to it. A brown hand, belonging to a brown man who appeared from behind the leaf. He had short tight curls, a flat nose, and staring, staring eyes. He wore nothing apart from leaves gummed around his penis. In his right hand he clutched a gnarled bone knife; in the other, a bow. On his back he carried a sheaf of long makeshift arrows.

Jamie snatched Santi’s hand and pulled her hurriedly in the opposite direction. Three more warriors emerged from the bushes to bar their way. One of them placed an arrow to his bow, the animal gut string pulled back behind his ear. The tip was pointing right at Jamie’s heart.

Chapter Twelve

The river was a wash of gold in the late afternoon light, and Wemus was in love.

He could barely take his eyes off Wina, and his rowing was suffering as a result. She smiled coyly back at him every time he grinned at her, and more than once he reached out to touch her hand fleetingly. He must be more handsome than he had thought, he congratulated himself warmly. He'd always known he was witty and charming, adventurous and bold; but he was obviously a sexual magnet too.

'You're a buffoon, Wemus.'

Kepennis was shaking his head at his friend in disgust.

'Hey, you should be happy for me!'

'That whor-' he stopped himself with admirable self-control, 'That *woman* will see you dead.'

Wemus ignored him and, resting his oar, reached for Wina instead. She welcomed his embrace, her eyes flashing. They kissed, and Wemus was on fire. His lips felt alive and throbbing as he briefly moved his mouth away and then went back for more.

Thunk!

Wemus collapsed against the side of the canoe, his head an explosion of pain. One of the guerrillas had finally had enough of his amorous interludes and was now making a point of reminding them they were hostages and not on a love cruise.

'Row!'

Wina leant forward to rub Wemus's head for him, only to be pried away by the same oar that had interrupted their passion. A snickering came from behind. Drew was guffawing openly, leaning over his oar to enjoy the show.

Wina stood up in the canoe, rocking it dangerously. She trembled with rage as she pointed a finger at the white man.

‘Hey, screw you man! You not even man. You rat worm *rubbish!* You make my friend killed. I kill *you* now!’ She looked as though she would do it too.

‘Enough!’ The voice came from aft of the canoe. Tigus was stepping over the sacks of provisions towards them, a rifle pointed at Wina.

‘Yeah, that’s right,’ added Drew. ‘Sit down, shut up. And you sound more and more like your buddy Santi all the time. What happened to your etiquette, bitch?’

Tigus moved the barrel of his rifle so it nestled behind Drew’s ear. He shut up and resumed rowing. Wemus pulled at Wina’s hand and she grudgingly sat down again.

‘Tigus!’ It was the Doctor, calling from the rear of the canoe, anxious to resume the debate they’d been having. ‘You really must listen to what I’m saying!’

Tigus swept the hostages with a final warning glare, and made his way back to join the Doctor. ‘You say nothing that help our people,’ he said, gazing out across the river at the moss and vine-strangled shapes of trees lining the bank.

‘Your guerrilla tactics will never have a serious effect on the Indoni dictatorship, Tigus,’ the Doctor said, his eyes narrowed with grave wisdom. ‘Peaceful and diplomatic means are the only way you will secure offworld sympathies for your cause.’

‘Tigus disgust with your pacifism!’ the leader barked, the gun in his hand lifting in his anger. The Doctor looked a little nervous as the barrel wavered towards his face. He put out a finger and moved it gently aside. Tigus continued, face screwed up inside his balaclava. ‘How can we be peaceful and *diplomatic* in face of torture, rape and plunder of our spiritual environment. Our gods inhabit the trees, the grass, the mountains. The Indoni fell them, dig them up and blow holes in them. Our gods are bloody: they scream for retribution. We must avenge them, and all orphans and widows crying over corpses of brave warriors murdered by Sabit’s beasts!’ His chest was rising and falling with the extremity of his passion. The Doctor was humbled by his words, and in his heart could only sympathise with the rebels’ plight. Missionaries, greedy businessmen, politicians and prostitution were eating away,

with varying degrees of spiritual damage, at the pure heart of a once unsullied Papul. He was at a loss how to respond.

‘Tigus sick of cultural pollution of our land as well as its physical rape.’ This was from Kepennis, who had turned to face them in the canoe, and was listening to the conversation with some interest. ‘And I begin to see what he mean.’

It was a mistake. Tigus’s mounting fury was expended on the Papul guide instead. He advanced on Kepennis, rifle shaking in his hands. ‘You want speak for me?’ Then again, almost shrieking: ‘*You want speak for me? You, who are scum! You almost sound like Papul, but not enough to stop me kill you now.*’ He would have done it too, had not a shout from a guerrilla sitting in the prow of the canoe stayed him.

The ‘pilot’ was gesturing at a tiny tributary emptying into the main river on their left. Apparently, this was what they had been looking for, because the vessel began to head towards the small mouth of what was really no more than a stream.

Barely ten yards in width, the tributary was choked with weeds and almost completely enclosed by trees overhead, so that thick gloom squeezed them as they commenced this new stage of their journey. Moist fronds wiped across their heads like dangling wet hair as they passed beneath the branches. Tree roots blocked their way, and bumped at the canoe from all sides. Intermittent sunlight filtered through, sometimes picking out huge butterflies of gorgous hues that tripped through the air about their heads, but the majority of the long, twisting journey was dark and oppressive indeed, and soon all their spirits began to suffer. At one point, an orange snake as thin as the Doctor’s wrist swam alongside the canoe, and the trepidation with which the guerrillas regarded it signalled its deadliness. Another time, coils of reptile as thick as the Doctor’s body lowered themselves from the branches above them, a momentary streak of sunlight picking out the rainbow markings of their scales, the beauty of which did nothing to alleviate their terror.

The Doctor gazed ahead silently as the canoe continued its progress. Sometimes there would be no way forward at all; the guerrillas were forced to stand up in the canoe and hack a passage through the encroaching foliage. Whether they moved

forward or not, it made no real difference to the Doctor, however. He was thinking of Victoria and Jamie, and wondering incessantly about the possibility of their still being alive. The chances were slim indeed, it seemed. And it was all his fault. He'd brought them here.

Insects droned, and hidden birds whistled and squeaked from the jungle all around him. This then, was his purgatory. This was where he came to repent for all his sins, he thought gloomily. And there'd been enough of *those*, he supposed. He briefly pondered taking out his recorder to cheer them all up, and quickly decided better of it. Things were bad enough as they were.

The tree-house was in a large clearing, erected on top of four smooth tree trunks, and it had to be at least forty feet above the ground. Jamie and Santi were pushed towards it, having waded through swamps for the last half hour or so to reach it. The tribesmen had said nothing to them as they guided them through the jungle, apart from chortling now and again at Jamie's attire. Jamie had tried to convince Santi that they might not be responsible for the bone shrine in the glade, and even if they were, they might have just arranged the missionary's bones there, and not necessarily have eaten him as well. Santi was having none of it. 'Are you stupid? They cannibal, man!' being her only response.

Jamie gazed up at the hut perched on top of the branchless trunks; it was made of thatch and wicker, patched with holes and hardly substantial looking. A series of notches were carved into the surface of one of the tree trunks supporting it; obviously the 'ladder' they were to use to gain access to the 'house'. As he continued to stare upwards, something emerged from the opening that was the door; a head dwarfed by distance, old and wrinkly, peering back down at them with the kind of stoicism that extreme old age and a lifetime spent in the most unexplored of jungles will instil in your average cannibal.

A bone knife nudged Jamie's backside, right where he'd been clawed by the Kassowark. He winced and turned to face the uncompromising glare of a tribesman. The meaning of the

gesture was obvious.

‘Okay. Better follow me up.’ Jamie said, rubbing his hands together in preparation. He clasped his hands around the trunk and placed his right boot on the first notch.

Three yards up, he looked down and smiled encouragingly at Santi. ‘It’s easy!’

She didn’t look so convinced, but was following him up anyway.

Jamie had the impression he was climbing out of the jungle itself. He was rising up to the level of many of the tree tops fringing the clearing, and behind the tree-house he was now scaling, he could see another identical one, and that gave him some idea as to how high up he was. A burst of dizziness threatened to peel him from the trunk. He blinked a few times, focusing on the smoke issuing lazily from a hole in the grass roof of the neighbouring tree-house.

He looked up towards the doorway again, and the inquisitive head had vanished. Then he was level with the opening, and stepping onto the bamboo poles strung together that formed the porch. He risked a glance inside the hut, but could only make out the glow of a fire and a huddle of shapes slumped around it. Didn’t look very inviting. He reached down to pull Santi the rest of the way up and clung to her, reluctant to enter the tree house.

One of the natives below jabbered something incomprehensible to Jamie; although the meaning was clear.

‘They want us go in,’ Santi said.

‘Yeah, I guessed that much’

He held her hand and together they crouched under the low opening and entered the hut.

He’d loved her.

It was that simple, and that brutal. She’d been able to quiet the storm, quell the rage in his head, bring warmth to the coldness. All the clichés, yeah, but all the clichés that stopped him killing.

She had never seen him kill before. She’d known he wasn’t a saint, of course; she’d known him long enough. But when he was with her he was always calm, could contain the urges, the

little psychopathies, as his skull-doctor had told him, while he was still at school. He remembered that freak, yeah, with his glib diagnoses and glibber phrases. Done him one night when the prick was mincing away from school, after another day of dosing out cleversounding little nothings. Pan had been on leave from one of the system trawlers, and thought he'd do a school reunion of sorts. Sorry, Doc, just one of my little psychopathies, he apologised, as he bludgeoned the therapist's head into a smear with a crow bar. Just can't help myself you see; but got to indulge my whims or it ain't healthy. Can't bottle these things up, can we?

Yeah, he'd loved her. She'd loved him. That's how it's supposed to be ain't it? Simple and cosy. No ifs, no buts. No kills, no psychopathies. Good for me, baby. Always were. You were the only one. Cool the rage...

So why didn't you understand? The biker was rude, he was ripping me off. Couldn't she see that? So why did she just scream as the blood ran red, red, red and the tattoo laser needle was still in his hand waiting to produce more vibrant colours of death.

Why couldn't you see, baby...?

I was never any good. Mum and Dad knew that, you knew that... but you didn't care, because you loved me. When we made love I was tamed, could frame your blonde head in my hands and know the universe was safe both for me, and from me...

So why'd you scream, baby, why'd you scream and make the universe no longer safe...

'See the little monkeys run,' Twist chortled with glee. He strafed another village hut, the fire bursting out from the thatch bright against the dark of the evening.

Pan stared at the back of the pilot's head. An irritated scab had formed on his bald patch where Twist had repeatedly scratched it. Pan's gaze was locked on the glint of metal beneath, although it didn't particularly interest him. Twist's plate was showing.

'Jungle rock, monkeys! Hear the blood bloom, see the bodies rattle with the dying of them. Let's all funk down with the psychedelic sounds of burn, burn, burn.'

Pretty Boy threw an empty beer bottle at him. 'You're as crazy as a cockroach with groin itch, Twist.'

'Combat rock. Let's all play.'

Combat rock. Yeah.

Everyone's insane. We're diving of the high one, and there ain't no water below.

Everyone's insane, and our minds are burning. There's no one here to stop the madness. Clown... Where was Clown? Not here, that's for sure. Absent without leave, or was that Missing in Action?

He no longer remembered. He no longer cared. Had he ever? Clown was missing, and that meant their conscience was missing too. Missing in Action while the Combat Rock played on...

The storm was sudden and vicious.

Rain lashed in through the ragged gaps in the grass walls, lightning turned the jungle white for flashes of electric time. Thunder came heartbeats later, and the cannibals huddled around their fire, waiting for the gods to stop their roaring.

Jamie and Santi did their own huddling. But at least they were relatively dry, and the fire provided plenty of warmth.

The interior of the hut consisted of one main room, in which half a dozen cannibals were gathered, all of them staring at the travellers without expression. There was obviously another room behind a thatch flap because every now and then a wail emerged disconcertingly. Jamie didn't even want to think about what was causing that. Next to him a pregnant naked woman lolled on the bamboo slats that formed the floor, an infant playing with her toes. Above her head, ceiling ornaments dangled.

Jamie looked away quickly. He didn't like those ornaments, and didn't like the idea of sharing a house with anyone whose idea of good interior design included human skulls and leg bones hanging from hooks in the ceiling. He tried not to concentrate on what was being roasted over the fire, suspended on a long spit above the flames, while the tribespeople sat around in eager anticipation. It was just as well his view was partially blocked by the back of one of the

naked men.

Santi let out a piercing squeak that made him jump. She was up on her feet and pulling her muddied skirt even further up her legs, forgetting her modesty in the face of some new peril that Jamie was momentarily blind to.

‘Kechouak!’ she wailed in utter misery

‘What?’ he asked rather helplessly. The natives were turning to see what the problem was too.

Instead of answering, Santi pointed towards a dark corner of the hut near where she’d been sitting. Her face was contorted with repulsion. Following her gaze, he could make out something moving in the shadows. He crawled nearer to get a better look.

Cockroaches. Cockroaches the size of carpet slippers. At least four of them, scaling the bamboo walls happily, antennae questing, armoured wings folded, carapaces throwing back the firelight.

‘Santi not like,’ the Indoni wailed miserably as another one trickled across the floor missing her bare feet by inches.

‘Jamie not like either,’ the Scot said, instinctively hitching up his own kilt and tip-toeing back to his former position as far away from the beasts as he could. The tribespeople were cackling with glee at their discomfort, and the man whose back had obscured Jamie’s view of the fire had now moved aside enough for the highlander to be able to see exactly what they were intending for their evening meal.

He promptly forgot all about the cockroach monsters.

Panic bolted through him, urging him to fling himself right back out of the door into the full fury of the storm, and waste no time sliding down the tree trunk. But the sheer horror of the moment fastened him to the bamboo floor.

Rationality kicked back in. He would never be able to get both himself and Santi out of there before the natives caught him anyway. All he could do right now was to try to prevent Santi from seeing what was cooking, and hope that it would prove sufficient for the tribe’s appetite.

He put an arm around her shoulder and pulled her head onto his chest, ostensibly to comfort her in her fear of the cockroaches. Santi being Santi, however, she refused what she

assumed were his attempts at intimacy, and pushing him away happened in the process to glance towards the fire, and so was treated to an unobscured view of what was left of Ussman slowly being rotated on the spit.

His blackened face stared at her in greeting, eyes boiled into spitting fat by the flames, hair seared away, but the features were still recognisable as belonging to their friend.

Jamie tensed, waiting for the inevitable screaming frenzy.

It didn't come. She stiffened, and her mouth fell open, but she said nothing. Didn't move. Even when one of the cannibals sliced away a portion of Ussman's belly with a bone knife and passed it to a naked man with grey hair who was obviously the head of the tribe. The Indio chief's eyes reflected the fire as he sank his teeth into the hunk of flesh, juices trickling down his chin. Jamie stared, along with Santi. Stared in sickened fascination at the pink-red meat under the charred surface layer, and one thought only played in his mind: *meat*. *That's all it was, all it comes down to; all we are.*

Meat.

Soon every man in the hut was offered their share, and still Santi said nothing. Jamie thought better of trying to talk about it. What was there to say? They were stuck forty feet up in the storm-lashed sky, sharing a tree-house with a room full of cannibals who were happily engaged in eating their friend. What was he supposed to do – crack a joke to lighten the atmosphere?

The men had all received their fine portions of breast, belly, leg and arm. Now it was the women's turn. The cook rotated the spit and worked his bone knife on Ussman's blackened backside. He then handed out slim portions of cooked buttock to the three women in the hut, two of whom were swollen with naked pregnancy, the third being a wizened hag. They accepted their lot gratefully.

It was only at this point that Santi broke her silence.

'Huh! Women always get bum deal!'

Jamie gaped. Nothing should have surprised him about Santi by now, certainly not her grasp of Earth slang. That was understandable after all, considering the number of off-world tourists she'd consorted with in the dancing dubs of Batu. But

the rapidity with which she'd managed to overcome her horror of the cannibalism of her fellow Indoni, someone she'd been joking with, even flirting with, only a day before, left Jamie at a loss for words. He blinked at her in disbelief, wondering whether it was just her way of coping. She was frowning in irritation more than shock, however. He thought about reminding her of the severity of their situation, but the Indio had heard her comment and was approaching her on his haunches in a peculiar squatting shuffle. He fixed her with his crazed eyes – and they *were* crazy – and uttered something in a tongue unfamiliar to Jamie.

Santi responded in Indoni, pointing at the women and what they were eating with a haughty expression of disdain on her face. The cannibal obviously understood because he responded in turn by giving her a cuff around the head, as if he were administering punishment to a particularly naughty child.

Santi screamed in fury, and Jamie only just managed to grab her arms and pull her back. The cannibal shuffled backward in amazement at this show of disrespect from a mere woman, and some of the other men laughed.

'They can understand what you're saying?' Jamie asked, amazed she could actually converse with this isolated and primitive tribe of cannibals. He gripped her tighter until her struggles became more subdued.

Santi was silent for a moment. The Indio smirked at her and continued eating, watching her closely, his eyes drawn to the curve of her smooth, brown thighs. Jamie noticed this new, unwelcome interest with dismay.

'Santi understand a little. Some words same as Indoni. Only some. He understand me. Not like what I say.'

'Well, be careful what you *do* say. You've seen what they've done tae poor Ussman. We don't want tae be next, now do we?' A thought struck him, and he turned her face towards his with one hand.

'Can ye ask him where we can find the Krallik, or where men with hats of animal skin live, because that's where the Doctor is going, and maybe they'll know, living in the same jungle and all.' It was obviously a vain hope, because even if the cannibals did know, they were hardly likely to change the

habits of a lifetime and suddenly come over all hospitable to strangers. But at this point anything was worth a go.

Santi looked at him dubiously 'You wear skirt too long. You crazy, man. They want eat us, not give us directions.'

'Just ask them. Say we'll pay them, I dunno. Bribe them.'

'What they do with money in jungle? You very foolish man.'

'Look, can you think of a better plan? 'Cos right now I'm all out of good ideas.'

'You have good ideas when?'

'Lassie, this is hardly the time to show off your wit. Just ask the man.'

The Indio was observing this conversation with some interest, while finishing off the hank of belly greedily. His eyes never left them.

Santi gave in, and turned to the cannibal. She spoke in her own language slowly, as if addressing a child. The cannibal stared at her, and slowly a grin lit up his face. He turned to his tribe and repeated what Santi had asked. They all laughed. Even the women. It was obviously a good and hearty joke for them.

Santi turned to Jamie with an 'I told you' expression. The Indio shuffled closer to them and spoke to Santi while actually looking at Jamie. His words were guttural yet musical, a fluting jungle language that was pleasant on the ear, even if the sights around them were certainly not pleasant on the eye.

Santi grunted, as if surprised. She looked at Jamie with a defensive glare.

'Well?'

'He tell us where men with hats of animal live.'

'You see?' Jamie squawked delightedly. 'What did I tell you. Everything's worth a go.'

'He say they hide in temple at pool of evil purple flower – no, not flower, I not understand word. Evil purple... something... that make men mad who eat them. Santi not understand all. He speak with cannibal tongue. He crazy. But he say pool not too far by canoe through swamps.'

Jamie rubbed his hands together. Now they were really getting somewhere. 'And will they take us there?'

Before Santi could ask, the Indio spoke again. Santi gaped at him for a moment, and Jamie had to shake her shoulder vigorously.

‘They say we not go there. We have more important... fate.’

Jamie didn’t like the sound of that. His optimism began to slide again. ‘And what’s that?’ he asked, not at all sure he wanted to hear the answer.

‘Santi become his tenth wife and man in skirt will be killed and eaten in honour of our wedding ceremony.’

Chapter Thirteen

The jungle was waking.

Dawn. Ice cream-pink skies, symphony of awed nature, and Victoria woke with the stink of a soldier's empty boots right next to her nose. She rolled over on the grass mat that was her bed and came face to face with Agus who was sitting up, watching her.

The shelter had been erected to provide room for all ten men in Agus's squad. And Victoria. There were no niceties in the jungle, no room for modesty. She'd been forced to sleep right alongside the men, listening to their snores and smelling their smells. Agus had snored happily along with the rest of them, and Victoria had finally sunk into a worried dream-ragged sleep a mere hour or so before dawn.

The smell of freshly boiled coffee was the most important thing to her at that moment. She accepted the steaming mug that Agus held out for her. He smiled and handed her a plate of rice and vegetables that had been cooked while she still slept. She shook her head, not sure she would be able to hold it down. Her whole body ached from the uncomfortable sleep she'd endured, and her feet were sore and blistered from the previous day's hiking through the jungle. On top of that her eyes were crusted and dry, her throat prickly and uncomfortable, and she could smell the stale sweat on her own body. Her sense of propriety was even more compromised by the fact that Agus was watching her so closely, and was himself immaculately turned out, looking for all the world as if he'd just spent the night in a luxurious hotel.

'You must eat.' Agus told her. 'We have more walking through jungle to do today.'

'What's the point?' she protested, heart sinking at the thought of more heat, more insects, more walking.

'What is the point in anything?' he replied, smiling,

smiling. 'President Sabit wishes for us to find the OPG, and rescue your friends, of course. I have already told you. You are here as a public relations exercise, to see for yourself what the OPG are capable of, and to report it to your world.'

'I can also report what I've seen in your prisons, Agus,' she reminded him pointedly.

'Yes, of course you can. But President Sabit seems to think you won't want to.' He finished his coffee and stood up, barking orders at his men to break camp. Victoria frowned at him. What did he mean? That didn't sound very good at all. Would Sabit resort to holding either the Doctor or Jamie hostage should they find them, just to make sure Victoria only said what they wanted her to say?

She brushed a hand distractedly through her hair, dislodging a bug that clung to her finger tenaciously before being shaken off to skitter off into a corner. She suppressed a sob. She really *needed* to see Jamie and the Doctor's faces more than ever.

The squad was on the march again, with Agus and Victoria at the head. The path was a little wider than before and progress was easier, but soon the heat became as oppressive as ever as the morning wore on. The insects came out to play again, forming an incessant cloud around Victoria's hair. Once their path led across a stream spanned by a tree trunk, and she was forced to teeter precariously across it, looking down into the fetid water beneath and not at all relishing the prospect of slipping and falling into it. She imagined all sorts of giant leeches and snake things and other even less savoury creatures lurking beneath the surface.

They were making their way across a jungle glade where the sun streamed blindingly down upon them, when Agus stopped. He held up a hand and his handsome features were serious. He turned to Victoria.

'Wait,' he said. 'I hear something.' He was drawing his Luger from its holster when the arrow hit him in the windpipe. He stepped back a pace as if performing a solitary waltz, clutched at the shaft as the blood began to bubble, well, and then spurt. Then he was on his knees, gazing at Victoria with a mixture of surprise and apology on his face.

Victoria's scream was lost under the crack of rifle shots. Three soldiers fell, two more staggered under the impact of arrows, joined their colleagues in the grass. The rest whirled, firing their pulse rifles in the perceived direction of the attack. Trees flashed into flame, but still the arrows and bullets came. Another soldier fell against Victoria, sliding down her body, his arms embracing her, an arrow shaft jutting from his right eye. She shook him off and ran for the far side of the clearing, followed by three surviving soldiers.

A man came out of the undergrowth to meet her. He was white, dressed in combat fatigues with a sleeveless jerkin. He clutched an old-fashioned rifle in one hand, aimed it almost lazily, picked off one of the soldiers behind Victoria, while he held out his other hand to welcome her. An arrow streamed across the clearing from the far side to drop another soldier, and that left one. He fired his pulse rifle at the white man, who didn't even try to dodge. The pulse went wide, igniting a palm behind him. The man smiled and loosed off a shot which caught the Indoni soldier in the chest, digging up a rose of blood and propelling him back into the grass.

Victoria stopped running, unsure what to do, but deciding it was probably time to stop screaming too.

More white men were emerging from both sides of the glade. They'd obviously been hidden securely enough in the jungle to avoid the erratic firing of the Indoni soldiers. They were a bizarre-looking group. One all in black, carrying a bow, with a shaven head and piercing eyes; another fat and sweaty with a bullet belt over his shoulder and a chainsaw strapped to his waist. He was also equipped with a bow and sheath of arrows and Victoria's gaze was drawn inexorably to his left eye lodged horrifically halfway down his cheek. Behind him came a man dressed in leather and white lace with long luxurious dark hair and eye make-up. He bowed mockingly at Victoria as he ejected spent shells from his ancient-looking rifle. The man who had appeared first clapped her arm heartily. He was tall with saturnine features and the most evil eyes Victoria had ever seen. He smiled, and it was the uneven yellow-toothed smile of a wolf. Next to him, two more: a good-looking man with raw cheekbones, slicked-back

hair, a cigarette tucked behind one ear and a rifle tilted on his shoulder, and lastly an untidy-looking psychotic with long straggly hair and lost eyes, plucking absently at the string of his bow as if eager to use it again.

‘Welcome to your nightmare,’ the saturnine man said. Some of the others laughed. The fat bearded man looked at her intently and began rubbing his crotch.

She had fallen into bad company.

The river journey was over.

The canoe was gliding across the surface of an extensive lagoon, the sun hot upon the tops of the travellers’ heads. It was like no lagoon the Doctor had seen before, and he paused in his rowing, fascinated. The water was tinged with purple, and now and again volcanic burps broke the surface, and wisps of steam rose lazily above the lake. But the most striking thing about the swamp was the silence. There were no birds; the twisted trees around the shore were empty of jungle wildlife. The lagoon itself was studded with black flowers seemingly floating like lilies upon the water. The Doctor prodded one of them with his oar, and lifting it slightly, uncovered a clump of purple fungus connected to the flower, membranous and buoyant. It resembled a pickled human brain, and was certainly the same growth the Doctor had already encountered, a piece of which had been lodged on the spinal column of the mummified chieftain in Akima.

‘Curious,’ he said aloud, narrowing his eyes mysteriously as he turned the growth over on his oar to examine it more thoroughly. A bulbous-headed fish broke water beside his oar, watched him malevolently with its one eye and proceeded to clatter its teeth around the wooden oar, as if hoping it was edible. The Doctor shook it free with a cry and the fungus fell away too. He sat back hastily, as if fearing the fish would attempt to snap at his face.

The canoe slid on through the ranks of black flowers, Tigus standing for’ard, and shading his eyes against the sun. Soon, what the Doctor had determined to be the far shore of the lake revealed itself to be an island, and it was not long before they could make out the wooden landing pier stretching

out into the lagoon.

'Oh my word!' the Doctor exclaimed as he saw the heads paraded on stakes above the pier. Wina emitted a moan of horror and Wemus duly consoled her. The guerrillas didn't bother slapping him away this time. They were tired, and their destination was within sight: they didn't care any more.

Now they could discern individual heads and the Doctor was puzzled to spot what were obviously Papul features among the grisly trophies. He stood up and climbed over the sacks of provisions cluttering the canoe to stand beside Tigus.

'This is the Krallik's solution to war? Kill everyone? These are your people he is brutalising too, you know!'

Tigus gave him a withering stare. 'The Krallik says there *is* no solution in war. There is only rage and death. Those who rage and those who die. It better to rage for what you believe, than die for what you don't. Sometime, if we lose our way, we cease to be the one, and become the other.'

'Sound like you rehearse that well, brother,' Kepennis said confrontationally.

Tigus didn't even look at him. 'This is Traitor's Dock. Soon you join your friends here.'

Kepennis shut up. Wemus gave him a warning glare not to open his mouth again.

The canoe nudged in under the hanging heads, bumping against the wooden struts of the pier.

'Right then,' said the Doctor cheerily, 'we'd better meet this Krallik of yours, hadn't we? There are quite a few things I'd like to say to him.'

'You meet him soon enough,' Tigus said, throwing a rope around one of the stakes and vaulting onto the pier. There were other canoes tethered along the dock, tapping each other in the lazy swell caused by the new canoe's arrival. The guerrillas leapt ashore, gesturing for their hostages to follow suit, levelling rifles just in case they felt like arguing.

They walked along the planks, and onto the island. A fringe of palms couldn't completely conceal the building that lurked beyond. When they passed underneath the trees and saw the head-shaped temple in all its macabre glory, the Doctor stopped in wonder.

‘So this is the heart of terror, eh?’

‘Where’s the Krallik, then, huh?’ Drew piped up brashly ‘Bring the bastard on, and let’s play.’ That earned him a rifle butt between the shoulder blades, but his grunt of pain soon degenerated into sniggers as they walked towards the gaping doorway.

A guerrilla came out to meet them wearing a black and white striped balaclava and with bullet belts criss-crossing his naked chest. He spoke to Tigus excitedly.

‘What are they saying?’ the Doctor asked Wemus to translate for him.

‘He say the jungle reclaim Agat.’ Kepennis answered for his friend. ‘Many Indoni heads have been hunted.’

‘And that pleases him?’

‘Yes, alien.’ Tigus broke in. ‘It please me that Indoni no longer prosper in Papul town: He glanced at Wina. ‘It please me to hear Indoni die.’

They entered the temple.

Several more guerrillas were slumped around the single room, eyeing the hostages with some curiosity. Several glanced appreciatively at Wina’s lithe form, causing Wemus to put an arm protectively around her waist.

The Doctor’s attention was immediately drawn to the sacks of purple fungus that were leaning against one thatched wall. ‘What do you intend doing with those, might I ask?’ His question was to Tigus who was barking orders for someone to fetch them food and drink. The rest of the weary group collapsed on grass mats, Wina and Wemus sitting together, both looking tired and miserable. Kepennis folded his arms around his legs and lowered his head to sleep. Drew stretched out on his back and closed his eyes.

‘They much desired at Agat. Good for healthy. Delicacy. Only grow here in swamps. We sell to Papul in Agat to finance OPG activity and weapons. Krallik’s orders. But now Agat empty Papul return to the jungle, no more sell. Highly nutritious. You want try?’ Tigus was actually being hospitable now that he was relaxing in the rebel base again, safely away from Snatchers and Indoni patrols.

‘Highly nutritious, eh?’ the Doctor said pensively ‘Yes, I

would like to try some...’

Tigus shrugged and crossed to the heap of sacks. He tossed a hunk of the purple growth to the Doctor and sat down cross-legged to enjoy a bowl of soup brought to him by one of his men. Similar bowls were put in front of the other travellers, but the Doctor seemed far more interested in sampling the growth.

He tore a fragment off and sniffed it. It was porous and gave off a faint odour of toadstools and spice. Not unpleasant, but not overly appealing, either. Daring all, he took a tentative bite.

The Dogs have work to do today. A little job, courtesy of Sabit the Rabbit. Shall we take a little peek inside their heads, see what’s making them tick on this humid jungle afternoon?

Grave was watching sick horror movies on his wrist video. He’d already done what he felt like was his share of the work and he was taking half an hour out to relax, sitting on a fallen tree on the edge of the clearing. It was a very old movie, but it was one of his favourites, and quite appropriate considering the locale, as it was set on a jungle island overrun by flesh-eating deadheads. The disc was not holo-pressed, which was a shame, but the movie wasn’t filmed in that format anyway so why should he moan? He noticed that the bitch they’d taken away from the Indoni was watching him, and as the movie was nearing the ‘hot lunch’ scene, he purposely moved his arm so she would be able to see the screen more dearly. Bloated zombies were tearing off pieces from a prostrate and ridiculously blood-soaked woman to chew, for all the world like a bunch of shabby old men morosely munching on their sarnies at a picnic.

He saw her shudder and grinned. Hell, genuine kicks were few and far between on this planet; might as well grab ‘em when he could. And he’d *always* enjoyed scaring girls.

Better than sex with ‘em, that was for sure.

Saw was busy collecting the last of the dead soldiers. They were all arranged in a pile now, ready for ‘styling’ as Pan called it. The bearded giant glanced over at the Earth woman, who was being allowed to wander around free at the moment.

Well, it wasn't as if there was anywhere she could go, was there? Apart from down on him, which is exactly what would be happening *very* soon, lady. He came over all sweaty just at the thought of it, even though she was older than the usual girls he took. But maybe Pan would interfere. Like *he* had morals... Probably wanted her for himself. Maybe it was time for Pan's felling. He dropped the corpse's ankles and patted his chainsaw. Yeah, maybe it was felling time for big bad Pan. Don't get in my way, Devil Eyes.

Pretty Boy was sharpening stakes made out of buzzed trees, along with Bass. Saw's little namesake tool had really come into proper use for once. Pretty Boy and Bass were the buddies of the group. They had a mutual respect that Bass would never let go too far, always conscious of Pretty Boy's ambivalent sexual inclinations, but they worked together well, killed with similar flair and precision, and laughed at pretty much the same jokes. For such good friends they couldn't be more different: Pretty Boy was wild and good-humoured, extravagant, theatrical, loquacious; Bass was cool and laid-back, laconic to the hilt. They often went into battle back to back, forming a two-headed killing machine with no weaknesses. Right now Pretty Boy was thinking: Bass, you is looking older, more stressed. Your hairline's retreating like it was ambushed, boyo. Soon gonna stop getting the best looking chicks.

And Bass? Bass was daydreaming of riding a big, black Harley down to Mexico, drifting in and out of the border towns, sampling the wine and the señoritas. It was something he'd read about once in an ancient music magazine. One of his rock idols had done it, once upon a legendary time. Yeah, well... there probably was no Mexico anymore. No wine, no señoritas. Perhaps he should check it out on a map when he got back to Earth.

That left Twist. He was hiking further up the trail to fetch the camouflaged cruiser, and then he was gonna cruise it right back to the clearing and pick up the boys. Do we really want to look inside his head? Just drug-addled ruins in there; a chemical burn-out that was truly frightening. Wasteland of distorted desires and a skewed Expressionist's nightmare of

tottering perceptions. This man was on the highway to mental hell, and if the boys ever did get to look inside his mind, they'd never let him fly them again.

Pan. We know how he works. Let's leave him for now.

And of course, Clown was missing in action.

The bodies were collected, the long stakes sharpened and set beside the corpses in the centre of the clearing. Grave reluctantly paused the *Zombie Flesh Eaters* Tini-Disc and crept over to join the others.

Pan took Victoria's arm.

'So you were brought out here to see what the OPG are capable of, huh?'

Victoria said nothing, glaring at him with fear and anger, seeing what he was, seeing right through to his heart of emptiness.

'Well, now me and the boys, we're gonna show ya.'

He signalled to Saw to lift Agus's body. The big, lumbering Dog promptly hoisted the officer up by the shoulders, the arrow still sticking out from his bloody throat.

'Playtime!' Pan picked up one of the large stakes and with a shocking show of strength, rammed the sharpened end through Agus's abdomen, until the end stood out a good foot from the officer's back. Saw yukked as blood emptied over him. Then, his huge arms betraying the fact that they contained an awful lot of muscle rather than just fat, he shoved the stake down into one of the holes especially dug earlier. Twisting the stake into a firm position, the bloodied Goliath stood back to admire his handiwork.

Victoria hadn't seen any of it. But she heard it. She had twisted her head around, closing her eyes. Pan let her be sick, doubled over in the grass beside him. He kept one hand around her trailing hair just in case. Now, with the grisly human 'toffee apple' secured in place, he yanked on her hair and bellowed at her to open her eyes.

As she did so, screaming and throwing up dry heaves of nothing, he briefly pondered what she'd be like. Nah, too pure. Prim as a clothes-horse. No matter how pretty she was, she just wasn't no whore.

No use to him then.

He would have killed her if Sabit hadn't wanted her brought back alive. And they still had to find her friends as well.

So much to do, so little time to go whoring.

The rest of the Dogs concentrated on erecting more of the gruesome stakes in the centre of the clearing. Pan forced Victoria to watch each one go up, holding her hair with his right hand and prying open her eyes with the fingers of his left. She made plenty of noises, and did a lot of crying, and finally got around to making conversation, which was all right by him.

'Why... why are you *doing* this?' It was a sobbed expression of horror more than a rational question, but it would do.

'So the world will open up its eyes, baby. Just like you are now. See the barbarity the OPG revel in. No Alliance Government in the system or beyond will criticise Sabit's policies then.'

'But...' she coughed and spluttered away the last of her nausea, still on her knees. 'You're not Indoni. Why are *you* doing this?'

Pan pushed her away with an exaggerated laugh. 'Why if that ain't the dumbest question!' He watched Pretty Boy and Bass levering a stake bearing its Indoni trophy into place in the ground and clapped his hands. Grave was filming the impaled corpses with a tiny hand recorder, and even leaving a broken bow next to the grisly tableaux just for added authenticity. That was it then. All done. Time to fly. And here was Twist, right on cue, the tree tops wavering under the retro blasts kicked out by the lowering cruiser.

'Are you ready, milady?' he asked mockingly, gesturing towards the fuel burn-streaked cruiser. 'Your chariot awaits.'

She rose shakily to her feet. Pretty Boy even gallantly offered to help but she shook him off.

'Tell me...' Pan said, catching a glimpse of portions of her backside through the rents in her skirt as she climbed into the port. 'You ever consider becoming a whore?'

The rising whine of the engines drowned her answer.

The Doctor promptly spat the piece of growth onto the floor.

‘Taste that bad, huh?’ Drew said, jumping up from his mat, as if curious.

‘It’s not the taste I don’t like,’ the Doctor said darkly. He gave Tigus a piercing glare. Before he could say anything else, Drew was interrupting, insisting he needed to excrete. Tigus pulled a strained face, then grumpily ordered one of his men to follow the hostage at a safe distance to the makeshift toilet outside and behind the temple. The man chosen didn’t look overjoyed by his nomination for the task.

The Doctor wasn’t finished. ‘That growth contains highly concentrated proactive encephalo-tissue stimulants, if I’m not mistaken.’

Tigus looked none the wiser. Kepennis and Wemus were watching him curiously. Wina was asleep.

‘What you say?’ Tigus asked gutturally, annoyed at not understanding the Doctor’s words.

But the Doctor was really talking to himself, deliberating the possibilities he’d uncovered aloud. ‘The motor neurons and muscles would certainly be excited, even those preserved in an atrophied state of mummification, if only in a limited way and for a brief period. But certainly long enough to simulate life. Yes!’ He beamed almost happily at Tigus. ‘That would explain your hyperactive Mumis returning from the dead!’

Tigus frowned, as if the Doctor had gone mad. He looked at the piece of fungus on the floor that the Doctor had tasted, and began to wonder. Agat. Mass head-hunting among normally passive locals. Now this raving alien. Cogs began to whir and click. Tigus was far from being a stupid man, but he was an uninformed one in this particular field. He usually kept a safe distance from the fungus, knowing full well they could have some odd, mind-altering side affects. But the Krallik’s instructions had been unequivocal: the guerrillas were to eat them on occasion too, presumably for nutritional reasons. And Tigus didn’t mind selling them to his fellow Papuls in Agat and along the river stations, because he was sure they were not fatal, and were definitely looked upon as a bit of a delicacy. But the Doctor was still rambling, and he tried to concentrate

on his excited words.

‘That’s not all, though, is it?’ He was looking at Tigus, as if the man could answer him. Then he turned his back on the leader, deep in his own thoughts, and began roaming around the centre of the room, looking at the slumped guerrillas forming a curious audience without seeing them. ‘This fungus also contains depressants. A bit like an extreme form of alcohol. If they were to be consumed regularly enough, all mental and moral barriers would crumble. The minds of consumers would be susceptible to any influence. In this instance that of the Krallik, perhaps?’ He whirled to confront Tigus again.

‘You know all this from one bite?’ The Doctor searched for the speaker, and it was Kepennis, a look of wonder on his dark face.

The Doctor smiled. He raised his right hand for the guide to see. It was twitching noticeably. ‘It’s entered my system already,’ he said gravely.

‘Always like that when eat fungus,’ Tigus said defensively, a look of concern on his face nevertheless. ‘Gives body much energy.’ His voice carried a noticeable lack of conviction.

‘Curious...’ the Doctor said, ignoring Tigus for the moment. He lifted his head and frowned.

‘What is?’ asked Wemus.

‘That mind-controlling influence I mentioned: I can feel it now even as I speak, working through the digested juices from the fungus in my system, tapping into my brain. Someone or something is... ah, yes...’ He smiled broadly like a child delighted with a gift, and looked straight into Tigus’s eyes.

‘The Krallik, where is he?’

Tigus looked puzzled by this sudden question and was momentarily at a loss how to answer it.

‘I should dearly like to speak to him,’ the Doctor continued. ‘It’s just so much more satisfying face to face, rather than conversing telepathically, don’t you think?’

Tigus’s eyes were huge. ‘You hear voice of Krallik too?’ Then he paused, as if listening, his head cocked to one side. There was a note of awe in his voice when he spoke again.

‘You honoured. You will be first man Krallik ever ask to meet.’

‘Indeed?’ The Doctor had a silly grin on his face as if well pleased with his own cleverness. Then he frowned, and trepidation replaced the grin. ‘Oh dear. I hope he’s in a good mood.’ He looked about somewhat helplessly as Tigus snapped his fingers and one of the guerrillas herded him towards the ladder in the centre of the room. Nobody offered to come to his assistance. Wina was still asleep, and Wemus looked decidedly timid. Kepennis shrugged at him and commenced rolling a cigarette.

This was it then. He was on his own. ‘All right, all right,’ he said grumpily to the guerrilla who was prodding him forward. He placed one foot on the lowest rung, heaved his body up, then lowered his foot back onto the floor, turning with an apologetic, simple look on his face.

‘I’m really not dressed for the occasion,’ he twittered. ‘Perhaps we ought to call it off in favour of a more suitable time. After tea, perhaps.’ A prod in the backside from a spearhead persuaded him to cease his babbling. He skipped forward, letting out some almighty, indignant bellows.

‘Well, there’s no need to be so rude about it, is there?’ He cried, trying to retain some dignity, while straightening his jacket and puffing his cheeks in and out. He peered up the ladder to the hatch above. ‘Oh well, nothing ventured...’ he said cheerfully, and put his foot back on the ladder.

Sex with a stranger was always better than committing.

You taught me that, didn’t you?

That commitment meant nothing when it came down to it. You and me, baby. We had it all. And you burned it. As if smearing some rude biker was such a bad thing to do? The look of horror and fear on your face said it all, though, baby. You remember how I tried to reach out, and take you back, to promise you that this didn’t matter and nothing had changed and I wasn’t no psycho killer but just a man with a short temper.

Didn’t listen. Didn’t try.

Just the screaming. And you knew how I felt about that.

So...

Back to the loneliness.

Back to the whores.

Whores had no claims. Whores had no feelings. You used 'em and you tossed 'em.

They couldn't see into your heart, and they couldn't touch you where you were really naked.

Bless 'em. Love 'em.

Whores had no feelings, you see. That's why be loved 'em so...

Pan was about to break into song when the signal came through. It would have been a cynical song of course, not a joyful parading of the soul. But the rest of the Dogs were spared it anyway, because the monitor light was flashing on the instrument bank.

'Looks like our man has located the target at looo-oong last,' he contented himself with crooning instead. He reached over and patted Victoria's knee.

She was sitting rigidly next to him, tired and afraid of these bad, bad men. One of them – the big fat one with a beard and the dislocated eye – had already tried interfering with her, but the evil brute with the tattoos had stopped him. He seemed to hold a little power over the others, although why he had spared her the indignity of being molested she wasn't sure. However, she was absolutely convinced it had nothing to do with any finer qualities he might have. She was quite, quite sure he didn't have any of those.

'Let's go, boys'

Twist let his fingers dance over the control keys and the cruiser lurched, vibrated worryingly and then shook itself like a dog before steadying itself into relatively smooth flight again.

Twist hunched over the monitor, triangulating the signal source.

Pan got up and moved to a large screen set in a bank on the starboard bulkhead of the cruiser. Victoria watched him. He moved like a panther, all stealth and easy violence, his lithe frame alive with antisocial energy. He was activating the

screen now, and an image was fading in from snow.

‘Let’s talk to the Rabbit,’ Pan said good-naturedly.

The image cleared, and the sound channels connected.

‘Hello and good afternoon, most esteemed President,’ Pan said, smiling cheekily into the monitor.

Sabit peered back at him expectantly, ignoring the irony. ‘Well?’ His thin face was piqued and sallow, as if he were on a bad diet.

‘The locator has located,’ Pan said in a sing-song voice, ‘And the terminators are grooving in to terminate.’

Victoria had heard the word ‘president’ and was up on her feet. She stepped up behind Pan and before he could say anything, was addressing the face on the monitor.

‘Are these men under your employ?’ she demanded.

Sabit gave her a gracious, if rather impatient smile. ‘I hope they are treating you with every courtesy.’

‘You sacrificed your own men, didn’t you? You let them be killed for your own wicked political ends!’

‘Oh please... you are making me blush. Would you rather talk about this in the luxury of my personal palace? I shall instruct the... men...to bring you here as soon as they have carried out their duties.’

‘You will tell your men to return me to Batu. *After* they have found my companions,’ she said bravely and with a good enough imitation of severity for Pan to laugh delightedly.

‘Of course,’ Sabit agreed. ‘Your companions must be found. If only to secure your co-operation, my dear.’

Pan was folding his arms, following the conversation with some enjoyment. The other Dogs seemed bored, and a little restless. Perhaps sensing their mission was nearing completion, they were wondering what the hell they would do next. Killing was easy. Recreation wasn’t.

‘What do you mean?’ Victoria asked apprehensively.

‘Well, of course, I mean that I need you to provide the Earth Alliance with a highly detailed account of what happened to my soldiers. You remember: when they were ambushed by OPG savages in the jungle and murdered in the most horrific and barbaric ways imaginable. It’ll provide a great voice-over for the video, don’t you think?’

‘I will tell them what really happened. I will –’

‘No. You won’t.’ Sabit was quite adamant about that. ‘Not if you want to see your companions alive again.’

‘You’re disgusting!’ she spat. ‘What you’ve done is obscene.’

‘That’s politics,’ he said with a wink. ‘But actually I’m merely securing harmony in a troubled province. Someone has to fuel the fires of off-world condemnation of Papul savagery. That person happens to be you. It’s all the means to a glorious end, my dear. Think of it that way, and then I’m sure you can create a wonderful report. But as to obscene... don’t you think sometimes we must all muddy our toes somewhat?’

‘You call murdering your own soldiers – men who were fiercely loyal to you – and impaling them on stakes “muddying your toes”?’ She had never felt so angry, and so powerless in all her life. This man was worse than the Daleks. At least they were incubated without access to passion or mercy. This man had jettisoned those emotions quite casually to further his own position.

‘Barbarity must sometimes be met with an equal “lack of decency”, my child. Sometimes that’s the only way to ensure world peace and harmony.’

‘Yeah, well. That’s more than enough glib bullshit for one day,’ Pan said, reaching forward to cut the connection, winking at Sabit’s fading scowl. ‘Let’s get on with some honest killing instead, shall we?’

Victoria sank back into her seat and felt like sobbing. But she wouldn’t. Oh no. She *wouldn’t*.

The cruiser skimmed the treetops, and Pan broke into song anyway.

He was happy, goddammit. They were all set to climax the kill mission, and then after that particular distraction was taken care of, he could go back to Baru and indulge in some serious whoring again.

Life could be wonderful.

So he sang, and he cleared his thoughts for battle, and he didn’t remember *her* at all.

Well, tell them this, for God’s sake,’ Jamie pleaded as he and

Santi squatted in the tree-house while flies buzzed around the remains of the meal from the night before. 'Tell them I'm completely lacking in courage or any spiritual attributes whatsoever – Victoria could vouch for me there, aye. So eating me would not benefit them in any way, 'cos they would only be gaining bad qualities by digesting me. Have ye got that?' He nodded his head as if satisfied with his logic. Santi blinked at him, waiting for him to finish. And besides, I've got very tough thighs,' he finished lamely. 'Can you no tell 'em all that?'

Santi shook her head. 'How can Santi translate when she no understand you?'

'What d'ye mean ye don't understand me?' he said with exasperation and indignation, fearing his beloved Scottish dialect was under attack again. 'Don't *you* start...'

'You must more slowly.'

'What? Oh, you mean *speak* more slowly? Oh, aye. Well, tell them...'

He was interrupted by a droning buzz from outside. He stuck his head out of one of the ragged holes in the thatched wall and there, drifting above the cleared space that housed both tree houses, was an Indoni cruiser. He yelled enthusiastically, waving his hands in the air, and would have continued to do so until he was hoarse had not the sharp tip of a bone knife suddenly pressed the back of his neck. He obliged by shutting up and sulkily withdrawing inside the hut again. The cannibal who had prodded him also sat down, having been waiting impatiently for his toke on a long bamboo 'pipe' of sorts which gave off a great deal of smoke, and caused some of the tribesmen to cough quite inordinately.

'Well, are ye going to tell them or what?' Jamie nagged Santi again. 'Or do ye want me to end up as the main course for your wedding feast?'

'Santi not marry cannibal!' she said with disgust.

'You sound like ye're more worried about that than me being eaten. Remember, you'd have to have a slice of me, too.'

Santi didn't look too pleased with that idea. 'Santi like rice and vegetable more.'

He gave her a double take, just in case she was being serious, but still couldn't tell. Then his face slowly creased into a thoughtful smile as a bright idea came to him. Even the Doctor would have approved of this one, he congratulated himself 'Santi,' he said eagerly. 'That was an Indoni cruiser. Tell yon cannibals that it belongs to those who would kill their gods.' She looked at him blankly. 'Go on!' he insisted. 'Tell the chief man. Lie: tell him the men wi' furry hats are in it, and they are responsible fer making great holes in the mountains, and fer chopping down all the trees that house his people's spirits. If he takes us to the lake where they live, we can help him rid his land of these sassenchachs.'

Santi was still watching him with a blank expression.

'Well, go on! What's holding you up now?'

'What is sassenenakker?'

Jamie sighed with genuine exasperation. He was pretty sure the cruiser was not being operated by OPG rebels, of course. They'd only acquired one and promptly managed to crash it soon after. What he didn't know was whether the cannibals even cared about the mountains of their land being mined, or the trees being felled; but he felt it was a gambit he had to play. He was, admittedly, getting desperate. But then again, no self-respecting cannibal liked strangers in their territory did they? Particularly strangers who were invading their homelands and killing off their gods. Just so long as the cannibals were crazy enough to confuse the OPG with the Indoni it didn't matter. So he looked at Santi with hope and expectation and urged her again to translate his request to the Indio chief.

Then he thought of something else, and a slow smile played across his face. "Then, of course, there's you, Santi.'

She put her head on one side waiting for him to continue.

'Well, how do I put this... you've been with too many men to make an eligible wife for any self-respecting chief. He wouldnae want spoiled goods now, would he?'

Santi's hand cracked across his face.

'Och, I'm just being practical, lass,' Jamie said ruefully, putting his hands up in case of further attack. 'We need to put our cannibal friend here off the idea of marrying you, and then

he won't need me for the wedding celebration either. Think about it: he told you you were tae be his tenth wife. So where's the other nine? Maybe one of these preganant lasses, or even both of 'em, but that still leaves seven. What d'ye think he did wi' them, eh?' He patted his stomach demonstratively.

Santi looked over at the Indio who was smoking the fat bamboo pipe and watching her amorously, quite content in his cannibal world.

'Santi tell him. And she not stupid. She know how to make cannibal not want her.'

'Well do your best. It might just save both our lives.'

Tigus was right behind the Doctor as he pulled himself up into the dark antechamber. The time traveller struggled to accustom his eyes, the splinters of sunlight from the chinks in the wall showing him the dirty curtain that divided the upper storey.

Tigus hauled himself up to join him. The Doctor turned nervously to confront the guerrilla leader. 'Ah, perhaps this wasn't such a wonderful idea. Maybe he can send me a letter. Preferably when I'm back in Batu!'

'I think you are brave man, Doctor. Do not prove me wrong.'

'Hmmp! Well, yes, I wouldn't want to disillusion anybody I suppose.' He took a mincing step towards the curtain. 'Behind here, I presume..?' His face was like a frightened child and an inquisitive scholar all at once. 'Are you coming with me?'

Tigus shook his head, and ushered the Doctor forward with one hand. 'Krallik want see you alone, Doctor.'

'Well, I'd better not keep him waiting then, had I?'

He plucked at the curtain, looking for the parting, and only managed to get himself tangled up in the folds. 'Oh crumbs!' he said, unravelling himself and making for the ladder again determinedly. Tigus barred his way. The guerrilla leader pointed to the edge of the drape and tapped the hilt of his machete meaningfully.

'Let us hope you return from your audience, Doctor. The

last man go see Krallik did not.'

'Yes, well, we must always look on the bright side, mustn't we?'

The Doctor sighed and pulled the curtain aside. He took one look back at Tigus and then stepped through the gap.

More darkness. And a smell. The Doctor had been aware of it out in the antechamber, but here it was far stronger. the stink of rotting meat. Sunbeams picked out patches of bamboo and wicker that formed the floor, and the face of a young Papul man lying on it, staring up at the ceiling. The Doctor strained his eyes to see further into the room, and could make out a hunched shadow at the centre, flanked by two thinner silhouettes. He looked again at the face on the floor. Stooping closer, he saw that the young man's body was severed messily in half at the waist. The Doctor straightened up quickly and his foot slipped on something moist and slimy on the floor. He let out a cry and pinwheeled his arms.

'Are you enjoying making a fool of yourself, Doctor?'

The voice came from the dark shape in the centre of the room. Except it didn't sound so much like a voice, but more a tremble of echoes creeping through a coffin lid under six feet of earth. It was like a whisper from the other side of the greatest divide; a signal emanating from behind the last taboo.

The Doctor straightened himself with as much dignity as he could muster, and puffed his cheeks defiantly. 'The Krallik, I presume? Well, I don't think much of your hospitality... or your domestic tidyness!'

'What...'. A hiss, as if the voice were fading through time and distance, 'do you hope to achieve with your puerile jokes, Doctor?'

The Doctor was squinting at the two thin figures slumped on either side of the main shadow, but he could not make out what they were. He ignored the question, and came back with one of his own, holding onto his frockcoat with both hands, and inflating his chest.

'So this is your ultimate solution, is it?' He tried to sound as unconcerned and bold as possible. 'Regression to savagery and cannibalism. Mass murder. Head-hunting.' He glanced at the torso beneath him. 'Atrocity upon atrocity!'

‘Of course,’ the echo concurred softly. ‘But then what else would you expect from someone who looks like *this*?’

A match was struck, and a candle appeared, held by a slender hand. The wick was lit, and the candle-flame bloomed upon the face of the Krallik.

Chapter Fourteen

The Doctor said nothing. He didn't move. What could he say? What could he do? This was beyond grotesque, beyond appalling.

The Krallik was sitting half-naked on an old wooden chair, the dark skin of his torso daubed with depictions of agony and torture, war graffiti painted with blood long since dried. Tattered khaki combat trousers covered his legs. An arm lifted, undeniably a man's arm, but of a slighter build than the average Papul's; a gold bracelet of the type popular with all the Indoni merchants the Doctor had seen on Batu gleamed in the candlelight. But the Krallik was not showing off its jewellery, but rather lifting the candle to exhibit its macabre body for the Doctor's benefit. The Doctor's gaze was drawn to the hands, slender, feminine, the fingernails still adorned with red crumbling nail paint. The hands were stitched crudely onto the masculine arms.

The candle moved upwards, and the ghostly light fell upon the head of the Krallik, and what the Doctor had only glimpsed moments before was revealed in all its glory.

The Krallik's head belonged to that of an elderly white man, and like the woman's hands, it was sutured in crude fashion onto the brown skinned neck. The grey hair was dishevelled, flecked with dried blood, the pale eyes returned the Doctor's incredulous stare with a stare of their own, but this one contained no animation whatsoever.

It was like staring into the eyes of a fish, dead on the beach.

The Krallik was speaking again, and its lips were moving flaccidly, dead meat moved by a macabre ventriloquist.

'The head of a missionary...' the Krallik hissed, and the lips were out of tune with the words, adding to the sickness of

it all, ‘... the body of a merchant, and the hands of a prostitute. An assemblage of shame, off-worlder. You see that I have become the twisted symbol of everything that is eating away at my land. This way I can never forget...’

The Doctor was emerging from his shock, and fascination was kicking in. He took a step nearer, and then promptly took two steps back when he became aware of the two Mumis squatting motionlessly on tree-trunk stools in the candlelight, one on either side of their king: an unholy trinity of corpses.

‘So, the feared Krallik is a collage of body pieces.... extraordinary. I wonder how you can possibly be alive? But then, of course, you can’t be, can you?’

‘You are an intelligent man, Doctor. You do not believe in symbols. But there are plenty who do. My people *need* a symbol. They need an idea. But you are wrong: I am very much alive. I am kept alive by my hate.’

The Doctor squinted at the bizarre figure. The head was too big for the slender body, the hands in turn too small for the muscled arms. Everything was wrong about the Krallik; it was an amalgamation of wrongness.

‘Oh no, I’m sure it must be more than that animating you, Krallik...’

‘This is no carnival trick, off-worlder. The Krallik is very real.’ He lifted the prostitute’s hands to demonstrate. ‘Can you not see the cruel poetry of my body?’ the voice was hushed, fading, then growing strong again, as if the voice were crawling up a very dirty tunnel, and gasping for air, or for expression. The head nodded gruesomely, the ghost eyes fixed on the Doctor, but not fixed at all. ‘The beauty of irony... the loveliness of pure obscenity. You will see how gorgeous it all is, Doctor, and share in the moral carnage that is me, that is everything I represent.’

‘*You’re* wrong too, Krallik: You are definitely a carnival trick!’ The Doctor puffed his cheeks out in a show of antagonism, even if his legs were betraying him by wobbling so.

‘Did you think I brought you here to act as a mere hostage, off-worlder?’ The candle tremored, the whore’s hand spasming. ‘You are here to die. To be an example to all

intruders encroaching like insects where they are not wanted. You and your kind are cockroaches, infesting corners, creeping, *creeping*... But I will not stamp on you; Doctor, I shall embrace you. You will become a part of me too, just like the God-liar, the stealer and the whore. You are an off-worlder of some eminence: that I detected some time ago – and off-worlders are the biggest cockroaches of all: swarming, swarming...' the ghost voice echoed, was silent. Just when the Doctor thought the grotesque figure was slumped in sleep, if such a thing were possible, it reanimated itself, rocking back and forth on its chair, as if striving to console itself. The voice was renewed, a whisper of malice in the gloom.

'You trample our holy sites, despoil our ancient customs with rancid money, finance the Indoni vultures to gut our spiritual mountains for one to propel your craft. You are cockroaches from space, always creeping, always making filth of my land...' A wail, a weakness. A sob. 'Creeping, creeping...' A hushed madness. Silence for a breath, two, three ...

Then: 'Maybe I take your face... sew it to the head of the God-liar... or just your hair. Certainly your heart, and your soul.'

The Doctor blanched in the face of such terrifying insanity, and put his hands over his cheeks to calm himself, but there was nowhere for him to go now. This was truly the end of the river. He had to find light and reason amidst all this blackness. 'Your people may have a just cause, but you are a sickness within their body Krallik. A cancer eating them from within. And you are wrong about one more thing: how can I be a warning to others, if I am unknown to them. I am just a wanderer, and of no importance to any outer system alliance. I cannot help your cause by dying for you, you see.'

The Krallik was silent, a dead thing. Had he... it... even heard the Doctor? But the time and space traveller wasn't finished yet.

'You said something else, Krallik you said you detected some time ago that I was an off-worlder of some eminence.' He stuck his chin out and glared defiantly at the figure in the chair. '*But you've only just met me!*'

There was the whine of engines decelerating outside, and the first crackle and burn of pulse weapons being discharged. The Doctor turned to face the direction of the noise, but there were no windows to see out of.

‘Sounds like the army have arrived, Krallik. Your little reign of terror has ended!’

The Krallik continued to rock back and forth, as if nothing mattered but his own madness.

‘Time to burn their minds and fry their eyes,’ Twist said, cutting the engines as the cruiser dropped clumsily onto the wooden dock.

‘Twist,’ Pan said as he checked the power pack on his rifle, ‘if you ever live through this it’ll be a miracle.’

‘But they got monkeys inside ‘em,’ Twist spat. ‘I see the bad monkeys in their souls.’

Pan ignored him, and thumbed the hatch mechanism. Then he reached for Victoria. She pulled away from him, but he snatched her anyway with a casual laugh. ‘Come to Pan, baby.’

Bass and Pretty Boy popped through the hatch first, pulse rifles ready. Pan heard one of their weapons discharge and a scream kicked in. Right, battle commenced then... He checked his Luger next. He was slipping: the pack was nearly empty.

It would do.

Saw was lumbering to the port, heavy gleaming rifle in one hand, chainsaw clenched in the other, although the big lug had not switched it on yet. Grave was behind him, and Pan couldn’t help noticing he was playing a movie on his wrist disc player. On the small screen someone’s head was being buzzed with Saw’s favourite weapon, the upper part of the skull lifting like the top of an egg teased away by a spoon. Grave paused in the doorway to catch the scene.

‘Move, you sick freak.’

‘That’s right. We got to give them purple time.’ Twist was up from the pilot seat, and creeping down the cabin towards Pan, his fingers curled into claws, eyes rolling back in his head. Pan let him come. Twist tilted his head back as he drew close to Pan, stared first at Pan’s saturnine eyes, then down at

the tattoo on his bare left bicep.

‘Anyone ever tell you, you look just like your tattoo?’

‘You just saved your life. Well done.’ Pan shoved him out the hatch. The freak wasn’t even carrying a weapon. Pan didn’t care. The pilot was obviously suffering some psychic overload brought on by too many bad drugs. Let him deal with it. Combat was always good for curing self-indulgence.

He clenched Victoria’s left hand securely in his right, the bulky rifle cradled in the crook of his other arm and leapt out of the port, pulling Victoria with him.

She landed clumsily, and would have sprawled on the planks of the dock had he not yanked her brutally upright.

The cruiser was on the wide wooden dock, the fringe of palms ahead, the long pier behind. Twist was leaning against the side of the cruiser, staring at his own fingers. A dead OPG guard lay in the grass just beyond the dock. Bass and Pretty Boy were sheltering behind the bulky flank of the cruiser which was parked at an off-kilter angle, and chucking blaster fire towards the trees. Saw was zig-zagging through the undergrowth to the left of the half-glimpsed building beyond the trees, and there was Grave, completing the flanking manoeuvre to the right. Now Pan could hear the buzz of Saw’s tool, a harsh shriek layered over the sizzle of energy weapons.

Pan heard answering fire in the form of old-fashioned projectile rifle shots and the twang of bows. Bass and Pretty Boy didn’t look bothered as bullets and arrows screamed and bounced off the bulkhead around them.

Pan walked casually past them, swinging Victoria round to act as a human shield.

He stepped off the dock, depressing the trigger of his pulse rifle with his left hand, the weapon heating up fast and burning into Victoria’s side as it discharged shot after shot into the trees.

The palms were alight, flames boiling up into the sky. The guerrillas were flushed out by the intense heat and Pan picked them off as they ran.

Wemus clutched Wina protectively to him. Drew was sitting on the floor, tapping his hands complacently on his calves.

Kepennis was slumped on a mat, head resting on his knees. He looked worn out, without hope, eyes closed.

Tigus had dropped back down the ladder leading to the Krallik's chamber as soon as the cruiser's engines screamed overhead. He'd deployed the majority of his men to greet the attack, leaving four to guard the hostages and protect the temple, and most importantly, the Krallik.

He hadn't spoken to the hostages. He led his men out in silence, checking his old rifle quickly before he left the temple. His men looked scared, and unprepared for this unforeseen attack. They'd believed the location of the Krallik's base a secret, the temple inviolable.

Drew laughed in their faces as they chattered excitedly, milling around checking weapons before Tigus snapped them into some form of ragged order. There weren't even enough guns to go round. Some of them had to resort to bows and arrows.

'Sounds like you've got trouble, Tigus...' Drew shouted after the leader as he ducked out of the temple.

'We be freed now, Wina,' Wemus said comfortingly, stroking her head as the sounds of uneven battle picked up outside.

'You gotta be joking, Papul man,' Drew told him. 'You think the Dogs gonna care about a monkey boy like you? They'll burn you along with the rest of your kind.'

Wemus's eyes opened wide. 'What you mean... Dogs?'

'Of War, monkey. They comin at ya!'

One of the guerrillas deployed to guard them advanced on the blond off-worlder, his rifle muzzle pointing at him menacingly.

'You want speak?' the guerrilla asked him quietly. Drew shut up. For a moment, at least; until the guerrilla returned to the hole in the thatched wall that was his window position. Then he couldn't resist adding: 'Course, they'll rape your girl there first. Before putting *you* down.'

Wemus had heard enough. He slowly pried Wina's hands off him and advanced on Drew. The off-worlder had never seen the usually docile and amiable Papul guide angry before. Wemus's eyes were narrowed, his large nostrils fluttering, his

teeth showing in a grimace. Drew began to regret – not for the first time in his rat-like existence – having such a loose mouth. He nudged Kepennis next to him, but the other guide was either asleep or dead, because he gave no answer.

‘Hey! Guard! Help m-,’ his pleas were cut off as Wemus snatched him by the throat and pulled him off his mat, his large hands clamped around Drew’s scrawny neck, squeezing hard.

Saw and Grave were waiting for the main force of rebels to leave the temple, and then duly closed their pincer movement.

Grave walked slowly through the bushes, pulse rifle level with his belt, squeezing off lances of energy that touched guerrillas, turned them into pillars of screaming fire. The rebels were scattering into the undergrowth and trees outside the building seeking cover, but they had made their most foolish mistake leaving the temple in the first place. Saw had already dropped three outside the doorway, and now Grave could see him grappling hand to hand with another – a big, muscle-bound, half-naked Papul, who, despite his size, still looked like a woman in comparison with the big, man-mountain pork lug that was Saw.

Grave snapped off one last shot, sending a pole of energy into a guerrilla who was not very well hidden behind an exotic bush. Guerrilla and bush ignited, the crackle of burning twigs and the scream of roasting Papul a duet of pleasing harmony. Grave knew his power pack was exhausted, and didn’t care. He’d actually purposefully not recharged it in the cruiser. He’d known right from the moment they got the word from Sabit that this would be his last mission. And guess what? He didn’t care.

He pressed the rewind button on his wrist video. He’d missed the best part of the movie, the bit when Leatherface saws through the wall of the radio station in an explosion of sound and the girlie screams and Chop Top screams and... he reached the required chapter stop and let the movie roll again. Leatherface burst through, chainsaw wailing.

An arrow pecked the tree trunk beside Grave’s face. He – gave it an absent glance, almost offended at the interruption to

his viewing. Leatherface had the girl pinned up against the coke cans, was popping them open with his vibrating weapon, was homing the tool in toward her groin...

Yeah, mum. I was a real disappointment to you.

The next arrow took him in the forehead.

Saw, still wrestling with the big guerrilla, watched Grave drop. He grunted. He didn't care about the geezer in black, but the Dog's death reminded him of his own mortality. He punched the guerrilla in the nose. The blow would have snapped the neck of any normal man, but this Papul was a big bastard. He recovered from the blow and came at Saw again. But Saw had gained himself the extra second or two he needed to pick up his beloved tool from the grass where he'd dropped it to wrestle. He fired the engine and revved the beauty up. He placed the whining teeth of the 'saw against the man's head and let her rip.

Pan was advancing through the trees with Victoria still held like a shield in front of him. He clocked Saw buzz his opponent, watched the upper part of the guerrilla's skull lift up – and wondered, if only for a second, where he'd seen that before. A bullet nicked his arm, returning his thoughts to the matter in hand, which was killing all the OPG.

Not that there were many left. A guerrilla broke cover to his left, dashing towards him, firing a rifle. He spun, flung out a spear of energy that flicked the rebel smoking against a palm. Another rustle directly ahead of him. This time it was a big freak of a beast, low to the ground but muscular, flat pancake head twisting from side to side. Pan let it lumber away. He sort of liked animals, even freakish ones. Hell, especially the freaks...

Bass and Pretty Boy were back to back on the dock, guarding the cruiser, blasting down any guerrilla that tried to make it out of the trees. Arrows clattered against the metal of the port hatch, one thunked deep into Bass's thigh. He went down on one knee, still firing, and a bullet crashed through Pretty Boy's shoulder, sending him spinning around to face the other way, blood spiralling down onto the wooden planks

of the dock. Another bullet ploughed through his right arm. He turned around to face the trees again, transferred the pulse rifle from his wounded arm to his good hand, depressed the energy release button. Again. Again. Again.

The jungle around the temple was burning wildly now. The surviving guerrillas, those who had been lucky enough to escape Pan, Saw and Grave, emerged from the inferno, intent on taking the cruiser, spurred on by Tigus. Twist walked through them, not seeing them, holding his hands before his face, as if he could not understand what they were. A guerrilla took a shot at him, but the bullet missed. He advanced into the smoke, was gone.

Pan had not let them escape. He had merely let them past him so he could emerge and blast them down from behind. He didn't notice Saw collapse into a bush not ten yards from him, his throat cut with three rapid slices from behind. The guerrilla who had done it didn't waste time watching him fall, but came on after Pan, tucking the bloody machete back into his belt and picking up Saw's pulse rifle.

Pretty Boy was on both knees, head hanging forward over his breast. Arrows decorated his body. He was still pressing the button on his empty weapon. Click. Click. Click. Bass was draped over the edge of the dock, head and arms hanging down towards the water.

Pan wasn't interested. He emptied his power pack and let the jungle burn around him, Victoria still struggling in his right hand. 'All right,' he said, tossing the rifle and pulling his Luger, tapping the barrel on her forehead. 'Let's go find your friends.'

The back of the evil white man's head was targeted perfectly in the sights of the pulse rifle. Tigus was on one knee, taking his time drawing a bead. His hand didn't shake. It would be a clean shot.

His men were dead or dying all around him. The rest had fled, giving up on the idea of taking the cruiser – there was no one who could fly it anyway. That left four men loyal to the cause still guarding the Krallik's temple – that is, if they had not downed arms and run too.

They had been taken by surprise. That was the only answer to this craziness. Six men – with admittedly superior firearms – had massacred fifteen or so rebels. So much for a crack troop of survivalists highly trained in guerrilla warfare. The OPG had been made to look like children playing at war.

And this man...

He eased down on the pulse button.

This man was walking casually around like he was on an afternoon stroll.

The woman was struggling gamely with him. Tigus watched the Dog pat her forehead with his Luger warningly, and she relented somewhat. They were turning back this way now, heading for the temple. Smoke tumbled in, obscuring his vision.

A crackle of burning leaves to his left. A thrashing sound. Something caught in the incendiary. Something big. In a frenzy of burning pain it came at him, driven from its hiding place in a hole beneath the bushes by the heat and the smoke.

Tigus swung the gun.

The massive grey Slinker waddled at him with surprising speed, its flat, blunt head jerking from side to side in distress. The forearms, thick as Sumo wrestlers, lifted from the ground to embrace the guerrilla, raking cloth and strips of flesh from his back.

The energy weapon discharged, the bolt wild. The Slinker closed its jaws firmly around Tigus's head, wrenched sideways, snatched the Papol's head free from the shoulders. The creature trampled over the decapitated body, on towards the cool lake, crunching on its mouthful.

The inferno hadn't reached the temple yet. But the guards could see through the window holes there wouldn't be much time before it did. They also saw their leader devoured by a Hole Slinker, and the evil man who was the worst killer of all coming toward them, dragging his woman.

All that was enough to put them off their guard, and get them quivering with indecision. But they still had two rifles between them, and plenty of arrows. In their confusion they forgot about the hostages. Wemus had released Drew and

dropped him gasping on the floor. The guards had ignored the struggle, more intent on keeping abreast of the action outside, which was of far more importance to them. The last thing they expected was an attack from the cowardly Drew.

Rubbing his bruised throat, and sheepishly trying not to look at Wemus or Wina again, the blond man had spotted a bone knife dropped by one of Tigus's men in their disarray. Now he found an outlet for his frustration, and leaping up, jammed it between a guard's shoulder blades as the rebel peered out of the window, and leaned on it hard. The guerrilla dropped his rifle. Drew caught it, let the OPG rebel fall.

The other three guards were turning. Drew shot one in the groin. Ejected the spent shell, shot another in his left eye. The third backed away stupidly as Drew ejected. The rebel lugged the door open in his panic and bolted, colliding with Twist outside. There was a bark of Luger fire and the guard re-entered the room, his head half-shorn away.

Bad acid, man.

the baddest

scored it on a satellite off Jenggel before they hauled in. Been saving it for combat. Best time, man. Psychedelic jungle, man: combat trip.

The flames frenzy of beauty caressing the trees painting the skies. Smoke toke poke an eye hell baby. Laughing at it all on the inside of course dying out on the outside where it mattered no frock no cock

no combat rock.

Look at my fingers man. Fingers of a fiddler angler looking for fish right from the trees, see em grow there man but they're dying cos they got no air. Wham bam thank you man, and another one bites the dust. Who? Saw? Grave? More? Pan coming.

Comingggggggg angggggryyy oggggre, chill out, man, you got hell head up there

hello.

'Hello...?

Pan stopped in front of Twist, who was wandering around

in circles talking to himself outside the temple. His chemical-blasted eyes fused with Pan's long enough for the pilot to recognize him and frame his greeting.

'Guess what, Twist? There ain't no miracles.' Pan shot him through the head and dragged Victoria into the temple.

He scanned the interior, Luger swinging to cover any potential flicker of aggression.

Two Papuls, one Indoni female, and...

'All right, Pan.' Drew was holding a projectile rifle, pointing it at the other three. 'Took your time getting here.'

Pan said nothing.

'You *know* him?' Victoria asked Drew in amazement and disgust.

'Course I do, dozy bitch.' Drew looked proud of the association. 'I'm one of the boys. Sent on a special mission to locate the Krallik, posing as a tourist, deep in OPG territory. Bound to get caught now, weren't we? All part of the plan. Got a signal activator hidden up my backside for when I found him. I'm one of 'em. One of the boys.'

Pan smiled. Said nothing.

'Upstairs, Pan. The Krallik's upstairs.' Drew pointed at the ladder leading to the hatch in the ceiling.

Pan shot him too. Drew's fried body hit the bamboo floor next to Kepennis, who raised his head as if from a long doze. 'Did you *really* think you were one of the boys?' Pan grinned and tutted. 'That's... quite funny.'

He looked up at the hatch. He beamed at the hostages, poked Victoria with his Luger. 'What are we waiting for? Let's see if the Krallik wants to come out to play.'

'I'm afraid you're beaten, Krallik,' the Doctor said. The sounds of battle were not so concentrated now, but the roar of flames eating the jungle was becoming increasingly louder.

'Afraid...? You *should* be afraid,' the Krallik whispered hoarsely. 'Independence Day is here...'

'Independence Day?' The Doctor looked nervously behind him as smoke began to ease through the cracks in the temple walls. Maybe Tigus had gone out to help protect the temple, and was no longer guarding the antechamber. He edged slowly

backwards.

‘... is coming. The gods declared it should be so.’ The Krallik rocked more slowly now, as if the composite monstrosity were focusing its emotions. ‘They foretold this dry season would mark an end to Indoni rule and off-world influence in Papul. This season my land reverts to its people.’

‘The gods?’ echoed the Doctor. ‘Don’t you mean the fungus?’ He pulled the piece of purple growth he’d bitten into earlier from his pocket. ‘It’s alive, isn’t it? A sentient organism that feeds on the cortex. And what does it give you in return? Delusions of grandeur? Independence Day? They are the same thing, aren’t they? You’ve been used by a toadstool!’ The Doctor took another careful step backwards. The Krallik’s candle was burning lower, still held in the prostitute hand. The peeling red fingernails reflected the glow.

The Krallik was silent. The inane rocking slowed even more.

‘Must have seemed wonderful though, before you lost sight of what you were doing... The fungus supplied you with a nice bag of tricks... powers of long-distance telepathy? Mind-manipulation over those who’ve digested it in lesser quantities than yourself? Am I close? And then there are the dead chieftain re-animation stunts, aren’t there? To make believe you’ve resurrected your ancestors to allow the gods to speak through them, himm? Certainly fooled the natives. How did you do that? Let me think..’ Another shuffle backwards. ‘A tiny device with a recorded message in the Mumi’s mouth, perhaps? And what about the snakes? Oh, of course, there would have been a crude catapult device fitted inside the Mumi’s throats, I shouldn’t wonder. The reptiles were probably imprisoned in the hollowed out body cavities, weren’t they? Then just pop the head back in place with a few stitches when no-one’s looking... very crafty.’

He hoped his flow of words was distracting the Krallik from his gradual retreat, and carried on regardless: ‘The snake catapults and recordings were activated by motion sensors, I suppose. The eye sockets would undoubtedly be a good place for those, wouldn’t they? Well, am I right? Quite ingenious, I must say. I really must take my hat off to you.’

He risked another look behind him. The curtain was invisible in the gloom, however, and he had no way of knowing how far away it was. The last thing he wanted to do was become entangled in the folds again.

‘Ingenious, yes...’ he continued, to no response whatsoever, which was somewhat alarming. ‘Even if somewhat hypocritical: you used the very same off-world technology you claim to despise.’ Again, no reaction. ‘But maybe you’re too far gone to appreciate the irony of the situation... the fungus has extracted a price, hasn’t it? Well, no, you’re probably not even aware of it, of course. It’s eaten away at your mind for far too long. This growth,’ and here he flung the fungus into the pool of wavering light in front of the Krallik’s stool, ‘is nothing less than a sanity assassin.’ The Doctor lowered his voice, and as he warmed to his theme he actually forgot about leaving the room for the moment. ‘You were probably a good man once, weren’t you? A good man, who had very, very bad things done to you and your family. But this growth has turned you into a monster, hasn’t it? Is that what you envisioned when you created the OPG to free your land? Your righteousness has become dementia. Dreams of freedom and justice replaced by visions of blood, and acts of obscenity. Independence Day... the gods, or should I say the fungus, told you that was imminent – but have you considered the possibility that all Independence Day really means is the paranoid sections of your brain finally being laid bare...?’

The Doctor sighed. There was still no response. The prostitute’s hand continued to hold the candle, not moving at all now

‘But then, I’m only really talking to the monkey, aren’t I?’ He placed his hands on his braces and tilted his head back, fired up by his own verbal attack. ‘If I’m not very much mistaken the organ gr-’ The crash of pulse energy weapons being discharged in the room below interrupted his sentence.

He turned to face the curtain, a moment before it was blasted from its hangings to collapse burning to the floor. A white man in combat fatigues was revealed in the glow from the flames, clutching tightly to Victoria, and ushering Wemus, Kepennis and Wina to walk ahead of him into the room.

‘Doctor!’ Victoria sobbed with relief and would have flung herself forward had not Pan clamped his forearm tighter around her throat.

‘Victoria! Oh my word, you’re safe!’ The Doctor held out his arms and trotted towards her, then just as quickly scampered back again, as Pan swung the Luger to cover him.

‘Well, ain’t this just too sweet to bear,’ the mercenary said. Then he saw the figure of the Krallik and swore profusely. He moved further into the room, craning his neck to get a better view of the Krallik. ‘What are *you*?’ he said in almost amused disbelief, although disgust was creasing his face.

‘You’re a beauty, ain’t ya?’ He shot a quick look at the Doctor. ‘This for real?’

‘If you mean is this the Krallik, then yes... in a way...’

‘Screw me. Does it speak? I mean, it’s holding a candle...’ The Krallik said nothing. The flames from the smouldering curtain played on the gruesome white missionary face, lit up the brown merchant’s arms, flickered on the smooth, stitched whore’s hands.

‘I came all the way for *this*?’ Pan raised the Luger, sighted it on the Krallik’s pale forehead. The fish-dead eyes held his without emotion, without anything. ‘Locate and terminate, baby. Always do as I’m told, especially when the target’s as beautiful as your good self.’ He fired.

Click.

Pan laughed. ‘Well, ain’t that good timing? But it still ain’t your lucky day, freak.’ He chucked the empty Luger, pulled a machete from his belt. He went for the Krallik in a fluid violent lope, spun like a vicious ballet dancer, swung, connected... *lop!* The Krallik’s head arced across the room, plonked onto the bamboo flooring, rolled, stopped.

Pan waited for the still seated figure to topple. ‘There,’ he said, unsurprised when it didn’t. ‘Told you that thing wasn’t real.’

The headless body of the Krallik remained on the stool, the candle still held in the slender female hand. The hand twitched, spasmed, the candle light rippled, stabilised again.

Pan whirled with the same agility he’d displayed in

decapitating the Krallik, and the point of the machete was under Wemus's chin as the guide was still halfway across the room in a lumbering attack.

'Gotta be quicker. You've just *got* to be.' He tickled Wemus's throat with the blade until blood began to trickle, pushing him backwards.

Wemus stumbled over the bisected body of the young rebel on the floor. He flailed backwards as he fell, and his right arm rocked one of the Mumis on its stool.

Pan grunted. Firelight glimmered on the two green snakes twisting and coiling as they sank their fangs into two different parts of his neck.

Rock-a-bye, baby in the tree top, rock-a-bye, baby let my rage stop. They always told me I was bad, mama. Especially you. Had to live up to the rep, right? What you gonna do? Find a way, I mean everybody's got to find a way in life, ain't that right? Mine just happened to be a bad one, that's all. Born to be bad, bad to the b-b-b-bone. Sometimes there ain't always a reason for it. You done one thing for me though, mama – you gave me her. Beautiful cliché blonde. Even had the eyes so, so blue. Nose a little big, skinny too, but what did that matter? I loved you, you bitch. When we made love, you used to say you loved me too.

And that word never meant anything to me. Before you. After you. Only with you.

My sister, my whore.

The Mumi was still again, its motion sensors detecting nothing within immediate attack range. Pan, green and twitching, lay on the floor below. The machete was still in his right hand, and now it lifted with one final act of aggression as a convulsion shook his entire body. The weapon clattered to the floor and Pan twitched no more. The Piper at the Gates of Dawn tattoo seemed eerily to move in the crawling shadows cast by the candle.

Wina gingerly helped Wemus climb to his feet and together they withdrew as far from the Mumis as was possible in the chamber. The curtains heaped on the floor were just smouldering now, the fire having practically burned itself out.

The Doctor picked up the severed head of the Krallik. A large blob of purple fungus bulged from the neck stump. He advanced on the seated figure, careful to avoid the crouching Mumis. In the glow from the candlelight, he could see more growths poking up grotesquely from inside the torso. The entire body seemed to be crammed with the organism, like a dummy stuffed with purple foam to give it shape.

‘Stopped decomposition from setting in too...’ the Doctor mused aloud. ‘And the sheer concentration of fungus explains the extent of the animation compared to that of the Mumis. Hello, what’s this?’ A tiny metallic object could just be detected, attached inside the open mouth of the missionary head. ‘Well, well, well: a minute microphone speaker, of course. Telepathically activated, I shouldn’t wonder. Extraordinary. Much more effective than the tape recordings in the Mumis. A wonderfully ghastly puppet... but where’s the puppetmaster?’

The Doctor placed the head gravely back on the shoulders and turned to face the little group, his fingers templed in front of him, eyes shrewd and expectant. ‘You might as well come forward now, Kepennis. Or should I say... the Krallik?’

Kepennis seemed to relax for the first time in days. ‘Was it that obvious?’ he asked, smiling thinly.

‘Not really, no. But you did give yourself away with little things. Speaking a little *too* emotively about your homeland being spiritually raped, for instance. And then there was your dramatic fainting fit – I take it that was necessary to focus all your concentration on mobilising the Krallik here.’ The Doctor glanced at the corpse of the young Papul rebel, Wayun. ‘Looks like the Krallik defended itself only too well. All the same, it must have been hard on your mental energies, all that long-distance ventriloquism. But I first began to suspect you long before then, of course. I’m sure you haven’t forgotten the burning Mumi at Akima. It was rather puzzling why you had to be first on the scene to inspect it. Destroying the evidence of your little devices, perhaps?’ He blinked at the ‘guide’ reproachfully. ‘Well, you certainly fooled Tigus all this time. But I must confess I’m rather surprised you managed to keep it from your best friend for so long, though...’ He inclined his

head towards Wemus.

Wemus was shaking his head slowly, as if struggling to understand.

Kepennis took a step towards him. Wemus put out a hand to stop him, still unable to speak.

‘Surprised, my friend? But then how long have you known me? Three years, maybe four? Before you knew me I was a hunted figure. You could not understand the horrors I experienced. My family, Wemus...’ His face was hard with the memory of his own suffering. ‘Can you imagine what it’s like to return home to find your wife and child dead? My baby son’s head was burned away, Wemus. My wife naked and strangled.’ He turned away from his friend, who still had not uttered a word.

‘I evaded them for months.’ There was a shuddering sigh, almost lost in the crackling from outside as flames drew nearer to the temple. ‘Hiding in the jungles near my home. Soldiers tortured and killed my relatives, my friends. Not one of them betrayed me. Can you believe their loyalty? They died for me. The Indoni knew I was dangerous, that I had sabotaged their mining equipment, destroyed their logging tools. But they didn’t know how dangerous I would become...’

The torture. Carried in a metal box too short for him, his legs folded, arms cramped, neck squashed at an angle. They kept him like that for days, without food, without water. The only air sucked in through one small hole in the lid. Lying in his own waste, suffocated by his own fear. Then the interrogation: who were his accomplices, did he have foreign allies? Laughing, laughing madly at that of course. Accomplices all dead, you bastards: you killed them when you murdered my brothers, my cousins. Foreign allies...? No-one outside of Papul cared, some governments even supplied weapons to Sabit. More torture. Then his escape. Away from his spiritual home in the west. South. And East.

Into the cannibal swamps.

The purple lake.

The fungus.

‘The gods spoke to me, Wemus. They told me how to fight back. I communed with them for three years here on the island

I made my home. And after that... I emerged from hiding with a new identity – a perfect one, don't you think? How else could I rig the Mumis, or encourage the people of Agat to buy the Godgrowth, other than by being a humble guide, seemingly under the yoke of the Indoni tourist harness? Very easy to tamper with revered trophy skulls then, believe me... I would never have been allowed to wander so freely otherwise.'

He was standing very still, only the candlelight moving in his eyes. 'Of course my loyal OPG warriors never saw the real me. A full head balaclava was essential for when I needed to come here in person. Easy to convince them of the necessity for secrecy concerning my identity. Better for them, better for me. Better for you too, Wemus.'

Wemus opened his mouth to speak, but couldn't. He turned away from his friend, then pulled himself together enough to be able to whirl round to confront him again, and this time he had found his voice.

'You don't even sound like Kepennis!' It was an absurd accusation, but it was only Wemus's way of coming to terms with the shock of discovering his beloved partner in mischief was somebody else entirely. This man who had shared his jokes, his drunkenness, his extortion of the tourists – was actually the dreaded Krallik, the feared head of the OPG used to scare Papul children to their beds, and powerful enough to shake Sabit in his palace of comfort. Then again, it explained all the little things that had perplexed Wemus too. The sudden fits of anger over Wemus's affection for Wina, his disdain towards the Indoni girl herself...

'Yes, your English does seem to have improved somewhat, Kepennis..' The Doctor had a protective arm around Victoria now, and was once again making slow and careful backward steps towards the antechamber.

Kepennis detected the movement. As the Doctor watched in horror, the composite corpse of 'The Krallik' rose stiffly from the wooden chair, still holding the candle. It shuffled with a grotesque, wooden gait towards the time traveller, the flame bleeding backwards from the outstretched candle. It was a macabre and grisly sight, made infinitely worse when the

missionary head, dislodged by the movement, tipped forward and bounced on the floor. The dead white eyes held Victoria petrified from below. One of the whore hands twitched towards the belt fastening the khaki trousers, and when it lifted again it was clutching a gnarled and dirty Kassowark bone knife. ,

The Krallik was three yards from the Doctor and Victoria. Her involuntary scream shattered the spell both were under.

‘Move again, and I will saw your companion’s head from her shoulders, Doctor!’ Kepennis ordered, his face frowning with the mental energy he was using to manipulate the Krallik.

Without taking his eyes off the composite corpse, Kepennis spoke to Wemus.

‘My friend: you must let her go.’

Wemus, understanding Kepennis’s meaning, merely clasped hold of Wina’s hand even harder.

‘She is Indoni. A blight, a pollution. A working girl selling her filthy wares in our pure land. Without her you can stand at my side as we free Papul forever. But you must prove your loyalty by killing the hostages. The Indoni whore must die first.’

Wina shrieked in indignation, twisting like a snake in Wemus’s grasp. ‘I no working girl!!’ she bellowed, her hands claws raking the air in her desperation to get at Kepennis. She pulled Wemus forward towards the ‘guide’, so determined was she to vent her anger.

The Doctor tried to intervene, dodging around the now motionless figure of the Krallik.

‘Peaceful solutions are always the better option, Kepennis.’

‘We have discussed this already, Doctor. *Extreme* solutions are the only ones that count.’

Kepennis took his eyes away from the Krallik for a moment, raising an eyebrow at Wemus.

‘No? This is your answer? You choose a whore over your own people’s freedom? Then you are cockroach too..’ He stepped back and passed a hand in front of the nearest Mumi’s eyes.

The Mumi emitted a horrible wail, and coughed a snake up

from its desiccated throat. It didn't have far to travel, catapulted through the air by the spring mechanism inside. Its fangs found the scalp beneath Wina's long, glossy hair and pumped venom through the skin into the bloodstream beneath.

Now Wina was writhing in agony instead of fury, dancing, dancing one final time. Wemus was still clutching her in a firm embrace, clutching a green dead thing that had writhed its last, both in pleasure and pain. He did not let her fall, but held her still, staring into her mottled jungle face.

More snakes were raining onto the bamboo flooring as Kepennis waved a hand in front of the second Mumi, and then took his place on the seat vacated by the Krallik. The Doctor pulled Victoria to the floor hastily. He felt a slim serpent flick past his ear and emitted a yelp of consternation.

'Oh my giddy *aunt!*'

Victoria's screams drowned out any further utterance from the time traveller. Only Wemus's cry could pierce her almighty shrieks.

'*You won't free Papul. You'll only kill us all!*'

Wemus finally let Wina fall, moving forward through the hail of snakes. And they were all missing him. He dived towards Pan's body, rolled, came up brandishing the mercenary's machete, threw himself at Kepennis, still sitting in his chair.

Kepennis proved his long years of jungle combat experience by leaping from the chair, twisting around behind Wemus and thrusting the guide towards the nearest Mumi.

Wemus reacted just as quickly, using Kepennis's push to propel himself at the desiccated chieftain. The corpse, squatting gruesomely on its log stool, withered head drooped over bony knees, lifted both arms to embrace him.

The blade flashed out, deadheading the Mumi, taking one withered arm off at the shoulder for good measure in the same swipe. From his huddled position on the floor, the Doctor could see snakes questing up from the headless torso. The tiny serpents wriggled from the neck-hole to slide down the Mumi's body.

The Krallik lurched into motion again; Victoria screamed again. Two lumbering strides and the headless corpse was

upon Wemus, slashing with the bone knife. Wemus spun to fight. The machete chopped down. The hand holding the candle dropped to the floor. The flame continued to flutter, the candle still held by the nerveless hand. The Krallik rammed the femur knife into Wemus's mouth, and out through the back of his neck. Wemus doing St Vitus' Dance, two snakes attached to his back. He pulled the Krallik down with him, straddled the corpse even as he turned into one himself, slamming the machete through the torso. He collapsed, face the colour of rainforest leaves, across the twitching body of the Krallik.

Kepennis released it from his will strings, turned his attention upon the remaining Mumi. The Doctor raised his head long enough to see the dead chieftain unfolding from its crouch. The head that had been thrown back in a permanent death scream twisted slowly from side to side, the arms lifting like withered sticks.

Chapter Fifteen

If they didn't get out now, they were going to die, the Doctor realized. He yanked Victoria up, protecting her from the Mumi's line of fire with his own body. The Mumi had dragged itself from its log now, and although its legs were useless, was pulling itself along the floor by its hands, huge dried eye sockets pointing at them like cannon barrels of dead flesh. The mouth yawned.

Kepennis was behind it, orchestrating its attack. The Doctor turned with Victoria to run from the room, but the corpses of Wemus and the Krallik were blocking their exit. They would have to leap over the obstacle, and the Doctor wasn't sure Victoria could manage that. There was no way past them to the left because of the proximity of the wall. The Mumi was humping itself along to the right, preventing egress that way.

Kepennis's eyes were betraying his madness truly for the first time. The candlelight was inside them, fluttering like insane moths, the pupils vast tunnel-mouths leading nowhere. 'This is the carnage we deal in. Roll in it, glorify the obscenity. The entrails of hate and combat around your fists as you delve them deep, deeeeeeeep into the warm cavity of man. Doctor, do you see the beauty, the absolute beauty of it?' As he spoke, he ripped free the machete buried in the Krallik's torso.

An arrow took him in the right shoulder, pushed him back across the room. He didn't make a sound.

The Doctor, trapped against the wall, clinging tightly to Victoria, heard the babble of alien tongues and the sound of more arrows leaving their strings – the dry pock! pock! of them hitting the Mumi.

'Doctor! Victoria!'

The Doctor was sure it was the cannibals calling his name at first, because that was all he could see in the confusion – a group of naked warriors with leaves gummed around their penises, clutching bows and stone axes with wooden handles. He wondered stupidly at their amazing ability to mimic a Scottish accent, and then Jamie was emerging from behind them, forcing his way through the throng now filling the room. Smoke was squeezing in through the gaps in the walls fast now, and the Doctor's eyes were already beginning to stream.

‘Get down, Jamie! Watch out for the Mumi!’

His warning was too late for one of the tribesmen. A snake had propelled itself right into his open mouth. He convulsed in a twisted dance, having completely swallowed the diminutive serpent. Two natives sprang forward, stone axes rising, falling, slamming into the crawling Mumi. The axe heads might have been stone, but they were sharp and very strong. Between them, the two cannibals soon bludgeoned the chieftain into a leathery mess on the floor. They backed away in superstitious awe when they saw the snakes winding through the desiccated wreckage.

Kepennis vaulted nimbly over the bodies of the Krallik and Wemus and straight into Jamie's arms.

‘Kepennis...’ Jamie said, startled. ‘What's going on?’ Instead of replying, Kepennis thrust him hard into Santi, who had forced herself into the room despite the protests of her cannibal proteges. Both Scot and Indoni dancer tumbled together in an undignified heap on the floor. Kepennis raised the machete with his good arm, aiming for Jamie's head.

Then, abruptly, Kepennis froze. He tried to take a step forward as the cannibals continued to retreat from the snaky bundle of dried flesh that was the Muni. There was no-one to stop him. He dropped the machete. He swivelled slowly to face the source of his torment.

‘Not... possible...’ he gasped, hands shaking uncontrollably in his exertions to free himself from whatever was controlling him. ‘I have... the stronger mind. You cannot...’

‘It doesn't seem that you do, Kepennis,’ the Doctor said gravely, withdrawing slowly from Victoria's embrace and

approaching the rebel guru.

Kepennis sank to his knees. 'The horror...' he said.

'The horror,' the Doctor finished for him, releasing his hold on Kepennis's mind. 'Jamie, perhaps you'd like to get your new friends to look after the Krallik for us.'

Jamie had regained his feet, and was looking both embarrassed and utterly clueless, a combination actually quite easy for him. 'The Krallik?'

Santi took over for him, speaking to a cannibal with grey tight curls and crazy eyes. She pointed at Kepennis. The Indio chief motioned to his men, and soon Kepennis was being pulled roughly to his feet, the natives dragging him away from the uncoiling nest of snakes on the floor.

Victoria came up behind the Doctor, coughing as smoke drifted into her lungs. 'Doctor,' she spluttered. 'What did you do?'

'Come on, this whole place is burning up!' Jamie bellowed, as the cannibals hauled a silent Kepennis into the antechamber. Santi seized Jamie's arm to encourage him to follow. Her eyes widened momentarily as she spotted Pan's corpse.

'Oh, nothing really, Victoria,' the Doctor said, taking her hand and ushering Jamie to carry on ahead. 'Just something I should have thought of doing a lot sooner.'

'But what?'

'Well, don't you see: Kepennis controlled people's minds by relaying his own thoughts to them via the fungus organisms in both his and the recipient's minds. Because he had digested more over a longer period, and because he had learned how to do it, he was able to control whoever he wanted. But I've been subjected to this kind of manipulation before, haven't I? I finally realized I should have a go myself, seeing as I had already digested some of the fungus.' He looked quite pleased with himself and patted Victoria's hand as they waited for the tribesmen to descend the ladder to the ground floor of the temple. Then his face dropped. 'But I didn't think of it in time, did I? Maybe I could have saved poor Wina, and Wemus too!'

Outside the temple, the jungle island burned.

The flames seared the travellers' faces and hands, and the

natives were whooping agitatedly at them to move quickly. Victoria looked around at all the corpses, noticed Santi passing them blithely by, without even flinching. Jamie seemed quite close to her, she found herself thinking with a bite of what could have been jealousy. She chided herself. She had believed the highlander to be dead, so she should hardly be angry he'd got himself a girlfriend instead, should she? Even if the girlfriend was Santi, the foul-mouthed dancing girl from Batu.

They stumbled through the banks of smoke, past trees roaring with flame, and reached the dock. The mercenary's cruiser was still parked clumsily on the wooden landing. The cannibals were pulling Kepennis towards a long painted canoe. Still he said nothing, following them meekly without struggling.

'Wait, Jamie!' the Doctor said as they stood on the dock. 'What are they going to do with Kepennis?'

Jamie shrugged, looked a little sheepish. 'I didn't know the Krallik would be Kepennis, did I? We had a bargain – they would spare me and...' 'The Soiled One' here – ow!' Santi interrupted him at this point with an elbow in the ribs.

'Go on,' the Doctor said darkly.

'Well, the chieftain promised not to eat me and marry Santi if we delivered someone to them that possessed great spirit and courage. It looks like they found their man.'

Kepennis was sitting facing them in the canoe. The last of the cannibals was already leaping in to the vessel which was being paddled away from the pier as they spoke.

They were alone on the smoky dock.

The Doctor gazed at Kepennis's dwindling face helplessly, guiltily. There was no reaction, no sign of understanding. Kepennis was immobile, lifeless, just like a mannequin. .

Victoria shuddered. 'What's wrong with him?'

'He's discovered the true horror of things, I should imagine,' the Doctor said morosely. 'Inside himself. Nothing anybody else can do will make him suffer more.'

'Discovered? Or did you show him?'

The Doctor shifted uncomfortably at Victoria's question and gave no answer.

A melodic jungle chant lifted from the Kirowai tribesmen as they rowed away across the lake.

‘But they’ll eat him!’ Victoria persisted.

‘Better than they eat Santi!’ the Indoni girl pointed out pragmatically. Victoria glared at her, but Santi had been glared at by more formidable foes than a prim Victorian Miss in her time, fierce Kirowai cannibals being one recent example. She pointed at the cruiser. ‘We go?’

Jamie nudged the Doctor who was still staring out across the lake at the receding canoe. The surface of the lagoon was relatively still now, volcanic activity evident only in very intermittent bursts of bubbles softly breaking the hush of the afternoon.

‘Well, Doctor?’

He looked at Jamie with a frown, struggling to collect his thoughts.

‘Yon flying thing: can we no travel back to the TARDIS in it?’ His tone was endearingly hopeful, but he knew what the answer would be.

‘You know I hate gadgets like that, Jamie.’ the Doctor said, as if repeating a doctrine to a child with learning difficulties. Then he beamed brightly, shaking off his earlier mood as he pointed at one of the OPG canoes still tethered to the pier. ‘That will be more than suitable.’

‘Och, ye’re no serious!’

‘You want row all way to Batu!’ Santi was incredulous too, and not a little peeved, which secretly warmed Victoria to the idea of using the canoe when she’d been just about to object herself.

‘Well, I’m sure we can find a proper motor canoe somewhere along the way,’ the Doctor said cheerily.

Victoria had thought of something; something it seemed everyone else was oblivious to.

‘But what about the fungus? Won’t others eat it and become insane like the Krallik – trying to control everybody and killing lots of innocent people?’

The Doctor sighed. ‘I’m afraid there will always be Kralliks, my dear. And not all of them will have the excuse of eating mind-distorting fungus. No, I think the lessons will be

learnt from Agat; the people will return from the jungle and resume their earlier lives, but a little wiser for it. I think they will steer well clear of the growth from now on. And besides, he folded his hands together on his stomach and beamed at Santi. 'We have a little advocate of sanity among us, don't we?'

'Uh?' said the Indoni girl, squinting at him suspiciously. She was already climbing into the canoe, impatient to be away from this island of horror.

'Why, who better to propagate the word about the insidious effects of the fungus, than you, my dear? Yes, I think you might make rather an interesting missionary, don't you?' He unleashed a dazzling and slightly idiotic smile, obviously delighted by his own bright idea.

Santi turned to Jamie, now seated next to her in the canoe. 'What rubbish he talking about?'

The Doctor's face dropped. 'Then again, perhaps not.'

He followed Victoria down into the canoe. Jamie pushed an oar against the side of the pier and the vessel moved smoothly out across the water.

No Mercy

Executions could get very boring, if you watched them too often.

It was like everything; you could always have too much of a good thing, Sabit thought, and supposed he was rather wickedly droll, as he prodded the pause button on his armchair panel. On the screen, the line of Papul men performed a little jig as the image flickered momentarily and then froze.

Sabit moved to the French windows opening onto the balcony of his palace. Outside, the sun was setting over Batu. A glorious orchestra of colour, playing in the evening sky; purple, blue, lime green, screaming red. The crimson beach was sinking into shadow but the sea was iridescent with reflected beauty.

Life could be wondrous indeed...

The roar of pulse rifles made him jump. For a moment he thought the palace was being invaded as he spun around in shock. But the firing sounded decidedly too tinny to be real and his heart moved again as he realized it was merely his execution video playing again.

He peered through the open doors of his private chambers. Someone was sitting in his chair.

He was speechless with rage. One of his personal servants *daring* to enter his rooms without permission? But of course it wasn't a servant. Sabit knew that before he even saw the jester's hat, the latex nose, the white facepaint and ludicrous lipstick grin. The mercenary was wearing a full-blown clown suit now instead of combat dress – purple blouse, yellow braces, multicoloured checked trousers. Only the army boots remained.

He re-entered his chambers slowly, thinking hard and fast. His initial outrage was cooling, replaced by the first stroke of

fear. This was most unorthodox, and he'd made it plain on a number of occasions that the mercenaries were not to approach him in his private palace. What had happened to his security? He didn't like the look of this, the way the man was casually sitting watching Sabit's video without even bothering to turn as the president stepped up to him.

He managed to control the trepidation however, and his voice was smooth as ever: 'I wasn't expecting you. May I ask how you got in?'

The killer in the clown suit continued to watch the execution. 'Does it matter?' he said after a moment, when the racket of pulse fire had died away and the bodies lay still in the dust.

'I suppose not.' A handful of seconds, then, quietly: 'What do you want?'

The clown didn't move. 'Can't you guess?'

A bolt of true, hard terror shot through Sabit. Then his fears were realized.

'I didn't think it would be you.'

No reply to that.

'I'll pay you double what I promised.'

'Thanks, but no.'

'But why not? Your kind lives for money.'

The mercenary pulled a silenced Luger out from under his trousers. 'Maybe because I just don't like you,' he said. 'Or maybe because sometimes I just want to feel clean...' He shot Sabit between the eyes. 'Just to see what it's like..?'

Blood drip-drip-dripped down the screen of the monitor and onto the floor beneath.

Clown got up from the chair and moved to the balcony, just in time to see the last of the sunset.

About the Author

Mick Lewis likes cannibals. He feels he has a bit of an insider viewpoint after having stayed in Irian Jaya, New Guinea with so-called 'reformed' tree-house-dwelling cannibals a couple of years back, who turned out on a subsequent visit last year still to be practising their flesh-eating customs. His girlfriend is also descended from Javanese cannibals, and one of his friends is a female tattooed Dayak whose grandparents only recently kicked the habit. This probably explains where the idea for *Combat Rock* came from... He is currently working as a clown scaring the hell out of children for *Coco Pops* and is the proud owner of a Jelangkung, a black magic ghost summoner from Java that actually works...

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