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Editorial

The Big Two-Oh: Celebrations and Apologies!

So this is it for another year – our fourth year of issues (even if it's only been three and a bit years since the first came out). I'd love to say that this has been a great year for *Theaker's Quarterly Fiction*, because in many ways it has. Our downloads have increased immensely and even our print sales have gone up a bit. People are starting to hear about what we're doing. Listings on places like duotrope.com, ralan.com and the AA Independent Press Guide have brought dozens of submissions to our inbox, and the stories which we have accepted have enriched the magazine in every way. But I can't bring myself to say it's been a great year when it was the year our best friend died, leaving us utterly shaken. He'd spent Christmas with my family for something like the last six years, and while that sadly reflects the fact that he never managed to find someone special to create his own Christmases with, they were always good times, and it's hard to face this one without him around. Apart from anything else, he nearly always bought superb presents for me. (Last year it was *The Lurker in the Lobby*, a fascinating overview of Lovecraftian cinema.)

I won't spend the whole editorial being sad, though. It is Christmas, after all, and however much I miss my friend, I'm in ecstatic anticipation of the new Doctor Who Christmas special, and the Marks & Spencers pre-cooked turkey crown in the fridge looks as delicious as it does every year!

In this issue we have the first portion of a new novel by my co-editor, John Greenwood. I made him co-editor in recognition of the fact that he was writing half the magazine at the time – it would be unfair to reject his work now to avoid accusations of bias! And why avoid those accusations? I am biased, no doubt about it. I have a sneaking suspicion that with this novel, as perhaps with his Newton Brad-dell series, John is pandering to me somewhat, since he packs into each of them everything I want to read whenever I pick up a book (rare as that tends to be nowadays). It's as if he has made a careful study of my literary tastes and preferences and custom-written a novel to entertain me. *The Hatchling* is his paciest, most thrilling and most atmospheric piece of writing to date, and if I could get away with reprinting it in every issue from now to eternity I would.

Next, Bruce Hesselbach regales us with a Tale of Yxning, "Contrariedades". Like *The Hatchling*, this is a story that hits the nail of my tastes so squarely on the head that it is almost uncanny. And the last story of the issue is the concluding part of Michael Wyndham Thomas's serial, *After All*, "A River. It Had to Be." It's been a privilege to publish this fine serial in these unworthy pages.

To both authors I owe an apology (in addition to the one I owe Bruce for the appalling illustration of a plant pot falling on Yren Higbe's head that marred the

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publication of his story in TQF#19). Michael Thomas's serial appeared in all six issues this year, while Bruce Hesselbach's *Tales of Yxning* appeared in three, and yet neither author has had the cover devoted to them. The first cover was a portmanteau covering all the stories in the issue (just one postage stamp-sized illustration related to *After All*), and the next two were devoted to Howard Phillips' *The Doom That Came to Sea Base Delta*. The fourth cover of the year featured a creature from the fabulous "Ananke" by Jeff Crook, and the fifth concerned "The Walled Garden", by Wayne Summers, not that anyone would have been able to tell, thanks to my lack of drawing ability. Then this sixth issue has a cover relating to *The Hatchling*. So that's four out of six covers given over to our in-house writers, and that's not at all fair.

The reason is that we knew way in advance what in-house material we had in hand, and once draft covers were drawn up, even though other material came in, I didn't want to start over on the covers, out of sheer laziness!

In 2008 I'll make much more of an effort in this regard: I've made a vow that none of the covers will be devoted to anything written by myself, John Greenwood or Howard Phillips (unless there is nothing else in the issue).

That brings me to something else that I don't feel we've done particularly well this year: reviews of the books people have sent us. If you look at page 72 of this issue you'll see my review of *Test Drive* by DJ Burnham, a book I did not finish reading. As a one-off that wouldn't be too bad, but it follows similar non-reviews of DF Lewis's *Weirdmonger* and *Nemonymous* #7 (aka *Zencore!*) in previous issues. For that matter I didn't get very far through *Apex* #10 before writing a short review, and *Apex* #11 stands on my desk now, just as an interesting book by the name of *Triangulations* stands on my co-editor's desk. It's a bit of an embarrassing pattern. We just don't get around to reading them. In the case of some books that are sent to us on spec, or that we've bought ourselves, I don't feel too guilty, but in the case of something like *Apex* or *Nemonymous* where the author has



offered review copies and we have specifically requested them, it's very poor of us.

I can't promise that we'll do better next year. For one thing, what really interests me about other small press publications is their methods, philosophies and goals, rather than the stories within. I'm fascinated to see what people are doing, and love to think about the reasons they are doing it. But (and I doubt anyone will disagree) a reviewer should really read the book too! Another issue is that reading an entire book for review takes about as much work as proof-reading an entire issue of TQF, and for me it often comes down to doing one or the other.

So while I can't promise to write better reviews, I won't ask people specifically to send us review copies, and I apologise to anyone I've asked to send us a review copy in the past. If you do send us review copies of your work, I think you've had fair warning of the poor quality reviewing you can expect! (For really good reviewing, visit the web site of the excellent *Whispers of Wickedness*, www.ookami.co.uk.)

So here's to the end of a very exciting year for this flawed but good-hearted and tenacious magazine! Twenty issues down, but the next will be the best yet – because every issue is! – *SWT*

THE HAT

Post-Natal Paranoia

An Inconvenient Inheritance

When my father died in 1952 he named me as a benefactor in his will. I wish he had not. I mean to say, I wish he had not left me his inheritance. I did not care at the time that he was dead, and my feelings towards him have not changed since. Sometimes I wish that he had never lived, that I had never been born, or at least not born his son. For although it was painful enough to endure a childhood knowing that my father had been a drunkard and a draft-dodger who abandoned my mother when I was four, though it was even harder to watch my mother's slow decline into unreason, leading to her eventual incarceration, these sufferings were nothing in comparison with the horrors that awaited me at the bottom of that long, twisting passageway that began with a telephone call from the executor of his will.

I remember the day distinctly, which is unusual for me, blessed with a singularly poor memory for many of the major events of my life. Were it otherwise, I doubt I would be here to recount, however incompletely, this memoir, for I would no doubt have followed my mother into Marriston Insane Asylum. It was a crisp, chilly Thursday morning in December, and I was taking the lower sixth for Literary Appreciation, trying to hammer into those arrogant adolescent minds, if not understanding, then at least some respect for Shakespeare's sonnets. Shafts of sunlight carrying no warmth, but dazzling all the same, stabbed diagonally across the classroom from the tall, narrow windowpanes, illuminating phantom pillars of swirling dust above the parquet flooring. I slouched against a low bookcase, listening to Grimshaw reading the poem aloud in a gruff monotone. Bored, I picked up one of the small framed prints that stood on top of the bookcase, and ran my forefinger along the edge. Beneath the dusty glass, Noah's ark fought the mountainous waves, and pairs of animals and

HATCHLING

John Greenwood

people looked on anxiously. Noticing that Grimshaw had stopped reading, I put the picture down and chose another boy at random to read the sonnet through again.

I was a young English teacher at a second-rate public school in a dying industrial Yorkshire town. The local industrial magnates and middle classes, what was left of them, sent their sons here with the firm expectation that they would be therefore guaranteed a place at either of the only two universities that matter to such people, and the headmaster, Mr Ernest Cresswell, did everything in his power to confirm them in this delusion. A handful of the brightest did indeed go up to Oxford or Cambridge and spend three years trying to lose their northern accents, but those who did succeed did so on their own merits, and the school, and least of all my own part in it, could not legitimately claim to have played any decisive role. The school continued to claim just that, in any case.

There was a time when I had entertained similar fantasies about my dazzling future in

academia, but after my mother had been sectioned, this future began to drift apart, and my PhD on the social functions of Elizabethan theatre stalled and was abandoned. Financial constraints began to exert their familiar pressure, and when I went for the interview at Kershaw Grammar School, I promised myself that this was a temporary measure. My thesis would remain my top priority. A few late nights studying and weekends in the reference library would ensure that my dreams of authorship and a lifetime of elevated discussion and research were still within my grasp and worth pursuing.

That had been five years ago, and my thesis lay forgotten in the bottom drawer of my desk, almost totally obscured by old nuggets of chalk, confiscated knick-knacks from the boys, unmarked workbooks, and unfinished copies of the *Times* crossword. Kershaw Grammar School, like all schools, was not a place for getting things done. It was, I soon realised, a place in which to grow old. The other masters who had been there longer than I had a head start, but I

was catching up quickly. I was already quite attached to certain rituals and habits: my own chair in the staff room, a pipe in the evening while listening to jazz on the radio. I had noticed the annoyance I felt whenever any of these minimally comforting routines had to be broken. In short, the school was claiming me as one of its own, and I had not the energy to resist it.

Miss Scholes, the school secretary, brought me the news as we were trudging through *The Phoenix and the Turtle*. Her bird-like, anxious face bobbed up at the glass in the classroom door, waving a scrap of paper as though that would explain her intrusion.

"Enter," I intoned.

Miss Scholes entered, and, approaching my desk, whispered dramatically, "A telephone call for you Mr Willoughby. Rather urgent I should say."

The entire class was privy to this message, and I distinctly heard Pickles Jr say to Althorp, "It's about his missus – she's escaped from Marriston again!"

I pretended not to notice this, primarily because I had no desire to explain to the lower sixth that it was my mother, and not my wife, who was confined to a mental asylum. Quite how this mistaken rumour had spread throughout the school I could not say for sure, although I had my suspicions that the break-in to the school office six months ago had been an inside job, and motivated not by profit but sheer thirst for gossip, which at Kershaw, amongst pupils and staff alike, was unquenchable.

In all honesty my first suspicions did fall on my mother. I left Shuttleworth, the head boy, in charge of the class and hurried down the corridor after Miss Scholes to the phone, expecting to hear the voice of Dr Campbell on the other end. What had Mother done now? Attacked her nurse again? I had little fear that Pickles' prediction might prove true: my mother's agoraphobia was sufficient to prevent any escape attempts, although there were few deterrents for the other residents, who were often discovered shambling around the suburbs of Marriston in their institutional dressing gowns. Occasionally their escapades reached the local press, which was the

main reason why the name Marriston had become, for the public in general and for schoolboys in particular, a by-word for mental instability and an inexhaustible source of amusement.

When I took the receiver from the secretary's shaking hand, it was not Dr Campbell that I found myself speaking to, but an Adrian Hollings, who announced himself as one of my father's oldest friends. I braced myself to refuse any loan requests. Although I had not seen or spoken to my father for many years, I was well aware that he kept extremely queer company, and as a student I had once been approached by a man wearing a fez in St Pancras station, who offered me ten thousand pounds if I would reveal the whereabouts of Alexander Willoughby. When I declined, the man offered the threat of a broken nose as an alternative inducement, but by that point the police had intervened. I spent the next six hours in a police station answering silly questions, and missed most of the conference on Shakespeare's heroines that I had been due to attend in Reading. I would have gladly revealed where my father was hiding had I known, and allowed him to take the broken nose in my place, but I really had no idea, then or at any time since. My assailant's headgear led me to suspect that my father might have spent some time in North Africa, but I made no further enquiries. As far as I was concerned, my father was trouble, and the less I had to do with him the better. It was a lesson I had learned at my mother's knee, and never questioned. There had been a dribble of other such characters since, demanding the repayment of gambling debts, or offering me incredible investment opportunities; all were politely and firmly refused.

"I know this must seem highly irregular," said Hollings in an assured public school drawl. "And I apologise in advance for the intrusion..."

He paused, no doubt offering me the opportunity to assure him that it was really no intrusion at all. I said nothing, feeling the secretary's gaze on the back of my neck as she strained to eavesdrop from her desk on the other side of the office. I tried to shield the receiver with my hand

when at last I spoke. "What is it that you want from me, Mr Hollings?"

When I had put the receiver down, I turned to Miss Scholes, who was pretending to type something.

"Is Mr Cresswell available this afternoon?" I asked.

The secretary checked the diary. "Yes, I believe so," she said. "Is everything alright, Mr Willoughby?"

"Yes, quite alright," I said. "My father has just died, that's all."

I returned to the classroom to find that Althorp had filled Grimshaw's desk with ink from the large glass bottle in the cupboard. I kept them both in for an hour's detention.

Cresswell hadn't much of a leg to stand on when I requested compassionate leave to hear my father's will being read out, at the offices of his solicitor in Earl's Court Road, London. The headmaster made some comment about how in his day a junior teacher wouldn't dare ask for time off during term even if they had died themselves. "And I suppose this will mean another trip to London for the funeral," he grumbled, shaking his grey head and toying with the fountain pen that hovered over my "authorised leave of absence" form.

"Oh no," I said quickly. "That won't be necessary. The funeral has already taken place. I wouldn't have attended in any case."

I had meant to sound brisk and neutral, but I was surprised by the bitterness in my voice. Cresswell caught the tone too, and winced.

"Well, as you know Willoughby, I'm the last person to want to pry into the personal lives of my staff..."

He trailed off into an awkward but wholly typical silence.

"Yes, Headmaster," I replied.

"But, you know, the interests of the school... any hint of impropriety... not that I am implying, but... the parents, as you know, have very fixed ideas... we have our reputation to uphold."

"I understand, Headmaster," I said, nodding. What I understood was this: Cresswell knew all about my mother's scandalous lack of sanity, but he would never stoop to broaching the subject

with me, so long as her madness did not interfere with the smooth operation of the timetable and did not become the subject of rumour amongst the parents. Of course Cresswell knew nothing of my father's crimes against respectable society, but the same general rules applied to him too, even in death.

"I'll just be glad when the whole thing is behind me," I said.

That seemed to Cresswell a more reasonable sentiment. He smiled his relief and signed the form. "Quite, quite," he murmured as his pen scratched away. "No point dwelling on these things, is there? Least said, soonest mended was always my motto."

I took the form and stood to leave.

"So we'll expect you back on Tuesday," he said. "I'm sure I can persuade Gillings to take your fourth formers on Monday morning, if Toller can push his 3A history back to second lesson for a week... of course assembly will have to move..."

I left the Head in contemplation of his timetable, a work of staggering complexity that dominated his waking hours, and headed slowly back to the Masters' cottage, looking forward to the long weekend that had quite unexpectedly been granted me.

Adrian Hollings had offered to meet me from the train at Kings Cross, and I had made an excuse and invented friends in London who had promised to meet me, and who would put me up during my stay. In fact the only soul I knew in the capital would have flatly refused to meet me. Freddie Simlow was an artist of sorts, and a man of exquisite aesthetic sensibilities, so finely tuned that he could not bear to spend any length of time in ugly buildings, and if there was one building that grated on his delicate metropolitan nerves it was Kings Cross Railway Station. But I had an almost superstitious fear of involving myself with a man who freely admitted to having been one of my father's oldest friends, and so had used Freddie as my alibi. Hollings sounded disappointed on the phone, and maybe even a little put out, but I promised him that I would be at the solicitor's office at the appointed time, and he was mollified. Why he considered

it so vital that I attend the reading of the will was entirely a mystery to me. Was he preparing to bamboozle me out of the millions my father had accumulated in his shady business dealings in the far east? Not that ever I imagined my father capable of acquiring more than was needed for his next drink, or the next dead cert at the races, but I had to wonder at Hollings' insistence.

"He's probably your long lost half brother, or some such," suggested Freddie, as we sat in a protective cloud of smoke in the snug of an unpleasant little bar in Camden town.

"Don't be so crass, Freddie," I said glumly, nursing my glass of mild.

"I'm perfectly serious," he said, exhaling cigar smoke to join the haze that happily obscured the rest of the pub's clientele from view. "Some half-Chinese chappie, son of an oriental harlot."

"Now you are just making yourself sound perfectly ridiculous. I told you before that he sounded plummy."

"So what?" said Freddie, warming to the subject. "Indian fellow when I was at Eton, Choudhury, sounded more English than the Prince of Wales. Now that I think about it, I think he was some sort of Prince back in India. At least that's what he told us."

"Well, Hollings hardly sounds like a Chinese name to me," I said. "Or Indian for that matter."

"Might have changed his name," said Freddie. "Perfectly easy thing to do, changing your name. I changed my own name once."

"Did you?" I asked, wondering how much Freddie had had to drink. "What did you change it to?"

"Freddie Simlow."

I frowned. "So what was your name before that?" I asked.

"Don't think I'm going to tell you!" said Freddie, knocking back another G and T. "That's exactly why I changed my name, so I wouldn't have to keep hearing myself saying it."

Freddie was in one of his odder moods, and I decided not to press the matter further. While he was one of my oldest friends, and the only one of my university chums with whom I had bothered to keep in touch, I knew that his carefully

cultivated air of bohemia was largely a sham, a patchwork of anecdotes amplified over the years, self-conscious gestures designed to shock and amuse his audience, and an exaggerated belief in his own talents as a painter. Sometimes I pitied Freddie, but more often, when I was attempting without hope of success to teach a mob of teenage boys the importance of Spencer's *The Faerie Queen*, or sat alone in my room in the master's cottage with a pile of marking in front of me, I envied him. So far as I could gather, Freddie had never been gainfully employed. In addition, he enjoyed what appeared to be a virtually unbroken series of liaisons with willowy, artistically inclined girls who viewed society's sexual mores as a challenge rather than a framework of moral guidance. These two constant motifs in Freddie's life were linked, in as much as his solvency often depended on the financial largesse of his girlfriends. Fortunately for him, Freddie's female companions tended to be daughters of the landed gentry and captains of industry, sent away to art college to get them out of their parents' hair. They also generally considered the question of money trivial and base, and the stuff itself to be disposed of with all haste. Freddie's current squeeze was a little older and more savvy than usual. Monica managed a gallery on the Kings Road, and had promised to get some of Freddie's work shown there.

I won't deny that Freddie's success in this area was a further source of my envy. My own romantic experience up to that point had been limited to a few adolescent affairs at university, and Ursula. The three years I had known Ursula stood out in my memory as intense, complicated, even spiritual, but ultimately unfulfilling, and this had been our undoing. Our parting had been messy, incomplete, like a skein of wool teased apart into two, an image that stuck in my mind from a Chinese poem I had once read in Walley's translation, and which had seemed to fit the situation. But despite everything I had been taught and fervently believed about the redemptive power of the written word, poetry was little comfort to me in her absence. Soon after our dissolution I took the job at Kershaw,

and without warning Ursula had signed up as a missionary and disappeared off to Kenya, a fact that never ceased to amuse Freddie.

The evening dragged on. Freddie's mood improved the more he drank, mine worsened. We moved from one dingy Camden pub to another, drinking up what remained of my month's wages, Freddie being perpetually broke.

"Look," I said to him as we staggered through the frigid night after kicking out time, "why don't I just stay at your place tonight, instead of going all the way back to my bed and breakfast? They've probably locked me out, anyway. It's..." – I struggled to read the dancing numbers on my wristwatch – "... bloody late."

"Sorry old chap, no can do," said Freddie, who spent far more time drinking than I did, and could therefore fake sobriety more convincingly than I. "Monica's having some people round at her place, bloody Germans or Americans or something. Art dealers, I think. Anyway, if we both turn up in this state I'll be in the soup. Look, if you're really worried about it, I'll walk you home. Could do with getting some fresh air into my lungs anyway."

We walked. A fog descended, the kind of oppressive, tangible fog that only London can produce, and Freddie's much needed fresh air was in short supply, especially considering the unbroken series of cigarettes that we smoked – roll-ups for me, while Freddie worked his way through a packet of Black Sobranis pilfered from Monica's purse. We lumbered through unnamed parks and trudged down leafy avenues of immaculate Georgian terraces. As is often the case when drunk, the journey seemed epic, whether because we were walking so slowly, or we kept taking wrong turns, or simply that time expanded in proportion to our inebriation. The tube trains had stopped hours ago, and we had spent my cab fare on nightcaps.

"Let's hope your father has left you a few thousand," said Freddie, footsore and irritable as we crossed another deserted road. "I don't think I could stand another night of this."

I stopped in my tracks and glanced behind me. "What?"

I shushed him, as I turned around and watched

a human figure dodge silently out of sight, into the shadows and fog.

"This is going to sound like something out of a cheap detective novel but..."

"You're going to have to kill me?" asked Freddie.

"I may have to in a minute if you don't shut up," I whispered. "No, what I was going to say was, I think we're being followed."

Freddie smirked. "Heavens, Simon, I never knew you were so paranoid, or is this just a side-effect of the booze I was unaware of?"

"No, there was definitely somebody there," I said, straining my eyes to make out anything moving on the far side of the road.

"No doubt," said Freddie. "But I hardly think they can have much interest in us, unless you really are expecting to inherit a fortune tomorrow morning."

I have to admit that my first suspicions fell on the man Hollings. He had been so insistent that I stay with him in London, for reasons that were far from clear to me. Even if he was an old friend of my father's, or perhaps because of it, I could not trust his motives. The fact was that wherever the hated name of Alexander Willoughby cropped up, I had learned to suspect some form of skulduggery as a matter of course.

For once, Freddie had a point. Nothing could be gained from following two inebriates around the streets of London. What exactly did I expect from tomorrow's appointment at the solicitor's office? If anyone had asked me, I would not have known how to answer. Was I looking for some kind of explanation for my father's sudden disappearance?

According to my mother's account, which she only volunteered to me years later, my father had received a phone call in the middle of the night, had told my mother that he was urgently needed, left a hastily scribbled note by the telephone to let my mother know where he could be found and walked out of the front door at 3.00 am on Thursday, December 27th. Had he been a GP such behaviour might have been excusable, but my father had been employed by the Meteorological Office as a weather forecaster. But what was the emergency? My mother could not

remember, or she had never known. She had kept the piece of paper though, and on the one and only occasion when she had been able to talk to me about my father lucidly, she handed that unhappy family heirloom to me. She had kept it in her purse all these years, and it was yellow and creased, falling apart, but the writing was still legible: "24 Reynolds Street", above a number: 4161.

When my father did not return the next morning, the operator told my mother that the number was unobtainable. She made enquiries about the address: no such street existed in our town, and the nearest Reynolds Street was fifty miles away, a long way indeed for my father to cycle in the snow. My mother took the train there anyway, while I was left in the care of my Auntie Liz and Uncle Bill, from whom I learned many of these details in later years. Were it not for the testimonies of these two, I should have strong reason to doubt my mother's story, given that she told it to me on the morning she was committed to the asylum. Much of what she said that day, and on subsequent days, bore no relation to reality whatsoever, but this much bears water: my father was not to be found at 24 Reynolds Street. In fact, nobody was to be found there. The house was derelict, along with all the houses on one side of the street, slum terraces awaiting demolition, soon to be replaced by one of the new tower blocks.

I think it was at that moment that my mother began to lose her moorings. My Aunt Liz and Uncle Bill took me to the train station to meet her, but she did not return home that night. They tried to pretend that nothing was amiss, but I was a sensitive child and could read the alarm in their faces as we sat in the station tea room for hour after hour, and still my mother did not come. As an adult, I looked back on this scene and understood another reason for my uncle and aunt's misgivings. What if my mother never returned, and they were left with an infant to raise?

But the next day, at the right time if not the right day, my mother did turn up. At first she tried to claim that it had been the arrangement all along that she should stay away overnight. Then, when the absurdity of this was pointed out to

her, she became evasive, and refused to explain where she had been during those missing twenty-four hours. Had she been trying to track my father down? She could not remember, she said, and went to bed early, complaining of an imminent migraine. She did not get up again for six months.

I had half a mind to investigate that dim silhouette in the shadows, but the other half of my mind was full of Newcastle Brown Ale, and my rented bed, however ill-sprung, was a far more tempting prospect than a wild goose chase amongst the dustbins.

"It's nothing," said Freddie, "Come on, I'm freezing here."

I gave in. As luck would have it, we reached my bed and breakfast at a particularly fortuitous moment: we found my landlady in the front hall, bawling at an errant husband who had returned from an evening's revelry in an even worse condition than Freddie and I. In the circumstances, we were able to slip past the bickering couple practically unnoticed.

"Don't be too hard on him, love," called Freddie from halfway up the stairs. "He's got a lot to put up with."

"Shut up, you ninny!" I whispered, as the landlady broke off her harangue to glare up at her two rapidly retreating guests.

"Well, you certainly know how to pick a classy establishment," Freddie commented as we mounted the narrow stairs to my room.

"I'm not made of money," I replied, a little annoyed that he had not yet gone home to his swanky apartment, and to the lovely Monica. "And unlike you, I have no wealthy patroness."

"More's the pity," said Freddie, as I unlocked the door and let him into my tiny, shabby room. "We'll have to see if we can't do something about that. I'll ask Mon if she has any unattached friends she might introduce you to."

I sat down on the bed and kicked the shoes off my aching feet. "No thanks," I said. "I remember the last date you organised for me."

"This time it'll be different," said Freddie. "Monica knows some very interesting females. Intellectual types, you know." He threw his overcoat onto the hook on the back of the door.

The hook immediately came loose, and the coat slumped to the floor.

“Jesus Christ,” said Freddie. “Where’s the khazi in this dump?”

“Down the hall, first left.”

“What? Not en-suite?”

I threw a shoe at him as he disappeared.

Despite all his moaning Freddie slept on the floor, wrapped in his overcoat, while I, as the paying guest, claimed the bed. I am not altogether sure who got the best night’s sleep. According to the hand-written notice framed in glass on the bedside table, by allowing Freddie to crash on the floor I was in clear contravention of Rule 4, but after last night’s escapade I was already firmly in my landlady’s bad books.

In any case, I would not be staying another night. As soon as this meeting at the solicitor’s was over and done with, I would be back on the train to Yorkshire, to Kershaw Grammar, and to my humdrum life.

Tangling with Grunewald

I was due at the office at twelve noon sharp. I managed to shake Freddie awake at a quarter to, and leapt into a cab, promising to meet him in the Renaissance Room of the National Gallery at two thirty. It was Freddie’s theory that the National Gallery was the only effective cure for a hangover.

Were it not for the pin-stripe suit and the black and gilt telephone on the desk in front of him, Ronald Mardle might have walked from the pages of Dickens. The mutton chop whiskers, the bulbous strawberry nose supporting a pair of gold-rimmed spectacles, all seemed rather theatrical, as though his appearance had been carefully chosen to complement the dark, wood-panelled room. A massive lump of mahogany separated him from his clients by three feet, and was perhaps better suited to this purpose than as a writing surface. Hollings was there too of

course, and I recognised him immediately. He had just the sort of boyish, untroubled, complacent good looks that the English public school system has been churning out for centuries, marred only slightly by a decade of evenings at his Mayfair club, his straw blonde hair receding slightly as he moved into middle age. How had a man of such self-evident good breeding become embroiled in my father’s affairs to such an extent? He certainly didn’t appear to find this duty too onerous, and met us all with a solicitous little smile as though he were the chief mourner at a funeral. For all I knew, he may well have been. I learned from an off-hand comment by Mr Mardle that my father had died a fortnight ago and was buried a week later, but in what manner of plot and in which graveyard I did not trouble to enquire.

I was the first to shake the solicitor’s hand and take a seat, but I was joined by two others: an impressively tall elderly man with an even more impressive ginger beard, who had the air of a recently deposed East European monarch, but who was introduced to me as Professor Grunewald. He did not speak with a noticeable German accent, and exactly what he was a professor of he did not say, and I, a little too hung over for small talk, did not ask. We three men sat in the uncomfortable silence that most men will willingly endure rather than attempt conversation with strangers, until we were joined by a fourth party.

The woman was dressed ostentatiously in black, and might have been the grieving widow, were it not for her age, barely into her twenties. Mardle introduced her to me as Miss Jane Reed, and as I shook her pale, slender hand she said, without looking me in the eye, “Mr Willoughby, I’m so glad you could make it. Alex would have been so pleased.”

“Alex...?” I began, before realising that she was talking about my father. I sat down, struck dumb by her familiarity with the man who had destroyed my family. She was beautiful. A beautiful young woman had known my father well enough to call him Alex. She had a kind of beauty that was all too easy to miss, but once I

did notice it, I could not stop seeing it anew in every fleeting expression.

Miss Carstairs sat gazing at a figure in the carpet while Mr Mardle proceeded with the legal preamble. I found my eyes drawn time and again to the line of her profile, perfectly motionless against the grimy windowpane. Mr Mardle had a voice that induced torpor, irresistibly it seemed, for I found myself nodding, and the pattern of the carpet drifting upwards until I snapped awake again, and tried without success to make sense of the solicitor's words.

My father had died penniless, a matter of very little surprise to me. To Professor Grunewald he had left several oil-paintings by a Russian artist whose name I did not recognise: V I Scherlasky. They were currently in storage at the premises of a London art dealer, and Grunewald, although he remained silent throughout, appeared very pleased at his share in the Willoughby fortune. Neither Miss Carstairs nor Hollings received anything at all, but neither betrayed any surprise or disappointment at this outcome. As for me, I became the owner of half a dozen cloth bound notebooks, every page of every volume filled with small handwriting. I had expected the solicitor to make some difficulty about my lack of identification. My birth certificate had been lost when I was an infant, and I have never held a passport. But the solicitor was unusually accommodating. Mr Mardle handed the strange bequest over in a cardboard box there and then, and seemed rather relieved to be rid of it.

While I could not read the language the books were written in, I knew at once that these were my father's diaries. I already had a sample of his handwriting in the note that my mother had given me, the last time she ever spoke. And while the diaries were not in any language I recognised, they were at least written using the Roman alphabet, else I would have been unable to identify my father's hand. Each page was headed with the date in numeric format, leaving me in no doubt that here was a record of my father's last six years, if I could only read them.

Nobody present made any comment about the diaries, but Miss Carstairs breathed what I guessed was a sigh of relief when she caught

sight of the dog-eared volumes, and Professor Grunewald pretended to take no notice as I leafed through the pages, but I felt his glare from the other side of the room.

Hollings affected an air of nonchalance as I packed the books away, and he offered to take me to lunch. As the son of his one of his dearest friends, he said, it was the least he could do. I protested a prior engagement, and purely for something to say, explained about Freddie, wandering the corridors of the National Gallery with a thick head.

"Bring him along too," said Hollings. "The more the merrier, what?"

I thought about it. Freddie would never forgive me if I turned down the offer of a free lunch on his behalf. Free lunches, in one guise or another, were more or less his whole *raison d'être*. And it would be useful to have some form of support, should this invitation take any untoward detour, as an obscure intuition warned me it might.

I accepted, and we parted on the steps of the solicitor's office having agreed to meet at the Fleur de Lys on Bond Street in an hour. I was to fetch Freddie from his post-alcoholic wanderings amongst the El Grecos, and drag him along. I barely managed to say goodbye to Miss Carstairs as she strode across the pavement into a waiting cab, apparently too busy to make a civil reply.

I did not see Professor Grunewald leave, but it was not long before our paths crossed again. Once I was out of sight of Mardle's office, a black car hurtled around the corner and pulled abruptly to a halt in front of me. The rear window was wound down impatiently, and Grunewald, now shorn of his ginger whiskers, thrust his head out of the window.

"Get in!" he barked at me, flinging the door open. I stared.

A chauffeur in a peaked grey cap sat impressively in the driver's seat.

"What?" I stammered. "Why?"

The chauffeur wound down his window and inclined his head fractionally towards me. "I should do as he says if I were you," he said in a quiet but business-like manner.

Only then did I notice the barrel of the pistol that the chauffeur was resting on the top of the window.

I considered my options. It didn't take long. Having discarded all but one, I climbed into the scarlet leather interior of the car, and we shot off into traffic. Once again, it seemed, the dime store novelist had taken hold of my life and decided to sprinkle it with a liberal handful of lurid clichés. Apart from the now beardless Grunewald, there were two other men in the car, one in the passenger seat, and one on the other side of the Professor. Both were expressionless, Neanderthal types and neither spoke a word throughout our journey.

For an unsettling few minutes we sat in silence, and I tried to make a mental note of where we were heading. I had never been kidnapped before. It is not an eventuality that one is led to expect in the teaching profession, and while I had experienced my share of discipline problems as an apprentice teacher, they were never as serious as all that. It looked as though we were heading for the river, and when I saw the Black Friar pub shoot past, I knew that my surmise had been correct. We sped over Black Friars Bridge.

"I am very sorry that we had to meet in such dramatic circumstances," said Grunewald, offering me a cigarette, "but events are moving quickly. We must act fast."

"I don't believe we've been introduced," I said. "I met a certain Professor Grunewald, but that gentleman wore a beard, I think."

"Oh, I am still Grunewald to most people," he laughed, "although the subject of my researches is not recognised at any of our universities. And you must forgive my little subterfuge back at the solicitor's office. I can assure you that it was entirely necessary, in the circumstances. Your life was in imminent danger. It still is, to be frank. I do hope we can be entirely honest with each other. It saves so much time and trouble."

"Absolutely," I said, looking at him in complete bafflement. Grunewald was smiling placidly out of the window, as though kidnapping at gunpoint was part of his daily routine.

I still had the cardboard box full of my

father's diaries on my knee. "If we're all going to put our cards on the table, I assume this is what you are after," I said, offering the box to Grunewald. "So if it's all the same to you, I'll just hand these over, and let's dispense with the veiled threats and strong arm stuff. You can drop me off at a tube station, and I promise I won't go running to the nearest policeman. I really have no interest in reading about anything my father might have done with his life, even if I could decipher the code they were written in..."

I picked out a book at random and began to flick through the pages. "Perhaps all this makes more sense to you..."

Grunewald leaned over and slammed the book shut. "Not here!" he said. "Don't open them! You never know who might be looking over your shoulder! I select my travelling companions with great care, but there is always a chance, however slight, that we have been infiltrated by our enemies in spite of my most stringent precautions. In my trade, I find it is always better to err on the side of caution, even if sometimes caution is indistinguishable from paranoia."

He chuckled to himself, but I confess that my sense of humour was rather subdued that morning, whether due to my hangover, my kidnapping, or a combination of the two.

"And you mistake my motives entirely – I have no more acquisitive interest in those journals of your father's than you do. In fact I consider them a blight on the face of all that is good, and it would have been better for us all had they never existed. However, we cannot change that."

"If the books are such a burden to you, why do we not simply burn them?"

Grunewald smiled as one might smile at a child's mistake. "If only it were that simple, Mr Willoughby. But as your father knew very well, such ancient secrets as he has recorded in these journals cannot simply be forgotten. There are those in this world who are already planning to use this knowledge for such evil ends as you could not imagine. These books might give us some small insight into their plans, and tip the

balance in our favour, but the battle will still be hard fought."

I tried not to lose my patience, but I did not believe a word this peculiar man said, and was beginning to suspect that he was one of those unhinged millionaires one reads about in the newspapers, indulging his paranoid fantasies and inflicting them on the rest of the world. "And who are these scurrilous fellows, this infamous 'they'?" I asked.

"All in good time, Mr Willoughby. Now, I assume that the man calling himself Hollings made some attempt to recruit you, did he?"

"Yes, he did," I said, looking out of the window. We were passing through Golders Green, and I guessed that in due course we would be leaving London behind, and heading south into Sussex. "I agreed to dine with Hollings at the Fleur de Lys on Bond Street, round about now as a matter of fact. Tell me, Mr Grunewald, is Mr Hollings one of us, or one of them?"

"Oh, one of them, most assuredly!" he exclaimed. "A very slippery character, that one. Of course, Hollings is not his real name. When our paths first crossed, twenty years ago, he went by the name of Abdul Hossein, if you can believe that."

I almost laughed out loud, but I saw that Grunewald was deadly serious. "A master of disguise," he explained, although I was still unsure whether I had stood up Hossein in the guise of Hollings, or vice versa.

"Well, he will have an unpleasant surprise when you don't turn up," said Grunewald.

"I was under no obligation to attend," I objected. "There was no guarantee that I would even show up, if it was that important an engagement for him."

A shadow passed over Grunewald's face. "He had you tailed," he said gruffly. "He wouldn't have let you out of his sight that easily. But we dealt with the tail."

I didn't have the nerve to ask exactly how they had dealt with it, but made a mental note not to make any mention of Freddie, who would no doubt be getting very impatient amongst the quattrocento masterpieces. Freddie always insisted that he despised the Renaissance. The

great majority of his opinions were similarly ridiculous, but Freddie was harmless, in as much as he was ignored by the rest of the world. What frightened me were men like this Grunewald character, who not only peddled patent nonsense, but obviously had the power, resources and will to put their crack-brained ideas into action. Or perhaps my kidnapper was only a minor player in some larger organisation of similarly unhinged occultists, dilettante Crowleyists and the like, beguiled by sweet incense smoke and the prospect of unveiling ancient mysteries.

No, I did not wish Freddie "dealt with". He was my only lifeline back to normality. I decided that I must try and call him if I got the chance.

"Where exactly are we going?" I asked hesitantly, as the South Downs began to rise up in slowly undulating green waves on the horizon. We were speeding along the trunk road.

"To safety," said Grunewald. "To my house. We can lie low there for a few days at least, and I will begin a rough translation of your father's journals."

I laughed, but it was a laugh of incredulity and despair. "Lie low for a few days? Do you realise that if I am not back home by tomorrow morning, then 3C will find that they have no teacher for poetry appreciation and the headmaster will be banging on the door of my cottage? I cannot simply abandon my life in this way! It is simply unfair of you to expect me to!"

Grunewald shook his head sadly. "I'm afraid you have misunderstood me," he said. "It's my fault entirely. I failed to communicate the gravity of our situation. The fact of the matter is that unless we take swift and decisive action, you will have no job to go back to."

"If I am not present at morning assembly tomorrow morning at 8.45 the result will be exactly the same," I said.

"Listen!" shouted Grunewald, gripping my shoulder. "I don't care tuppence for your pilfering school! In a few days time, unless we pull this off, your precious school will no longer exist! The survival of our species depends on the contents of those notebooks!"

This last comment pushed me over the edge. I had had just about all I could take. "Stop the

car!" I demanded. "Stop the car immediately! I'm getting out!"

The chauffeur cast a worried glance at his employer through the rear view mirror but said nothing, and kept up a steady speed.

"Quite out of the question, dear fellow," said Grunewald, but in a more conciliatory tone. "Simply for your own protection, I cannot allow it. You may not realise it now, but you have been in very great danger ever since the day your father died."

I had been casting surreptitious glances at the silent Neanderthal in the passenger seat, and guessed, from the way his suit jacket hung, that he had a gun in the right hand pocket.

"My life may or may not be in imminent danger," I said to Grunewald, leaning forward, "but that is not the most pressing matter." I quickly dug my hand into the henchman's pocket, and felt my fingers close around cold metal. "The most pressing matter is that your life certainly is in peril unless you stop the car at once and let me out. Keep the diaries, I don't care!"

Before either Grunewald or his employee had appreciated what was going on, I was pointing the business end of a revolver squarely at Grunewald's chest.

"What the Dickens!" exclaimed Grunewald, before his man on the other side of the back seat caught on, and tried to retrieve his own weapon, but the car was rather crowded, and he was firmly wedged between Grunewald and the door. He struggled to remove his hand from his breast pocket.

The chauffeur decided to take things into his own hands. The car lurched across the middle of the road, and went into a spin, while Grunewald and I fought for the revolver. Tyres shrieked, and traffic swerved on either side to avoid us, honking their horns in fury at the driver. After performing a 360 degree revolution, the car skidded across a grass verge and slumped into a shallow ditch by the roadside. Just before we came to a halt, there was a deafening shot. I looked at Grunewald. He wore an expression I shall never forget, an admixture of surprise, regret and rebuke, but the gun in my fist was still cold. At first I thought he had been shot in the

back by his own bodyguard, but I could see no blood. He was slumped against the back of the passenger seat, breathing heavily. Grunewald's eyes rolled up into their sockets, and he pitched forward onto my shoulder. I wrestled with the door handle with one hand behind my back, and the other desperately trying to push him off. The engine was still running, and through the smashed windscreen I could see smoke rising ominously from the crumpled bonnet. Eventually the door sprang open, and I fell out backwards. I took one last look at that handsome champagne coloured car, pointing down into the ditch at a crazy angle, its front end mangled beyond hope. I didn't even think to check whether the two men in the front were still alive, but fled like a criminal.

I climbed the other side of the ditch, ruining my best shoes in the process, and making sure that the bottom of both trouser legs were soaked through with mud. There was a wire fence to climb, and then an empty field of stubbly grass, and another, then six more, separated by identical wire fences, before I dropped down onto an unsurfaced, tree-lined farm road.

My shadow stretched out before me as I walked, and I considered my next move. I had to get to the nearest village, track down a house with a telephone, and call Freddie, the police, and the headmaster, in that order.

The nearest village was further than I had imagined, and dusk had settled over the fields before the welcome lights of a country pub greeted me. The landlord eyed my sodden trousers with mild alarm, but allowed me the use of the telephone, while he went upstairs to fetch the rest of his family down to gawp at the peculiar man who had been out walking all day in a business suit, carrying a cardboard box under his arm. Apart from the gaggle of curious children who watched me from the bottom of the stairs, and the landlady who served me a large brandy to shake off the November chill, the pub was deserted, but I guessed that it would not be for long. I wondered whether the police would give me a lift back to London.

The phone rang and rang. Finally, just as I was on the point of giving up, Monica answered.

"I *think* he's here," she said vaguely. "I do seem to remember *someone* coming in a few hours ago. That *might* have been Freddie. I suppose you'd like me to go and check."

"I really would appreciate it," I said.

Monica went off in search of Freddie, and I could hear what sounded like a bridge party going on in the background.

"Where the devil have you been?" asked Freddie when he finally came to the phone.

"I've never been more pleased to hear your voice," I gushed.

"Steady on," he said. "Now, why don't you take it from the beginning? You might start by apologising for standing me up. I spent three hours mooching round the Raphaels. It made me feel quite unwell."

I gave Freddie the condensed version of recent events. When I was done, I announced my intention of phoning the police straight away.

There was a longish pause, and it sounded like Freddie had dropped the phone. I heard muffled voices and a brief scuffling.

"Look, hang on a second," said Freddie. "That might not be necessary."

"Freddie, a man's been shot, and is very possibly dead! The police will probably have discovered the car by now. If they haven't, it's only a matter of time before some passing motorist decides to investigate."

"Exactly," said Freddie. "So why involve yourself? They don't need to know you were there, do they?"

I couldn't understand where Freddie was going with this. Was there some shady business of his own that he didn't want the police getting wind of?

"Freddie, you haven't been producing your own Mondrians again, have you? I thought you stopped all that after we graduated."

There was some coughing and throat clearing on the other end of the phone line, then Freddie said, "No, that's not it, but there's a young lady of your acquaintance here, a Miss Carstairs, and..."

"Miss Carstairs!" I groaned. "How do you two know each other?"

"Bit of a long story," said Freddie in a shaky

voice. "Upshot is, she thinks it might rather throw a spanner in the works if you tip off the Old Bill, and considering that she's pointing a gun at my head, I'm rather inclined to agree with her."

There was a muffled exchange, then Miss Carstairs herself came on the line. "Good evening, Mr Willoughby," she said. "So you gave Grunewald the slip. Good job. Now, we'll come and pick you up in my car if you like. Where have you pitched up?" She sounded bright and breezy, as though she were organising a church picnic.

"I'm in Little Rottingbury," I said. "In the pub. But if it's all the same to you, I'd rather you didn't shoot Freddie. In fact, I don't see how he's involved in this at all. Couldn't you just let him go?"

"Don't worry," said Miss Carstairs. "I won't shoot him unless it's absolutely necessary. Seeing as you've very wisely decided to cooperate, there should be no need for any unpleasantness."

"Oh, I'm cooperating alright," I said. "It's just that I have no idea who I'm supposed to be cooperating with, or why."

"All in good time," she replied. "Now, has anyone noticed you there?"

"I should say so. I think I must be the first tourist they've had since the clocks went back."

"Well, that can't be helped. You have still got the diaries haven't you?" she asked.

"Oh, I chucked them on the fire to warm myself up."

"If only you knew how important this is, you'd see how out of place your jokes are."

"Well, nobody seems to want to explain, so what choice do I have?"

She ignored my question. "I strongly advise you to keep the books out of sight. Try not to attract any more attention. Sit tight. We'll be there as soon as we can."

"Right oh," I sighed.

I took my drink from the bar and, clasping the cardboard box under one arm, made my way into the deserted saloon, where I sat down in front of a roaring fire. My quip about burning my father's diaries hadn't been entirely facetious. I had always told myself that I wanted

nothing to do with the man, and my experience of the last two days had only confirmed that prejudice. Perhaps if the diaries were gone forever, then all these strange people would leave me alone and stop waving guns around and issuing mysterious instructions. I was sorely tempted, but Freddie's plight stopped my hand. He had sounded seriously worried, and I had always considered the man constitutionally incapable of serious worry.

The Subterranean Ministry

"I don't suppose you've heard of the ancient Vrtaal culture of southern Peru," said Miss Carstairs in the car.

I looked at Freddie and he was wearing the same silly, nonplussed expression as I no doubt was.

"Southern Peru?" I said, rubbing my chin. "Can't say I've ever been there, no."

"Well, we might have to do something about that. Anyway, follow me. I'll explain on the way."

We left her Bentley outside a grand old Victorian building somewhere off Whitehall, government offices according to Miss Carstairs, but as far as I could make out without any signs to identify them. Although we arrived there in the dead of night, there was more than just a night porter to greet us as we pushed through the revolving doors into old empire opulence, marble floors, gilt mirrors from floor to ceiling, and an unmistakable air of official skulduggery. Sharp-suited men conferred in twos and threes in echoing whispers as they strode across the lobby clutching armfuls of paper. One of them, I realised, was Hollings. As soon as he saw us he came straight over and shook our hands.

"So I hear you fell for one of Grunewald's tricks," he said to me. "Bad show. Still, never mind. You're here now."

"And where is here, exactly?" I said.

"Let's just say it's a safe house," said Hollings with a wink.

"All funded by the poor benighted taxpayer, in his ignorance, eh?" said Freddie, who sometimes liked to affect a vague sort of socialism. I didn't want us to get into any more trouble and motioned for him to be quiet, but Miss Carstairs smiled.

"Don't worry," she said. "It's not all as grand as this, particularly where you'll be working. But we can't stand around here chatting. Even if Grunewald's dead, which I'll believe when I see the corpse with my own eyes, there are plenty more like him, and much worse. Let's get a move on."

"I'll leave you two gentlemen for now," said Hollings. "See you at the briefing session."

Miss Carstairs trotted away across the marble, and Freddie and I hurried after her.

"Where we'll be working?" exclaimed Freddie. "Briefing session? There seems to have been some kind of misunderstanding. Why, I've never worked a day in my life. I certainly don't remember applying to become some kind of shady government agent!"

"I'm afraid you have little choice," said Miss Carstairs severely. "You're both in possession of highly sensitive information that may endanger your lives and the lives of others."

"Are you suggesting that we are both prisoners here?" I asked. It struck me that I would probably not be allowed to call the headmaster with some excuse for my absence.

"Prisoners – well that's such a harsh word, isn't it?" she replied. "I prefer the term 'protective custody'."

Another civil servant type from the same mould as Hollings, distinguishable solely by the cut of his suit, held the lift door for us, and we all squeezed in.

"Down?" asked the man.

"Down," said Miss Carstairs, and we began to plummet below the London street, below the sewers and the tube tunnels. I looked around the interior of the lift but there was no numbered dial.

"If it's all the same to you," said Freddie, still fanning the flames of his own indignation, "I'll

do without your protective custody and take my chances on the outside. I've survived stickier situations than this. What possible threat could I pose to anybody? I don't know anything about this damn business!"

"That may be," said Miss Carstairs, "but I doubt that the Vrtaal torturers will be too keen to take your word for it."

"Why do you care?" asked Freddie in exasperation. "I'm not asking you to release us both. Willoughby here's clearly up to his eyeballs in trouble, but I'm no use to you. Just let me go. Please! I have a very important cocktail party to attend!"

"No can do, I'm afraid," said Miss Carstairs as we plunged on down through the bowels of the city. "And if you did try to escape, I'm afraid we'd have to kill you. The Ministry likes to play it safe when it comes to this sort of thing."

"That's what you call playing it safe?" shouted Freddie. "Safe for who?"

The nameless grey suit raised one well-bred eyebrow at this outburst.

I asked, "Ministry? What Ministry is this? The Home Office?"

Miss Carstairs made an amused little snort. "I doubt the Home Secretary has even heard of us. No, we've always been known as the Ministry."

A bell pinged, and our lift grated to a halt.

"This is us," said Miss Carstairs. "Going all the way down to the Record Store, George?" she asked the lift's other occupant.

"Yes," said George. "These your new civvies for Operation Seedhead?"

"That's right," said Reed, making no attempt to introduce us.

"I suppose I'll see you at the briefing then."

"Cheerio!"

We three stepped from the lift into what I had always imagined the War Rooms to look like, the underground bunkers where Churchill had met with his cabinet during the darkest days of the blitz. Roughly whitewashed brickwork, scuffed concrete floors, steel doors painted battleship grey, and a distinct air of spartan utilitarianism in everything from the light bulbs suspended in wire cages to the austere black

painted numbers which were all that adorned each office door.

"This will be your home for the foreseeable future," said Miss Carstairs. I looked in dismay at the cramped, ill-lit room. A military style bunk bed stood at the far end, and nearer to us was an equally military office desk, piled with mimeographed papers and cardboard files tied up with black ribbons.

"It's what we call the guest room," said Miss Carstairs. "It's a bit more comfortable, a bit homier than some of the other offices."

"Oh, this just gets better and better," said Freddie. "Well, I'm bagging the top bunk."

"But what do you expect us to do here?" I said. "We're not spies, and we're neither of us experts on pre-Columbian civilisations!"

Miss Carstairs sighed and dragged a couple of chairs from the wall. We sat down as comfortably as we could, and by pressing a button in the wall, she spoke into an intercom system and ordered some tea and biscuits.

"Well, at least they've got room service," commented Freddie.

"I know this has all been a shock to both of you," said Miss Carstairs. "In normal circumstances, we'd take the time to explain as gently as we could what was going on. But here at the Ministry normal circumstances are few and far between, and just now it's about as far from normal as you could possibly imagine, probably further. We're at sixes and sevens, so I'll try to make this brief."

A whiskery old boy in a navy blue overall appeared in the doorway pushing a trolley laden with a tea urn and a plate of rather dry and uninspiring biscuits. Miss Carstairs must have caught my disappointed look, because she said, "You get used to them. They're not so bad if you dunk them. Softens them up a little bit."

Freddie leapt down from his bunk, grabbed two cups of tea and a large handful of biscuits before retreating to the far end of the room. "I'm spitting feathers here," he said by way of explanation.

Anxious to understand how my father was mixed up in this bizarre secret organisation, I tried to steer the conversation away from bis-

cuits and back to the matter in hand. "So, you were going to tell us about this extinct Peruvian civilisation, Miss Carstairs. The Voortaal, did you say?"

"Vrtaal," she corrected me. "Firstly they're by no means extinct, although the world would undoubtedly be a better place if they were. And secondly they're not so much a civilisation – they can hardly be called civilised – as a cult."

"What, you mean rituals and human sacrifice and dancing around the fire in their altogether?" asked Freddie biscuitfully.

"Human sacrifice, certainly," said Reed. "And of the worst kind too."

"There are degrees?" I asked.

"In my job, there are degrees of everything."

"And what exactly is your job?" I said, trying to sound casual, but the young woman was immediately on her guard. "That really isn't relevant, Mr Willoughby," she said.

"Please call me Simon," I said.

"Simon. Please try to stay focused."

"So this cult of human sacrificers, they're the ones who've been trying to get hold of Old Man Willoughby's diaries?" asked Freddie.

"That's right," said Reed. "We've been keeping a close watch on Professor Grunewald for several years now, waiting for him to make a false move."

"Why didn't you just have him arrested?" I wondered.

"We couldn't make a move until he actually broke the law," she said. "Membership of the Vrtaal organisation is legal in most countries, including West Germany."

"So he is actually a German then?" I said. "I assumed he must be using a false identity, as well as a false beard."

"Bloody Germans causing more trouble!" snarled Freddie, who had always had a worrying jingoistic streak. "I always said we should never have let them run their own country again. They can't be trusted."

"We're not sure of his original nationality," said Miss Carstairs. "The West German government have been on Grunewald's case just as long as we have. He's proved very difficult to winkle out, but I think he's done the job for us this time."

He went a step too far in trying to kidnap you, Simon."

"So, Grunewald's dead, and the diaries are safely in the vaults of the Ministry of Hush Hush. All's well with the world. We can all go home and thank our lucky stars that the Vrtaal didn't decide to eat us," said Freddie. "What's the big hold up?"

"Grunewald was a minor adept, we think," said Miss Carstairs. "And there are members of the cult in almost every country in the world, including England. In fact, in recent years England has been rather a focus for Vrtaal recruitment. We're not sure why, and that is worrying in itself. They seem to concentrate their efforts on the more unconventional fringes of society: writers, artists, those who are typically drawn to new religious experiences. In general terms, the intelligentsia. To be honest, at first we thought you were a Vrtaal agent yourself, Mr Simlow. That's why we had you followed, and how we knew where to find you when word reached us that Mr Willoughby had vanished."

"You needn't have worried about Freddie," I said, watching him stuff three biscuits into his mouth at the same time. "Nobody's ever mistaken him for a member of the intelligentsia."

"Watch it, Willoughby," mumbled Freddie through a mouthful of crumbs. "Remember it was me who came to save your bacon when you were stuck in that pub in the middle of nowhere."

"Well, you didn't have much choice, at gunpoint," I said, then turned to Miss Carstairs. "By the way, why were you so keen to prevent me phoning the police?"

"The Vrtaal have members placed at all levels of society," she said. "There's every possibility they have a man in Scotland Yard, passing information back to Vrtaal HQ. That's why we don't work through the normal Government channels."

"It's like the Masons then, but with a bit more bite," suggested Freddie.

"I suppose you might put it like that," said Miss Carstairs.

"But where does my father come into all

this?" I asked. "Was he a member of this dreadful sect?"

"We're not entirely sure," she said. "But we have to assume so, given the intense interest in his personal effects amongst known Vrtaal members after his death.

"Grunewald inherited some paintings by that Russian chap, didn't he?" I reminded her. "What's happened to those?"

"Paintings?" said Freddie, suddenly taking an interest. "What paintings?"

"Yes, we've got one of our men trying to track them down," said Miss Carstairs. "Scherlasky I think was the name. Doesn't mean anything to me."

Freddie jumped down from his bunk to join us, and to snatch up the remaining biscuits. "V I Scherlasky, 1854–1897," he said. "Went crazy in the end, they say. Probably syphilis."

If there was one thing Freddie excelled in, apart from making faux pas like discussing sexually transmitted diseases in front of respectable young ladies, it was his encyclopaedic knowledge of art history. He could recognise almost any painter at a glance, and then explain to you in detail what was wrong with their style, and how it was inferior to his own. While I blushed for his gaffe, I trusted his judgement without question.

"What kind of painter was he?" I asked Freddie, moving the discussion swiftly on from the causes of his mental breakdown.

"Religious," said Freddie with a nod of certainty. "Stations of the cross, the Pieta, the Annunciation, all that stuff. But there was something a tad queer about some of his later work, as I recall. A touch of the Hieronymous Bosch."

"Perhaps he was a member of the Vrtaal," I suggested.

"Who knows?" shrugged Freddie. "There was a bit of a scandal a few years ago. Some of his work had been hanging in a monastery in St Petersburg for over a hundred years, before a visiting priest noticed something odd about the Scherlasky's Crucifixion, and he made a complaint to the Abbot. Kicked up such a fuss, they had to remove it."

"What was wrong with it?"

"Well, obviously I never saw the picture, so I can't say for sure. But apparently in the background landscape, behind Jesus, there's a sort of canal, and there are some kind of sea creatures climbing out onto the land."

"Sea creatures?" I asked. "Is that all?"

"You see, I knew we'd done the right thing bringing you on board," said Miss Carstairs triumphantly.

Freddie, always unable to resist flattery, beamed. "Don't thank me," he said. "Thank my perfect photographic memory."

Miss Carstairs glanced at her wristwatch. "Well, we can discuss all this at the briefing tomorrow morning. For now I suggest you two try to get some sleep. You might not get another opportunity for a while."

She was on the point of leaving the room when I remembered something important.

"Look, I don't want to put you to any trouble," I said. "But is there a telephone I can use? I really ought to phone the headmaster and tell him – well, I'm not altogether sure what to tell him..."

"It's already been dealt with," interrupted Miss Carstairs. "One of the girls in telephony put a call in to Mr Cresswell this afternoon. He's not expecting you back any time soon, and will arrange a supply teacher at least until the end of term. You'll still be on full pay."

I was astonished at the power of the Ministry. Nobody in living memory at Kershaw had ever persuaded Mr Cresswell to go to the expense of hiring a supply teacher.

"But what did they tell him?" I said.

"Your headmaster believes that you have been involved in a very serious car crash."

"Yes, but I wasn't injured, was I?"

"You haven't been injured yet," said Miss Carstairs as she closed the door. "But it's early days."

Freddie and I sat together in silence. Absently, I picked up the only biscuit Freddie hadn't snaffled, and bit into it. It was a truly horrible biscuit.

Later that night, as I lay in my bunk listening to Freddie's snoring, I contemplated the unexpected changes that had happened in my life

over the last two days. I had never thought it possible that I could miss my miserable little room in the teachers' cottage at Kershaw Grammar, but I did miss it. I had become attached to the feeling of knowing exactly how the following day would turn out. I had carved out quite a comfortable, little existence there, for a bachelor of limited means and few prospects. It was not a particularly happy existence – in fact it was often painfully lonely – but it was what I knew, and had become used to, and habit is one of the most powerful forces in the world.

I calculated that if the truth about this business ever came out, I would probably lose my job, and my home with it. Cresswell was not a man who readily tolerated eccentricity, and however I tried to explain this adventure to him, he would consider me beyond the pale, and probably a dangerous influence on the boys.

What would become of me? Could I do as Freddie had always done, freeloading, bandwagoning, coat-tail riding? None of that came naturally to me, and I could not picture myself living in that way without a sense of shame. But why? I had no real work ethic, and privately mocked those who swore by honest, hard graft. There was for me no inherent dignity in mere nine-to-fiveism.

I realised then that my aversion to Freddie's ideal of the free lunch was chiefly that this was how I had always envisaged my father's life. There had been no wartime duties for Alexander Willoughby. He had ducked out of that responsibility just as deftly as he had avoided responsibility for his family. Nobody it seemed could tell us what my father had been doing, or where, during the war years. Certainly he had not used his training as a weather forecaster to help defeat Hitler. His salary from the Met Office ceased to be paid the same week that he walked out on his family, but whether he resigned or was dismissed his former employers would not reveal.

The revelations of the previous day provided a new image of my father. This Alexander Willoughby was a dissolute traveller in South America, lured into a depraved native cult by the promise of easy power. What had taken him

across the world to Peru? I drifted into sleep with this question skulking at the back of my mind, and my dreams were infested with Aztec architecture, maddening drums and blood.

The long-awaited briefing revealed both more and less than I had anticipated. A room identical to our lodgings in decor, but three times as large was filled with dour civil servants perched on folding metal chairs. Hollings was there, so was the man Miss Carstairs had called George. A lot of the meeting went straight over my head, and Freddie declined to take any interest in the proceedings, but I soon gathered that nobody present knew the ultimate purpose of the Vrtaal. That much was obvious, despite the jargon and bickering between departments. At least somebody had managed to retrieve the two paintings by Scherlasky. Both depicted scenes of hell, according to Hollings. He gave a brief presentation with slides, as the originals were still being conserved. It appeared that the Russian artist's vision of eternal punishment involved a lot more water than was traditional. Waves lapped over the languishing sinners, while hungry devils crawled from the briny depths to torment lost souls.

I wondered how the paintings had been acquired. Had they been taken from the trunk of Grunewald's stranded car?

"We've got to find some way out of this place," Freddie muttered to me. "If I have to spend any more time with these dullards I shall expire from boredom. And these paintings are simply the ugliest things I have ever set eyes on."

I sympathised. I had had high hopes of the Ministry, but now I despaired of these bureaucrats ever discovering the truth about my father. It was all just an endless round of committees, memos and presentations.

"I fail to see why we are needed," I said to Miss Carstairs in the Ministry canteen afterwards. "We know nothing that you haven't already discovered for yourselves, and it looks like it will take weeks for you to make any kind of decision. At least let Freddie go. He has no involvement in this. Surely you can see that."

Miss Carstairs looked surprised. "I'm sorry

you feel that way, Simon," she said. "I thought you'd be interested to know that some work has been done already to translate your father's diaries. It turns out they were written in a native Peruvian dialect called Quechua."

"So my father died in Peru?" I asked. I supposed that it certainly added weight to the theory that he had been drawn in to the unsavoury world of the Vrtaal.

"We don't know for certain," said Miss Carstairs. "Most of the entries are about the weather. He talks about little else. The last entry is dated the day of his death. I understand that your father is a meteorologist."

"Was," I corrected her.

"Not necessarily. We've discovered a discrepancy."

"What sort of discrepancy?"

"Alexander Willoughby kept a detailed record of the times of the tides and of the sunrise and sunset each day. But on the last page of the diary, Dr Tellerman happened upon something odd: on the day he died, your father recorded the tides, dawn and dusk times for a week after his death in a very particular area of Peru."

"What area is that?" I asked.

"It's an area of coastline bordering the Nazca desert, with just a handful of tiny villages."

I shrugged. "So what?" I said. "Maybe he was staying there."

"There's something else," said Miss Carstairs. "What I've told you so far is not very remarkable, but let me also say that he predicted the weather, with pinpoint accuracy, for that day too. Two and an eighth inches of rain."

"It can't be anything more than coincidence," I said. "Nobody can predict with certainty what the weather will be like in a week's time in any given place, but they can always strike lucky."

"It hadn't rained in that area for over a hundred and fifty years," said Miss Carstairs.

"So what are you telling us?" asked Freddie with a yawn. "That Simon's old man invented some sort of weather predicting thingummy? Well, that's fascinating, it really is. Now if you'll excuse me, I'm going to have a little catnap. Wake me up when this is all over, Simon."

"No, not a weather predictor," said Miss

Carstairs. "I believe Alex Willoughby's forecasting days are behind me."

"Meaning what?" I asked.

Out of the blue, Miss Carstairs said, "Remember the Lynmouth Flood?"

I blinked and thought back. "That place in Devon? Got flooded a couple of years ago in torrential rain?"

"That's the one," said Miss Carstairs. "Only torrential doesn't even begin to describe it. Do you know, that year North Devon got about two hundred and fifty times its normal average rainfall? The whole town was swept away."

"Yes, I do remember seeing the headlines. Weren't some people killed?" I asked.

"Hundreds," said Miss Carstairs.

"Did you know any of the victims?" I asked, failing to understand where she was going with this.

"Not personally," she said.

The event had made no more than the faintest impression on me, a freak accident at the other end of the country.

"Weren't there some rumours going round that the RAF were responsible for that?" said Freddie from the top bunk. "Something to do with spraying the rain clouds with salt?"

"What rot!" I snorted. "I don't know why you pay any attention to that kind of pub talk!"

"Perhaps you should. Perhaps we all should have been paying more attention," said Miss Carstairs, looking away. "I should have seen it coming. It was my job to stop it. But it was something a little more exotic than salt."

"What on Earth could you have done to prevent a catastrophic flood?" I asked. "It was just one of those things, an act of God."

"Only if you're a member of the Vrtaal," said Miss Carstairs. "But for the rest of us, it was an act of war."

"The RAF really were involved?"

"Certain elements within the RAF," she said. "I told you the Vrtaal had infiltrated every level of society."

I shook my head, disbelieving. "But what war? Who were they fighting?"

"Us," she replied. "It was an experiment, at least that's what the MOD were led to believe."

Brainchild of some eccentric major. Told the Prime Minister he could increase crop yields by targeting rainfall on agricultural land. The Government gave him permission to spray chemicals into rain clouds from a squadron of fighter planes. We found just too late that the Major was a very close friend of your father's."

"So what did they do about it?" I asked.

"Hushed it all up, of course. The Major was retired. He died last year. I remember the obituary in the Times: accidentally shot himself while cleaning a shotgun. Somehow he'd managed to shoot himself in the back of the head."

My mind reeled from these revelations. Was it possible that the British Government would act in such an underhand way to cover up their own incompetence? "But what were the Vrtaal hoping to accomplish?" I demanded. "Are they simply trying to wipe us out?"

"In a manner of speaking," said Miss Carstairs. "But marinade might be a better word for it."

Abroad, Unarmed and Incommunicado

The next day Freddie and I boarded a plane bound for Lima. According to Miss Carstairs's theory, my father was still alive, and his staged death had been nothing more than a ruse to contact me, perhaps to warn me of the Vrtaal's plans without them suspecting. What sort of plans? Miss Carstairs would not speculate, but her dark hints about ancient evils led me to suspect that whatever the Vrtaal were planning, it boded no good for anyone else.

The diaries told us his location roughly to within a few hundred square miles. An English doctor living in the middle of the Peruvian desert should not prove too difficult to track down, were he not pretending to be dead.

Miss Carstairs had become convinced that my father wanted my help. I had already explained to her that in agreeing to travel to South Amer-

ica, my motive was not to do my estranged father's bidding, but simply to discover the truth about his disappearance, in the hope that it might bring my mother some kind of relief. If he was still alive, I would have no hesitation in beating the truth out of him. I was not yet prepared to believe Miss Carstairs's account of Alexander Willoughby as a hero, risking his life to warn us of the Vrtaal danger.

I had never flown before. From the pictures I had seen of passenger planes in magazines and in films, I had expected our means of transport to be significantly larger. At least we were the only two passengers; there was no room for more. The Ministry had chartered this flight specially, to avoid the danger of running into any Vrtaal agents, who apparently had infiltrated every branch of the civilian and military authorities, and might well have been expected to send an assassin disguised as a fellow passenger or as an air hostess.

We landed to refuel in Portugal, then made the gruelling journey on to Lima. Freddie slept most of the way. I could not. It did not surprise me to discover that I was a bad flier. Thoughts of my father kept me from sleep too, of what I should say to him, how I should make him ashamed, how I would bring him low, were I to actually track him down. And how would I recognise the man anyway, if we passed each other in a crowd?

At least I had a good view over the Andes as we crossed the border from Brazil into Peru, a fearful conglomeration of God-sized stones looming over the whole country. It struck me, as I gazed down on that forbidding sight, that Freddie and I might easily die out here. And for what? Some half-baked conspiracy theory dreamt up by those furtive mandarins skulking in their bunkers? I could understand why they had sent me, rather than one of their own: if my father really was still alive, then his reaction to my arrival would tell them whether he really was an agent of the Vrtaal. I was simply a pawn in this scenario, bait to tempt out the opponent from his lair. And if my father was, as Miss Carstairs suspected, an honest man trying to warn us of the Vrtaal's perfidious scheme, then I

would be able to put him in touch with the Ministry, or so they hoped. In my present mood I could not have vouchsafed that I would not simply shoot the man on sight.

Not that the Ministry had issued us with firearms, although both Freddie and I had argued with Miss Carstairs on the subject, claiming quite reasonably that if we were being sent into harm's way, then we ought to have some form of protection. Miss Carstairs had objected, unfairly I thought, that there was not sufficient time for firearms training before the flight. I think in reality she was considering the diplomatic consequences of a couple of nervy Englishmen firing off live ordinance in a busy Peruvian market place, and I suppose I could hardly blame her for that. In any case, Freddie was confident that in a country as near the edge of the civilised world as Peru, a couple of pistols would be easily acquired.

"They'll probably be handing out rifles at immigration control," Freddie had claimed. "Purely for self-defence against marauding..." He paused, unable to think of any South American beast capable of sustained marauding. "Capybaras," he said finally.

"Capybaras?" I said. "What on earth are they?"

"Sort of giant guinea pigs," said Freddie. "Terribly sharp incisors. Read about them in *National Geographic*."

Privately I thought it unlikely that any sovereign state would encourage foreign nationals to wander the streets armed to the teeth, but I made no comment. Nor did I consider that the main threat to our safety in Peru would turn out to be giant guinea pigs. The agents of the Vrtaal might or might not turn out to possess sharp incisors, but it was the clandestine cult, not the herbivorous rodents, that haunted my imagination. What were the Vrtaal up to? Why did they want to get their hands on my father's diaries so badly, particularly when they contained nothing save meteorological readings and amateur weather predictions? Or had Jayne Reed and her colleagues at the nameless Ministry misled us, and there was more to the journals than we had been led to believe? Futile speculations, but they

helped to pass the time between Lisbon and Lima.

"Interesting little magazine, this," said Freddie, tossing the yellow bound journal over to me. "You ought to have a read of it before we land. There's a fascinating article about Peru, actually. Did you know, one of the ancient tribes used to worship a giant armadillo? The way they saw it, this armadillo was buried underground, all trussed up with rope, and whenever it struggled, it caused earthquakes."

"Sounds a rather over-elaborate explanation," I said. "I mean, who tied up the armadillo, and why?"

"No idea," shrugged Freddie. "But it sounds rather a fun religion, don't you think? Would've made Sunday School a damn sight more interesting. And apparently there was this other tribe who worshipped a sort of giant woodlouse."

I began to suspect that Freddie was making all this up, and I stopped listening.

After a minute's thought, I said, "Even if we do find a gunsmith, how are we to negotiate our purchase? I don't speak any Spanish. Do you?"

Freddie shrugged. "Probably," he said. "I've never tried." And with that he pulled his black-out goggles over his eyes and was instantly asleep. That had been seven hours ago, and my only entertainment since had been the varying rhythms of my companion's snoring. I dearly wished that I had his feline capacity for sleep, and also some of the sang-froid that allowed him to float through life without fretting about where the currents might carry him.

In Lima we had been instructed by Miss Carstairs to make contact with one of the Ministry's agents, an Argentinian called Edoualdo Santorio. He was waiting for us in the airport arrivals lounge, itself little more than a glorified nissan hut. Miss Carstairs had told us to look out for a man drinking tea from a gourd with a straw, but as we hauled our suitcases past the immigration control desk, it became clear that at least two thirds of the people waiting in the arrivals lounge were drinking tea from gourds of various sizes, with straws.

We stood looking lost for a few moments, a fatal mistake in any country where the taxi driv-

ers are predatory and persistent. Very soon we were surrounded by several dozen of them plying their trade. Polite refusal was insufficient, and Freddie was on the point of coming to blows with one particularly insistent fellow, when a giant of a man stepped to assist us. He could not have been an inch below seven foot. The man exchanged a handful of sharp words with the mob of cabbies in Spanish, and the crowd dispersed. Of course it was Edoualdo, and he was drinking tea, or *mate* as he was quick to correct us, from a gourd with a wooden straw. I never saw him without that beverage in his hand more than once, the whole time we spent in Peru. Apparently it was a very Argentine custom, and Freddie and I had been unlucky enough to land on the same day as a large delegation of the Argentine government had flown into Lima.

“And you yourself, do you work for the Government of Peru?” I couldn’t help asking Edoualdo.

He smiled, revealing a row of gold teeth beneath his bushy black moustache. “Me? No, Sir, I work for no government. I work for the Ministry. Come, let us go. Our car is waiting.”

I thought his answer made little sense. At the time I put it down to a misunderstanding, or an inadequate grasp of English, but I soon realised that he spoke our tongue with great fluency, infinitely better than Freddie’s Spanish, which came close to causing several international incidents without the involvement of firearms.

Lima was all sprawl and squalor, and those who could afford it, like Edoualdo, paid good money to shut the rest of the stinking, noisy, ugly city out, by living within a high-walled courtyard where frangipani bloomed and cast delicate shadows on the terracotta tiles.

“So gentlemen,” said our host, after we had been shown to our rooms and given time to shower and change our clothes. “What assistance can I provide?” He pulled on his wooden straw and dug among the grassy residue of his current brew.

“We assumed you had already been briefed by Miss Carstairs already,” I said.

“They tell me nothing,” he said, with a shrug.

I told our host that we had been sent to track

down my father, whose last known whereabouts was a town called Juliaca. I did not tell him that my father may have faked his own death, working on the assumption that such sensitive information ought to be rationed out on a need to know basis. I had no idea whether Edoualdo was a major figure within the hierarchy of the Ministry, or merely a foot soldier, but it was safer to assume the latter, and to speak as circumspectly as possible.

“Alex Willoughby is the man we are looking for,” I said, measuring my words carefully. “We have reason to believe that he has information that may be advantageous to our long-term aims.”

Freddie interrupted me. “You see, Simon’s father is pretending to be dead, or at least we don’t think he’s dead. He left Simon these very dull diaries in his will, full of nothing but weather reports and tide times and what have you, only now we think that might be some sort of code to let us know he’s still alive, without the Vrtaal catching on. Of course they were desperate to get their hands on the diaries too, and they even kidnapped poor Simon here, but he gave them the slip after Professor Grunewald and his henchmen all died in a car crash. Well, we’re not entirely sure they’re dead, but one can only hope, eh? Anyway, that’s about the sum of it. I can’t think of anything else, can you Simon?”

Exasperated, I shook my head. So much for discretion, never Freddie’s strongest suit.

“Juliaca, eh?” said Edoualdo, sucking thoughtfully on his *mate*. “The arsehole of Peru!”

Freddie and I exchanged a look. “Is that so?” I asked.

“Oh, yes!” insisted Edoualdo, “A terrible place. A little corner of hell raised up to Earth by God, as a warning to us sinners!” He flashed us another gold smile, and cracked his knuckles. “Not a patch on Lima. Now Lima, there is a city you can really live in! You agree? Yes?”

“We haven’t had much time to look round,” I explained, “but I’m sure you’re right.” From what little I had seen of the capital, I could not imagine a sorrier town on the face of the Earth. What could Juliaca offer to top it?

"Oh well!" said Edoualdo, "We cannot always live in such a paradise, no? Tomorrow we will travel to Juliaca and look for your father, Mr Willoughby. I promise you that if he is there, and he is alive, we will find him."

If I had thought air travel uncomfortable, I would have given a thousand pounds to have the padded aeroplane seat I had come to despise on our way across the Atlantic fitted to the back of the flat bed truck that became our home for the next week. We were all piled into the back, open to the elements, as the driver, a bull-necked Indian who spoke not once to us during the whole journey, sat in the driver's seat. The passenger seat was occupied by a mangy and thoroughly unfriendly dog, who kept his eyes fixed to the road the whole time. Freddie objected to the dog taking the only other proper seat in the truck, but Edoualdo assured us that the dog was absolutely necessary to keep a look out for bandits in the mountain passes.

"I'm perfectly capable of keeping watch," said Freddie. "And the dog can ride in the back. At least he should take his turn. It's only fair."

"Ah, but you might fall asleep. The dog never falls asleep."

"How come?" I asked.

"He knows that if he falls asleep, the driver will beat him with a big stick."

"I suppose that makes sense of a kind," I said, and decided that having my spine jolted out of alignment in the back of the truck was probably preferable to being beaten with a stick for dozing off.

"We are very lucky," said Edoualdo as we bumped across mile after mile of rubble strewn dirt tracks. "Some of these vehicles are very bad, full of chickens, and you know, dirty people."

We had passed many of these people walking by the side of the road, often laden with sacks and boxes, and sometimes carrying chickens, dead and alive. We stopped for nobody, and left the pedestrians in our dust cloud.

We travelled for many miles down the pan-American highway, a grandly named dirt track that snakes down the country following the coastline, and crossing the almost uninhabited desert that runs down the Western side of Peru.

Giant sand dunes towered over us on either side, blocking the sea from view.

"Jolly place for a holiday," commented Freddie, and when I looked round I noticed that he was not being sarcastic. "I must tell Monica about it," he went on. "She'd love it here."

"Would she?" I asked. I knew that Freddie hung around with some fairly eccentric females, but I could not imagine the woman who could see this barren wasteland as an appropriate holiday destination.

"What about Monica?" I shouted above the roar of the engine. "Won't she be worried when she finds you gone?"

He gave it a moment's thought, as though the notion had never occurred to him before, then said, "No, she'll understand, I'm sure. Won't she?"

"Well, I've never met her," I said. "I don't have any insight into her character."

"No, I don't suppose you have," said Freddie. "Come to think of it, nor do I. But I'm an artist. She'll see that I can't be compared to run of the mill men. Society's arbitrary standards of behaviour don't apply to artists."

"Where does Monica think you are?" I asked. "What did you tell her when you left the house with Miss Carstairs?"

"Nothing," said Freddie, looking slightly annoyed that I continued to pester him with these questions of his personal responsibility towards others. "I didn't like to interrupt her bridge game."

It was pointless to pursue the question any further. I wondered what had induced Freddie to agree to this expedition. He was not much of a traveller, a man of the metropolis who was fond of saying that in London, the whole world was on your doorstep. The British Museum round the corner had half the world's treasures squeezed into its glass display cases. Emigrants and tourists from every nation on Earth flocked to the city. What need, then, for the Englishman to stray beyond his capital? That was Freddie's constant refrain when globe-trotters began to bore or upstage him with their tales of grisly dishes and exotic love affairs. Had he suddenly changed his tune? He might have very easily

refused to join me on this wild-goose chase. Then I remembered Freddie's unerring instinct for a free lunch, like the mysterious inner compass that guides migrating birds. All our expenses were being paid for, I assumed, by the British taxpayer, and that had proved enough to drag Freddie all the way to South America. I only hoped he did not live to regret it, knowing that if he did, the blame would fall on me.

I said that I would try to get some sleep.

"Good luck," said Freddie. "I think I'll just sit here and watch the sun set over the mountains."

"Righto," I said, before dragging my overcoat across myself and tipping my hat so that it covered my face the way I had seen detectives and other fearless types do in the movies. I had been awake for over thirty-six hours, and my body was screaming for sleep, even if my bed was a vibrating, cold steel platform.

As I lay there in the darkness I wondered how long it would take for Freddie to get bored of the Andes. It was a curious thing, but despite having always dreamed of seeing the majestic peaks through which we were winding our slow way, after a few minutes of wonder and appreciation, the eye becomes jaded, and one jagged peak begins to resemble another, whether or not the sun is setting behind it. After several hours of this, one cannot help but hanker for some diversion from the landscape, a raggedy village, a herd of alpaca, an old rusting car by the roadside, anything to relieve the boredom of uninterrupted nature. My ennui made me feel ashamed, for it was not the fault of the Andes that I wearied of them, but something lacking in myself, an inability to pay attention, or to put it another way, an addiction to distractions that comes with spending one's whole life in cities, living at the city's pace.

Almost impossibly, given the circumstances, sleep came. I dreamt of my father, for the first time in fifteen years. He looked just as I remembered him when I was four years old, not much older than I am now, but in the dream I was an adult too. I was back at Kershaw Grammar, taking the fifth form D stream for Elizabethan drama, and they were reading out *The Duchess of Malfi*, each pupil taking a part. Hetherington,

who was supposed to be reading the part of the Duchess, was gazing out of the window and had missed his line. I was just about to go over to his desk and rap him on the knuckles with a wooden ruler, when I saw that it was not Hetherington at all, but Freddie Simlow, looking very ridiculous in a Kershaw uniform several sizes too small for him.

"Simlow!" I bellowed. "Your line!"

Covered in such childish confusion as I doubt the real Freddie had ever experienced, he tried to find his place in the book, but could not.

The classroom door burst open and my father staggered in, dripping blood from the stab wound in his chest where a stiletto handle still protruded.

"How dare you interrupt my teaching!" I cried.

"I am Duchess of Malfi still!" croaked my father, before collapsing to the floor in a rapidly expanding dark pool.

I woke up in darkness, unable to recall where I was. Then I felt the overcoat on my head, and remembered. The truck had come to a halt but the engine was still running.

"Freddie!" I said. "What's the hold-up?"

"Shhh!" he replied. "It's a hold-up!"

"Well I know that much," I said irritably, emerging from my warm nest into crisp early morning air. Then I understood what he meant. There were men with rifles surrounding the vehicle. The dog had fallen asleep.

Freddie was standing up in the bed of the truck, holding up his hands. I decided I had better do the same. A small, rodent-like man wearing a greasy cap and an even greasier moustache pointed the barrel of his rifle at us and barked something, perhaps in Spanish, perhaps not.

"What do you think he wants?" asked Freddie. "Money?"

"We haven't any," I said. "Where's Edoualdo? He might be able to translate."

"Indisposed," said Freddie glumly, and nodded to his right. I turned and saw Edoualdo lying on his back a few metres away, a gunman standing guard over him. So the gunshot had not been a warning.

The rat-like man barked his instruction again and pointed the barrel of the rifle to the ground.

"I think he wants us to get down," I said.

"I do believe you're right," said Freddie. "But do you think it's wise?"

"I'm not sure we have a choice."

We climbed down onto the road. Another two of the bandits, for that is what they undoubtedly were, searched us. They found only loose change, but took our wristwatches and our shoes. Then one of them clambered into the back of the truck and seized on my overcoat, trying it on for size.

"It doesn't suit you," said Freddie, and would have said more, but a jab to the belly with the end of a rifle cut him short.

Then the thing that I had most feared, short of being killed, happened. The man wearing my overcoat reached into the breast pocket and pulled out two British passports. He held them above his head, and there was a roar of triumph from the rest of the mob.

"I thought you said you were going to keep those in a safe place," said Freddie.

"It was a safe place. Safe in most circumstances anyway."

"You should have sewn them into the lining," he whispered.

"With what? Did you bring a needle and thread?"

"It wasn't my responsibility. You're the one who said you'd keep them in a safe place."

"Well that hardly matters now," I fumed, as a man with a dusty black poncho snatched the passports from the hand of the bandit on the truck and examined them carefully, glancing up twice, I assume to confirm that our faces matched the photos inside. He had a darker complexion than his fellows, and his face was as rugged and impassive as a stone carving of one of the ancient Incan kings. Clearly he was in charge.

He took the passports over to the man standing over the Edoualdo's body, who I now recognised as our driver. The bandit chief exchanged a few words with the driver, and I saw money change hands, a thick wad of foreign notes.

"Perhaps the dog didn't fall asleep after all," I said to Freddie.

Freddie didn't reply. The dog was nowhere to be seen.

Our hands tied behind our backs, and roped together like a chain gang, Freddie and I watched Edoualdo's still-warm body flung into the back of the truck, which performed a hasty three point turn in the road and headed back down the mountain, its driver now considerably richer.

The bandit chief squared up to us.

"You two Englishmen."

There was no arguing with him there. I had never felt more ineffectually English in my life.

"Now we walk. You try to escape, we shoot you."

His instructions could not have been clearer, but Freddie cleared his throat.

"Point of clarification: where exactly are we going?"

"Long way," said the chief. "You meet El Alcalde. He want to see you."

"And how should we address you?" asked Freddie, ignoring my black look.

The chief didn't understand, but Freddie persisted. "What – is – your – name?" he asked in the loud, slow voice adopted by Englishmen abroad all over the world.

The man came as close as he ever did to smiling. "You may call me Mr Boss," he said. "And now you walk."

We walked. We walked further than I have ever walked, or had ever thought myself capable of walking. Crossing the Andes had seemed an arduous task in the truck. On foot the task was incomparably more painful and tedious. My hiking experience was limited to a few gentle expeditions into the Yorkshire Dales with Ursula. Nothing could have prepared me for this forced march.

We must have reached a significant altitude in the truck, because within a few miles my breath was laboured and painful, and it seemed impossible to get enough air into my lungs, no matter how hard I gasped. We walked in single file along narrow goat trails, our rat-like guard in front of me, and Freddie roped behind. I could

not imagine how Freddie was faring, he whose abhorrence of the outdoor life was legendary, and whose daily exercise was limited to raising his right arm to flag down taxis. Later he told me that he had only managed to keep going by repeatedly promising himself that after one more step, he would throw himself to the ground, not caring whether the bandits beat him or shot him or merely tipped him over the edge of the nearest precipice. Luckily for us both, he always found the prospect of a single step more, however painful, preferable to taking a tumble, or a bullet.

The bandits walked in silence. They all chewed on wads of dried green leaves that were doled out by Mr Boss. Even Freddie and I received our ration. Neither of us knew the purpose of this herb, but Freddie speculated that it might be some form of chewing tobacco. Were it not for my gnawing hunger, and the fact that all the other bandits were happily chewing on the stuff without any visible ill effects, I would have refused my share, or spat it out discreetly on the path. The leaves were faintly bitter and tended to numb the cheeks and the inside of the mouth. We chewed and walked, and as Freddie noted later, somehow the walking became easier when one was concentrating on the chewing.

Occasionally Mr Boss called a halt while he and his second in command, a fat, bearded fellow who leered at us with yellow incisors as though we were his next meal, argued over the map, although naturally we were not allowed to see it, nor told where we were going.

I would not have been entirely surprised if cannibalism had been on the minds of our captors, but the bandits did not eat us. Even the theft of our watches and clothes was incidental to their main objective, which I quickly understood to be kidnap. We were valuable because we were British citizens, and our fellow countrymen would pay handsomely for our safe return. That was how kidnap worked in theory, but I could not help wondering who would stump up our ransom. I did not trust Miss Carstairs and her colleagues at the Ministry to pay up. No doubt they had the means, assuming the ransom demand was not astronomical, but I suspected

that Freddie and I were both, in military parlance, expendable. Wasn't that what all spies were told by their bosses, at least in Hollywood: "If you are captured, we shall deny all knowledge of your existence." I could not be certain, but it seemed to me that the Ministry, whoever they really served, were the kind of organisation to behave just like that.

And who else did I have in the world? I was virtually an orphan now that my mother had been committed, and I lived what has been erroneously described as the carefree life of a bachelor. I was childless and my time was entirely my own. If I were shot today, the only person who would notice my absence would be the Headmaster at Kershaw Grammar, Mr Cresswell, and he would allow only a brief period of uncertainty before advertising for a replacement. And while as an art dealer Monica might have access to larger stores of cash than the average private individual, unless she was a very forgiving woman indeed, it struck me as unlikely in the extreme that she would be prepared to pay for our release. I did not know whether Freddie had any other friends of similar financial clout, but I was dimly aware that he had left a trail of unpaid debts and broken hearts all over the more fashionable districts of London. No, nobody would be rushing to secure Freddie's release. His parents, it always astonished me to recall, were dirt poor Northumberland sheep farmers, and Freddie had toiled for years to rid himself of his regional accent.

So we were doomed. We had before us perhaps a few weeks more of marching, followed by a period spent chained to a wall in the cellar of some stinking hovel, before the bandits realised what a poor investment Freddie and I were. We would be blindfolded, stood against a wall, and shot. In my imagination, our bodies would then be fed to the pigs, but that was merely a morbid fantasy. What did it matter anyway, once we were dead? Strangely enough, the thought gave me a sense of relief, almost of peace.

Towards dusk our path began to turn downhill, and once it got dark, the bandits stopped us, and rolled out some fairly unpleasant looking

tents that appeared to be made from animal skins sewn together. We were given a cup of water each, and a handful of strips of dried beef, then the rat-like man, who I had learned was called Pedro, motioned us to help put the tents up, using a frame of sticks bound together with twine. He busied himself with building a campfire. At first I wondered where he had found the wood, for we were a long way above the tree line, where little more than a few sparse grasses clung to the icy rocks. But Pedro had carried large bundles of sticks in his backpack all the way across the mountains.

Mr Boss ignored us throughout the evening, standing to one side with his second in command Raul, who made what I gathered from the reaction of his colleagues were some very funny jokes, most probably at Freddie's and my expense. Not for the first time since we had landed in Lima, I wished I had a little more Spanish. I still had a smattering of Latin, but I failed to recognise any similarity in the bandits' gruff speech. Freddie reminded me that our captors could have been speaking an entirely different tongue, which owed nothing to the romance languages. Perhaps it was better for my peace of mind that I didn't understand. I did not like the way Raul kept grinning over at us in that wolfish way.

When the sky was heavy with stars, after the bandits had finished drinking dark liquor from leather bottles, and the fire had been stoked again with fuel, Mr Boss strode over to where Freddie and I were sat apart from the main group, squatted on his heels, and addressed us.

"Time to sleep now. You Englishmen very weak. Very tired. Not strong like us. You sleep in there." He pointed to the dark, pungent interior of the tent.

"And where are you going to sleep?" I asked him.

"Outside," said Mr Boss.

Freddie put up his hand like a schoolboy. "When will we meet this El Alcalde?" he demanded. "And where are we going?"

"Tomorrow, tomorrow," said Mr Boss with a complacent wave of his shovel-like hand. "No more questions. Sleep now."

I bridled at being labelled a weak Englishman, and nannied in this way by our kidnappers, but the truth was that I was dead tired, and thankful for the tent, however distasteful the smell, and the smell was indescribable. I imagined this was how a tannery smelled. Freddie seemed not to mind, as he was already asleep by the time I had crawled inside, and he had left very little space for a second occupant.

I too was asleep the moment my head hit the rolled up blanket that served for a pillow.

What felt like moments later, hands were roughly shaking me awake.

"Go back to sleep, Freddie," I moaned.

"Shhh!" said a voice that did not belong to Freddie. "Wake up, Señor. I can help you, but you must be very quiet."

In the pre-dawn light I could barely make out the face of Pedro, the rat-faced man who had kept guard over us for most of the day.

"You can speak English?" I said blearily, sitting up as best I could in the cramped tent.

"Please be quiet!" said Pedro. "You must run away. All the others are asleep now. I am on watch for the next two hours. It is your only chance."

Pedro's English was so good, and his English accent so flawless, that for a moment I could not take in what he was saying, but merely goggled at the man. Then, regaining my senses, I said. "I must discuss this with Freddie. He has a say in this too."

I made to shake Freddie's shoulder, but Pedro stayed my hand. "No!" he whispered harshly. "Leave him! You have no time for talking things through. You must go now while you can. Your friend will only slow you down. Now go! Go!"

"Go where?" I asked. "I wouldn't last more than a few hours out here alone. And I don't know the route. It's madness to talk about escaping! Why are you doing all this anyway? What's in it for you? I don't have any money."

"No discussion..." began Pedro, as he struggled to untie the ropes that still bound Freddie and I together, but a noise outside the tent stopped him short. Somebody was stirring in their sleep. We both sat there, frozen, waiting to be discovered. The unseen bandit had woken up,

and was pacing the camp, calling Pedro's name. It was Raul.

"What shall we do?" I whispered.

"It does not matter," said Pedro with a shrug of resignation. "It is all over." He closed his eyes and rocked on his heels, praying.

"What the dickens!" said Freddie, waking with a start. "Why is that man praying? Is he worshipping us?"

Outside, Raul had heard the commotion, as had others, and he was making for our tent. I saw a shadow flash past on the fabric, before the tent flap was thrust aside and the wide, bearded face of Raul, like some ravening, salivating bear, filled the space. One thick arm reached in and grabbed Pedro by the shoulder. Raul shouted a question that didn't need much translation. Shaking with fear, Pedro tried to make an excuse. I didn't understand his explanation of what he was doing in our tent, but it didn't satisfy Raul, because he dragged the little man out, and proceeded to knock him from side to side like a rag doll.

I could not bear to see a potential ally abused in this way. I crawled out of the tent, without any clear plan of what I intended to do. I struggled to my feet to see Pedro and Raul bellowing at each other nose to nose. Pedro gave his adversary a hefty push. The bigger man stood firm, looking half astonished, half amused. It was obvious to any observer who was going to come off worse. The disturbance had woken the rest of the gang, and they looked nervously to their leader. Mr Boss stood with his arms folded, as though he had stood like that all night, watching the entertainment with eyes devoid of expression.

Pedro swung a punch with his short, wiry arms, and didn't connect. Raul had merely stepped back. He laughed, and the rest of the gang laughed with him, a touch nervously, glad that it was Pedro and not they who were about to take a pummelling. All at once, I understood: Pedro was trying to give me a second chance to escape. Quite why he would risk his life for me was still a mystery, but I had no time to mull over this question now. I had only a few seconds before the bandits realised I was no longer tethered to my companion. I looked behind me at the

open tent flap, and saw Freddie snoring within. He had simply gone back to sleep. This fact alone made me so angry that the prospect of abandoning him to the mercy of the bandits seemed momentarily acceptable. I took a deep breath and waited until I saw Raul land a bone-shattering blow on Pedro's jaw. There was a general cheer from the rest of the camp. I ran.

I ran behind the tent, ducking down instinctively. There was no tree cover to head for, but a low hillock a hundred yards away promised some protection, and I headed thither. It was further away than I had estimated, and before I was halfway, I heard the sound that I had been dreading. A gun fired somewhere behind me, and an angry shout echoed against the wall of the mountain. I thought I had heard Mr Boss's voice, but dared not look round. All I could do was run. Every second I expected another shot, one which would tear through my chest. I ran, my lungs screaming in the impoverished air. When the next shot came, I looked down at my chest, but saw no gaping exit wound.

I prayed that Freddie would wake up and follow my example. Surely even a notoriously heavy sleeper like Freddie could not sleep through a gunfight. I had provided him, I told myself as I ran, with a first rate distraction. But I could not expiate my guilt as easily as that. At some level I knew that I had abandoned my friend to save myself.

The third shot zinged off a rock. Taken unawares, I jumped away from the noise, misjudged my footing, and saw too late that I had also misjudged my distance from the edge of the path. Beyond the edge of the path was empty air. I fell into it. Below me a distant snowfield was growing rapidly. The white rushed up to meet me. There was a soft crumping noise, but I carried on falling. Snow and ice collapsed above and below me as I slid down towards darkness. My head snapped back, and met a hard surface. The world turned from white to black. It was a blessed relief.



Another Road to Juliaca

When I woke, I spent a moment wondering why I was so cold and uncomfortable. Was I on the back of the truck with Freddie, snaking through the mountain passes? No, that was in the past, I remembered. I was in the awful, reeking tent, held captive by a group of brigands after a ransom. No, I told myself, that too was over and done with. I waited there, feeling the damp that had invaded my socks, as I waited for my brain to arrange my memories in the right order. I moved my right hand to my mouth and tasted snow and blood. It all came back to me.

I was in a snow cave. I could feel both my legs and my arms seemed to move as normally as they had before, so I assumed that I had not fallen far. Had I hit some concealed ledge just below the level of the path? No, I had a very clear, if brief memory of hitting the snowfield squarely, and feeling the cold crystals against my face. In that case, I must have broken through a thin crust of ice and snow, into a shallow cavern beneath the surface. I looked in the direction that my instincts told me was up. Endless white, bright and luminous, painful to the eyes. That was the least of my pains. My back felt like someone had struck it with a steel rod. Or rather, it felt as though someone had replaced my spine with a steel rod. At least I could feel something there, I told myself.

What of my captors? Had they pursued me down the cliff? I heard no shouts, no gunshots, no footsteps. They must have given me up for dead. And what about Freddie? Had he tried his luck, used the distraction of my escape to attempt his own? I doubted it. Freddie would not have risked starvation to regain his liberty. At least the bandits fed him. It was the pattern of Freddie's life: find somebody willing to look after him, to take care of such wearisome chores as keeping body and soul together, and then stick to that person like glue until they tired of his sponging and shiftless ways. Previously this position had been filled by a succession of

female fine art graduates with independent incomes. Now it was a band of filthy, Peruvian bandits that played the role of Freddie's nursemaids, but he was not a man to look askance at the offer of some strips of dried salted beef and half a cup of melt water, when the alternative was so unattractive.

These and other strange musings occupied my mind as I lay in the snow cave, enveloped in quiet, a kind of sensory deprivation were it not for the increasing pain and cold. I decided that I could waste no more of my thoughts on Freddie. He could shift for himself. Before too long, the lack of food and water would deprive me of the ability to think clearly, and I had to think my way out of this situation before the hallucinations and terror set in. In my youth I had read stories about the fate of mountain climbers and arctic explorers who lost their way or became separated from their friends. These tales of madness and survival returned now to haunt me.

I was drifting into aimless reverie, and on towards sleep. But that would not do! I pinched the skin on the back of my hand, already pinched red by the frost, in an attempt to stay awake. I had to think hard and clear, else I was doomed.

Firstly: who was Pedro, and why had he persuaded me to flee the bandits? Was he another employee of the Ministry in deep cover? It was scarcely credible that the Ministry would have had the supernatural foresight to infiltrate Mr Boss's gang. For one thing, how could they have known that these particular bandits would happen upon Freddie and I? Had we been a few hours earlier or later starting our journey to Juliaca, we might have avoided the ambush altogether.

Unless our kidnapping was no simple crime of opportunity! Maybe we had been kidnapped to order – there was, after all, no other route passable by motor vehicles between Lima and Juliaca. It was for precisely this reason that bandits infested the mountains in this area. Who would want to stop our progress towards Juliaca so badly? The only name I had was El Alcalde, and that told me nothing at all.

I wondered too at Pedro's sang-froid as he had watched our guide Edoualdo slain before his

eyes without showing a hint of anger or dissent. Had I not watched Pedro toss the lifeless body onto the back of the truck, so that our treacherous driver could take the damning evidence away? What must have gone through his mind in those moments? It was too awful to speculate.

My most pressing concerns were how to free myself from the snow, how to get myself down from the mountain, and how to get myself out of Peru and back to my snug little room in the teachers' cottage in Kershaw Grammar as soon as possible. I will not pretend that I had any intention of fulfilling my mission. I cared not a jot for Miss Carstairs's opinion of me, or that of the other fellows at the Ministry. The fate of the whole world was nothing if it stood between me and my warm bed in Yorkshire. It was a shame that I had failed to unravel the mystery of my father's life and death, but as a motivating force, curiosity was no match for hunger and thirst.

Could I dig myself out of the snow? Using frozen, numb hands like paddles I began to dig in a haphazard way. I kept up this effort until my hands began to bleed, and I had to cram my fists, one at a time, into my mouth, like a baby, to try and soothe the burning pain. Then I realised my mistake: I had been digging downwards, creating shallow grooves on either side. I had to dig upwards, removing the snow and ice directly above my face where the sunlight was still filtering through.

I tried again, scraping at the ceiling of my cavern and streaking the ice with blood from my hands. I anticipated the roof of the cave collapsing in on me, bringing down a deluge of snow to bury me completely. Some of the snow fell away, hitting me in the face, and each time I brushed it away in a panic, wondering if this was the final moment before everything gave way. But the end did not come. Instead, I continued to dig, stopping every five scrapes to suck my hands. The snow I dislodged gathered on either side of me in loose piles, and before long there was no more room in the tiny, coffin-like space. I decided to try and pack the dug snow underneath my body, compressing it with my weight, and perhaps even lifting myself up towards the surface by slow degrees.

The work was endless and punishing, but it was better than doing nothing. It is impossible to reckon how long I kept up the routine of scraping and resting, scraping and resting. Soon I could not think of anything else, or recall a time when I had done anything other than dig snow from a few inches above my face. Each time I rested, I had to rest for longer, and the more difficult it was to start digging again. I felt myself slipping away into dreams of digging, and forced myself awake, scraping furiously at the snow, fighting off sleep.

Sleep can be evaded, denied and put off, but it is persistent, and it will always win out in the end. I began to imagine that my bedroom in England was just beyond the wall of snow, and that I was digging my way through that wall. Safety and comfort seemed just inches away, almost visible through the white crust. Just a few more handfuls to go, and I would be home. I thought of the dog in the passenger seat of our truck, ever vigilant, never falling asleep. If only I knew the dog's secret, I would be safe. Then I remembered that the dog really had fallen asleep when we had needed him most. He was probably to blame for this whole misadventure.

I fell asleep.

A noise woke me, some time later: a dog's bark. I opened my eyes into bright sunlight, then shut them again, and groaned. Every muscle in my body was aching. A dog's tongue slobbered horribly over my face, and I pushed it away weakly with one hand. I could smell the animal's hot breath hanging in the air.

"You're alive," said Pedro.

"Thank God," I replied. "I hope the afterlife has more to offer than stinking dogs slavering over me."

I sat up, waving the excited dog away.

"That's not... is it?"

Pedro was struggling to free my legs from the snow. "Yes, that is Edoualdo's dog," he said. "He is the one who found you, so you mustn't be too mean to him. He caught your smell."

"Smell?" I asked. "What smell?"

Pedro laughed. "Well, he is a giant's dog. He smelled the blood of an Englishman."

The dog barked, and copying Pedro, began

digging furiously in the snow with his front paws. He made more headway than Pedro, and in a few minutes I was free. I was now lying in a shallow crater on the vast snowfield. I sat up. Pedro and the dog's footprints were the only marks on the undulating, spotless blanket of white.

"Where did you come from?" I asked, my thoughts still awlirl.

"Juliaca," said Pedro.

"Juliaca," I said. "That's where I'm going. Arsehole of Peru."

"What?" said Pedro, frowning as he dug a green glass bottle from his rucksack.

"Just something that Edoualdo told me," I said.

"Well don't say it again!" said Pedro as he offered me the bottle. "Not when we get into Juliaca itself. People there will not like you saying that. In fact, I was born in Juliaca myself, so don't say it at all!"

"What's this?" I asked, examining the bottle, but finding no label. I sniffed at the neck: it smelt strong. "Brandy? Shouldn't he be carrying it round his neck in a tiny little barrel?" I asked, pointing to the dog, who had laid down with his head on his paws. "Where's his little barrel?"

"What are you talking about?" cried Pedro, curling his thin black moustache in irritation. "The snow has sent you crazy? Just drink!"

I drank. It was definitely not brandy. I coughed and gasped and drank some more.

"Don't drink it all," said Pedro, snatching the bottle from my lips. "We will need that for the journey."

"Journey?" I said. "Ah! The journey to Juliaca!"

"Yes," said Pedro. "We go to Juliaca and give Edoualdo his dog back."

He helped me to my feet. They felt wooden. I couldn't imagine how I was ever going to be able to walk more than a single step, never mind all the way down the mountain.

"Edoualdo's dog?" I asked, hobbling forward to test out my new wooden feet. My ankle turned inwards with a sharp pain, and I would have collapsed had Pedro not grabbed my arms and hauled me back upright. "We are talking about

the same Edoualdo aren't we? Very tall chap? Took a bullet in the chest back at the mountain pass?"

"Yes, yes!" said Pedro. "Now, enough chatting! You English fellows are worse than old women, always chat, chat, chat! We must reach Juliaca before nightfall. Hurry, now!"

The dog barked, as though emphasising the urgency, and bounded away, following his own footsteps back down the mountain.

I surveyed the vast snowfield ahead of us, and looked upwards to the cloudless sky, where the sun was already in its descent. I doubted whether I could reach even the edge of the snowfield before dusk, but I said nothing, stung a little by Pedro's taunts about my countrymen.

Somehow we managed to get off that snowfield, though my feet sank into the snow up to my knees with every step, and I fell down on my face more times than I can recall. Each time I did, the dog, whose name I never found out, would dash back to snuffle against my face, and Pedro would haul me back upright. He refused to answer any more of my questions, saying that he had to concentrate on finding the right path, but I was still anxious to learn what had happened in my absence. Where was Freddie and how had Pedro fared in his brawl with the bestial Raul? Pedro dragged me on in silence.

Juliaca looks better at night because they have no streetlamps. There are no proper streets to illuminate, only dusty donkey tracks that turn into quagmires when the rains come. In fact, the list of modern conveniences lacking in Juliaca is long and ever-expanding, for as the rest of the world progresses, Juliaca is left further and further behind. No doubt there are many very similar towns in Peru, and all over South America, but it was Juliaca where I was now stranded.

My problems did not start in earnest until the following morning. By the time Pedro and I had stumbled into town, I was asleep on my feet, and accepted the hotel room that was offered me without question. I barely managed to drag my boots off before collapsing onto the mattress. I awoke to find myself in an uncarpeted bare room with peeling, oddly stained wallpaper and cockroaches frolicking without restraint on the tiled

floor. As I placed one foot on the cold tiles, the beasts scattered underneath the bed. I noticed that two of my toes had gone purple. I wondered whether there might be a doctor in Juliaca who could treat frostbite.

A few hours later, when I had got a more accurate picture of Juliaca, I changed my mind about finding a doctor. Juliaca's surgery, or what passed for a surgery, but was to all appearances nothing more than a filthy adobe shack frequented by feral dogs and stray children. I would wait until I got back to England, and my local GP, even if the delay meant that my whole foot had to be amputated. Nothing in Juliaca was quite clean, from the cup that my morning tea was poured into, to the sink in my bathroom, and I had no doubt that this also applied to surgical instruments. Perhaps I am being unfair to Juliaca's doctor, but my impression of the town was one of all-pervasive squalor.

The next morning after I had made the best of a poor breakfast in the Hotel Ferrocarril's draughty dining room, Pedro met me in the lobby and we went to visit Edoualdo together at his house. When we arrived he was lying in bed sipping a *mate* from an ornate silver cup and straw. I saw no evidence of bandages or bullet wounds. The dog, failed bandit spotter but thankfully more adept mountain rescuer, lay on the cold concrete floor, head on his paws, looking as worn out as I felt.

"How are you feeling?" I asked, full of concern.

"Fine, fine!" laughed Edoualdo, springing out of bed. "I drank too much last night, that is all."

"As an anaesthetic?" I asked, imagining that alcohol was perhaps the only means of pain relief in Juliaca.

"What? No! To celebrate our success!" he said, clapping me on the back with his giant palms. "Although you nearly messed up the whole operation with that running away business, it all worked out somehow."

Utterly perplexed, and more than a little distracted by my fatigue and injuries, I had to ask the Argentinian to explain. He revealed to me that the shooting had been a sham, a carefully rehearsed piece of theatre devised to fool Mr

Boss and his compadres. While I was still snoring under my overcoat, the bandits had stopped our truck, but it had been the diminutive Pedro who rushed forward and dragged the seven foot tall Edoualdo off the back of the vehicle.

"I was sure they would see through it," sighed Edoualdo. "He pulled and pulled at my coat, but I wasn't going anywhere. I really threw myself off that truck."

Pedro replied sharply to this in Spanish, and while I missed the nuances of the quarrel that followed, I got the gist of Pedro's argument. Some half-hearted insults were tossed around, before I intervened.

"How did you avoid being shot?" I asked. "Blanks?"

"That's right," said Edoualdo. "Pedro and I made to have a fight. That was the easy part – we have plenty of practice at fighting one another. Everyone was watching when I punched him..."

"You hit me too hard," said Pedro, who was clearly struggling to keep up with the bigger man's more fluent English. "Learn to pull the punches!"

Edoualdo shrugged. "Learn to duck," he said, grinning at me. "Well, I died, as you saw, and our good friend Antonio carried me back down the mountain."

"Antonio? You mean the driver? I thought I saw Mr Boss paying him off."

"You did," said Edoualdo. "Well, why not let your enemies pay you, if they want to?"

So the entire kidnap had been a ruse. But to what end? Freddie and I had still been kidnapped. What had their elaborate charades achieved?

"Why didn't you help us escape?" I demanded. "We were made to march all day across that mountain! I might easily have died out there!" I could feel myself going pink with indignation. Then I remembered about Freddie: he was still in the hands of the kidnappers, if he was still alive. "My friend's life is still in danger!" I said. "Why are we sitting around here swapping anecdotes? Shouldn't we call the police?"

Pedro shook his head. "Nobody in this town

ever talks to the police unless they have to," he said.

"Well, I think this is one of those times when we shall just have to!" I cried. "They've got to do something! Maybe I should phone the British Embassy in Lima. Where is there a public telephone in this town?"

The two men exchanged a worried glance. "There is a telephone in the bar," said Edoualdo, "But the telephone exchange is in the Town Hall."

I worried about what state Freddie might be in, and reproached myself for not doing anything sooner. "So what?" I said. "What's that got to do with it? I'll demand to speak to the British Ambassador! Come on, let's find this bar before it's too late!"

I turned for the door but Pedro's arm blocked my way.

"You are going to stay here," he said, one hand holding onto something in his inside pocket, probably a pistol of some sort.

I tried to push his hand away, but he was stronger. "Now look here!" I fumed. "I'm a British subject!" It sounded ridiculous even as the words came out of my mouth. Edoualdo strode over.

"You will put your friend's life in more danger if you try to involve the authorities!" he said, taking hold of me by the shoulders. "That is not the way we do things in Peru, and certainly it is not the way to deal with the Vrtaal! Didn't they explain all this to you at the Ministry?"

"But what do they want with us?" I asked. "What is any of this to do with us?"

Edoualdo shook his head, his brow furrowed with worry. "I wish I knew," he said mournfully. He dragged out a chair for me, and we both sat down at an unvarnished table. Edoualdo refilled the *mate* cup with boiling water from his wood stove, and carefully handed me the brew. The sharing of *mate* was a communal ritual upon which Edoualdo, like all Argentinians, placed great importance, and his offer could not be refused without causing serious offence, whether one liked this traditional beverage or not. I emphatically did not, but did my best to disguise it. Pedro stayed by the door, arms

folded, guarding the exit as though he suspected I might try to escape again. I took a sip of *mate* and held the cup out for Pedro. He made a face and shook his head. Edoualdo cleared his throat.

"The Vrtaal have preyed on the people of this country for generations, for centuries if you believe the historians. Some say that Vrtaal practices can be traced back to Inca times. Ever since the founding of the Peruvian nation, successive presidents have tried to root out this ancient corruption, but all have failed. The Government is riddled with Vrtaal men. Those officials the Vrtaal have not co-opted, they have coerced, bribed, threatened or killed."

"But to what end?" I said. "What do they crave? Is it power, pure and simple?"

Edoualdo shrugged his massive shoulders. "No, if it were that simple, they could have taken over the country many years ago. We just do not know what they are about. It was always believed that they were just a remnant of more barbaric times, a native cult that managed to avoid assimilation by the Catholic Church. There are plenty of these ancient religious groups practicing all over the country, usually very discreetly. They are mostly local affairs limited to a few villages. But the Vrtaal have always been different. They are, in their own perverse way, evangelists. They have recruited a network of followers all over the world."

"Miss Carstairs mentioned human sacrifice," I said. "Is there any proof of that?"

"Every year around a hundred people go missing from Juliaca," said Edoualdo. "No bodies have ever been discovered, and nobody has ever filed a missing persons report with the police. Do you consider that proof enough? Like I said, people around here do not involve the authorities in their lives if they have a choice. This is a town run by fear."

Edoualdo met my frightened stare with his own steady gaze, grim and stoic. I turned to look at Pedro, who was still guarding the door, although I suspected now that he was keeping a lookout, rather than preventing my escape. He seemed jumpy, and kept peering out through a spy hole in the door of Edoualdo's hovel.

“What happens to them?” I whispered. “The missing, what do the Vrtaal do with them?”

“We do not know. Nobody has ever managed to infiltrate the cult.”

There was a crash. Instinctively I cowered, covering my head with my hands.

I span round. The door had been smashed open, and Pedro lay on the floor, a boot on his neck. He made a strangulated sound and tried to reach his hand into his inside pocket, but the boot pressed down harder and Pedro gave up the attempt. The boot belonged to Mr Boss. He seemed to fill the doorway with his huge frame. He was not carrying a weapon of any kind, and stood there with his arms folded.

“So you made it to Juliaca!” said Mr Boss to me with a snarl of amusement. “We all say you die when you fell off the cliff. Never mind. You die later, yes? But now, you go to meet El Alcalde. He is waiting for you many hours, Freddie Simlow.”

“But...” was as far as I got before Edoualdo punched me in the kidneys. I shut up.

Mr Boss took his boot from Pedro’s neck and rolled him out of the way with his foot. He stepped over the unconscious body and came towards me. The rest of the gang trooped into Edoualdo’s tiny cottage. Rough hands grabbed me and ropes appeared again to tie my hands. Why did Mr Boss now believe that I was Freddie? Hadn’t they already stolen our passports? Who was left now to come to my rescue? Even the dog had disappeared.

Mr Boss was talking in Spanish to Edoualdo, but he refused to respond or even meet the bandit leader’s eye. He took a calm sip of *mate* from the cup I had been sharing with him just moments before. It was his last. Before he had taken the straw from his lips, there was a shot. I jumped involuntarily at the noise, and saw Edoualdo slump from his chair to the floor. Blood pumped out over his white shirt.

Mr Boss turned to me. “This time no blanks,” he said, pocketing the revolver. He turned to Rau, and barked a command. The underlings hurried to grab hold of Pedro’s arms and legs. Four of the bandits carried the unconscious man

out into the street, and lifted him into the boot of a waiting taxi.

“We will keep the spy alive,” said Mr Boss. “Maybe he knows...”

“Knows what?” I spat. “About your despicable Vrtaal rituals?”

Mr Boss took a hold of my jaw with one hand, and wrenched back my head with the other. He looked me in the eye and said, “We are not Vrtaal. We are men of Juliaca. We work for Vrtaal, take their money, yes. But soon they will go from here, if we help them. Then you have them in your country, and Peru will be free.”

He let me go and I staggered backwards, unable to balance with my hands tied, and crashed into Raul, who jolted me forward again. I missed my footing and fell to the floor, barking my shin quite badly against the table leg on the way down. My cries of pain were drowned out by the raucous laughter of the bandits watching me writhe on the dirty floor, my glasses askew and my pride badly bruised.

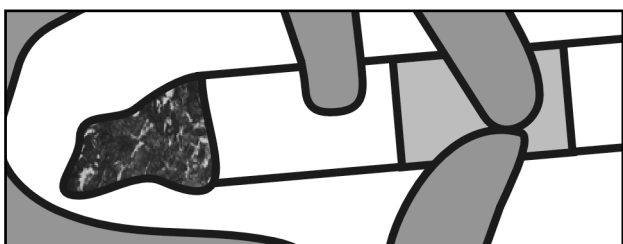
The street outside was deserted and silent. I knew we were being watched from behind peeling shutters and moth-eaten curtains. I remembered Edoualdo’s last words: this really was a town run by fear. I could hardly blame the people of Juliaca, if it was true that so many were abducted every year by the Vrtaal, never to be seen again. I only wondered why anyone would continue to live here under such conditions. Were they under some kind of spell?

I was bundled into the back seat of the taxi, and Raul climbed in beside me, grinning that stupid, brutal grin of his for all he was worth. We bumped down the muddy road, and turned onto the main street, which was distinguished only by being slightly wider, and having rather more litter choking the gutters. It was market day, and in a little square the townsfolk were bustling around stalls of fruit and vegetables. The stallholders were mostly old women in traditional dress: black bowler hats perched on the top of their heads, and layers of multicoloured skirts and aprons worn on top of each other. The men wore white smocks. The stallholders and customers all turned to stare at the taxi as it trundled noisily past. It was very possibly the only motor

vehicle in the town, but I doubted this was the only reason for their fascination.

Juliaca Town Hall was the only building in town not entirely offensive to the eye. A grand, sparkling white facade in the colonial style, it was wholly out of place amongst the dismal hovels, and spoke volumes about the consolidation of wealth and power in the town. The Mayor of Juliaca was at afternoon tea, and I was invited to join him on the terrace. Seeing no alternative I acquiesced, but told myself that no tea should pass my lips. For all I knew, it might be poisoned or drugged. Was I being melodramatic? It was a building ripe for melodrama, with its dark blue flock wallpapers, and the rows of oil paintings lining the corridors, portraits, I guessed, of previous mayors of Juliaca. All were shifty-looking fellows, overfed despots and twisted lechers every one, and all no doubt members of the Vrtaal.

Raul turned me through a doorway into a bright conservatory, like a giant bird cage of wrought iron and glass. The air here was cool and fresh, like an English garden in May, and there was something incongruous about the serenity of this place, isolated from the filth and poverty that surrounded it. At a glass-topped table sat an old man in a spotless white suit, drinking tea from a scalloped, bone china teacup, and smoking a cigarette. As we approached across chessboard black and white tiles, I noticed the unusual way El Alcalde held his cigarette, squeezed between his thumb, index and middle finger, with the coal of the cigarette pointing towards his palm, as though he were a labourer sneaking a quick puff while his foreman was looking the other way. It was an incongruous gesture – I would have expected a long, black cigarette holder – and one that told me without a shadow of a doubt that the man before me was my father.



An Audience with El Alcalde

Alex Willoughby had lost his moustache, along with the rest of the hair from his head. I wondered whether he had shaved his head to give himself an air of monkish austerity and intellectual rigour. The only places where his white hair seemed to flourish were on his eyebrows, and from his ears. His face had shrunk in on itself, and dark liver spots discoloured the skin on his scrawny neck. The hands that held the cigarette and lifted the teacup were strapped with protruding veins and the bones shifted visibly beneath the sagging skin. He was an old man, older in appearance than the tally of his years.

He seemed pleased to see me, and waved me over with enthusiasm. All my prepared reproaches and retorts stuck in my throat as I stood before him, and all I felt was impotent rage that threatened to emerge as tears unless I got a grip on myself. I gritted my teeth, knitted my brows and did my best to reign them in. By the time I had crossed the checkerboard tiles to meet him, I was outwardly calm, even smiling. My father extended a hand to shake mine, but of course I could not: my hands were still bound behind my back. He laughed, and said, “Ah well, don’t worry about it Mr Simlow. I won’t take offence!”

He laughed again, a high-pitched trilling laugh, and Mr Boss and the rest of the bandits laughed with him, even though most of them could not have understood the joke. He offered me a seat at his table, and I was made to sit down. My captors hung around in the background, as though they were afraid I might suddenly escape or attack their employer.

So my father had not recognised me! I had not anticipated that, but of course he had not seen me since I was four years old. Had he assumed that Freddie was his estranged son? Freddie was blond and his features had a certain aristocratic elegance, even if his forebears had herded sheep across the Northumberland fells for generations. Even as a boy I had been lumpen, mousy-haired

and entirely unexceptional. When I attended my school reunion, most of my former classmates had trouble remembering who I was, and even some of the old masters had been unable to recall teaching me.

I lacked charisma, and I had long been resigned to it. Charisma was not everything in life. But if anybody had been blessed with an excess of that enigmatic quality, it was Freddie. It was his principal, an unkind observer might say his only, asset. It struck me as incredible that anyone could confuse the two of us, even after a separation of more than twenty years. But perhaps vanity played its part in my father's error. It was far more flattering to his ego to have sired a child of Freddie's charm and wit than a wholly average, wholly typical grammar school teacher.

The question of the passports still baffled me, but it was not unimaginable that somebody had interfered with our documents. To what end, I could not imagine.

"So good of you to accompany my son on his journey," said Alex Willoughby, blowing smoke through thin, withered lips. "I suppose you are probably wondering why I sent for him, and in such a cryptic manner."

"I assumed that you wished him to join your religion," I said.

"You would be very much mistaken," said my father. "Religions worship invisible beings, beings whose existence is, at the very least, doubtful. The Vrtaal is not a religion in the everyday sense of the word."

I sensed that the old man was in the mood to lecture me, and I decided to play along.

"So how would you describe the Vrtaal then, Mr Willoughby?" I asked.

"I have not used that name for many years," he said. "In Juliaca, they call me El Alcalde. It means simply The Mayor. And of course, amongst my brethren, I have another name, a secret name that cannot be revealed."

"It sounds like a Freemasons' Lodge," I commented.

"You are being facetious," said my father, unsmiling. "Very well. Be my guest. You will soon understand that we are not an organisation

to be mocked. We are not bored businessmen playing at the occult."

"What are you then?"

Alex Willoughby banged the table with his fist. "We are meteorologists! Have you any idea what that means, Mr Simlow?"

"You study the weather?"

"Yes, well done! Perhaps my son has not chosen such stupid friends as I had feared. But we do more than merely study the weather. We are a new breed of meteorologist! Throughout human history men have tried to predict the weather, some have been charlatans, others scientists. Ultimately all have been failures. Even today, with the technology at our disposal, the forecasters get it wrong more often than right. They talk of sending satellites out into space now, as though that will solve all their problems! Imbeciles!" He thumped the table again, growing increasingly animated as he railed against the world's weathermen.

"But weren't you a weatherman yourself?" I asked. "I remember your son mentioning it."

"In another life, yes," said my father. "Before I saw the light, before the Vrtaal showed me what could be achieved if we learn to control the weather instead of guessing what it will do next."

"Control the weather?" I said, unable to hide my disbelief. "But how? With magic? Red Indian rain dances? Is that it?"

"Your goading will not work on me, sir," said the old man, fixing me with a steely glare. "Our methods are proven. Do you know when it last rained in the Nazca desert?"

I remembered what Miss Carstairs had told me back at the Ministry.

"About a hundred and fifty years ago?" I said airily.

"Near enough," he conceded. "And can you guess why?"

"Natural climatic changes," I suggested, unwilling to flatter the old man's harebrained theories any further. My father had lost his mind out here, I thought. That made two mentally unbalanced parents. It was a wonder I had ever managed to reach adulthood and remain tolerably sane. Perhaps madness awaited me in

middle-age. But my survival beyond the next few days, even the next few hours, was now far from assured. I remembered Edoualdo, killed with such nonchalant brutality. I had seen nothing to suggest that the Vrtaal had any different plans for me.

"Climatic changes?" laughed my father scornfully. "Yes, I suppose you could call it that. But natural? No! The desertification of Nazca was a man-made event, the first great achievement of the ancient Vrtaal, my spiritual ancestors. No human had ever wielded such power over the environment before!"

"But why would anyone want to create a desert?"

"Punishment," replied my father, his eyes glittering. "The people of Nazca were once prosperous, the land fertile. But they despised and feared the Vrtaal, and wanted to destroy us. Wars were waged between the two civilisations. The giant geoglyphs that puzzle anthropologists now were just one of the ways that the Nazca people tried to wipe us out: by appealing to their gods. But their gods did not help them, because they did not really exist, and no amount of drawing in the soil would make them pop into existence. Our god, on the other hand, does exist. Our god is real, palpable and terrible. And with our god's help, the Vrtaal sucked away all the moisture from the Nazca. Their crops failed, their animals died, followed by their children. In a few years, an area that had once been densely populated contained only sand and gravestones."

"Well, all that is ancient history now," I said, beginning to feel a certain lunatic intensity in my father's manner that I found uncomfortable. I wanted to change the subject to something more comfortable. "But you still haven't told me how this weather control system works."

"You shall see for yourself," he said. "The whole world shall witness a very persuasive demonstration of our power! Now, I think we have talked for long enough. You have asked your questions, and I have been so polite as to answer them all. Not that they will do you any good, where you are going."

"But why me?" I cried. "What has any of this

to do with me? Why couldn't you just leave us alone?"

Of course, I meant my mother and I – in my panic I had momentarily forgotten that I was Freddie Simlow. Alex Willoughby seemed not to notice my slip.

"What has it got to do with you? Nothing at all. But if you will go trailing around after my son, then you must expect to find yourself in hot water now and again. Simon Willoughby has a great destiny in front of him, and one day his name will be known the world over as one of the most important figures in the history of the Vrtaal. You, on the other hand, are a mere sponger, but you have your uses, and you will play your part in the sacred work of the Vrtaal. We will meet again, in different circumstances, but for now, I have no need for you. Goodbye."

Alexander Willoughby turned away from me, as though I had ceased to exist the moment he stopped talking to me, and said something to my captors in a soft, authoritative Spanish that knows it never has to shout. Two men stepped forward to grab my elbows. Mr Boss looked stern, and murmured what sounded like words of dissent, but the Mayor dismissed him with a wave. I was marched back out of the conservatory, back to the waiting car.

The sun was nearing its zenith as we crossed the dirt road to the waiting taxi, and the men all quickly replaced their wide-brimmed hats to avoid the glare. The heat was like a hammer blow, and I could not even raise my hand to shield my eyes or wipe the sweat from my forehead. I walked on in a dead trance, enduring the sun's heat on the back of my neck. The streets were quiet again – most of the residents of Juliaca were having their siestas, apart from a few beggars who obviously had nowhere to go to get out of the sun, and had to sit in whatever shade they could find.

I felt Mr Boss's large hand clap on my shoulder.

"You know, if you try to run, we shoot you in the back," he said, looking at me from the depths of his eyes.

"There's no need for threats," I said. "I'm cooperating."

“We shoot you, and you die in one or two seconds. You die like a man.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, sensing that I had missed something. “Where are you taking me?”

“To Puno,” said Mr Boss. He sounded almost sorrowful as he pushed my head down through the open door of the taxi. The engine was already running. The bandit leader squeezed in beside me, and we jolted off down the road. I realised too late that I had just been offered a way out, if a desperate one. What had Mr Boss been arguing about with my father, just before we left? It was pointless to wish that I had a basic grasp of the local language. In reality I wasn’t even sure what language they had been speaking. Was it some form of Spanish? Or Quechua, or some other native dialect?

The car was speeding along a straight road out of town, the ditches on either side clogged with tons of builders’ rubble and household garbage. How could Puno be any worse than this?

“What’s in Puno?” I asked.

Everyone in the car but the driver turned to look at me.

“The lake,” said Mr Boss thickly.

“Lake Titicaca!” I said, remembering my boyhood geography lessons. “The highest lake in the world.”

“Yes,” said Mr Boss, looking straight ahead at the road. “The lake of the black jaguar.”

Puzzled by this remark, I asked, “Do jaguars still live there, then?”

“No jaguars,” he said. “That is an old story. Something else.”

I sensed that the conversation was at an end. Everyone was staring out of the window at the miles and miles of Juliaca’s litter. Even Raul’s grin had slipped a little, and his brows were knitted in unaccustomed thought.

We began to climb into the mountains again. Apart from a few herds of alpacas crossing the road accompanied by wizened old women, there were few distractions. The road hairpinned unpleasantly around jagged peaks, and I fell to thinking about Freddie. What had become of him? Had he decided to play along with my father’s mistake about his identity, and if so,

why? Perhaps that had been the only way to save his skin. But where did that leave me, now Freddie Simlow, at least in the eyes of the Vrtaal? Was this my last journey? With that thought, I made a conscious effort to appreciate the passing scenery as though it were my last glimpse of the world. I certainly could have chosen a worse glimpse than the high plains of the Andes, but my mind was racing, and the landscape offered no distraction from my disordered musings on mortality.

I would have preferred the bus ride from Kershaw Grammar to the Insane Asylum to have been the last journey I took before I died, or even better, the journey back, once the onerous duty of visiting my mother was over and done with for another month, and I could look forward to a quiet pint or two of mild in the local on a Sunday evening, before I had to think about the pile of marking that waited for me on my desk. Had someone suggested to me that I would one day feel a nostalgic longing for my old life of routine and habit, for my battered lectern, for the stacks of dog-eared poetry anthologies in the classroom cupboard, even for the mobs of gangling, resentful adolescents who I had to face armed only with Shakespeare and my own wits, then I would have laughed in their face. But now, here in what was generally agreed to be one of the most beautiful places of Earth, with possibly only hours to live, I did miss it all.

I could not help but wonder what would be the manner of my death. Would they stand me up against a wall, blindfolded, and shoot me? No: Mr Boss had already offered me one of his own bullets as an act of mercy. Then I remembered what Miss Carstairs had told us back in our underground office in the Ministry: the Vrtaal practised human sacrifice, “of the worst sort”. So were the Vrtaal cannibals?

I had no faith in an afterlife. I realised that very clearly during our journey to Puno. I was not about to pray for either salvation or deliverance. I had always been an uncontroversial, church-going sort of Anglican, content to say Grace before the waiting, ravenous hordes in the school dining hall, happy to thrust hymn books into the hands of my charges as they lined up for

morning assembly, without examining my own indoctrinated beliefs. Now, without struggling with my faith or any such melodrama, I simply saw the foolishness of it all. The vicar in the school chapel saying the Lord's Prayer was no better or worse than the Vrtaal, worshipping their own weather-altering god. None of it was relevant to me in my final hours.

The road finally levelled off, and we crossed a high, grassy plain, following the line of what I was surprised to see was a railway. People carrying large bundles of produce crowded the wooden platform at the station, and they craned their necks with undisguised nosiness when our car sped past on the other side of the tracks.

It was not long before the tortuous hairpins began again, but this time they faced downhill. Puno hove into view. Painted adobe cottages clung to the side of the hillside at improbable gradients, and led the eye down the rows of terracotta tiled roofs to the lakeside, where a cluster of dinghies and motor boats pattered around the shallows of Lake Titicaca. From this distance it was picturesque, the opposite of Juliaca, but as we wound our way down the mountain, and through Puno's outskirts, it became obvious that the differences were not so marked. Puno was still a squalid, overcrowded slum, if one built on the shores of Lake Titicaca. The water stretched off to a dim, cloud-dimmed horizon. I wondered why, if jaguars did not live in the area, it had been named after one. Probably it was merely another one of those impenetrable and bizarre myths, like Freddie's giant armadillos and woodlice.

The centre of Puno thronged with people. They lined the streets with a faintly discernable air of expectation, as though they had been waiting for us. Small knots of Peruvian men stood around in the civic squares, drinking from shared bottles and smoking. The young women carried infants bundled up in sheets on their backs, and the older ones hawked fruit from trays round their necks.

"Big festival here," said Mr Boss. "Everyone stops work today."

"What are they celebrating?" I asked.

Mr Boss shrugged. "I don't know," he mut-

tered. I didn't believe him, but didn't want to press the matter.

We drove right through the centre of town, the taxi drawing curious stares and a trail of young boys who chased after us all the way to the docks. The driver stopped at a large wooden jetty.

"What's happening?" I asked.

Two men dressed in what looked like carnival costumes strode towards the parked car. They both wore bright scarlet tunics and skirts, and what at first I took to be animal skins on top of their heads. When they got closer, I saw that they were not skins but the dried corpses of large birds, their vast grey wings outstretched and pulled down over the men's ears. Condors, I realised.

"Now you go on the boat," said Mr Boss. "We leave you here."

"With the Vrtaal," I said.

"Yes, with the Vrtaal. I am sorry."

All of a sudden my heart was beating with a panicky rhythm. I knew they were nothing but thieves, but I had felt safer in the company of Mr Boss and his underlings than I did with these bizarrely dressed, blank-faced cultists. At least I could understand the bandits' motives. They killed for money. But what did the Vrtaal kill for? I supposed I would find out soon enough.

As I was dragged from the car by my wrists, the ropes now digging into well-established wounds, Mr Boss said, "You should have stayed in England, Mr Simlow."

I lost my composure then, and shouted, "But I'm not Freddie Simlow! There's been a mistake! I'm Simon Willoughby! I'm the Mayor's son! I'm Alex Willoughby's son, not that other guy! He's an impostor!"

The Vrtaal men took an elbow each, and steered me towards the jetty. They didn't look at me, and didn't speak at all. I caught a last glimpse of the bandits piling back into the dusty old taxi, before they manhandled me into a small motor-boat. I sat on the wooden plank that was the boat's only seat, while the two condor-hatted men started up the small outboard motor. The boat roared off through the reed beds, towards the deeps of Titicaca. Were they going to drown

me? It seemed far too simple a death given the elaborate preparations. I studied the face of the man at the bow. It was entirely devoid of expression. These servants of the Vrtaal were neither cruel nor kind in themselves. They were something far more terrible: they were slaves, defined by their obedience to the cult. I glanced down at the surface of the lake. I had not had the opportunity to take a bath for several days, and the water looked inviting: cold, clear and deep. The Vrtaal zombies didn't notice as I shuffled myself across the narrow plank to the edge of the boat, but they did notice when I toppled myself over the edge.

I was right: the water was cold. As I sank quickly, my hands still bound behind my back, I hoped it was deep. Instinctively I held my breath, though I knew it was futile. I intended to drown myself, to cheat the Vrtaal, and ultimately my father, of one small victory. But the act itself was not so simple. I could hear the muffled rumble of the outboard motor above me, and as I turned helplessly in the water, I saw the underside of the boat shimmering on the surface. It was peaceful here. I looked down and saw a cloudy darkness rising to engulf me. I wondered how long it would be before my lungs gave out. They were already screaming with pain.

I closed my eyes, shutting out the world. When I opened them again, a monstrous face was staring back at me, beady eyed, narrow necked, hook beaked. Arms grabbed at my clothes, and I tried to fight them off, but my strength had already drained away. My lungs could take no more punishment, and as I opened my mouth, the lake flooded in. Geometric patterns invaded the space where my head should have been. I passed out.

When I awoke, I was back on the boat, this time lying on the floor, coughing up huge lungfuls of water. Two faintly anxious faces loomed over me, crowned with the dead heads of condors. They muttered something that sounded like relief. I shivered with cold. Only one side of my face was warm, and as I opened my mouth I could taste blood. At this, as at every thing else, I had failed. The boat sped on across the lake. They were in a hurry now, worried that I would

try it again. One of the two men sat on the plank, staring down at me for the rest of the journey. I guessed they would both be in trouble when we reached our destination, wherever that was. I imagined an island.

I was right, after a fashion. The pilot of the boat cut the motor, and I was hauled upright, and lifted bodily from the vessel. More ropes had been used to bind my arms and legs tightly to my sides, preventing even the slightest movement. I could barely crane my neck to see the small gang of cultists, all dressed in the same uniform, all with their own condors in varying degrees of decomposition, strapped to their heads.

I began to swear. I have never been much of a swearer. Life as a schoolteacher trains one to moderate one's language even when one is not in the presence of one's pupils, to avoid slips of the tongue in the classroom. But now all the curses I had ever heard or overheard in the staff room and in the schoolyard, rose naturally to my lips. I cursed the Vrtaal from the bottom of my soul. I insulted their persons, their religion, their country, their mothers and children and their ridiculous, obscene costumes, as my captors passed me from the boat to waiting hands on the shore.

But what kind of an island was this? I caught a glimpse of straw-yellow reeds packed in layers at the water's edge. The surface of the island was a continuous mat of flattened reeds. It seemed that we were not on a real island at all, but aboard a vast floating platform. Single-storey buildings had been constructed of the same material, a floating village. At the water's edge, elegant longboats resembling gondolas, but made of reeds bound tightly together, bobbed in rows. At their prows, the reeds had been cleverly fashioned into the shapes of animal heads: jaguars and condors predictably enough, but also horses, human faces contorted in expressions of rage, pain or horror, and some sort of insect, with long waving reed antennae, and rows of segmented legs on either side.

They carried me through the village. I saw women and children there too, sat outside their reed huts, smoking fish over fires. I wondered how they prevented their whole island from

burning down. There was a powerful smell, and not just of smoked fish, but an unpleasant odour of rotting vegetation, which I assumed came from the reeds. I realised that this was a whole community of people and families. Were these all members of the Vrtaal?

We passed into one of the huts where the smell of rotting reeds was even stronger. More costumed men gathered round, and the ropes were removed from my wrists, although strong arms still held me fast. A trapdoor in the reed floor of the building was hoisted open, revealing a square of darkness. There were muttered voices coming from below. I could see what was coming next, and I struggled, and pleaded with them not to send me down there. But I might as well have been pleading with machines. The condor-headed cultists tumbled me down into the fetid darkness.

The Prison Under the Lake

I landed in knee high water, and many hands lifted me up before I choked. Unintelligible voices chattered all around me. The trapdoor above us had been shut, and just a few slivers of light were allowed to penetrate our prison, but it took several minutes for my eyes to adjust. The smell was like nothing I had ever experienced, a combination of body odour, rotting fish and sewers. The stench became bearable after a few days, but the cold water was less easy to get used to. It never got any warmer, for it was really only part of the surface of the lake. If it had not been, then I suppose the smell would have been worse, for our water was not entirely stagnant, but occasionally refreshed by waves lapping in from the outside through narrow vents close to the floor.

There might have been a hundred men held captive there. I wondered whether they were keeping women in another chamber somewhere. All were from Juliaca and the surrounding vilages, as I gathered after long and frustrating

attempts at conversation with my fellow inmates. There were no inhabitants of Puno, or anywhere else, barring me. It seemed that the Vrtaal did not want to antagonise their host town, and so selected all its victims from its nearest neighbour.

We were crowded into a square space beneath the floating platform, with the water swilling around our legs continually. Sleep was virtually impossible. There was no way of lying down without drowning oneself. The best position was to sit clutching one's knees, with one's head lolling backwards. This method tended to give me a terribly painful crick in the neck, but at least I managed to snatch a few minutes' rest. There was always the danger that my head might suddenly flop forward in my sleep, bringing my face perilously close to the surface of the water. It took me three days to learn the technique properly. If one can imagine trying to sleep in a freezing cold bath where dozens of animals have already fouled the water, then you get an approximate picture of my difficulties.

There was probably very little real difference in the water temperature from one area of the cell to another, but after a few hours in the water, I understood why there was so much pushing and jostling going on amongst the other prisoners. The temperature at the centre of the cell, where the inmates were crowded very closely together, was slightly higher than at the perimeter. Those in the middle, benefiting from the radiated heat of all the bodies surrounding them, were constantly besieged by those at the edge trying to take their place. Were it not for calls of nature, and an unwritten rule which required everyone to use a particular corner of the prison for that purpose, then there would have been a near unshakable status quo, with the strongest prisoners holding fast in the warmer centre, and the rest of us at the frigid margins helpless to dislodge them. As it turned out, nobody could go for very long without a visit to the designated corner, and anyone who tried to circumvent this rule was forcibly exiled to the periphery as soon as the transgression was discovered. This was a rare occasion on which the prisoners were able to act in concert. Otherwise it was the very

exemplar of Hobbes' image of natural society: a war of all against all.

There were two daily events that generated interest in the cell. The first usually took place in the dead of night. When the trap door creaked, everyone did their best to move out of the line of sight of the guards standing on the floor above, for it was on these visits that prisoners were taken out. I did not know where they were taken, and could not ask any of my fellow inmates. But from their terrified reaction at the prospect of being plucked from the cess-pool, I imagined that those unlucky enough to be chosen had a very unenviable fate ahead of them. If our water-logged gaol were preferable to what came next, then it made sense to keep as far away from the trap-door as possible. For five days, I managed to avoid the attentions of the guards, while five others were caught in a large rope net that was lowered into the prison, and winched back up again when the guards had chosen their victim. Sometimes they seemed rather indiscriminate about their choice. On other days, they were pickier, rejecting one or two before finding a catch to suit their unknown criteria. Once the choice had been made, the victim's neighbours were only too willing to assist the guards by bundling the screaming, writhing man into the net, thankful that it was not their turn, and perhaps hoping that if they made a show of their subservience they would be spared.

For each man who was hoisted up, struggling and gasping like a drowning fish, another newcomer was thrust in. Sometimes there would be a general cry of recognition as the new man floundered in the water, before the trap door slammed shut again, leaving us in darkness. Some of the prisoners formed fierce friendships based on previous acquaintance, and these small teams fared better than the loners, particularly at mealtimes.

Every day, a couple of hours after daybreak, the trap door would be opened, and a few bucketfuls of food were tossed down into the murky water. The menu varied only slightly from day to day, consisting mainly of fish heads and the soft inner pulp harvested from the reeds. By the time one had fished one's meal from the mire and

fought off one's ravening neighbours, it was difficult to distinguish the mush in one's mouth from the mush swirling around one's feet.

Most days I managed, by flailing wildly around when the trapdoor was opened, to acquire a little food, but by no means enough to keep me from passing out and drowning. But one morning, I found myself set upon by a team of no less than three men, who jointly decided to separate me from my breakfast. After a tussle during which it appeared likely that I would go hungry for at least the next day, a fifth party joined the struggle.

In the darkness, it was near impossible to work out who was grappling with who, but in a few minutes my assailants had either fallen or fled, and I found myself shaking the hand of a young Peruvian man, barely out of his teens. Ricardo had managed to fashion a shiv from sharpened fish bones knitted together, and this had been his secret weapon in our fight against the thieves.

It was the first kind gesture I had experienced since falling into hands of the Vrtaal. While our conversations were extremely limited, and relied on improvised sign language, still my existence was made vastly more bearable by Ricardo's company. He was by nature a taciturn young man, slight of build and with a normally subdued and distracted expression. He spent most of his time constructing tools and weapons from pieces of bone, twine and dried reeds that he tore from the ceiling of the cell. He meant to escape, and spent all those silent hours planning it, unlike the rest of us wretches who found it impossible to think of anything beyond the next meal. Ricardo was a man apart from other men, and it was to my inestimable advantage that he had chosen to befriend me.

Very strangely, although others in the cell were able to shove me in front of the trap, it seemed that the guards had instructions to leave me be, and even when some of my enemies tried to tumble me into the waiting net, the guards waiting above refused to raise the net until I was exchanged for another. I began to wonder whether I might even be spared the fate of those other unfortunates who the net had taken. Per-

haps the British Ambassador had stepped in, and even now civil servants were negotiating my release from the cultists. I imagined the nation in uproar over my kidnapping, and an outraged Prime Minister demanding my immediate release from his Peruvian counterpart. In retrospect it is quite clear that I had lost my grip on the real world: nobody was in the least bit disturbed at my continued absence from my normal life. My employer, Mr Cresswell, had in all probability already found my replacement, who no doubt taught English Literature with greater verve and dedication that I had ever been able to muster.

On the sixth day I had a visitor. When the net came for me, I was convinced that now, finally, the end had come, and whatever awful doom had lain in wait for those other men had now come for me. As the other prisoners gleefully bundled me into the waiting net, something was pressed into my hand. It was a tiny, perfectly constructed knife, the blade made from a sharpened fish skull, the pommel from a piece of old shoe leather, the two cunningly bound together with long, flexible strands of the ubiquitous reed. Before the guards at the upper level could spot it, I hid Ricardo's gift inside my shirt, and held it in place with my armpit.

They led me out into the reed village, dressed in a bright yellow robe that the Vrtaal guards threw over my head to cover the bruises, filth, and leech sores on my skin. Inside another reed hut I was made to kneel down, with my forehead pressed against the pungent reed floor. I could not see the man I was bowing before, but I heard and recognised his voice immediately.

"Glad to see you're keeping well," said Freddie.

I tried to glance upwards, and Freddie gestured to the guards to step back. As I rose, I saw that his garb was even stranger than mine. Naked from the waist up, Freddie looked like a man who had taken an invitation to a fancy dress party far too seriously. A long skirt of rainbow rags swished around his knees, and his ankles and feet were wrapped in fur. But the really outré element was the jaguar skin draped around his shoulders, the snarling, slightly flea-bitten

head perched atop his own. Despite the thick red and black stripes painted across his face, Freddie's effete features were still instantly recognisable. He brandished some kind of feathered stick in one hand and was drinking tea from a familiar china cup and saucer with the other. A Vrtaal servant girl stood discreetly to one side holding the silver tea tray with all the accoutrements of an English garden party: the sugar tongs, tea strainer, and a small plate of biscuits.

"You've got to get me out of here, Freddie!" I begged him. "They've got me locked up in a dungeon with hundreds of others! We're living under the water! I'm starving to death here!"

Freddie looked rather embarrassed by my entreaties. He finished his tea, handing the empty cup back to the servant. "Try not to make a scene, old pal," he said. "I'm pulling all the strings I can here! But we don't want to upset these people, do we?"

"Freddie!" I cried. "These aren't people! They're demons! I'm half-drowned! For God's sake man, do something!"

Freddie squirmed on his reed throne, then tutted. "First you say you're starving, then you're drowning – make your mind up. Look, we've just got to play along with this for a while. I'm doing my bit as well, you know!"

I narrowed my eyes at him as he flashed a knowing smile at the servant girl, who blushed and retreated behind a reed curtain, taking the biscuit plate with her. We both followed her out with our eyes, but for different reasons.

"Give me those biscuits," I snarled, suddenly overcome with an all-consuming hunger.

"Look, Simon," said Freddie. "Try to understand. There are protocols to be followed in this society. Certain taboos, etiquette. It's really quite complex, and I don't entirely understand it myself yet, although Alex has been very patiently teaching me. But what I do know is that it would be quite impolite of me to allow you to have those biscuits. It was rather a tricky affair getting them to agree to this little chin-wag, let me tell you!"

"So you've been making friends with my father, eh?" I said. "Does he know you're not

really Simon Willoughby? Or are you still stringing him along?"

A guilty look flashed across Freddie's painted face. "Well, I'm just keeping the old man happy," he said. "He wants to retire, you know. He's been working out here in Peru for over twenty years now, and he wishes to pass on his secrets to his son and heir."

"And you thought that ought to be you?"

Freddie looked vexed. "It wasn't me who switched the photos in our passports! It must have been one of the Ministry's little jokes, or maybe that tall chap interfering with our luggage. Don't ask me why. I'm just trying to make the best of a bad situation, Simon."

"That tall chap, Edoualdo, is dead," I said. "Your father's hired muscle shot him."

Freddie barely lifted an eyebrow. "Oh really?" he said. "What a shame. Well, he shouldn't really have been meddling with Vrtaal business. Anyone with any sense would know to keep out of our affairs."

"You're one of them now, aren't you?" I said, only slightly surprised. "You really believe in all this nonsense."

"I haven't changed, Simon," said Freddie in a reassuring voice. "I'm still the same old Freddie Simlow. It's just that I've changed my name to The Cloudlord."

"The Cloudlord?"

"*El Señor de Las Nubes*. It's a rough translation."

"But you're also Simon Willoughby," I reminded him.

"In a manner of speaking, yes," said Freddie. "For practical purposes."

"So where does that leave me?" I demanded. "What's my name, now? Or do I even have one?"

"Well, that's what I've been trying to tell you," said Freddie. "We haven't forgotten about you, Simon. You've got a very important role to play in all this too."

"What? Master of Fish Heads?"

"Eh?" said Freddie. "No, it's much grander than that. You see, you're going to be a Sacred Courier."

"Are you kidding me, Freddie? The Sacred Courier? What am I supposed to be carrying?"

"Well, as a matter of fact you'll be accompanying the Son of God, or at least one of them."

"The Son of God!" I snorted. "Jesus Christ!"

"No, not that one," said Freddie, smiling weakly. "Actually, Alex has been telling me how Jesus was just a story made up to keep people down, to keep them subservient, like sheep. You know, just like in the hymn, 'The Lord's my shepherd'?"

"So my father has had you reading Nietzsche, has he?"

Freddie frowned. "No, this is part of the Vrtaal way of thinking. It makes quite a lot of sense once you really get into it, you know? But our Sons of God have nothing to do with Jesus. In fact they're not really sons, or daughters either, at least that's what Alex says. Not people at all. Some kind of hermaphrodite, I expect. Or space aliens possibly. I'm a bit shaky on the details. Anyway, you'll be taking one of them to England, to spread the Vrtaal message there. You're really very privileged, Simon. You're going to be sent home, back to old Blighty. I've got to stay here and carry on my father's work."

"You mean *my* father's work," I interrupted.

"Yes, well that hardly matters now, does it?" said Freddie. "I've been ordained Cloudlord, not you. I understand you feel a bit sore about not getting the job, old chap, but if you think about it, you'd have only messed it up somehow. You always do, don't you know? It's really for the best this way, trust me."

"You've lost your mind, Freddie!" I said. "I'm going to die here unless you do something! Try to get in touch with the Ministry, with Miss Carstairs, anybody!"

Involuntarily I had risen to my feet and now I approached Freddie in what must have appeared an attitude of menace, although it was merely one of desperate entreaty. He snapped his fingers at the two guards standing by. I had quite forgotten their presence until now. They sidled up behind me, ready to restrain their prisoner.

"Freddie!" I yelled furiously. "This is madness! You must tell them to let me go! Don't be such a bloody fool!"

I had never spoken to anyone in this manner before, let alone a friend of such long standing.

Freddie had crossed me many times, stood me up, failed to pay substantial debts, and humiliated me in public, and I had always given way, telling myself that it was really too trivial a matter to make a fuss about, when the truth was that I lived in mortal fear of making a fuss of any kind. But now that I had seen Freddie ready to sacrifice me to an evil sect, merely to avoid any inconvenience to himself, a fuss was definitely what was called for. Now my attitude of menace was real enough.

"That's close enough," said the Cloudlord, holding out his ridiculous sceptre made, I was not surprised to notice, from a thick reed stem. "I command you in the name of the Mother of the Lake! Desist, Sacred Courier!" he cried, raising his skinny hand.

It was the final straw. My hand closed on the bundle of fish bones concealed inside my damp rag of a shirt, and holding this unpromising weapon aloft, I leapt at Freddie, screaming, I confess, like a madman.

There was blood. That I do remember. Mine and Freddie's both. And Freddie's pitiful wails as he lay on the reed floor, clutching his eyes. Those reeds soaked up the blood with remarkable speed. I also learned that the stiffer reed stems, used for Freddie's ceremonial sceptre, were also employed as staffs and cudgels by the Vrtaal henchmen. My bruises were testament to the resilience of these instruments, and the skill of the guardsmen in their use. There was little else about the episode that warrants the telling. My memories of the beatings are patchy at best and I see little point in burdening the reader with their description.

It was back to the cell for me. The other prisoners were astonished: nobody who had been fished out had ever returned. This precedent scared them, and there were no further attempts made to steal my food. A couple of the more vulnerable inmates even tried to befriend me, presumably hoping that some of my magical powers of survival would rub off on them, or that I would be able to pull some strings with my contacts in the world above. But there were no strings to pull, and I had no more idea than anyone else why my life had been spared, especially

since I had assaulted the revered Cloudlord. I did not need hangers on. The silent pact of mutual defence between Ricardo and myself was sufficient, and we did not need to complicate matters by forming some kind of larger clique.

On my return to captivity, I noticed immediately that the place was less crowded than before. Men had been removed and not replaced, and evidently the rate of removal had quickened. At least five or six had been taken in my absence. It sounds far-fetched that I could have estimated this discrepancy with such accuracy, given the conditions we were forced to occupy. But I had become so attuned to that miserable square of space, that any increase in my personal territory was immediately palpable. Ricardo confirmed my suspicions through sign, but was unable to explain to me why our numbers were shrinking, or indeed what had become of the absentees, although he seemed quite sure of the answer. On one occasion, he brought me a small, crawling insect cupped in his hands, handed it gingerly to me, then pointed to the locked trapdoor, as if to indicate the fates of the men who had passed through that exit. I still failed to grasp his meaning, although the insect formed a useful meal for us both, once it had been painstakingly divided into two with one of Ricardo's knives.

Rumours of my own handiwork with Ricardo's knife began to filter down through the trap door. I was not proud of my violence – quite the opposite – but my status within the prison hierarchy benefited from this bit of hearsay. How accurate a version of the event my fellow prisoners heard, I could not judge. Ricardo and I were quickly becoming the most feared and best fed inmates in the cell.

Another week passed. Dozens of men were being winched out of the prison, sometimes two at a time, and none were brought in to replace them. It looked as though the guards had been instructed to leave me alone, and Ricardo managed to avoid drawing attention to himself. We were a dwindling remainder. I could not stop wondering on what they needed these wretched prisoners for. Ricardo's eyes told me that he

already knew. Perhaps it was better for my sanity that I did not.

Finally one day, Ricardo and I had the place to ourselves. It was such a strange novelty that we were both in an oddly euphoric mood. I almost felt like celebrating our new territory. We were still imprisoned, but our boundaries had been widened just a fraction of an inch more. We had only hours to enjoy our domination of the cell, for it wasn't very long before the trap door opened once more.

This time the net sought Ricardo. We fought them off together for a while. Ricardo sawed down the rope that suspended the net above us using one of his serrated blades, and when the guards came down into the cell to deal with us, we leapt on them. Our insurrection was quickly discovered and we were outnumbered. Ricardo gave up his struggle and allowed the Vrtaal to tie his hands and feet. He left without a word or a backward glance, as stoical a man as I had ever met.

Thus it was that I found myself the sole occupant of the place. I began to wish that at least some of the others would return. Solitude in such circumstances, when I knew neither my own fate nor that of my former cellmates, was intolerable. The only sounds now were the waves lapping against the reed walls. The guards above me changed shift every six hours, and I could hear them grumbling to each other as doors and chairs creaked and cigarettes were lit. These events became the highlights of my day, to be sharply anticipated when there was nothing else to break the monotony. I began to understand why solitary confinement was the subject of such horror, at least in films.

My food rations had increased vastly in quantity, not at all in quality, for the guards seemed completely indifferent to the fact that they were now only catering for one. The same bucket load of leftovers was tossed through the trap door at the same time every day. I was no longer close to starvation. My bruises were beginning to heal, and I had got used to the cold, and the damp. I was surviving.

Just when I was starting to get a handle on life in the Vrtaal prison, I had to leave it. They came

for me, not in the middle of the night, as was generally the case, but in the morning. The new net flopped down above me. As there were none left to wrestle me into the trap, I had to climb in myself. There was no point in putting up a show of strength, I told myself, until I could form a clearer picture of where I was being taken and the numbers of Vrtaal who might impede my escape. For now, I went quietly. The riddle of the Vrtaal was a secondary concern, but my curiosity had only been temporarily dampened by my period of imprisonment. I was anxious to learn where the other prisoners had been taken, who the Mother of the Lake was, and how Freddie expected these lunatics to be able to control the weather. He had spoken of the Children of God as though their birth was imminent, and of me as playing a role in this incarnation of the divine. Why would the Vrtaal place one of their Sacred Couriers in a filthy box with a hundred starving men, if I had such an important role to play in their own little second coming?

The guards spent an unusually long time hauling me up through the trap door. I certainly had not gained any weight during my captivity, on a diet of reeds and rancid fish. After I had been dumped on the floor, I struggled free of the netting and understood the reason for the delay. They had only sent one escort, a rather short chap, whose whole face was covered with his jaguar head-dress. The rest of the pelt dragged on the floor and flapped around the guard like a cloak. I stood up, dripping and chafed with rope burns. I could see through the window frame that it was evening. Out on the dark water, insects hummed. There was another noise too: a humming that was human, but only just. Hundreds of voices were groaning along to some dirgeful Vrtaal hymn. Out on another, larger floating island, I could see torches raised aloft on poles. Tonight, I realised, it was my turn to face what the others had faced. I would not be coming back here, one way or the other.

The guard motioned me with a large cudgel of stiffened reeds. I knew those cudgels well, and instinctively I began to comply, shuffling forward on weary, leech-drained feet towards what I could now see was a small reed canoe rocking

in the water. There were no other Vrtaal in sight. A strange way to honour a Sacred Courier, I thought. Then I had another thought. I turned to face my escort. The jaguar face hesitated, looked left and right nervously, and made to reach out towards me with one slender hand.

I had never, in my recollection, hit anybody in the face before. I might have done so in my nursery days, but I was a meek child even then. I remember at school, older boys telling me that, should I ever find myself in a fist fight, I should always ball my fist by tucking my thumb underneath the other four fingers. Otherwise I would run the risk of breaking the bones of my thumb with my first punch. Those words of advice had always recurred to me in times of danger or anger, such as waiting at a bus-stop late on a Saturday evening, as the local toughs emerged from the pub across the street at kicking out time, or during long and inconclusive staff meetings. Tuck your thumb in, make a fist, punch from the shoulder. Or was it tucking in your thumb that was the dangerous method? I couldn't quite remember how the maxim went. Perhaps the thumb should be pressed against the outside of the knuckles, so that the sudden pressure of one's opponent's jaw would not squeeze the thumb against the palm?

All this uncertainty recurred to me in the split-second it took to make a decision. For once, my choice was clear. If I did nothing, I would die, and Freddie would get the upper hand on me in this as in everything else. I cannot say which mattered more: survival, or unseating Freddie from his reed throne.

It was not a very forceful punch, and I had not really managed to employ the strength of my shoulder muscles. I cannot remember whether I tucked my thumb into my fist or not. Either way, the impact certainly hurt my knuckles. It may have been that my fist connected with the bared fangs of the jaguar head, or with one of its glass eyes, but schoolyard advice could hardly have anticipated those possibilities. The punch certainly made an impact on my opponent. The masked figure stumbled backwards through the doorway, tripped over the trailing edge of the cloak and only narrowly avoided rolling off the

edge of the reed platform into the lake. At that moment, it felt like a blow for my personal liberty, a first taste of the worm finally turning after so many years. That feeling lasted a couple of seconds, until the prostrate figure tore off the mask.

Night of the Lakemother

"Simon!" said Miss Carstairs. "I came to rescue you!" She put one hand to her jaw, rubbing cautiously.

I stammered some inadequate apology and helped her up. "Where's Freddie?" she asked as soon as she was on her feet. She brushed herself down briskly.

"Freddie is beyond help," I said. "He's convinced himself that he's the King of the Cumulo-nimbus, or some such nonsense. I'm sorry if you travelled all this way to rescue him. You've had a wasted journey."

Miss Carstairs, her long dark hair scraped back into a tight bun, black camouflage paint smeared across her delicate features, frowned. "This isn't a personal matter, Simon," she said. "I'm here on Ministry business. But we assumed that you, if anyone, would have been crowned Cloudlord. Doesn't Alex know that you're his son?"

I explained about the switched passport photos. "I assumed that was your doing," I said. "Or rather, the Ministry's."

"Not our style," said Miss Carstairs with a shrug. "But it seems to have worked out rather well, all things considered. Perhaps we should have thought of doing it ourselves. So Freddie has become your father's heir? Well, he won't have long to enjoy it. Come on!" she called to me as she pulled the canoe up against the side of the reed platform, and held it as steady as she could for me to board.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"Time to stir things up a bit, I think," said

Miss Carstairs. She leapt into the other end of the Vrtaal boat, and handed me a paddle. We began to pull silently across the lake towards the platform of flaming torches and relentless baritone humming. Clouds of insects followed us, flitting around our heads and biting any tiny patches of exposed skin.

“Damned bugs!” I said, swatting them away.

“We’ve got one to deal with tonight,” said Miss Carstairs. “The Lakemother, to give her her proper title.”

“An insect? That’s what all this is about? All this worship and sacrifice?”

Miss Carstairs said nothing. We manoeuvred the canoe towards an empty jetty on the edge of the platform. There was nobody else around, and Miss Carstairs tied the stern of the boat to a long post jammed into the lake bed, before clambering out and motioning me to follow her round a dark maze of cottages. All the reed huts were empty and silent, and there was little danger of being spotted, at least yet. The entire lake-dwelling community were at the ceremony on the other side of the island. We could see the lights beyond the empty houses, and the chanting, a single, droning, endless note, filling the night.

Miss Carstairs led me directly towards the centre of this unholy activity. I wondered what she was meant to do – we were two against the innumerable hordes of the Vrtaal faithful. Since I had no better ideas, other than simply running away, I held my tongue. It took us no more than a couple of minutes to cover half the perimeter of the island, and from the shadows of the last house, we got our first glimpse of the Vrtaal in festive mood. Ranked along the far shore, dozens of cultists were dancing madly, dressed even more outlandishly than the condor-hatted guards. Others were busy at the shoreline, in reed canoes, or with crane-like contraptions that I could not make out clearly. Some of my fellow prisoners were there too, bound hand to foot, while guards fussed with machinery. There was a device that resembled a medieval trebuchet, or perhaps a witch-ducking stool. We watched them strap one of the prisoners into this device. I could tell from his silhouette against the fire-

light that it was not Ricardo, but Ricardo might well have been next in line for whatever inhuman treatment the Vrtaal were preparing.

I was almost ready to cut and run. Our chances of rescuing the captives, in the teeth of the opposition, were absurd, and I had no particular desire to extricate Freddie from the predicament he had placed himself in. The sensible option would have been to row quietly back to the shore in our canoe, then make our way back to England, leaving the Vrtaal and my father well alone. I soon learned from Miss Carstairs that retreat was not an option. But it was the thought of Ricardo that gave me pause. I said nothing to Miss Carstairs about cutting and running, and crouched beside her, mesmerised by the clamour and hysteria taking place a few dozen yards away.

Eventually the dancing and chanting died down. An air of horrible anticipation hung over the gathering.

“What happens now?” I whispered.

“The Lakemother emerges,” said Miss Carstairs.

She was studying the scene through a pair of field binoculars. “Damn it, I can’t get a good enough view from here. We’re going to have to get a bit closer.”

“Closer?” I said. “How?”

She soon had an answer in the form of an unguarded motorboat, identical to the one that had originally ferried me here from Puno, tied up at the shoreline.

“We’ll just float out in front of the harbour,” she said confidently. “They’ll never see us in the darkness, but we’ll catch the whole show.”

I was feeling rather ambivalent about catching the whole show. Once again I found myself stepping gingerly aboard a small, unsteady boat. Miss Carstairs untied us, and we pushed away from the artificial shore with our feet. We left the outboard motor alone, and paddled with our hands in the chilly, black water, as the boat described a wide curve, taking us directly in front of the harbour. It was difficult to believe the Vrtaal would not notice our presence, but all on the island were far too preoccupied with their own duties. Miss Carstairs and I waited in

silence, allowing the waves on the lake to gently rock us.

We did not have to wait long. A wooden structure, like scaffolding, was carefully raised by dozens of Vrtaal men pulling ropes. I was reminded of artists' impressions of the building of the Egyptian pyramids, the long lines of toiling slaves dragging each stone into place. The scaffolding rose up at one end; the other end began to dip down into the water, forming an outsized ramp, a dozen yards across, held in place with a complex arrangement of poles and ropes.

"That's where the Lakemother will emerge," said Miss Carstairs in a whisper. "It only happens once every two centuries."

"You don't mean to tell me you believe in this nonsense too?" I asked. "About the controlling the weather, and all?"

I could appreciate that Freddie was the sort of man to be taken in by superstition, so long as it flattered his ego. Offer him a crown, even one made from dried reeds, and an extravagant title, and he was willing to believe just about anything you demanded. But I did not expect such gullibility from a woman of Miss Carstairs's intellectual capacity.

"You'll see for yourself in a few moments," she said, peering through her binoculars at the costumed figures busying about the ramp of wooden struts. "Unless I'm very much mistaken, the bait is being prepared."

She handed me the binoculars, and I saw half a dozen prisoners being manhandled onto the platform by a crowd of Vrtaal heavies. The prisoners looked sluggish and dazed. Either they had been drugged for the occasion, or were simply too exhausted or terrified to put up any sort of struggle.

I peered at the chaos of bodies and costumes on the harbour. Not all were natives. In fact about half the celebrants were pale-skinned. I remembered what Miss Carstairs had told me about the Vrtaal's global reach, and realized with a shock that some of these frenzied primitives were probably English converts, men and women who led respectable lives back home.

Miss Carstairs pointed out a figure in a black

gown, his face obscured by what from a distance resembled a kind of balaclava, but through the binoculars I saw that it was more like a cylindrical headpiece made of woven hair, with two small rectangular slits for eyes, and a larger one for the mouth. Although the wearer's face was thus effectively obscured, I recognized him from his demeanour, and the deference with which the other members of the Vrtaal greeted him. This was Alex Willoughby in his full regalia.

"What happens now?" I whispered as I handed the binoculars back to her.

"Maybe nothing," she said. "Wait and see."

The monotonal humming grew steadily louder. At an unseen signal all those present prostrated themselves on the reeds. A small handful of worshippers had the task of raising the wooden scaffolding to an angle of something less than forty five degrees, one end under the surface of the water, and the other end tipping the bound prisoners ten or fifteen feet into the air. There they lay, suspended, heads down, on the ramp. I counted eight men. I looked again through the binoculars, and thought I saw the face of Ricardo, at the very top end of the ramp, but in the poor light I could not be entirely sure.

My father, in the persona of the Grand Stormking, waited, arms folded, as underlings scuttled over with what looked like a stepladder, which they proceeded to rig up at the high end of the ramp. The waves of humming had gradually transformed itself into a more ordered sound, a long, low chant. The Grand Stormking held his arms above his head, grasping an instrument in both hands, and the chanting grew in volume and enthusiasm. The worshippers, still prostrate on the reeds, lifted their masked heads to get a better view of my father's gesture. Were they paying homage to my father, or to the thing in his hands? It was curved, flat, and angled in the middle like a boomerang or a gorkha knife. I guessed that reeds had probably played some part in its manufacture.

Sitting on the plank seat of the tiny swaying boat, I shivered, but not from the cold. I turned away and stared out at the cold, black waters. What secrets lay beneath the frigid waves that lapped against our hull? I sincerely did not want

to know. The ancient mysteries of the Vrtaal could remain mysteries to me. I would rather remain ignorant. I tried to make out the shore, the real shore, not this floating sham. If I jumped in now, and swam for Puno, would I make it? Assuredly not. Even had I not spent the last few days slowly dying from a combination of exposure and starvation, I was not capable of swimming such a distance. And if I did manage to crawl ashore on dry land, what good would it serve? For the rest of my life I would know that I had abandoned not only my oldest friend, but my newest friend Ricardo too, as well as possibly dozens of other innocents, to a death that I was too cowardly even to bear witness to, let alone prevent.

My father was now mounting the steps towards the top end of the ramp. He brandished the ceremonial blade above his head. Silence fell over the assembled cultists as they awaited the first blood-letting. I could hear the gentle lulling of the waves, and flames guttering in the torches perched on high poles. Miss Carstairs was holding the binoculars, and was peering intently at the Grand Stormking. I had absolutely no desire to interrupt her. My father was but a black shape bent over the head of his first victim. He stood there on the top step, the knife poised to do its work. Why did he hesitate? Was he having second thoughts? Was there some scrap of humanity left in Alex Willoughby that was calling him to account, urging restraint, a twinkling star of sanity in the darkness, light years away but inextinguishable? Maybe he was simply reciting his abysmal incantation before the slaughter? Hidden within the cylindrical mask, I could not see whether his lips were moving.

I closed my eyes for a moment, and opened them again at a murmur of anticipation from the throng. The deed was done. A dark river flowed from the man's neck into a semi-circular channel fitted to the ramp. The blood rushed down and mingled with the waters of Lake Titicaca. The dead man's face had not changed a fraction, but a thick, dark band had spread across his neck like a cravat.

Just to his side, the second man had watched all this take place, and was now screaming. The

Stormking moved fast, and quieted him with a single swipe of his arm. A second tributary began to flow into the lake, past the prisoners bound to the lower reaches of the ramp. I could only imagine their reactions to this sight. The first two sacrifices dispatched to the Lake-mother, I fully expected my father to move on the others. There were six men left still alive.

"Is there nothing we can do?" I begged Miss Carstairs, as we watched masked Vrtaal servants busily removing the stepladder. My father stood to one side, overseeing the work with his blade still dripping onto the reeds.

"Not yet," she replied impatiently. "Nothing to do yet but wait."

"What for?" I exclaimed, a bit too loudly. "He's going to murder them all!"

Miss Carstairs clamped her hand over my mouth. "Don't be a fool, Willoughby!" she said. "Do you want them to catch us? Did you like it in that dungeon so much you want to go back there?"

I pushed her hand away. "Ricardo saved my life," I whispered. "I owe him."

"He's still got a chance," she said. "A very small one, mind you. Look!"

She held out the binoculars. I shook my head, but she thrust them into my hands. I raised the device reluctantly to my eyes, and noticed that the stepladder had vanished. Alex Willoughby was standing right at the edge of the reed platform, facing the lake, as though he were staring right at us, his arms stretched out above his head. I supposed he was offering more incantations to his imaginary god, but his voice was carried away by the wind, and all that reached us was muffled shouting.

Was that the end of it? Had the Vrtaal demon been placated? Would Ricardo and the others be spared? It made no sense.

Then, I saw it. I started and the binoculars fell from my hands into the bottom of the boat. I scrambled blindly in the wet darkness until I found them. Miss Carstairs ignored me, and was squeezing off frame after frame on a camera she had pulled from her rucksack.

Frantically I tried to refocus the lenses, and finally spotted them again. Two crooked tree

branches were rising from the surface of the lake. They were stuck out at a wide angle, as though they were the antennae of some giant insect. Then the head began to emerge. They *were* the antennae of a giant insect, or rather, a crustacean. A hard, lilac dome came next, the top of a head equipped with two vast, silver discs for eyes, that gleamed dully in the torchlight. The eyes were compound like a bluebottle's, but each of the many thousands of lenses must have been the diameter of my shaving mirror.

The front feet were next, lobster claws longer than our boat, which scraped audibly on the wooden ramp. The monster was climbing ashore, using the rungs of the ramp to cling onto. The carapace was an island in itself, a perfect, salmon-pink dome. For a second I had to pull the binoculars away, just to verify the appalling spectacle with my own, naked eyes. But there was no doubt about it: the Lakemother was very real, and merely a few dozen yards away, lumbering towards the helpless human figures strapped to the ramp. Understanding dawned on me: the blood-letting had only been a signal, an offer of bait, the way an angler will toss a handful of maggots into the millpond before casting his line. The real feast was yet to come. As I shifted my attention from the demonic creature in the lake to the demonic humans scurrying about on the shore, I saw a phalanx of Vrtaal garbed in white robes, huddling in the triangle of space beneath the ramp. Were these intended to be part of the creature's meal too? If so, these were willing victims, unguarded and apparently uncoerced.

But my eyes could not keep away from the Lakemother, the fiend which crawled on seven pairs of jointed claws and which dwarfed the white figures crouched below its head. As more of the carapace emerged into the night air, I could see that it was formed of distinct bands, allowing the creature to flex and arch its whole thorax.

"Like a giant woodlouse..." I murmured, thinking out loud.

"Possibly a distant cousin," commented Miss Carstairs. She had finished her film, and was struggling to insert another into the winding

mechanism of the camera. "There's a limestone fossil of one of its relatives in the Natural History Museum, about a fifth of the size of this one. Any marine biologist will tell you it's extinct. But there are others who don't believe its origins are entirely terrestrial."

"What do you mean?" I asked, disbelieving. "That this is some kind of alien life form?"

"Not exactly," said Miss Carstairs. "And it's only a theory. But some of my colleagues are of the opinion that this is the result of cross-breeding between planets. Possibly the extraterrestrials bred with other species too, creating superior hybrids. The anatomical parallels with the giant isopod are striking. You know, *Bathynomus giganteus*?"

I shook my head. "So the Ministry knew about this? And you still sent me and Freddie out here?"

"We had no proof. We have now," she said tersely, clicking the camera case shut.

How could she observe barbarity like this with such insouciance?

"You're actually happy about this!" I whispered harshly. "It's all a big scoop for you, I'm sure. Well, two men have died here, and it looks like there's more to come while we've sat by and done nothing. I hope your photos come out in focus Miss Carstairs, and you get your promotion."

"Don't get on your high horse, Mr Willoughby. Many more have died at the hands of the Vrtaal than these poor souls tonight, and if we mess this up, there will be plenty more in the future, and much closer to home. I've been hunting your father for six years. I'm not about to jeopardise the whole case because of your squeamishness. We are nearly at the endgame, Simon," she said, with a peculiar coldness in her voice. "Try to have patience."

I had no reply. What patience could any reasonable person summon up in the face of this alien visitation? I thought of what Freddie had told me, in our last interview. So this was my father's god, a vile, giant crustacean. I wondered whether it was what Freddie had been led to expect. Where was Freddie, exactly? One would have thought such an important figure as the

Cloudlord would have taken centre stage in this depraved communion.

With dreadful, slow deliberation, the creature was making its way up the slope of the ramp. I was amazed that the structure could take the weight, but the beast continued to drag itself out of the water, towards the helpless, struggling bait. Seven pairs of legs twitched obscenely as they tried to maintain a firm grip on the wooden slats. Mandibles quivered in anticipation as they sensed the prey almost within reach. I saw the expression on the face of the nearest prisoner as the clacking jaws loomed above him. Then I could watch no more, and turned aside to look at the ripples on the water as the screaming began.

“Giant isopods do the same kind of damage when they get caught up in fishermen’s nets,” said Miss Carstairs impassively, still working the camera. “They can ruin a whole catch with those jaws, and that sort of appetite.”

I was leaning over the edge of the boat, trying to hold down rising nausea. It didn’t work.

“Shhh! Do it quietly,” said Miss Carstairs. “We’re not invulnerable out here. If they came after us in their paddle canoes, they’d overtake our outboard motor before we were halfway to the shore.”

I retched again, as quietly as I could. The screaming had abruptly ceased, replaced by a

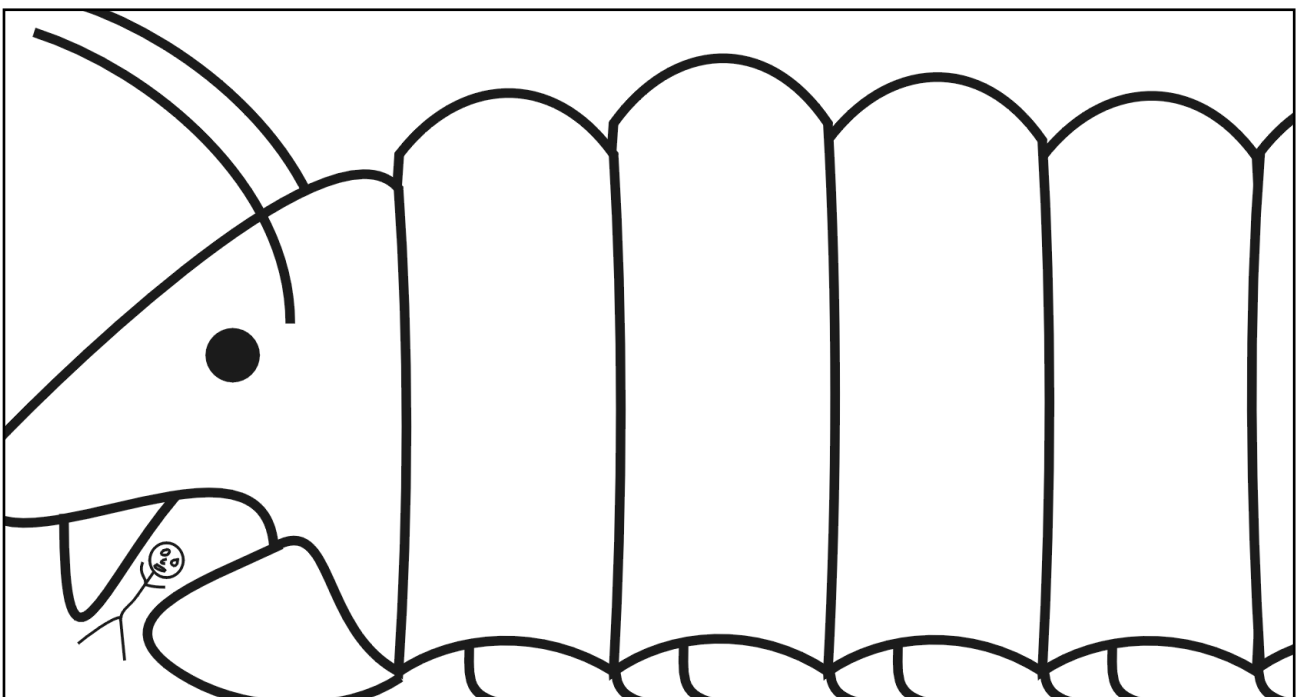
crunching, slobbering sound. I wiped my mouth with water from the lake. Then the screaming started up again, in a different pitch this time.”

“The interesting thing about giant isopods,” said Miss Carstairs, “is that they don’t know when to stop feeding. Sometimes, if a large food source is discovered, a dead whale on the ocean floor for example, the females gorge themselves until they bloat, and any eggs contained in their brood pouch are forced out, condemning the unborn young.”

“Fascinating,” I said thickly, still studying the patterns in the waves with all my concentration. “You seem to have made a real study of these monsters.”

“Well, I’ve had six years at it,” said Miss Carstairs. “And giant isopods aren’t monsters, certainly not in comparison with this. They don’t tend to get any bigger than about two feet long.”

I forced myself to take another look towards the shore, without the binoculars. The beast was poised at the very summit of the ramp, its impossibly long antennae waving ponderously over the crowds of worshippers below. Mercifully the remains of the Lakemother’s victims were obscured by the swollen undercarriage of the creature itself. The nightmare head lifted up then, and let out a hideous whistling. I saw my father, standing to one side, cover his ears in



pain, as did many of his followers. The alien cry echoed across the lake again and again. Was this a bellow of triumph, or of rage?

"And what rough beast, its hour come round at last, slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?" recited Miss Carstairs in low, reverential tones.

I was about to ask her what she meant, but there was no need. The white-gowned Vrtaal huddled beneath the ramp were stirred to action by some gross swelling and pulsating in the underbelly of the creature. The flesh parted to release a leathery grey egg into the waiting arms of three human figures below. The cries were birth pangs! The egg was carried away with great care, and more followed. I counted thirty-two, over the space of an hour, and each one was accompanied by the unearthly cries of the mother.

"She's overdone it," commented Miss Carstairs. "Her stomach is distended, and now the brood pouch is being squeezed empty."

"But won't the larvae die?" I asked.

"There is no larval stage to their development," she said, stuffing the camera back into her rucksack. "The young hatch fully formed inside the brood pouch and emerge as perfect, miniature versions of the adult. Well, that's how it works in the case of isopods. Of course, nobody's ever seen the hatchlings of this species, at least nobody outside the Vrtaal. So we could be wrong about that."

"What's going on now?" I said, nudging her and pointing to the shore, where another group of masked figures, this time in the guise of birds, with long, downward curving beaks like ibises, were clambering onto the platform. "Another feeding session?"

"No," said Miss Carstairs, studying the scene. "If I'm right, this is where the Vrtaal get something back for all their trouble."

To my astonishment, the tiny humans were climbing up onto the back of the beast. It seemed to tolerate their presence, and crouched there motionless, even when the men began to insert their beaks between the rigid bands that formed its carapace. They reminded me of nothing more than mosquitoes on the back of a cow, probing for veins. When I made this remark to Miss

Carstairs, she answered, "Well, the word Vrtaal does mean parasite in several ancient native dialects. And you're right, they are sucking out something, only it isn't blood."

"Then what?"

"We've never been able to get a pure enough sample for chemical analysis. Silver bromide is probably the active ingredient. Unusually high levels of that substance were found in several North Devon rivers after the Lynmouth flood. The creature must secrete it from special glands, and the Vrtaal stockpile it for later use."

"And that's how they control the weather?"

"Apparently so," Miss Carstairs agreed. "Although we've no idea exactly how it's done. Normally the chemical is emitted as a fine spray from the base of the carapace, at a relatively low concentration. One theory is that the creature has evolved these glands to regulate its climate, and to ensure that its habitat does not dry out while it's hibernating."

"Is that likely?" I asked.

"The species is believed to hibernate for between three and five hundred years at a time, so a lot could change. Lakes could dry up, rivers change course, deserts extend their reach. The beast can only survive on dry land for a few hours at most. On waking from hibernation, the creature mates, feeds, then gives birth before dying. The young feed on the dead carcass."

"But not this time," I pointed out.

"No, not this time. Your father must have other plans for these ones. I'm guessing dispersal."

I was beginning to catch on. "To other Vrtaal groups around the world," I said.

"Something like that," said Miss Carstairs. "But the manca – that's what the hatchlings are called – need a very particular environment: shallow, slow rivers, and plenty of readily available prey. In fact, in the case of the giant isopod, the manca must feed within twelve hours of hatching, or else starve."

"Just as a matter of interest," I said, watching the human mosquitoes clambering all over the back of their host. "How long do these creatures live for?"

"We've no idea," said Miss Carstairs.

"I wish I knew what had happened to Freddie," I said, scanning the crowds of worshippers one last time. I had not forgotten how he had sold me out to save his own skin. And yes, I had tried to kill him, but that had been a moment of madness, a crime of passion that I regretted. He may have been a treacherous friend, but I did not wish him eaten alive by the creature.

The Lakemother had stopped moving altogether. The swarms of long-beaked Vrtaal were leaping down from its back, having decanted the extracted pus into tall, ceremonial gold jugs, cast in the shape of the creature itself.

Why doesn't it go back into the water?" I said. "Or does it have to await my father's permission?"

"The creature is already dying," said Miss Carstairs. "In a few minutes it will be food for the scavengers on the lake floor."

The eggs had disappeared, hurried away to safety by the Vrtaal. The ceremony was drawing to a close. Alex Willoughby was deep in conversation with one of his underlings.

Miss Carstairs fiddled with something at the back of the boat. "I think we've seen enough," she said.

"Time to call in the reinforcements?" I asked.

"Reinforcements?" she asked, producing a greasy fuel can from the depths of the craft. "There's just you and me. What did you expect? A division of the Royal Marines over the next mountain, awaiting my signal?"

"Not exactly," I said, "It just seems a bit low-key."

"The Ministry is rather short staffed at the moment," she said. "We've got other agents monitoring the Vrtaal in England and elsewhere. Hollings is waiting for us to make contact with him in Norfolk."

"Norfolk?" I said. "What's in Norfolk?"

"Slow, shallow rivers, and a readily available supply of prey," replied Miss Carstairs, as she unscrewed the cap and began pouring petrol into a glass bottle.

"Ever made a Molotov cocktail?" she asked as she worked.

"No. I mean, I've seen it done, in films."

"Very simple, really. Grab that other bottle from my rucksack. The Vrtaal have been very well prepared in general," she commented. "But living on an island of floating reeds, with flaming torches everywhere. Well, it's just asking for trouble, isn't it?"

"What about the other prisoners?" I demanded.

"They're already dead," she said flatly. "And if there are any left alive, this will be their best chance to escape. How good is your throwing arm?"

"Not bad," I said, tearing two strips of cloth from my ragged shirt and handing one to her. "I was a fast bowler at school."

"Good enough."

"But Freddie..."

"He's lost, Simon. Forget about him. Even if he survived your little tussle, he'll never be the same Freddie Simlow. He's seen too much."

"I should say that goes for me too," I said. "And anyway, he's already dropped that name. He's gone and taken mine."

"Ah, yes," she said distractedly, trying without success to work a cigarette lighter.

"Let me," I said, taking it from her. "I don't suppose you had anything to do with that, did you? I mean, switching our passport photos."

"Not guilty on that count," said Miss Carstairs, lighting her homemade incendiary device. "I was a bit puzzled by that development myself. Still, it all worked out for the best. Right, aim for the huts. Once the roofs are ablaze, they'll have a devil of a time putting them out."

I stood up unsteadily in the rocking boat, and held the flaming bottle high above my head. Almost immediately, gowned and masked figures on the shore began pointing in our direction and shouting furiously. My father turned, his head-dress removed now that the ceremony was complete, and saw us too, and at his word, a gaggle of Vrtaal men began sprinting towards the line of reed canoes.

"Change of plan," said Miss Carstairs. "You take the huts. I'll try and take out the boats."

"Righto," I said, keeping my eyes on the figure of Alex Willoughby. I took aim. TQF

tales of yxning

The last throes of winter had piled the snow into looming blue drifts. Chimneys of several log huts puffed away in vain to keep out the cold, the roofs weighted down heavily by several feet of snow and ringed with long spines of icicles reaching nearly to the ground. The Greater Moon, reflecting on the snow, created a thin quicksilver light, throwing long shadows away from bare saplings surrounding the complex.

Two figures emerged from the centre hut, their breath sending out clouds like little miniature chimneys.

"I sent for you, Captain O'Goura, because we need your special talents to extricate us from a losing proposition," said General Yrling Knorrac. He was tall and heavy, and his moist breath in the freezing air set tiny icicles growing around his dark moustaches and beard. Captain O'Goura gazed at him intently as he continued.

"Our support of the rebels in Blynne has been a disaster. We've been totally thwarted by black

magic. You will see, Captain, from our prisoner, what we're up against."

The two reached the two-room guardhouse and were admitted. They walked into the back room, where the prisoner was closely guarded and shackled by both legs to the far wall.

"A woman!" Terence O'Goura exclaimed, startled by the sight. He had been told that an enemy assassin had been captured, but no one told him the assassin was a woman.

The prisoner stood up. She was 25 years of age, tall, and barefoot. She wore a peasant dress of good quality which unfortunately had been ripped in places and was now much in need of washing. Several large strands of her unkempt blonde hair hung in her face. She had hazel eyes, a large mouth, and a thin, curvaceous figure. Altogether, in spite of her unfavourable situation, she was stunningly beautiful.

"Look at the way she stands at attention for us," General Knorrac said. "That's unusual." Then he smiled. "My dear Dala Thute, this is

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Captain Terence O’Goura. I suppose you’ve heard of him.”

There was an awkward silence as Dala and Terence stared at each other. For someone who was renowned as the possessor of a magic sword, the Captain was not physically all that unusual: a thin clean-shaven young man of average height, with reddish blonde hair, green eyes a little bit closer together than normal, and a strong but not overly muscular physique. He had a very attractive smile, which his serious demeanour seldom expressed.

Because of Terence O’Goura’s second sight, what he saw was not the same woman that the others saw. Her enchantment was like a veil to him which his mind’s eye could toss aside, revealing her true semblance.

“Who did this to you? Why has your appearance been altered by magic?” he asked. She smiled a bit, but did not respond.

The General frowned. “She hasn’t said much to us, but we know from other sources that the Duke of Blyne has paid a magician to create

assassins for him. We’ve been unable to determine the identity of this magician. And, for some unknown reason, the assassins have all been young women.”

“Perhaps I can help,” Terence said. “Leave me alone with her.” The general and guards left the room.

“What are you going to do to me?” Dala asked. “Kill me with your magic sword? Try to seduce me into telling you everything?”

Terence smiled, and his smile did more than anything else to vanquish Dala’s hostility.

“A magic sword is a fine thing in some matters, but having second sight is a much more significant gift,” he said. “I know what you really look like. Why would you change it? You’re a beautiful woman.”

“Then you are not really seeing me at all. I’m extremely ugly in my normal appearance.”

“No, not at all. Without the glamour of magic, you’re short and thin, with light brown hair. You have a large nose which suits your face perfectly and you have a very nice expression.”

"You do see me, but through the eyes of a fool. What could I expect in life with such a ridiculous ugly nose?"

"A large nose in a woman is not a bad thing in my humble opinion. I think it gives a woman character and can be very pretty. You know that I speak the truth. I don't intend to harm you. I want to help you."

"No one can help me. I was promised and given great beauty in exchange for future services. I married a very handsome and rich knight. It was every girl's dream. Then it came time to pay my debt. It was like a pact with the devil. I didn't want to kill anyone, but if I refused my husband would be enchanted and tortured and I would become even uglier than I was before."

"This husband of yours, how long have you been married to him?" Terence asked.

"Six years."

"And yet you have no children?"

"Not a one. Perhaps I'm being punished for my wickedness."

"No, not at all. You're punishing yourself for your bad choices. Your husband is not a handsome young knight. In reality, he's a doddering 75 year old farmer that your magician friend has transformed in appearance. The man is weak, infertile and nearly impotent. He has all the charm of a hornet's nest. You don't really love him."

Dala cried. She suddenly realized it must be true; that her husband's sloth and crankiness revealed his true nature. "What can I do?" she wailed. "I'm better off dead. My life is ruined."

"Put that thought out of your mind," Terence said quietly. "We're going to defeat this magician and undo his spells. You're still a pretty young woman in your true appearance. There's no reason why you can't start anew."

"But I will be too old, too ugly," Dala cried.

"It's a funny thing about war, that it sometimes results in great piles of swag. If you help us, we'll make a rich woman out of you, and you'll surely have a much happier life than you had before. What is beauty without wealth? It's a flower on a remote barren cliff; it just sits there and nothing much comes of it. What is wealth without beauty? It's not so terrible. It's a great

bustling festival in the city with dancing and feasting and jokes everywhere. Surely you're too young to give up on life. If you join with us, besides wealth, you'll get to travel, have some adventures, and see yourself finally revenged on your deceiving devil of a magician. What do you say?"

"His name is Laszlo Sturdivant, and he has a twin."



The next morning Dala told General Knorrac and Captain O'Goura everything she knew about Sturdivant and his assassins. She said: "Laszlo and his brother Jason have a castle near the town of Old Nebbish in the country of Berill. Originally, they tried to get Sandever to bribe them for their help in the Lesser States, but when they were rebuffed they went over to the other side."

"Humpf," muttered General Knorrac. "There are so many mountebanks, one never knows who to bribe these days."

"The Sturdivants are very powerful," Dala replied. "They have been killing and torturing people with spells that either make them unbearably cold all the time or unbearably hot."

"One of our rebel leaders, Vernon Hinsdale, had one of those spells. He was constantly freezing and as a result he shipped out to the desert to try to get warmer."

"The women are given a spell for great beauty. After they marry well, they are told that if they are not successful as assassins they will lose their good looks and their husbands will be tortured."

Terence asked, "Does Laszlo have a way of seeing what we are doing?"

"Yes," said Dala. "He has an oracle that tells him in advance every move made by his enemies. He's a master of disguises. Each time I saw him he had a different face. He and his brother travel all around to cast spells against their enemies. By their magic, the Sturdivants make it hard for their enemies to get places they want to go."

"Is there any way we can make peace with

them?" asked the General with a worried look on his face.

"No, they are furious that they were rebuffed by Sandever and they have vowed to destroy you."

"It seems hard for me, as a military man, to see how we can defeat someone who knows in advance what we are doing," the General admitted.

"We must approach Laszlo's stronghold with several different parties by circuitous routes," Terence said. "That will buy us extra time."

"That sounds promising."

"Then if you send me as an envoy with a crew of soldiers and women, we will appear relatively nonthreatening. I would also like Dala to come with us to help us find our way."

"Very well. I will give the appropriate orders."

When they were alone, Dala asked Terence: "How did you know about my husband? Can you see things hundreds of miles away?"

"You carried your husband's image in your heart," he said. "I didn't have to look far at all to see that."

"Why do you want me with you?"

"He's not going to know if you've come over to our side or not, at least until we get close. I think it will buy us some time."

"If Laszlo thinks that I might assassinate you somewhere along the way, what makes you so sure that I won't?"

"Laszlo gave you nothing but false hopes and lies. I will make good on my promises to you. Who were you assigned to assassinate?"

"I was told to kill four rebel leaders. I killed three. The only one I didn't get was Themistocles Mundzucus."

"Then we will have him in our company. Laszlo will think you are just doing your job."

"He's a terrible man, this Laszlo Sturdivant. What makes you so sure you can kill him?"

"I'm probably aware more than anyone of the limitations of magic. My second sight, which impressed you so much, comes and goes and no one understands what triggers it. Your magician Laszlo seems powerful now, but is it wise to make so many enemies? No one is invulnerable. We poor mortals are at the mercy of the wheel of

fortune, and who knows what the next spin will bring?" He looked at her and smiled.

By the time Terence and his crew of seven men and eight women arrived in Doncle, the brunt of winter had passed over into the clutches of mud season and travel was difficult and slow. Dala Thute had been completely won over by Terence O'Goura, or so it seemed. She had many opportunities to slay him while he slept contently in the bed of an inn, and one would think she would have done so if she were just pretending to be his lover.

Although Terence had told Dala the truth, as far as what he said, he had not told her the whole truth. He had left out telling her that, even if her husband had been virile, she still could not have children because she herself was infertile. "It would be cruel to tell her that," Terence had thought. "Perhaps her problem could be solved some day through medicine or magic. She can't deal with this problem now, but hopefully later it can be solved."

"What's the next town?" Dala inquired.

"Weardburg," Terence said. "It's an amazing place where contrarities are equally true. According to my instructions from General Knorrac, we need to go there to meet up with an armourer who will help us defeat Laszlo."

"Do you really think armour is the answer?"

"No, of course not. My sword Hlemyldar will slow down an opponent in a sword fight, but it won't prevent me from being shot in the back by a crossbow. All the plate armour in the world won't do anything against a sorcerer who turns the knight into a mouse. However, I expect we'll find that this armourer in particular has something useful for us."

The town itself had an atmosphere of strangeness, a certain dreamlike quality. The signs of various shops in Yxning usually were just pictures, but in larger towns, such as Weardburg, where there were more literate people, the signs also had written slogans on them. Thus, they passed on one side of the street an establishment with a sign saying: Knives Sharpened. On the other side of the street was a sign: Knives Blunted.

Then they passed a store with a sign saying:

Musical Instruments. Across from this was a store with a sign saying: Silent Instruments.

They came to the inn which had a large sign in front which proclaimed: King's Head Tavern. Across the street, however, was a rather ramshackle old building with a smaller sign which said: Queen's Rump Tavern. Dala was thankful they had chosen the more reputable of the two.

Once inside, the party of 16 were given tables and began to order dinner. What a strange gallimaufry was found on the menu. The envoys were given their choice of such pairs of fare as:

freshly-baked bread – or – rock-hard, stale bread

savoury custards – or – unsavoury custards

fresh fish – or – rotting fish

crispy toasted buns – or – soggy uncooked buns

fine wines – or – disgusting wines

sausage on a stick – or – sausage running loose

On the walls of the tavern were contradictory placards saying such things as "Sale today – low prices" and "No sale today – high prices". Another pair said: "Wet your whistle here" and "Dry your whistle here".

While Dala and Terence were contemplating the choices available to them, other patrons were noisily carousing.

"Here's mud in your eye!" a patron exclaimed. His friend then reached behind his chair and pulled out a large bowl full of some earthy substance. "Well, here's an eye in your mud!" he said.

One taverngoer with a stein in his hand said, "Down the hatch!" At once a waiter grabbed him and said, "Up the chimney!", tossing him into the fireplace.

In a short time, the patrons and waiters fell to blows. Steins, glasses, and chairs flew through the air. Even the ladies were fighting: punching, kicking, pulling each other's hair. Curses and blessings could be heard above the noise of flying food trays and crashing bottles.

Terence had his hand on his sword and was just about to draw it from its scabbard when a large orange ring with a big fat protruding rubber "oar" or "proboscis" came floating down

from the ceiling, immediately causing the fight to cease and calm, quiet and amity to prevail.

A secret door in the wall of the tavern opened and a short, thin man said, "Psst! Terence! Over here!"

At once Terence and Dala rushed over and into the door. They went down a long chamber lit with torches and emerged into a laboratory.

"Allow me to introduce myself," the man said. "I am Professor Nidniopip Oompfquaghtich, at your service, but you can call me Nid."

Dressed in dark robes like a cleric, the man was about 35, with dark brown hair, high cheekbones, narrow blue eyes and a small mouth with some bent or missing teeth.

"How did you stop that fight?" Terence asked.

"That was an invention of mine, the public pacifier. The innkeeper is a friend of mine and my invention has saved his property many times. The pacifier works through aromatherapy and has a temporary calming effect. However, it only works in enclosed areas where the aroma can be trapped; it would be useless outdoors."

"The more's the pity. It would make a great weapon."

"Yes, yes," Nid said. "I know you are thinking about how to defeat Laszlo. So am I. Who is the lady?"

"This, my friend, is Dala Thute, who was once enchanted by Laszlo Sturdivant, but now that she sees how evil he is, she is here to help us vanquish him."

"So she is. So she is," Nid muttered. Turning to Terence, Nid asked: "Can you defeat Laszlo by the use of your magic sword?"

"I doubt it. The sword only slows down time for an opponent in a duel. In an age of sneak attacks, arquebuses, crossbows, and black magic, it's only of limited use. Still, I am happy to have it. I got it from two earth elementals when I was just a poor farmboy."

"Well, well, we will keep this in mind. Allow me to show you through my laboratory. It is actually quite a large complex. The first room is where I experimented with different metals for use in plate armour, chain mail, and jazeraint armour."

"Did you find anything better than steel?"

“No, actually, I didn’t. I found some alloys that could be kept cool in hot desert conditions, but they are not quite as strong as steel. This second room has some of my interesting concoctions.”

The room was lined with numerous glass and clay bottles of all types and descriptions. “This one,” Nid said, “is something I am very proud of. It is an invigorating ointment that you put on your feet. Anyone care to try it?”

“Let me try it,” Dala said, casting off her shoes, thinking she would get something that would be good for tired, aching feet.

She sat down while the Professor rubbed some of the ointment on the soles of her feet.

“That feels cool,” she said, “and quite refreshing.”

“Now stand up.”

When Dala stood up, her feet hovered about ten inches above the floor of the room. “What’s this? I’m flying!”

“It’s the effect of the ointment. Just walk around a bit please. Is that good?”

“Yes, I can walk just fine. This is so strange.” And Dala continued walking around the room, with her feet at a distance of ten inches from the floor, while Terence and Nid began looking through the other jars that Nid brought out.

“Now this other potion,” Nid said, “is also quite efficacious.”

“What does it do?”

“We mustn’t release it now; it spreads very far. It excites tiny specks in the sky and creates light where there once was darkness. Imagine all the motes in the sunbeam. If we could turn them into little torches they would light our path in the night. That is what I have done; I’ve turned all the tiny specks in the air into miniscule fire-flies.”

“That could be very useful. What is this next bottle?”

“This is one I am rather proud of. It stops the pangs of false labour in pregnant women.”

“I suppose we won’t be needing that.”

“Well, you never know. I haven’t fully tested all its properties, and any sort of painkiller might be useful under some circumstances. I would bring it along all the same, if I were you. Now,

come into this room. This opens out into an alley.”

When the three of them walked into the room, the two visitors were astounded. Two very large contraptions stood in full view. The first was a large cart meant to be pulled by four oxen or draft horses on the sides of it. In the front was a huge gleaming scythe large enough to cut straight through a house.

“This is my chariot of doom.”

“Very impressive. And what is that other thing over there?”

“It is a special trebuchet I designed to hurl mustard at the adversary.”

“Why mustard?”

“When my wealthy uncle died, I had an inheritance of several warehouses of jars of it, an almost limitless supply. Mustard in these parts for many years has been used to barter with some ogres who live in the mountains south of here. Having so much of it, I started using mustard as a prototype to be thrown from my trebuchet. Eventually, I suppose, the design could be revised to hurl something more deadly, but I haven’t got to that stage yet.”

“Too bad,” Terence said, the disappointment showing on his countenance.

“But never fear, I have one more thing that I am sure you will find valuable. For centuries this weapon has been believed to be lost, but by dint of careful research, and some secret nightly excavations, I have recovered it. Come.”

Nid led the two of them downstairs through a maze of several rooms and into a small chamber cut into bedrock. He went to a large ornate wooden cabinet and opened it.

“I have tried to keep this weapon concealed while I have been experimenting with it. Even my own assistants know nothing about it. Other than myself, you are the only two to see this. I give you, the one and only, the famous Battleaxe of the Missionaries!”

And he pulled out a large, heavy felt blanket, in the middle of which was a gleaming silver double-bladed ax.

“Can it be? Is this what I think it is?”

“Yes, the true and genuine, the Ax of the Apostles!”

His guests were both astounded. Dala said, "The legend is that this ax gave the evangelists the power to understand any language in the world."

"Yes, it is priceless," Nid enthused. "It is not just for languages as you think of them, but also it gives me the understanding of communications of all the animals in the world, the birds, the bears, the whales, the horses... They can talk to me and I can talk to them. It is just mind-boggling."

Dala wondered what the animals had to say for themselves, but Terence was impatient to discover some military use.

"Can it do anything else?" Terence asked.

"Not that I've noticed so far. And it only has a range of about four hundred yards. Still, I am sure it could come in very useful. For example, if you were facing a troop of cavalry, you might want to know what their horses have to say for themselves."

"Professor," Terence replied, "with all of the inventions you have shown us, we have a very interesting arsenal for use in our attack on the evil magician Laszlo and his twin brother."

"Er, fellows," Dala said, "can you get me down now?"



The next morning some of the crew went to buy draft horses to pull the Professor's chariot of doom, while others worked at packing up bottles of the Professor's various elixirs.

Dala asked him: "That's a very unusual name you have. Is it from outside the provinces and nations of Yxning?"

"I was born and raised in Gheinaar, but I had to leave that country because they don't understand the difference between an inventor and an evil sorcerer."

"Well," Dala said, "for a foreigner, you speak Yxning perfectly."

"Yes, indeed," Nid replied. "It's all the effect of the ax. Before that, I had a very bad accent."

When Dala left to help with some of the packing, Nid approached Terence and said: "Besides me, we have eight soldiers and eight women. I presume you trust the soldiers, but how can we

be sure about the women? Might not some of them actually be enemy agents? Why don't we just ditch the women and then press on without them?"

"How would we do that?"

"Are you forgetting that this is the town of contrarities? Every product here has its opposite. All we would need to do is to give the women the opposite of my potion that alleviates the pain of false labour. They would then get the pains of false labour, and we could leave them behind in the custody of some doctor or other."

"That sounds very ingenious, Nid. However, I'm in command and I think the women might prove useful. I don't think any of them are disloyal. So, it is settled, the women are coming."

"So be it. It is your show. I hope you are right."

When the chariot had been disguised with wood planking as an ordinary wagon, extra horses had been obtained, and all of the various inventions had been packed, the caravan began to wend its way to the south.

On the outskirts of town was a teenager sitting in a booth under a big sign: "The Amazing Gresgin." When they came to him, Dala said, "What do you do that is so amazing?"

"This region is the pretzel-making capital of the world, but wait till you see this!" he replied, whipping out a pretzel. He closed his eyes, wrinkled his brow, and then after a moment the pretzel began to unbend. By mindpower alone, he fully unbent the pretzel, then bent it back again.

"What a clever boy!" Terence exclaimed. "Young man, you must come with us. We are envoys on a very important mission. Your abilities are amazing and will be of great help to us. Come with us and I'll pay you three florins a day."

"Done," said the young man. "Can you loan me a horse?"

"No problem. We have several extra and you can ride on the largest of our spare horses."

When the boy was out of sight, Dala asked, "Why did you do that? You are just endangering this poor boy."

“Mind power is very important. He may prove invaluable.”

In two days, they crossed into the country of Vyvelyche, where the border guards saw their papers as envoys and let them pass without question. But soon matters began to get difficult.

As expected, Laszlo Sturdivant did what he could to stop Terence’s company from going south. First, he had the ground turn muddier and muddier, until it became as bad as a thin soup. However, by anointing their feet with the special ointment, as well as the horse’s hooves and the chariot’s wheels, the company was able to walk right over the gooey ground. If anything, their speed increased.

After that, they came back to dry ground and marched past the city of Behoote. Along the shore of a river outside of town they saw a long row of stakes, and when they got close to the stakes they saw that someone had killed members of other expeditions against Laszlo and had impaled their severed and rotting heads on these stakes as a warning to turn back. Terence was shocked to see that one of the stakes held the head of Yrling Knorrac.

“Perhaps this is some enchantment just to scare us,” Nid proposed.

“No, I think they are genuine,” Terence said.

Fortunately, the rest of the company thought that these were just the heads of brigands and had no idea that this was a warning to them.

Continuing on their way, they crossed the border into the country of Berill. Here, however, no border guards were seen. Terence assumed they had all been killed or scared off by the necromancy of the Sturdivant twins.

A day later there could be no doubt that some black magic was afoot. The ground itself seemed to ooze, seep and exhale a very thick, dense black fog. Soon, the very sky was blackened and the brightness of day was transformed into darkest night.

“Not to worry! Not to worry people!” shouted Nid, as he released his invented substances into the air. Particles sparkled and glowed, and the air itself became luminous.

“Are we in a fog?” one traveller said.

“Perhaps it’s an eclipse.”

“What a wonderful light this is. If he could bottle it, he’d make a fortune.”

“Dummy, he already did bottle it. Where do you think it came from?”

After about two miles, the fog lifted. They walked up a slope and out of the foggy valley. Down behind them they could see a long valley that was obliterated from sight by the fuliginous mist, and yet their trail through it shined like a luminescent line piercing the heart of darkness.

As they came down the slopes into another valley, they could feel the air become heavy and moist, and it gradually became so thick and muggy and rubbery that it was hard to breathe it in at all. Terence’s soldiers pulled wooden planks off the front of the chariot of doom, revealing the huge scythe. The chariot then proceeded in front of everyone, cutting a swath through the rubbery air, and enabling the company to follow without further difficulty.

Soon they started back uphill and were out of the zone of thickened air.

They left the chariot on the side of the road here, and entered into the forest of Funguswood, where a narrow track led through a gloomy forest of giant mushrooms on stalks a hundred and ten feet high. They camped in tents in the gloomy forest, where fireflies high in the air supplied the place of stars.

“You know, I just don’t trust Nidniopip,” Dala told Terence. “It just doesn’t seem right that he would lose an accent just because he possesses the Ax. Yes, he would learn any new language, but every child in Ghienaar learns to speak Yxning. Yxning is used all over the continent and Ghien is just a small, minority language. Nid wouldn’t lose an accent he already had from when he was a child.”

“He hasn’t acted suspiciously.”

“Why does he keep the Ax in a felt blanket? And he hasn’t even used it the entire trip? Could it be that he’s evil and he isn’t able to use it?”

“We’ll have to keep an eye out just in case, but so far he hasn’t acted evil.”

The next morning Terence asked Nid if he heard anything from the speech of animals or birds.

“No, nothing at all. The animals have fled the

forest out of fear. We must be close to Laszlo's castle."

Later that day they emerged from the forest and down in the plain far off in the distance they could see Laszlo's castle. The day after that they camped not far from the walls of the castle itself. They took the pieces of the trebuchet off their pack horses and began to assemble it.

Terence's soldiers came up to him and said, "How are we going to storm such a large castle with only ten men and a flimsy trebuchet like that?"

"Don't worry, men," Terence replied. "I have a plan."

The men went to sleep expecting some action in the morning. Dala asked Terence: "What is your plan?"

"My plan is that I'm going to improvise, just like I always do."

After hearing this, Dala could not sleep a wink the entire night. When Terence awoke in the morning, she was not in the tent.

Up before dawn himself, Terence roused Nid from his torpor. "What does the Ax tell you this morning, Nid?"

Nid took the ax out of its blanket and held it in his hands. It seemed to create a fiery glow around him. "There are no soldiers in the castle," he said. "Instead, Laszlo has created an army of mice enchanted to look like human soldiers. He has a huge catapult aimed at us, and is planning to squash us all with a stupendous pretzel!"

"The fiend!"

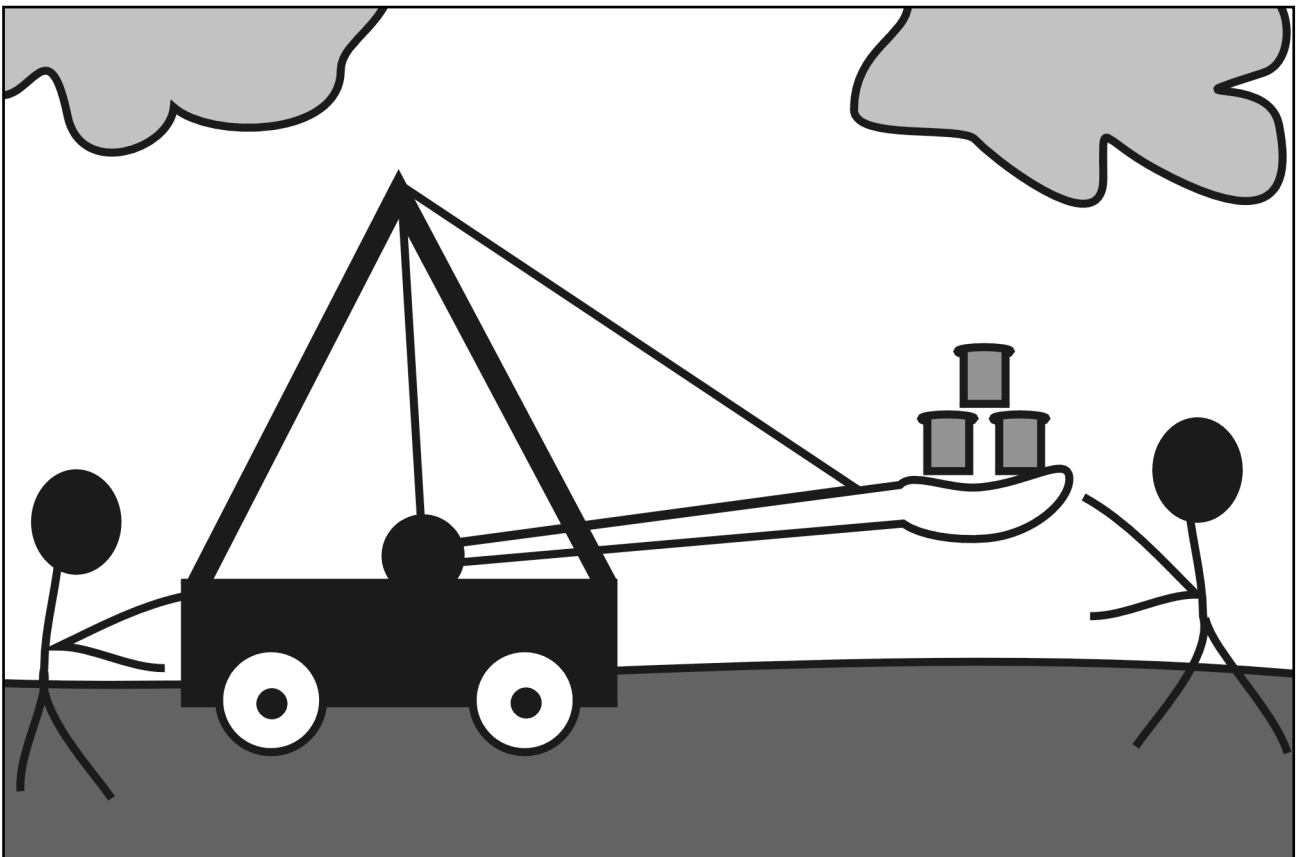
"We'll have to strike first," Nid said. "I will fire at it with my trebuchet."

"What good will that do?" Terence asked, but it was too late.

Nid had filled the trebuchet up with many jars of mustard, and launched a pre-emptive strike at the castle. He then reloaded and fired again and again.

"What is he doing?" the soldiers asked but Terence didn't know how to answer them. Then everyone began to hear a far-off thumping. The thumping became louder and louder.

Huffing and puffing, Nid ran up to Terence and said: "There are some eagles flying over the castle and they bring good news. The gigantic pretzel has been smeared with mustard. Laszlo's soldier mice could not resist it, and have been



nibbling on it instead of trying to launch it. Meanwhile, that thumping noise you hear is from two mean ogres. They can't resist the smell of their favourite food, a mustard pretzel!"

Looking to the East, Terence saw two enormous ogres appear over the horizon and head to the castle. "When they break through the walls, we can attack," Terence said.

The ogres did break through the walls, but before Terence and his men could move forward, Laszlo unleashed a powerful enchantment and Terence, his soldiers, and the women with them began transforming into pregnant women in the throes of false labour.

"Oh, I don't feel so good," one gruff soldier moaned, clutching his belly.

"You don't look so good neither," replied another, who was repulsed by the fact that the man's persisting bushy moustache contrasted with his obviously pregnant form.

"I'm starting to feel some mighty strange feelings."

"I hope this is just a dream."

But the spell gripped them until they were in agony.

"Oh! Oh! Somebody help us!" the soldiers cried.

Not everyone was incapacitated, however. Themistocles Mundzucus, the Blynne rebel leader that Terence had brought with him, the man that Dala had tried and failed to assassinate, remained in his normal form. He rushed back and forth, seizing the Ax of the Apostles and the magic sword, Hlemyldar.

Terence turned to him and said, "You'll never get away with this."

"You are a fool, Terence. You never realized that I was Laszlo Sturdivant all along."

"But Dala was going to assassinate you."

"She was told to do that, yes, but of course she failed. The other rebel leaders would not suspect me so long as the assassins seemed to be after me as well. With my great sorcery, I hid my powers from you for all of this journey. Since I've destroyed all the bottles of antidotes to false labour, you'll all remain in agony forever. And now with these two great weapons, the Ax and sword, I will soon be Ruler of the World!"

Laszlo roared with demonic laughter. "This false pregnancy spell is the best entertainment I've had in a long time. Seeing your pitiful army convulsing on the ground at my feet is a wonderfully reassuring way to demonstrate my overwhelming superiority. No one has ever been as great a sorcerer as I am.

"And who ever suspected that a sorcerer could be such an accomplished humorist? With my right hand, I create my own army out of mice. They work cheap enough, but those twitching whiskers can get on your nerves sometimes. When I become ruler of the world I think I'll use sheep instead; they don't twitch so much. Then today, with my left hand, I make my enemy's army grovel in the dust, helpless, ridiculous, pregnant women trapped in my ludicrous limbo."

As Laszlo again roared with laughter, a cross-bow behind him sent its quiver straight through his heart. He gasped, collapsed, and died.

Dala Thute emerged from her hiding place behind a bush next to one of the tents. "I was told to assassinate him and I did," she said. "I don't know why I didn't get all the false labour pains everyone else did."

When Laszlo died, his spells evaporated. Soldiers turned back into men, and the false labour stopped. Mice enchanted into soldiers turned back into mice. And Dala Thute went from being a tall gorgeous blonde back to her normal form. She began crying and Terence cradled her in his arms.

"You didn't get the false labour pains due to temporary infertility," he said. "But I believe it can be cured. I know it can be cured."

Nid came over to the two of them and said: "The ogres have left. We still have to face Laszlo's twin. Shall we attack the castle now?"

"Let's find out. Hand me that Ax, will you?"

Nid handed Terence the Ax. He held it and seemed in a reverie.

"The mice have spoken," Terence finally said. "When you fired the first jar of mustard, it hit Jason Sturdivant on the head and killed him instantly."

After All

A River.
It Had to Be.

MICHAEL
WYNDHAM THOMAS

Previously...

I was sitting in a car when it melted away. I awoke... somewhere. In a house. With people. But everything was vague. Then we began to arrive, again. Ourselves. From other points in time. This is the final instalment.

It scared the wits out of me, the front door, groaning open like that just as I got to the gate. They looked like kids at their first holy communion as they came out. (Having remembered “limbo”, I found all sorts flooding back now.) In slow and single file they came down the path. Without thinking, I retreated some way into the fog. Suddenly, there was nothing of the first communion about the scene. I felt like I’d stumbled on a burial party. It was the stillness of the faces, the unwavering gaze of the eyes. With

a start, I realized that the biscuit girl was on the opposite side of the gate, tapping a hand with that little note-tablet of hers. She stepped back too, now sweeping her free hand wide, ushering them into the lane. She didn’t seem to know I was there.

But they did. One by one, as they passed, they treated me to the same smile. Never mind that older Marjory’s was ever so slightly tufted round the lips, that younger Marjory’s was redly made up, that big Rob’s was a wisecracker’s grin, that



little Rob's was the innocent curl of a kid whom Jesus wanted for a sunbeam. All four smiles said the same thing: it's time.

But it clearly wasn't time for me. And this gliding and smiling was all very fine – but did they remember who I was? My mouth dropped open in stagey confusion, at which big Rob saved the day: "See you, then," he whispered to me as he slid through the gate, the other three variously mmm-ing and yes-ing agreement. What did he mean? Was it just that old throw-away farewell – or had they been told of a definite *then* – and a *there* to go with it?

"Shuuush." The biscuit-girl strung the word out like a half-kindly, half-hawkish teacher left alone to supervise a crocodile of kids at a road junction. I folded my arms and stared at her. Loving this, aren't you? I thought. I assume that, once this business is done, whatever it is, you'll give me chapter and verse on what lies ahead for me – and it'll be something totally different and inconvenient and cold. Or will you just make like a wisp of fog, a gust of wind, and slither away? I want to talk to your gaffer, I thought, staring hard at her, trying to bore the words into her head. No more messing about with monkeys – I had enough of them before. It's the organ-grinder or nothing for this boy. Once the quartet were in the lane, she did look across the gate towards me. I got ready with some good and proper lip-pursing and eye-narrowing. But still she didn't see me. Her gaze simply flicked here and there, as though she'd been distracted by a trick of her unfathomable mind.

Now the Marjories and Robs went two-by-two away from me. Pocketing her stone-tablet (had she written anything on it? done anything to it? was it just for show?), the biscuit-girl floated along behind them, a phantom shepherdess.

"Where are you going?" I called. The fog seemed to hold the words an inch from my

mouth. They dried without echo. No head turned at my cry. I could have been that tubby, paint-lid boy again, out in the playground of his nondescript school, aghast at his best mate's decision to turn round and walk off, to play with the others.

I let the fog all but swallow them up, then started to follow, bent a little at the waist like a pantomime assassin. Sometimes I crept more quickly than I intended, then checked myself. I really didn't want to find Miss Biscuit suddenly barring my path, holding up her stone doodle-pad as if I were a revenant to be killed with a holy token.

Then the fog was gone. Just like yesterday when, in a far different mood, Marjory, Rob and I had walked – single, untwinned – up the lane. Like a huge, expertly-yanked tablecloth, it flew aside to reveal peninsulas of cloud in a sea of unresting blues; a grown-up highway, properly wide; a river of almost blinding dazzle on which a boat – a double-masted effort, like a dhow – was skimming smartly in our direction. I stopped dead, watching the boat approach a landing stage, swing about and pull alongside. There was no crew.

A sort of pantomime followed, under the instruction of the biscuit-girl. The younger selves were motioned to board first, the boy on a front seat, the woman behind. The biscuit-girl waited till they were settled – still as statues, in fact. Then she permitted their respective twins to join them. I looked at the backs of their heads – both Robs first, then both Marjories. Never mind my mom's crack about me thinking I'd landed in Ilfracombe. They looked like Bank Holiday citizens at some eternal Skegness, ready for a sixpenny turn about the bay. On the landing stage, the biscuit-girl did some kind of abracadabra with that tablet, and the obedient dhow set sail. Squinting a little, trembling even more,

I heard another song start mockingly in my head: *"We're sailing 'cross the river, wash your sins away in the tide, it's oh so peaceful on the other side."* I thought of their identical smiles as they'd passed me at the gate. It's time, the smiles said. Time we pushed off from the banks of Jordan, Lethe, Styx. That endless, unfailling point of exit, older and longer than God's beard. A river. It had to be.

Suddenly I realised that the biscuit-girl had left the landing-stage and was bearing down on me. I thought of all sorts to forestall any dressing-down. Bit clichéd, isn't it, a river? Haven't we moved on? How about a monorail? A helicopter? Or are they insufficient for the romance of salvation? Do they make too much racket? She looked me full in the eye. As my mother had done, she choked every word before my lips could get at it.

Instead, I found myself burbling away about Junior One, Miss Collins, that infernal paint-lid. "It was you, wasn't it? You were holding a rabbit or gerbil or cat or – I don't know – a bunch of flowers? Oh, help me out, here," I spluttered. "I was seven years old." As I was yet again, to judge by the tearful flutter in my voice. My legs felt like they were made of that river. I thought I was going to drop to my knees, scrunch up the hem of her skirt in despairing hands.

"Your biscuit-girl? I probably was." She didn't sound that interested. And there was none of the creaminess of her "Shuush" back in the lane. Flinty, pitched slightly higher now, her voice was the kind you hang up on. "I've been a profile in a cameo on a walnut bureau in Versailles," she continued. "A hurrying shadow on a wartime street." She gave a smile; there was no sun in it. "I've even been on a 'bus poster in Hamburg. Just me and a pole and a most unlikely crouch. Yes, that's what I'm told, from time to time. That I lie cradled in memory. That I've always been someone's someone." Her face snapped back to business: "Now," she said, scanning her tablet. "What was your full name again?"

Even a wheeze of exasperation eluded me. I gave my name, dully, like the biscuit-lid custodian I once was, all snake-belt and elasticated

socks, in a school so often visited by the fogs of a forsaken time.

Her lips pursed: "Ah... yes... yes, I'll have to check." She looked back at me, making more of an effort with her smile. "You know your way back, don't you?" And she was gone – save for a few words which carried round and clear, falling about me as I stared, as the landing-stage and river seemed to come and go:

"By the way... your walk... the turn in the lane... you won't see them again... if you were worrying."

"Not dad on his own?" Don't ask where that came from. Some odd little kink of loyalty? That strange feeling I'd always had, all edge and angle, which he never rewarded but somehow kept alive?

Fresh words: "But he never is. You guessed that, back at the turn. I felt you guess. Nothing sunders here – or after." Then, quietly: "Your biscuit girl, am I?" That was all. Well, a little laugh, perhaps – or perhaps a wisp of breeze.

"But who will I see? And when?" Now my words came bursting with all the wrath of a broken traveller, misinformed, messed about, parted from his luggage. They set up a ringing in my brain – for that was as far as they got. In reality I stood dumbly on, counting the planks in the landing-stage walk, counting them again, finding I was one short, counting again, finding I was two short and realizing that, bit by sly bit, the fog was coming back. I stared as hard as I could down what remained of the river, willing the dhow to return – or even the biscuit-girl, friendly and contrite, telling me that all was sorted, it was her fault, she should really check her tablet more carefully: "Anyway," I imagined her saying, "you'll be on tomorrow's tide. And" – a gentle nudge in my ribs here – "you'll never guess which self we've lined up..."

The river vanished in a rush of fog to my very feet. At last I spoke, flinging my crumbs at where the water's dazzle had been – like a blind man with his handfuls of bread, who's told that, yes, the lake's right there, yes, the birds are waiting, but hears no ripple, no agitation of wings.

Who? When?

The Quarterly Review

Halo 3

Bungie (dev.)

US, Xbox 360

I fell in love with this game when browsing a replay movie. As Master Chief, the last hope for humanity, I had fought my way down a bog-standard corridor on my way to more exciting stuff. Watching the replay, I paused the game and zipped the camera down to the other end of the corridor to watch my death-dealing approach from the point of view of my enemies. That was cool enough in itself, but then I noticed one of the pint-sized grunts running off down a corridor. What was he doing? I took the camera down that same corridor, and watched him hide in the darkness as I ran past. Once I was gone, the grunt said with relief (words to the effect of), “I’m glad *he’s* gone!” Genius! I’ve rarely seen such attention to detail in a game – or perhaps it’s better to say that the attention to detail has never been highlighted in such an effective way. Like the achievements you can gain in this and other Xbox 360 games, the features of Halo 3 encourage you to play and explore the game to

its fullest. (See the photograph below for an example of what anyone can do with the exciting tools available.)

I haven’t talked yet about the gameplay itself. I wasn’t a huge fan of Halo and Halo 2, perhaps as a result of picking them up a few years after their release, by which time I’d already played other games incorporating their innovations. I’ve always found online gaming a bit of a chore, which killed part of their appeal for me. I also, to be honest, found them a bit hard!

I’m enjoying Halo 3 much more. For one thing, I’m finding it easier, thanks to your health (at least on the Easy level) being a single shield, which fully recharges in cover, avoiding the death by attrition which always did for me in the previous two games. For another, it’s currently the state of the art in videogames, and so its ideas are as yet unsullied by imitators.

The gameplay options it offers are endless, both in terms of online options, but also in every individual moment – every weapon has its uses in every situation, and every situation responds to a dozen different approaches.

Finally, we are always starved of proper, full-on, big-budget science fiction in the cinema. So



The reviewer driving over a hill! After playing the level, the reviewer used the in-game tools to watch the replay movie, pause it at a suitably dramatic point, position the camera, take this photo, and upload it to his service record on www.bungie.net, from where we downloaded it for the magazine.

it's a joy to watch a science fiction story as epic as Halo 3's unfurl, even if it's on the small screen.

There's a lot more to be said about this game; the game itself is a conversation that will continue for years to come. Despite playing it all the way through I've barely scratched its surface. In terms of Hollywood blockbusters, Halo 3 would be *The Matrix* or the *Lord of the Rings*, movies that satisfy on a visceral level, but also repay and stand up to sustained scrutiny. – *SWT*

Test Drive

DJ Burnham

Lulu (*Tales from the Inky Well*)

UK, pb, 320pp

I should be the last person on Earth to criticise DJ Burnham for self-publishing his collection of short stories, given that I've published two of my own novels (with more to come!) and started this magazine purely because I knew I could fill it with the nonsense I write if no one else contributed. So I won't criticise this book purely on that account. And given how badly the cover to TQF#19 turned out (I was trying to publish the issue on schedule, had no artwork in hand and it was 2.00 am, so apologies to all the contributors who saw their work published in the artistic equivalent of a smelly sock) I shouldn't say much about the abundance of fonts and general clutter of the cover. The profits from the book will be paid directly to charity, and I would laugh cynically that the profits from a Lulu-published book are likely to be small in any case, and that donating them to charity might make it easier to guilt his family and friends into buying a copy – except that we publish on Lulu too, and pay nothing to anybody at all. So really he's one or two up on us there! Would it be unkind to point out that one or two of the recommendations on the cover come from slightly indiscriminating sources? And if some stories seem to be inspired by a single striking idea which the story contrives greatly to realise, that's no worse than some of the stuff I've written. In fact, it's fair to say that a good few of the

stories in this volume would have found a good home at TQF, and that's about as good a review as I would give anything, given that I only have to read a few lines of any author's work before I'm riven with the desire to tear it apart, all the better to clear the way for my own writing's ascent to victory!

In fact, it's a shame that none of the stories found their way to TQF, because if they had we would have given them a thorough proofreading before publication. The odd mistake is always bound to get through, in any publication, but *Test Drive* seems to average at least one outright mistake or awkward infelicity per page, at least as far as I've read. (I confess to not having read the whole book – I've been gripped by Xbox mania these last few months, to the point where I had to ask my wife to activate the parental timer on the beautiful machine. And this evening, having played out my allotted number of hours for the week and casting around for what to do next, I came to a horrifying realisation: for the very first time in my memory, I did not have a novel on the go. What kind of man am I becoming? Expect reviews of *Mass Effect* and *The Orange Box* next issue!) For example on page one Karl Ferris, who plans to drive a car upon the surface of Mars, laughs "out loud as he imagined the indignation of the cubicle, if it only knew of his plan to gel and comb it into authenticity". That'll be one stylish cubicle! On page seventeen Karl knows that "the means would justify the end", which might apply if, say, you were talking about the excitement of riding your motorbikes a long way justifying a trip to Siberia, but in this case is just a basic error, typical of the kind of thing you miss when proofing and publishing your own work. The great thing about Lulu is that producing a corrected edition should be easy – unless, like this author, you've paid for Lulu distribution to booksellers, and would have to repurchase it for a new edition... He shouldn't let that stop him from producing a corrected edition on Lulu at least, because in other respects this is a pleasantly substantial volume of stories, one which I look forward to enjoying during the long days to be endured until my Xbox 360 playing time is reset! – *SWT*