
Theaker's Quarterly Fiction

Issue 21

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Editorial

Theaker's House of Horror!

Issue 21! It seems funny to think now that being 21 used to be a big deal in Britain. When I was a youngster, everyone talked about their 21st birthday as the big one, the one for which a massive party would be planned. Now it seems to be barely worthy of note. It's easy to see why – laws have changed, and reaching 21 is no longer the last barrier to adulthood. You can do mostly anything at 18 nowadays, and a good few things at 16 besides. In the US, it's quite different – you still have to be 21 to drink, which always seems funny to us, as university students played by actors in their thirties perpetually struggle to buy beer in the movies, even if it probably makes sense in a country in which so many teenagers drive.

I didn't expect to get all political in this editorial, but while we're here let me expound one of the ridiculous ideas I once came up with: the minimum legal age for smoking should go up by one year, every year. That done, everyone who can legally smoke now could continue up until their doubtlessly painful demises, while those who can't legally smoke now would never be able to start.

My other, more practical, idea with regard to smoking is this: if someone stands near you at a bus stop, or sits on a bench beside you, and starts to smoke, you should feel free to trump as much as you like. This should be a general policy, endorsed by government, perhaps even given its own advertising campaign. I think it's only fair that if your air is being polluted that you should respond in turn. The only foreseeable problem with this is the risk of blowing yourself up once your post-digestive fumes make contact with the cigarette's lit end.

Where on Earth am I going with this editorial? That's the problem with setting aside space for one of these things – you get to the end of the production process and there the space is, waiting to be filled. In an issue like TQF#19, that isn't a problem, because that one had lots of different stories, and so I only had to write a little bit about each of them to fill the space up.

This time, I've only got two stories to talk about, and so there I go, wandering into areas that would be embarrassing if I talked about them in the pub, let alone in the pages of an august and serious journal like the one in your hands (or on your screen, if you are reading this online). And now, what's worse, I realise I've used up almost all the space available without even getting onto the stories! Never mind, this may be the worst editorial of all time, but this issue contains two superb stories that more than make up for it! So, onward you go, to read the thrilling horrors!

First there's "The Exile From Naktah", by Wayne Summers, by whom we previously published "The Walled Garden" in the aforementioned TQF#19. When reading this story I imagined it as being filmed by Hammer. Then there's "The Hatchling: Ante-Natal Anxiety" by my pal John Greenwood, following on from "Post-Natal Paranoia" in TQF#20. I like to think of this as Tintin scripted by Lovecraft and filmed by Guillermo del Toro. I hope you enjoy them both. By the way, sorry for the cover painting! It may be rubbish, but I had fun painting it! – *SWT*

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Editors

SW Theaker &
JB Greenwood

Website

www.silveragebooks.com

Email

[silveragebooks@
blueyonder.co.uk](mailto:silveragebooks@blueyonder.co.uk)

MySpace

[www.myspace.com/
silveragebooks](http://www.myspace.com/silveragebooks)

Lulu Store

[www.lulu.com/
silveragebooks](http://www.lulu.com/silveragebooks)

Post

Silver Age Books,
56 Leyton Road,
Birmingham, B21 9EE

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THE EXILE FROM NAKTAH

DOOM SNEAKS THROUGH THE FOREST!
DEATH WAITS FOR YOU IN THE CASTLE!
TERROR STALKS YOU IN THE DUNGEON!
WHAT IS THE SECRET OF THE EXILE?

ONLY ONE MAN KNOWS!
HIS NAME...

WAYNE SUMMERS

HIS TALE BEGINS WITH AN INNOCENT GIRL. A GIRL CALLED...

LILY

Lily was sitting on a small stool and cradling a wooden pail full of juicy, ripe apples between her knees. Humming softly to herself and oblivious to the morning unfolding around her, she carefully picked through the fragrant fruit and placed those that were unblemished into one of the wicker baskets by her feet and those with spots and marks into a second basket. The apples in the first basket would be polished until their natural waxy lustre gleamed invitingly, while those in the second basket would be peeled, cooked and turned into apple pies. When these pies had cooled Lily would take them, along with the basket of polished apples, into the Chestnut village market and sell them.

Bathed in the gentle morning sunlight, filtering into the room through an open window, Lily's long, blonde hair shone like silk as it cascaded over one shoulder. Her smooth, pale skin had a luminescent quality and her thick, full lips formed a slight smile as she worked her way to the bottom of the wooden pail. Her figure was kept trim by the long hours of manual labour she performed each day, although her hips were a little larger than she would have liked. "Child-bearing" her father had called them, serving only to make her more self-conscious of a feature she had always loathed.

Since the dull, autumn evening of her six-

teenth birthday Lily had lived alone. Her mother, a woman of unearthly beauty and the gift of foresight, had died giving birth to her brother, a weak and sickly baby who promptly followed her into the next life. The shock of losing both his wife and newborn son had almost killed her father. Yet with Lily's love and devotion he'd managed to overcome his grief and survive for another ten years before succumbing to a mysterious fever which had swept through the valley, killing almost a third of the inhabitants.

Lily's cottage was a simple but adequate construction. The four whitewashed mud walls formed one large room, which was always clean and smelled of fresh wild flowers and apples. There was an open fireplace used for cooking and heating, and on whose mantle rested small, hand-painted portraits of Lily and her family. Nestled in the back wall were two nooks hidden from view by neatly sewn curtains. Each space contained a well-stuffed straw mattress and a generous collection of woollen blankets and goose down pillows. The thatched roof, though dry and dusty and full of cobwebs, kept the rain and snow out and gave the cottage a cosy feel.

The few pieces of furniture, which sat like wallflowers around the outer edges of the room, had been crafted by her father. His unique designs and elaborately carved decorations were breathtaking, and people from far and wide had

been willing to pay almost any sum to own one of his creations. Of course, most of the money had dried up over time, despite Lily's frugality, but she made a modest living selling the apples from her orchard and the wild berries which grew in prickly tangles amongst the fruit trees.

Forming the western border of her property, Gristle Mountain rose up to scratch the sky and cast its long shadow over Lily's apple trees. Its jagged, barren slopes were inhabited by creatures of the night; and by the mysterious Earl Dingen, a man who rarely ventured out of his fortress-like castle, which sat like a monstrous vulture perched high on its unforgiving slopes. Not many villagers could claim to have ever sighted the man himself, though many claimed they knew someone who had. His legend grew like an infection, spreading slowly but surely and strengthening as time went by. How could Lily, barely out of her teens and beloved by all who met her, possibly know that one day soon she would be touched by that infection?

If one were to believe any of the accounts, Earl Dingen stood at well over six foot and was lean to the point of being spindly. It was claimed that his skin was as pale as snow and his long black hair shone blue like the feathers of a raven caught in the light of a full moon. Dark rings circled his pale blue eyes and he kept his long fingernails painted scarlet. He wore the raiment of a royal, black velvets and silks beneath long flowing coats of red, purple and rusty brown, trimmed with ermine and adorned with precious stones. His long, spider-like fingers were likewise covered in diamonds, rubies and sapphires, set in gold which it was said he created himself.

For various reasons the Earl was never far from anyone's thoughts. Since no one in the village of Chestnut knew very much about him, rumour and myth had created an air of suspicion and mistrust which revealed itself whenever blame needed to be laid or anger needed to be vented.

Not even the village elders could recall when the Earl had arrived in the valley, nor could they say what the source of his immense wealth was, or why someone of such outrageous means should choose to inhabit such a remote location.

It was beyond the imagination of such simple folk, though it was widely assumed his riches were the product of witchcraft since another widely held belief was that the Earl was a master of the black arts. But no one was able to say for certain and when facts are thin on the ground, imagination steps forward with its version of the truth and no one is any more enlightened than they were before, though some are fooled into believing they are.

Klune was the Earl's faithful assistant and though an extremely personable young man he was never quite trusted by the people of Chestnut due to his association with the Earl. Klune was a solid tower of man possessed of short, jet black hair and a tanned complexion from days spent running errands for the Earl. His face was handsome and masculine, but with a subtle softness about it that relaxed all those who would otherwise be intimidated by such a powerfully built male. The single women of Chestnut could not help but fall in love with his swarthy good looks, yet they had to content themselves with admiring him from a distance. Although in their dreams they imagined themselves being held in his strong arms, the weight of public opinion was against any of their fantasies becoming a reality.

Adding fuel to the myths surrounding the Earl were the bats which lived in the caves below his massive castle. Every evening they would pour into the twilight, a great inky cloud weaving its way into the oncoming darkness. The bats were said to spy for the Earl. It was said that whatever they saw, the Earl saw too, and because of this old superstition, the streets of Chestnut were almost always deserted after sundown. The villagers may well have been hard-working, honest folk, but they were given to superstition and old wives' tales. Not one of them had ever questioned the logic of the bat story nor questioned how such a thing could possibly be.

In the mild summer of Lily's twentieth year, a feeling of restlessness settled upon her like a dark cloud and no matter what she did she could not shake it. There were days she would wander the grassy banks of the Snake River watching butterflies flutter from one apple tree to another,

or instead recline lazily amongst the reeds and marvel at the way the fish would appear like shimmering ghosts to suck in an unsuspecting insect that had lingered too long on the surface of the water. But those simple pleasures were mere distractions. While her apples ripened and fell she lay in the tall grass watching the clouds meander across the sky and dreamed of the far away places she'd heard travellers mention. There has to be more than this, she thought mournfully.

The ties that bind are mysterious tendons. With her parents gone and no dependents of her own, Lily couldn't understand why she felt unable to take those first few steps that would take her out of Chestnut and eventually to the sea. Of course there was the fact that she would have to leave her friends behind and the families in the village who had taken her under their collective wing when her father passed away. Yet while she loved them all very dearly they were not reason she felt tethered to her too-familiar life in the valley.

One mid-morning, with the first kiss of autumn in the air, Lily was walking home from the village market with a basket of supplies. Her mind was a million miles away. Humming to herself and enjoying the pale rays of the sun on her face, she was oblivious to the rattling and creaking of a horse-drawn cart approaching from behind. In seconds two white horses burst around the corner, manes and tails flying in the breeze, nostrils flared and hooves sending up small dust clouds as they pounded into the dry dirt. There was a crack of a whip. Lily spun around to be confronted by an enormous blurred object almost upon her. She screamed but the driver saw her too late. He pulled back on the reins, straining in an attempt to bring the beasts to a standstill. Lily heard the horses neighing and the sound of their gait changing as the edge of the cart clipped her shoulder and sent her flying into a shallow ditch by the side of the road. The wicker basket flew off her arm and its contents scattered across the road and into the small gully where she lay unconscious amongst the grass and summer-beaten flowers.

It was nightfall when Lily regained conscious-

ness. She was in bed but it was not her own; she could tell by the nest of soft pillows behind her head and by the quality of the bedding. Carefully, and with more effort than she anticipated, she lifted her head and surveyed the unfamiliar, candle-lit room through squinted eyes. Immediately she was assaulted by a sharp, jabbing pain which shot through her brain and made her eyes water. A wave of nausea flooded her body and she choked back a small stream of vomit that had risen to the back of her throat. Her head dropped gently back onto the pillows and she closed her eyes.

Almost at the exact moment the soft skin of her cheek touched the silky texture of the pillows, the door to the room creaked open. Lily willed herself to open her eyes but it wasn't until her visitor had made it to the side of her bed that she was able to accomplish the task. It was Klune. She'd seen him a few times in the marketplace and even giggled about him with her girlfriends, but even in her current fragile state she realised to her horror where she was. Earl Dingen's castle! She shuddered at the thought and shied away from Klune as he held out a goblet of fresh river water.

He was even more handsome at close range than Lily remembered. Beneath a black cassock-style robe which was tied at the waist by a thick black cord, he was wearing a white shirt; open at the neck to reveal a tuft of thick, curly chest hair. There was stubble on his chin, a great dark shadow which accentuated the perfect whiteness of his teeth, and when he smiled at her and handed her the goblet, she felt herself blush as she accepted it and took a hurried sip.

"May I?" asked Klune, his voice deep and rich; his words tinged with an accent.

Lily nodded and Klune sat down in the space between the edge of the bed and Lily's legs.

While she sipped the refreshingly cool water, Klune apologised for the accident that had brought her to a place no other villager had ever been or wanted to go. Lily kept her lips on the rim of the goblet and averted her eyes so they wouldn't meet his. She noticed that the grey-stone chamber was adorned on every wall with thick, richly-coloured tapestries and dusty por-

traits of what she assumed were ancestors. The furniture was ornate and made in a style that was foreign to anything she'd ever seen. Massive black iron candle-holders surrounded the room like sentries, each holding dozens of tall, white candles, burning and flickering towards their ultimate end. At each of the long, narrow windows hung a single white curtain that reached down to rest on the intricately-woven carpet which covered the flagstones beneath. Woven raffia mats had been placed by the door and by the large open fireplace, where a fire was blazing beneath a portrait of the Earl himself. In the shadows it was hard to distinguish the Earl's features and Lily found herself staring at the painting to absorb every detail she could.

Klune noticed Lily's fascination with the portrait and his smile widened.

"I suppose you are of the same opinion as the rest of the village?" His tone was not accusing.

Lily blushed a second time.

"I'm sorry," she replied, embarrassed by her bad manners. "Forgive me. I've heard so much about him that I can't help but be a little curious."

Klune laughed. "My uncle certainly is an enigmatic man."

Lily gasped. "Your uncle? But you're..."

She stopped herself before offending Klune any further.

"Don't worry. I've heard *all* the stories. He certainly is eccentric, there's no denying that," Klune laughed and thereby eased any discomfort his guest may have been experiencing. "I guess I've grown used to his peculiar ways over the years."

"Where are your family?" Lily asked bluntly, finding herself inexorably drawn into their story. "Where does the Earl come from?"

"My family come from a land across the sea, from a city called Naktah on the Lemorhan Peninsula. Have you heard of it?"

Lily shook her head. She had heard stories of many lands that had enchanted her and filled her with a longing for a more adventurous life, but she had never heard of Naktah.

"Well, it was a place I have almost forgotten, though due to time or desire I can't tell you. It

was the city my uncle was born in and a place he was said to have loved immeasurably. But then he exiled by the Council of Elders, a group of elected men charged with upholding the moral and spiritual standards of the community."

Lily settled back into the pillows and let Klune's rich voice trickle over her like golden honey.

"That year had been a bleak one. For the first time in living memory the rains failed to materialise and as a result the crops failed and much of the city's livestock died from the ensuing drought. An illness swept through the city claiming countless lives and the streets were filled with wailing and despair. Soon fear replaced grief and out of this fear grew anger. The Council of Elders realised they would have to do something to appease their public. What though could they do? They could no more control the rains than you or I. And if the physicians had failed to treat the illness, what could they possibly do to rid the city of the plague? They had to find another way.

"My uncle practised Lohdah, a forbidden, ancient religion, involving magic and the worship of woodland gods. When it was discovered he'd been holding Lohdah ceremonies inside his house, the council members sent a contingent of guards to arrest him. Yet before they arrived someone had set fire to his house and by the time the guards got there my uncle's home was an inferno and he was nowhere to be found."

Lily, although semi-recumbent, was nevertheless completely spellbound by Klune's tale. She'd never heard a story like it and, possessed of all the impatience of youth, she could not wait to hear how the tale ended.

"Under the cover of a moonless night my uncle scurried like a common thief through the narrow streets of Naktah to the harbour. Hidden by shadows and the brim of a large hat, he managed to secure passage across the Lemorhan Sea.

"Of course, I was not born when all this happened. In fact my father had himself only been a young boy."

Lily furrowed her brow.

"How *old* is your uncle?" she asked, biting her

bottom lip gently and hoping she had not been too indelicate.

Klune paused. His eyes roamed to a far corner of the room and then returned to Lily.

"No one really knows for sure. I'm sure he doesn't know. He's certainly far older than he looks."

Lily yawned and immediately covered her mouth. Klune noticed her eyelids growing heavier and pulled a blanket over her. He brushed a strand of silky blonde hair from her face, his hand lingering on the soft skin of her cheek.

"Sleep now, Lily, and in the morning I shall take you back to your cottage."

Lily rolled over onto her side and settled into the mattress. Klune wanted nothing more than to kiss her goodnight and lay down beside her, but he arose instead and left the room. For him the night could not pass quickly enough.

Lily's sleep was fitful. From the moment she sank into the velvety arms of her unconscious other world, strange dreams loomed to haunt her; obstacles to any rest she may have otherwise had. The image in the portrait above the fireplace appeared to her in living form, stroking her face and gazing at her youthfulness with envy and hatred. The stale breath of a dying being filled her nostrils and she rolled onto her stomach to escape it. Suddenly the dark figure transformed itself into a large raven and flew from the room into the pitch black night outside.

Almost immediately she found herself looking down from a great height at the city of Naktah, a bustling metropolis filled with large buildings and great monuments as far as the eye could see. The people below wore strange, elaborate garments, not the simple attire of those who dwelt in the valley. They also spoke a tongue she had not heard before, so the chatter which rose up from the streets was unintelligible and no more than noise to her ears.

Then Lily became aware of an enormous shadow sweeping over the city like a storm cloud. It was the raven, though now it was a great monster of a bird, and every time it beat its huge wings together, sparks flew off and ignited fires in the city below. People ran screaming up and down the streets, confused and terrified.

Children and parents became separated and pets were left to fend for themselves. Licks of flame reached out to consume living flesh, turning it black and reducing whole beings to bubbling puddles on the cobblestones.

Lily woke up screaming. Her eyes were crusted with tears. There was a pounding in her chest and as she stared wide-eyed at the wall in front of her, she tried to remember where she was and how she had come to be there. Her eyes darted around the room and slowly the events of the previous day came rushing back to her. The throbbing in her head had disappeared and for that she was grateful, but her body was stiff and sore. She had been lucky. She could have been killed. The sunshine pouring in through the thin curtains at the windows and the scent of pine on the early morning breeze made her glad she hadn't been.

She crawled out of bed the way an elderly person or invalid would to avoid as much discomfort as she could. Inadvertently, her eyes fell upon the portrait of the Earl and for a brief moment she was reminded of her dreams. She looked away and tried to forget the macabre images which had plagued her throughout the night. Klune's uncle or not, the man was evil. His ancient religion and his magic were just an excuse to practice the Black Arts. The sooner she could leave this godless place, the better, although that would mean leaving Klune and she wasn't sure she wanted to.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the sound of someone at the door. She leapt back into bed and pulled the covers up over her chest, a galaxy of stars orbiting her head as she watched the door being pushed open.

"Good morning!"

It was Klune.

"How are you feeling this morning?" he asked as he entered the room with a tray of breakfast.

"Much better, thank you," Lily smiled.

Klune handed her the tray and she settled it on her lap. After asking if she minded him staying, he sat at the foot of the bed and talked to her while she ate her oats and her eggs.

"My uncle has requested that you meet with him before you leave," he said finally.

Lily put down her spoon and managed, with great difficulty, to swallow the mouthful of food she'd been chewing.

"Klune, you have been the perfect host," she began as she wiped the corners of her mouth with the napkin that had been neatly folded and placed beneath a small posy of forest flowers. "You have gone out of your way to ensure that I was well looked after, and I have been. But I must return to my cottage. I have chores to do; things to take care of."

Klune looked down into his lap.

Lily knew what he was thinking and suddenly she felt ashamed of herself. He had done so much for her and yet she was not prepared to do this one small thing for him.

"I suppose I could meet him on my way out," she agreed with a bashful smile dancing on her lips.

Klune looked up and the grin on his handsome face was enough to tell her that she had done the right thing. In a quiet voice he said, "Thank you."

After Lily climbed out of bed for the second time that morning, refreshed herself with the water provided and brushed down her skirts, she joined Klune, who had been waiting outside. Together they walked down a long corridor adorned with old paintings and faded tapestries until they came to a flight of broad, stone steps which led down to the main rooms of the castle. Despite their light-hearted chatter, Lily found herself musing on how easy it was to be with this man she had only ever glimpsed at the market. In fact it seemed like only seconds since she'd left her room but she suddenly found herself at the double doors to the Earl's library. Klune placed a firm hand on one of the gold handles and pressed down, opening them slowly and unintentionally creating an air of expectation. Lily held her breath. Her chest felt tight and there was a slight tremble in her hands. Klune took one of her hands in his and together they entered the shadowy lair of his uncle.

He led her to a large-backed chair that had been positioned at an angle by the fire. The occupant of the opulent antique didn't stir a hair at their arrival.

"Uncle," Klune said, using a respectful tone. "This is Lily."

For a moment nothing happened. Lily swallowed to moisten her dry throat and glanced up at Klune. He winked at her to signal that this behaviour was nothing out of the ordinary. Then, slowly the dark figure rose up, turned slowly and faced them, allowing the light cast by a giant candelabrum to illuminate his pasty visage.

Lily heard herself gasp as the man before her bowed his head. Not even the portrait in her room could have prepared her for the youthful appearance of a man she had calculated to be at least a hundred years of age. His jet black hair, cut in a straight line across the fringe, was thick and shiny and fell like a shawl over his shoulders. His eyes were indeed black, as she had heard, but not from age. He had lined them with kohl, which accentuated his pale grey eyes spectacularly. His nose was straight and strong, and his lips had the colour of overripe raspberries. There was indeed something very feminine about the Earl's appearance, yet he was completely masculine. The hint of a smile played upon his lips, though it was arrogant and menacing rather than welcoming.

A collar of white ice-cat fur ringed his shoulders and the regal cloak it was attached to cascaded to the floor in a mass of luxuriously thick folds. Almost hidden beneath the vast expanse of fabric was a black silk shirt with a high collar and a pair of black pin-striped trousers. His leather boots were well polished, and caught the light of the fire as he brushed his cloak to one side and stepped forward.

"I hear you had a mishap involving my cart," he began, speaking in a low, barely audible growl.

"I did, sir," Lily replied, casting her attention to an invisible mark on the floor. "I'm feeling much better now, thank you."

"You're from the village?" he asked.

"I live in the apple orchard," she replied.

"Ah yes. I have tried some of your apple pies. Quite delicious."

At that moment there was a scuffing sound at the door and two large dogs burst into the room. Lily's eyes became as large as dinner plates as

she watched them come bounding towards the small party gathered by the fireplace. Both were of the same breed though it was not a breed Lily had encountered before. Although they at first appeared to be Dobermans, they were not. They were more robust and each had a single, upwardly curved horn in the centre of the forehead. Upon seeing Lily both beasts skidded to a halt. Their top lips curled to reveal long fangs dripping with saliva and their throats reverberated to produce a savage, snarling growl.

Lily took a step backwards, almost stepping on Klune's toes as she did.

'Out!' shouted the Earl, raising a finger to the door.

Both dogs looked at the Earl blankly as though they hadn't realised their error and then slunk out the way they had come.

'I'm terribly sorry,' the Earl apologised. 'Flame and Cloud are excellent guard dogs; alas at times they are prone to taking their job a little too seriously. It is an unfortunate trait of their breed that no matter how well one feeds them, they remain voraciously hungry and would no sooner look at you than tear you limb from limb.'

Lily moved behind Klune and gripped his arm, noticing the Earl's smile, which had more than a hint of self-satisfaction about it, broaden. It horrified her that he could take such pleasure in scaring her, although after the dream she'd had the previous night perhaps she should not have been quite so surprised.

'I think Lily is eager to return home, Uncle,' Klune said after a few seconds of uncomfortable silence.

The Earl executed a rather theatrical bow then turned to face the fire, giving them both a dismissive wave.

'It was very nice meeting you,' Lily lied, though her good manners brought no response from the figure standing silently by the licking flames of a healthy fire.

'When can I see you again?' Klune asked as he pulled the heavy front door open.

'I don't know,' Lily confessed. 'I don't think I'm completely welcome here. Your...'

'I know. My uncle,' Klune said. 'He is a lit-

tle eccentric. Would it be alright if I visited you at the cottage then?'

They stepped outside into a gentle breeze.

'I would like that,' she smiled.

Klune wrapped his arms around her and as they stood staring into each other's eyes, the rest of the world disappeared for a few seconds. Then as the breeze quickened, Klune kissed Lily softly on the lips and brought them back to the real world. Lily reluctantly pulled herself away from Klune's embrace and started down the small path to the main road, only once looking over her shoulder to see whether she still had his attention.

She did.

It didn't take long for the news of Lily's new acquaintance to become general knowledge in the village and it wasn't news that many were happy to hear. Why their own beloved Lily would even consider a relationship with someone so close to the Earl was beyond them. A small quartet of concerned wives even felt so strongly about it that they marched straight out to Lily's cottage to try and talk her out of such a calamitous partnership. Unfortunately for them Lily had already made her mind up. Their arguments were as water on wax. It didn't matter how they raised their voices or what they threatened, Lily could not be swayed to end her fledgling romance.

Sadly her loyalty to Klune was to cost her dearly. Those same women, who had been friends to her, had helped raise her and had comforted her when her father passed on, no longer acknowledged her when she came to market. And the cold shoulder had spread like a virus. Soon only her Aunt Lilith and her two best friends, Anna and Olga, would talk to her. 'It's only fear and ignorance,' they would console her. 'They'll soon have something else to occupy their minds. You'll see.'

The reaction amongst the men was considerably less severe. Many had no opinion on the matter one way or the other and many others felt ashamed of the way the village women were treating her.

'No one can predict where the seeds of love will bloom,' she'd argued the first time she

encountered the grim silence her greetings met with.

"Though," the wife of the village fishmonger had replied, "you are no longer a child and should try harder not to give in to every foolish notion."

It was clear to Lily that not one of the women was willing to understand. Either they had never truly known love or they had forgotten what it felt like. Nevertheless, the moments she shared with Klune in her cottage or down by the banks of the reedy Snake River were something she was not about to give up. Klune had proved to her that she could be happy in the small village she had grown up in and the prejudices of the village women were not going to take that away from her. She was determined that they wouldn't.

As the days grew shorter and colder, the villagers began to prepare for the oncoming winter. In the dim autumn sunlight the villagers gathered huge stacks of firewood, hunted antelope and harvested the last of the vegetables. Repairs were made to the cottages and the small flocks of sheep were brought down from the mountains to pens nearer the village. Lily was fortunate enough to have Klune helping her this year. He'd offered her a room at the castle, where there would be an abundance of everything she could ever want, but Lily had respectfully declined. She would rather take her chances with the wild mountain winter than with the Earl.

A week before the first snows arrived, a great tragedy befell the village. Shona, a five-year old girl from the village, went missing. When her body was finally found it had been half-eaten. Since the forests of the valley and the mountains surrounding it were free of predators, her death was baffling; and though her remains were buried in the small cemetery at the edge of the forest the very next day, a shroud of fear and anger had fallen over the village and wasn't likely to lift for a very long time.

Two weeks later, Tessa, the wife of the village school master, went missing on her way to the well. The resulting search was made more difficult by the fresh blanket of snow covering the countryside and with each minute she remained

missing the dread that she too had been attacked grew.

By chance a traveller making his way home from the coast happened upon the frozen, severed hand of a middle-aged female. He picked the bloody appendage up from where it lay partially buried in the snow, wrapped it in a sock and put it into a side pocket of his satchel. When he arrived in Chestnut he made his way to the inn, ordered a pitcher of ale and took a seat by himself near a front window. As more and more people entered the small alehouse, the conversation soon turned from chat about the weather to the disappearance of Tessa. The traveller, remembering the severed hand in his satchel, opened the side pocket, removed the sock containing the hand then walked up to the bar and placed his unusual find on the wooden counter top.

"What's that then?" asked Ivan, the portly bartender, as he flung the cloth he had in his hand over his shoulder.

"Open it," said the traveller.

The bartender studied the stranger for a moment then upended the thick woollen sock. As the pale, waxy hand landed with a dull thud in front of a growing audience, a sudden and total silence fell over the assembled patrons.

"I found it on the West Road," explained the stranger nervously, not knowing how the villagers would respond to his discovery.

"Show us where," Ivan demanded. "Show us exactly where you found the hand."

A posse of men followed the stranger back to the area where he had found the hand, but the wind and snow had made the task of discovering more clues virtually impossible and despite a thorough search of the area no more of the body was found. The village would have to wait for spring to uncover the secrets winter had kept from them.

The weeks crept by at an unbearably slow rate. The snow fell constantly and the accompanying winds whipped through the valley, screaming like banshees in the darkness and frightening small children. Families did whatever they could to pass the time and take their minds off the ever present danger of boredom.

The school master, glad of the break and devastated by the loss of his wife, drank himself to sleep each day until the alcohol ran out. Then he just remained in bed and tried to snatch whatever sleep he could from the constant nightmares which haunted his sleeping hours.

Occasionally there were days of clear weather when the children were allowed outside to play for short periods and their parents had the chance to catch up with their neighbours, who were likewise grateful for the company. Extra firewood could be collected and supplies that were always low by the middle of winter could be topped up. Yet the knowledge that two of their number had been killed hung over them like a shroud. Winter storms could blow up almost instantaneously and anyone who got lost in them was certain to perish. With these thoughts ever present no one ventured far from the village and children were kept under constant vigil.

Unfortunately Lily had no other choice but to make the arduous walk into the village. Klune ensured that she had ample supplies of firewood stacked along the side of her cottage and often brought her rabbits and portions of antelope, which she added to the vegetables she already had stored to make broth, but there were other things she needed that Klune couldn't provide. If she hurried she could make the journey into town and back again in under two hours.

One day, there was a break in the clouds and a few powdery rays of sunlight filtered down to the white landscape below. Lily strapped on her snowshoes, collected her baskets and set off down the track that wound through her orchard. How fine it felt to have the warm sunshine on her face, she thought, as she closed her eyes and raised her face to greet the meagre rays. But despite the simple pleasure of the sunlight kissing her skin, Lily was careful to keep watch for any sign of a storm approaching. It was good to be outdoors and to be walking through her apple trees again, but she would not be completely at ease until she had returned from the village and was safely home again.

Not far from the outskirts of Chestnut, Lily became aware of someone or something follow-

ing her. Unaware of the recent killings and knowing that the woods were free of any dangerous animals, she had no reason to be afraid. She stopped.

"Hello!" she called, though there was no reply.

Yet she could sense that just off the track, hidden by the snow covered bushes and pines, something was waiting. She shivered and pulled her shawl tightly around her shoulders. The hairs on the back of her neck bristled beneath the thick woollen scarf she wore in a tangle around her neck.

She began to walk, faster this time, looking this way and that. Her heartbeat quickened and the back of her throat had become dry, making it difficult to swallow. Beside her, unseen, something was following her. She could hear it now as it pushed its way through the undergrowth towards her.

Ahead she could see a dirty grey column of smoke and she knew that the village was only a few metres down the road, yet this knowledge didn't ease her fears. Whatever it was in the woods was so close now that she could hear it growling. She began to run as best she could with her snow shoes on but stumbled and fell. As she crashed into the snow two large beasts erupted from the snow-covered foliage and ran at her. She recognised them immediately as the same dogs that had come bounding into the Earl's library all those weeks ago. How could she forget those horns? Either they had escaped or he had set them free. Both explanations were just as plausible.

Lily screamed and curled her body into a ball, bringing her arms up to protect her face. She could hear their panting getting closer and closer, then just as she felt a small drop of warm saliva hit the back of one hand, a shot rang out and one of the dogs dropped into the snow beside her. Lily cautiously raised her head. The other dog was standing still and looking intently towards the village. From the corner of its eye it noticed Lily raise her head and it took a step closer. Another shot rang out and the demon beast turned on its heels and fled into the safety of the woods.

Too far away to be observed himself, the Earl stood on the balcony outside his library, peering through the lens of the looking glass he had positioned there to observe the village below. The laughter of a few seconds earlier had now ceased and a black look had taken its place. Not only had he been robbed of his sport but one of his dogs had been slaughtered. White hot rage pulsed through his veins like lava. His eyes became completely black and small, black feathers began to sprout on his face. His fingernails were lengthening into claws, but he stopped the transformation before it was complete. His energy would be better served on preparing a revenge for the people who had taken his beloved pet from him.

"Are you alright, Miss?" asked the hulking figure of Will the blacksmith.

Lily scrambled to her feet and brushed the snow off her skirts.

"Oh Will," she sighed. "Thank you so much. I don't know what would have happened if you hadn't come along."

Will, a self-effacing, middle-aged man, who was more concerned with life's practicalities than its mysteries, recovered Lily's baskets for her.

"Was nothing, Miss Lily. Are you alright?"

Lily assured him that she was and he walked the short distance to the market with her.

"At least we know what we're looking for now," Will said.

"Looking for?" Lily echoed.

Will realised that Lily wouldn't have heard about Shona and Tessa and wasted no time in relaying to her the whole gruesome story. As they walked past the first few cottages towards the village centre Lily listened horrified as Will's graphically told tale unfolded.

"Well, in that case I would only be too pleased to tell where you can find the remaining beast," Lily announced. "It belongs to Earl Dingen. I saw both of them the morning I left his castle. They frightened me half to death, much to the Earl's delight."

"You don't say," Will replied, Lily noticing a subtle change in his expression. "Well, Miss Lily

I should be off. Things to do. You take care now."

Lily nodded and bid her saviour thanks and goodbye. It would only be a matter of time before the remaining dog was found and destroyed, though Lily couldn't help but be concerned about the welfare of anyone who angered the Earl. There were depths to that man that had never been plumbed though she suspected the evil just got thicker and blacker the deeper you went.

The winter markets were abuzz with chatter. People happy to be free of the four walls of their homes gathered to get supplies and catch up on gossip, and Lily was looking forward to hearing some news of those she had known all her life. But in her weeks of seclusion she had forgotten her pariah status and it was a rude shock when the first of many women turned their back on her. So it was in silence and beneath the gaze of those gathered that Lily purchased her supplies and returned home, her heart weighing heavily in her chest and a torrent of tears flowing down her rubicund cheeks.

Early the following morning, Lily awoke to a room filled with golden sunlight and while the winter chill remained there was something different about this day. Reluctantly Lily got up from her position by the eastern window and went outside to collect some firewood. Having stacked the logs and sticks to a considerable height just inside the door, she collected two wooden pails and walked to the well. It was just as she was raising the second pail that she heard the sound of galloping hooves approaching. Lily looked over to a point amongst the apple trees where she knew that whoever it was visiting her would soon appear.

It was Klune.

Lily placed the two full buckets carefully in the snow and waited for Klune to dismount.

"The villagers are marching on the castle!" he announced, his voice full of panic.

"What? I don't understand," Lily said.

And then she did.

"Oh," she gasped as she realised to her dismay that she had been the catalyst for what was now happening.

“What is it, Lily?” Klune asked. “Tell me!”

Lily had to admit everything, from how she had been attacked by the Earl’s dogs to how she had revealed the remaining dog’s whereabouts.

“My darling, are you alright!” Klune said, his tone changing from panic to concern.

“Yes,” Lily replied with a gracious laugh. “I’m fine. A little shaken, but alright. But as for the villagers, I can understand why they want to find your uncle’s dog. It killed a little girl and probably the school master’s wife as well. It’s natural they would want revenge.”

Klune wrapped his arms around Lily and pulled her closer to his body.

“I know,” he said, kissing the top of her head. “I just don’t know what to do. Those villagers have no idea what my uncle is capable of, despite all the myths and rumours.”

Lily shook her head in despair. She wished there was another way out of this mess she had helped to create, but there wasn’t. There was nothing either of them could do. The villagers would not listen to reason and the Earl had already played his part. There was no changing that. She slipped out of Klune’s embrace, curled an arm around his waist and invited him inside for a hot drink. Whatever was going to happen would happen. The ball had begun to roll.

But he shook his head, removed her arm and set off in the direction of the castle, alone.

Down on the main road the procession of angry villagers was making its way noisily to the Earl’s castle. It would take them another hour to reach the Earl’s castle and once there they would have to contend with the two enormous, virtually impenetrable gates. Nevertheless, their resolve was unwavering. With Will and Harad, the school master, at the helm to urge them on and fan the flames of vengeance, the motley band of villagers was impervious to any thoughts of failure.

High above them, the Earl monitored the approaching army of villagers through his looking glass, sneering at their crude weapons and makeshift torches.

“What do you hope to achieve?” he mumbled to himself as he turned and disappeared into his

library, laughing uproariously to himself as he went.

He skulked across the cold stone floor to a tapestry which took up almost the entire wall and reached behind it. His hand immediately found the lever. He pushed it down and a slab of wall opened just wide enough for the Earl to slide through to the other side. In the semi-darkness he descended the many steps to the chamber below.

The room was small and crowded with objects. Rows of ancient books lined the many shelves, accompanied by jars of mummified animals and human body parts. Huge bunches of dried herbs hung from rusting hooks in the ceiling and charts with strange symbols hung on the grey, dusty walls. Cobwebs occupied every corner and their inhabitants were often plucked off and used in potions. A human skull stared blankly across the room from its position on the corner of a large wooden table and the black candles which lined the room provided just enough light to be able to work in and just enough shadow to keep the Earl’s secrets a secret.

When the Earl reached the bottom of the small flight of steps he went directly to a shelf behind the wooden table and selected a large leather-bound book. He opened and flicked through the pages until he found the one he wanted. Concentrating on the ancient symbols contained on the page, he read the instructions slowly and carefully then set about collecting the ingredients he needed to mix a potion he had only ever tried once before. Then, just before the strange-smelling concoction was ready, he reached inside his shirt and took out a small gold chain which hung around his neck. Hanging on the end of it was a small glass phial whose lid he removed. He tapped a small amount of the powder inside over his mixture, replaced the cap then set the doughy mixture alight, chanting an ancient Naktahnese curse as the flames grew higher.

The fire in the bowl burnt blue and a biting, acrid smoke filled the room. Soon the potent cloud found its way to a small duct in the wall and dissipated on the wind outside. The Earl

continued to chant the words of the ancient language and the louder his chanting got, the hotter the fire grew and the more smoke it produced.

Meanwhile, the gaggle of villagers, weary but fired up, arrived at the main castle gate. Klune had only just managed to make it back to his uncle's home before they arrived, although in his haste to warn his uncle of the impending trouble he'd forgotten to secure the gate properly. The irate villagers were easily able to ram the gate open with their combined weight and make their way, shouting, up the stone walkway to the heavy front doors of the main building.

Wasting no time, the angry mob held their torches to the door until the flames took hold and ate their way slowly through the wood. Then, as bits of the dry, ancient timber began to fall away, blackened and burning, the men cheered and surged in through the small space it had made in the door. Entering the smoky main hall, they stopped for a moment and looked about them. Their cries fell silent but for a cough here and there. They had reached their destination.



On the far side of the village in the cemetery by the towering pines, dressed in their thick, wintry coats of snow, there was a slight rumbling. At first it sounded far away, as though it were coming from somewhere in the distance, but soon the rumble grew into a roar that dislodged the snow from the branches and sent an owl that had been slumbering, hidden in the foliage, screeching into the sky. Great ruptures tore through the earth, overturning several grave markers as the earth pushed upwards. Then, as quickly as it had all began, the tremors stopped. Slices of dark soil streaked the white snow and an eerie silence fell over the cemetery.

At the edge of one crater a bony hand appeared, reaching up towards the light before grabbing the edge of the pit. Slowly it grappled in the loose soil, gaining a grip and slowly pulling the body it was attached to out of its earthy tomb. The scene was being repeated across the cemetery. The dead had begun to rise. Bodies in various stages of decomposition

pulled themselves sluggishly out of the grave to once again join the living. Some were no more than skeletons, the muscle and sinew long having rotted away, while others awoke with the worms and beetles still burrowing into their greying, decaying flesh. All were filled with the same purpose and having made it to the snow-covered surface, dazed and bewildered, they rested, sitting against tree trunks and against each other while the last few cadavers struggled out of the ground.



Klune burst in on his uncle as the Earl's chants grew into stern commands. His uncle's face was red and the veins in his neck throbbed as he held his arms aloft, calling the dead to duty.

"Uncle!" Klune cried. "What are you doing?! Stop!"

Klune launched himself at the old man, who was so caught up in his mission that he was no longer aware of the room around him, and brought him crashing to the ground. The Earl fell hard onto the cold stone floor, cracking his head on it and falling into a black pit of unconsciousness.

"By the Gods!" Klune gasped as he clambered off the still body beneath. "Uncle, are you alright?"

Klune fumbled for a pulse and was relieved to find a very faint one. His mind reeling with a myriad of thoughts, he suddenly remembered the bowl and the pungent smoke streaming from the glowing mixture inside. Safe in the knowledge that he hadn't killed his uncle, he turned his attention to the bowl, throwing his coat over it and stopping the stem of smoke, ending the spell before it had been completed.



At the cemetery the awakening dead were bewildered. No sooner had they felt their strength returning than it seemed to be seeping away again. Confused, they looked about them and at each other, searching for a clue as to what was happening. Some, feeling the pull of the earth, were already returning to the grave, clambering

over the muddy soil and slipping back into the darkness below. Others who had moved further away stumbled uneasily back to their graves, dragging their sodden rags in the snow and leaving bits of rotting flesh behind in their desperation to return to the ground before the life-force left them a second time.



In the castle, two villagers had cornered Flame. The wild mutant-creature lowered its head, its ears lying back against its head as a vicious growl slid out on the saliva dripping out from between razor-sharp fangs. The two brave souls shouted out for help as they held the beast at bay with sticks, neither of them daring to tear their eyes off the savage creature. Soon they were joined by others with more substantial weapons which were thrust angrily at the cornered animal. Snapping at the weapons being poked at it, it backed away until its tail was pressed against the wall. Now it had nowhere to run and only its instinct to guide it. Realising that it was trapped, something inside the beast snapped. Its eyes grew darker and it erupted into a storm of wild barking. Strings of thick, mucousy saliva stretched downwards from its mouth and criss-crossed the grey stone beneath it as it lurched towards any of the villagers that came too close.

Giles, a stocky man in his forties, broke through the throng of excited villagers and poked the end of his pitchfork into the side of the animal. Flame yelped and jumped aside, pulling itself off the prongs before leaping at the man and grabbing his arm between its strong teeth. The force of the bite almost broke the bone. Giles screamed in agony, recoiling as his blood sprayed the dog and all those close to him. Then the dog, wild with fury, began attacking anything that moved while the villagers did everything they could to bring the animal down. Again and again it was pierced with pitchfork prongs and hit with the handles of torches gone cold. Bleeding and wounded, it ran headlong into one teenage boy's thigh, spearing it with the massive horn which grew from its forehead. The

boy screamed in agony as the horn appeared out the other side, having torn through fabric, flesh and muscle. Then, since the devil-dog was now attached to the boy, thrashing to get free and tearing the wound open wider, another villager came up from behind and smashed it over the head with a hammer. The defiant beast dropped like a rock in a pool, defeated and dead.

In the secret chamber not far from where the gathered villagers were patting each other on the back and recounting their heroic battle with the horned dog, Klune stood listening at the foot of the stairs which led up to the library. He'd heard the commotion fall silent and assumed that the villagers, having done what they had come to do, were now leaving.

He turned to tell his uncle the good news and was surprised to see the Earl on his feet.

"Uncle?"

The Earl shot him a quick glance of acknowledgement before launching himself at the small air vent through which the potent smoke had escaped. Just as he neared the vent, as he threw himself upwards into the air, he transformed himself into a raven. With a string of caws the bird scrambled through the small vent and flew away towards the mountains. Klune could not help but smile. His uncle had done it again. Escaped, taking all his secrets with him.

Sensing that he was once again alone in the castle, Klune's thoughts turned to Lily. With the angry mob gone and the fire at the entrance extinguished, he leapt onto his horse and rode towards the orchard which he knew lay just over the rise. The doors had been burnt and the castle gate was unable to be secured but Klune knew the villagers would not be back. And if they did perchance return, he wouldn't worry. His uncle was safely away and he would soon have the girl of his dreams safely in his arms.

As he rode through the snow that lay carpeting the ground between the apple trees, he noticed a thin stream of smoke wafting upwards from Lily's chimney. The scene warmed his heart and he realised that while one adventure had just finished, another was about to begin. A faint caw echoed out from high in the mountains, but Klune did not hear it.

SOMETIMES A NIGHTMARE IS JUST WHAT YOU NEED. SO DISCOVERED...

KLUNE

Ten years had come and gone since the villagers had marched on the Earl's castle in the crags of Mount Gristle. Ten years since his hideous dog-beasts had taken the five-year old girl, Shona, and the wife of the school master, Tessa. The wily Earl had escaped but despite the passage of time the shadow of his evil remained in the hearts of everyone who had lived through that time.

Klune had married Lily and their union had brought them two beautiful children: Heron, their six-year old son, and Jude, their three-year old daughter. Both had inherited their parents' blonde hair, which glistened like halos in the full light of the sun, and both had the faces of angels.

The small family lived in the simple cottage that Lily's father had built, although Klune had added a small room for their children to sleep in and an underground cellar to store the cider he had been fermenting. Lily still baked her famous apple pies and sold fresh apples at the markets even though her life had become far busier than it had been before meeting Klune.

Life in the village, however, remained the same. One season flowed aimlessly into the next and the villagers went about their business in the same way they had always done. The atmosphere in the mountain valley remained idyllic and peaceful, although whispers of an even greater evil than the Earl were starting to filter in from the villages further to the north. Travellers

spoke of a vast Viking horde sweeping down from the Wild lands, and it was the fear in their eyes as they relayed the tale which convinced even the most hardened critic that the story was true. They told of entire villages, larger than Chestnut, being sacked and of men, women and children being slaughtered without mercy.

The villagers weren't wealthy. Their village was hidden away in a mountain valley and access to it was restricted by the hazardous terrain. If it had been winter they would have been safe. Both the southern and eastern passes would have been virtually impenetrable for a horseback rider. But it was summer. The few clouds wafting dreamily across the sky did not prevent the sun from bathing the valley in glorious light. The rivers were flowing with fresh, sparkling water and the scent of pine on the air was strong. Both passes, while still relatively treacherous in the summer, would present no obstacle to the hardy Northerners. And everyone knew it.

Early one morning, before the dew had melted from the blades of mountain grass, a rider from Rasnuch came cantering down the eastern path and into the village square. He jumped from his horse, his face contorted as a testament to how hard he'd been riding. He bent down and rested his hands on his knees to allow himself a second or two to catch his breath.

Finally, after a small crowd of curious onlookers had gathered around him, he straightened up

and began to speak. The news he brought was not good. The Vikings had razed Rasnuch, a major town just to the northeast of Chestnut. Even as he saddled his horse to warn the neighbouring villagers he had witnessed the first fires being lit and as he galloped away the roar of Viking shouting chased him like a swarm of angry bees.

Panic immediately swept through Chestnut like a virus. The villagers had never been at the mercy of something as incomprehensibly catastrophic as this had every potential to be. Stories of the Vikings and their ruthlessness were legendary, but they had always been stories from afar; stories to scare the children on a cold winter's night. No-one had actually seen a Viking or knew of anyone who had, up until that moment. They lived in the wild lands to the north and had never ventured this far south before. That in itself was terrifying.

The village elders gathered at the inn and wasted no time in discussing what action they should take. Damon, the father of Will the blacksmith and one-time saviour of Lily, suggested they hide out in the forest. At first this plan seemed ideal. The forest was certainly large enough and dense enough to hide them. Why, it was said that in some parts the trees grew so close together that their knotted and gnarled trunks formed a natural, impenetrable barrier. He was sure that no Viking, no matter how fierce, could get to them there.

Then Amarth, the eldest and wisest of those assembled, raised a wrinkled, trembling hand for silence.

"Damon, in theory your suggestion is logical," he croaked, his voice barely audible even though the chatter had ceased. "Yet what should we eat? What should we drink? Where would our children sleep? We would have to separate if we wanted to be comfortable and I'm sure you would agree that we do not want that."

The other men sitting around the chipped and stained table mumbled assent.

"We need a place where we can be together," he continued. "We need a place with storage facilities for food and water, and from where we can defend ourselves should we have to."

"Hear, hear!" the men cheered.

"But where is that place, Amarth?" Damon asked earnestly. "The Vikings will be upon us in a day or so. We have no time to find such an ideal sanctuary."

Harad, the school master, swallowed hard. For the past few minutes his fingers had been twisting around each other like worms in a bucket beneath the table top.

"I have a suggestion," he said, finding courage in the time it took to stand.

The others turned their attention to the bearded school master and an air of anticipation descended over the table.

"We could go to the castle."

There. He had said it. The other men didn't know what to say or where to look. Each man was as surprised as the next. The castle was a place of evil. It belonged to the very man who had been indirectly involved with the death of Harad's wife ten winters ago.

"But your wife..." Damon began.

"My wife is gone," Harad replied, his tone softening as he glanced down at his shoes, hidden in the shadows beneath the table "but we are here. We need a secure place to hide and despite what you think, despite what I think, it is the ideal place. We can store food there, it has its own well and we can defend ourselves from within its thick walls. No one has seen the Earl for years and we are fast running out of time."

The school master's explanation managed to produce a few hesitant nods, even though none of the others could dispute the merits of his suggestion. Time was running out and there was no reason, aside from stubbornness, that the villagers could not make use of the abandoned castle. A vote was taken and the result unanimous; they would hide in the Earl's castle. The meeting was called to a close and the front door of the inn thrown open to a crowd of desperate faces.

After the decision of the council had been announced, a rider was sent to Lily's cottage amongst the apple trees to get Klune's permission for the villagers to use the Earl's castle. It was merely a formality since the council elders had decided they would use it regardless of what

Klune's answer was, but there was nothing to be lost from being polite. Fortunately for all concerned, Klune was only too happy to oblige. With a beautiful wife and two small children, he was more than willing to offer the protection of the castle to any who needed it.

The villagers had been instructed to pack as many essentials as they could. Food and blankets were at the top of the list, though other items such as buckets for water and eating utensils would also be important. Then, just as the sun brushed the tip of Gristle Mountain that evening, they would leave for the castle; arriving under cover of darkness.

The preparations were frantic. It was hard to know what to take. If too much was packed, they wouldn't be able to carry their loads, and if they packed too little, there was the danger they would forget something essential. Klune and Lily had very few possessions and were soon able to load up Klune's horse with all the provisions they would need. The castle had been left much as it had been a decade ago and anything the family had forgotten they would probably find somewhere in the massive fortress.

Lily and Klune waited at their front gate for the stream of villagers to appear. Heron and Jude, who were too excited to wait patiently with their parents, chased each other through the wild grass which grew along the orchard fence. Their giggles and squeals of delight filled the air and for a moment they took Lily's mind off the approaching doom. It was not so long ago that she had been the one running through the wild grass, kissed by the warm sun and carefree, but time had changed her and her playground belonged to someone else now.

The sun continued to slip across the horizon. Cold night air began to sneak down from the Alps and into the valley. In the distance Lily heard the muffled sound of excited chatter and within minutes the first of the villagers rounded the bend. Klune led the horse out onto the road and Lily called the children to her. By the time the villagers reached them they were ready to go.

"We can't thank you enough," said Harad immediately, before anyone else had a chance to

speak. "It was very generous of you to let us use your uncle's castle."

Lily smiled and looked up at her husband with admiration. Klune, never one to feel entirely comfortable in the presence of a compliment, ignored the praise and quickly changed the subject to one he felt was more important.

"How far away are they?"

"One day's ride," Harad replied grimly. "Will is up on the peak watching for the first sign of their approach."

Klune nodded. "Do we have enough supplies?"

"We have enough for three or four days if we're careful," Damon replied in a deep, booming voice which belied his gentle nature. "We still have time to go back to the village and get more supplies if we need to, but we have to get the women and children settled first. The next thing is to fortify the castle gates and doors as best we can."

Lily listened in silent horror. How could this be happening in the peaceful valley she had grown up in? She remembered a time long ago when she had wished for some excitement in her life; when she had dreamed of far off places and wondered if she would ever be truly happy. Now she would give anything to return to the quiet life she'd had back in those days. Now she had children to take care of and a husband to worry about, and if she had to fight to protect what was hers, she would. But the men's conversation had grown dark and frightening so she dropped back behind them a couple of paces and began humming a tune to take her children's minds off whatever they might have overheard; take their minds off the cacophony of concerned voices which surrounded them like a circle of buzzards over a dying man.

Slowly the long line of people snaked its way along the main road towards the castle, which dominated the side of the mountain. Damon looked up at the peaks to his right, hoping to catch a glimpse of his son, but the snow caps were too high and the light too dim, though the look of concern etched on his face was clear.

Only the last few scraps of daylight remained when the weary parade of frightened villagers

arrived at the two imposing gates which led into the castle's front courtyard. Klune unlocked the giant padlock and pushed each gate open as far back as it would go. Everyone surged in, eager to be safe within the confines of the castle's thick, stone walls. Lily walked on ahead, with Heron and Jude, to open the front doors; her grace under pressure an inspiration for all those women who at one time had shunned her. Time and reason had soon cured them of their small-minded prejudice. Klune had proven himself to be a good father and provider, and they had both redeemed themselves in the collective eyes of the village.

The frightened crowd poured in through the double doors of the castle and swarmed across the flagstones of the great hall to find a place to put their belongings. Competition was fierce for a space near the gaping fireplace, which looked like a giant yawn in the wall. Others who were not so lucky made the best of the space they could find and settled down for a rough, uncomfortable night. While the women set about preparing makeshift beds on the cold stone floor, the children ran amongst the assembled families and their belongings, shrieking with excitement as they forgot their parents' fear and started thinking of their new situation as an adventure.

Those families who had jostled their way to the fireside were soon to regret their choice of position. Klune and Damon soon had a roaring fire crackling and snapping in the fireplace and many who had felt blessed to have secured such a prime location were forced by the intense heat to move, and since each family group was so tightly packed into the great hall, the only spaces available were those on the perimeter and away from any trace of heat. Even those who were far enough away from the fire to escape the worst of its heat still couldn't rest completely. They spent the next few hours shuffling this way and that to avoid being stepped on by women who needed to use the fire to prepare meals and heat water for pots of herbal tea.

It was a restless night for everyone, including Damon. He had chosen a patch of floor at the top of a set of steps which led down into the bowels of the castle, beneath the great arch which led

into the hall. From there he could keep watch of the heavy, double front doors and of the gathered villagers. But Damon was not being kept awake by the still fierce heat of a dying fire, nor was he disturbed by the occasional movements of other villagers. At first it had been thoughts of his son, Will, out there alone in the mountains that had kept him awake, but then something else had crept into his consciousness. A sense that something was not quite as it should be.

Damon put all thoughts of his son out of his head and concentrated. A sound, crawling out of the darkness from below the steps, captured his attention and held him hostage as he tried to think of what it could be. He rose from the tangle of blankets and glanced down at his wife sleeping beside him then made his way carefully across the mass of restless sleepers to Klune.

"Klune." He whispered, bending down to gently shake him. "Klune."

Klune slowly woke up, his eyelids heavy and his speech slightly slurred.

"Wh-what is it?" he asked. "That you, Damon?"

"Yes. I think you'd better come with me. Ssssh, don't disturb the others."

Klune looked over his shoulder and saw that his family were sound asleep. Lily looked serene, sleeping with her body curled around Jude's, and Heron beside them, sprawled out on his back, sleeping with his mouth wide open so that every breath was audible.

"What is it?" Klune asked as they reached the head of the steps.

"Listen."

Klune cocked his head towards the void at the bottom of the steps and listened. At first he couldn't hear anything.

"What...?" he began.

"Listen!"

Then he heard it; low, guttural growls and snarling which sent a shiver up his spine.

"What is it?" Damon asked earnestly.

"You expect me to know?" Klune said shooting him a look that hovered somewhere between annoyance and intrigue.

"Well, I just thought that since you lived here with your uncle for all those years..."

His voice trailed off into an uncomfortable silence. He had spoken without considering how Klune might feel about his long departed uncle. A feeling of guilt overcame him. He should have known better.

"Well, there's only one way to find out what is making those sounds," Klune said finally. "Light your torch."

Damon swallowed hard.

"Wouldn't it be better to investigate tomorrow?" he asked nervously, glancing down at the black space at the foot of the steps. "When it's light?"

Klune shook his head.

"No. We should go now, while the others are asleep. We may find something we don't want the others to know about."

Damon nodded. He hadn't liked the answer but could not argue with the logic.

The great hall was alive with the dwindling flames of oil lamps, fixed to the walls at regular intervals. One after the other they dipped the head of their torches into the flame of a nearby lamp and turned to face the blackness of the foot of the steps.

"Ready?" Klune asked.

"Ready," Damon replied, wiping his forehead which was already heavy with perspiration.

Together they made their way down the wide, stone steps and into the lower chamber of the castle. With each step that took them further into the shadows, the muffled, bestial sounds grew louder and clearer. When they reached the bottom, they discovered a long corridor lined with doors. Klune had only been in this part of the castle twice before that he could remember and had become lost both times. The entire lower level was a maze of tunnels and corridors, criss-crossing each other, and either coming to a complete dead end or continuing into the very mountain itself.

This is where the dungeons were located, dotted along the walls, hidden from both light and fresh air. This is where the Earl kept the creatures he had been experimenting on. He also locked up his failures here.

With great trepidation they made their way along the seemingly endless main corridor, mov-

ing gradually closer to the ungodly growls and grunts which punctuated the grim silence surrounding them. The air was heavy and stale. It was difficult to breathe and they struggled to fill their lungs with enough oxygen to continue. Then the first putrid whiff of decay assaulted their nostrils. Both men retched, forcing back the stream of vomit rising up into the back of their throats.

"What *is* that?" Damon asked through the back of his hand.

Klune didn't reply but continued on. Damon, not wanting to be left behind, flanked Klune. Soon they came to a row of reinforced doors inset with small, square windows with thick iron bars in them. Klune looked over his shoulder at Damon, who was cowering in the shadows behind him. It seemed that Damon, the curious adventurer, didn't seem so curious any more. Klune snickered to himself, then turned, lifted his torch to a position above the small window and looked inside.

At first the small dungeon appeared empty. The light from the torch revealed a floor covered with old straw and small piles of excrement, but no movement. Then, like a bolt from the blue, a creature, all teeth and gum, sprang at the window from the other side, snarling and snapping. Saliva from the beast's mouth splattered Klune's face as he instinctively jumped backwards. Wiping his face with the sleeve of his shirt, Klune struggled to stay upright as he slammed into the opposite wall.

Damon stared, wide-eyed at his friend.

"Ah-ah-ah-are you alright?" he stuttered, taking a step towards Klune and glancing nervously at the cell window.

"Yes, I'm alright," Klune replied, flicking one last thread of drool from his fingers as the look of disgust melted from his face.

"What was that thing?"

Klune picked up the torch he had dropped and shook his head.

"I don't know," he replied. "But what I would like to know is how that thing could have survived down here all this time."

Damon shrugged his shoulders and they moved on to the next door. As Klune peered

inside he did so cautiously. This time if anything leapt out of the darkness at him he would be ready. What he wasn't ready for, however, was the sight of a giant black rat scurrying across his feet, skirting around Damon's boots and hurrying down the corridor and into the consuming shadows.

"Well I guess that answers your question," Damon chuckled to himself.

Klune barely heard what the old man said. He lifted his torch once again to the small window and peered inside the second cell. Once his eyes had grown accustomed to the gloom inside, he was able to make out something quivering on the floor amongst the straw. He squinted for a better look and found it to be a hideously deformed thing, for there was no other word for it. While most of it looked human, its head, neck and shoulders were those of a dog. Its ears stood up on its head and its large snout twitched as the light from Klune's torch found it. Great strips of raw muscle glistened in the semi-light, while the rest of its body seemed to be covered in a short, thick fur which looked patchy and moth-eaten.

"By the gods!" Klune exclaimed to himself. "What were you doing down here, Uncle?"

With a plethora of thoughts swimming around in his head, Klune went on to check the other cells. In some he found no more than shadows and straw. If there had been anything living in there, they had long since perished; their flesh and bones devoured by rats. An ironically careless end to such carefully crafted misery. Many more cells contained specimens in various stages of evolution, wilder and more vicious than the beast Klune had encountered in the first cell. Other cells contained dead or dying monstrosities, half-human half-animal nightmares left by the Earl to rot in their damp prisons. The stench was over-powering. Klune, who had been managing to keep control of his stomach, finally gave up his dinner.

"We mustn't tell the others about these abominations," he said before spitting out the last, vile trace of vomit from his mouth.

Damon agreed and they both returned the way they had come.

The first few breaths of smoky air at the top of

the steps were like nectar to the men. They inhaled deeply, exorcising their lungs of the stench of death. Damon coughed loudly, the smoky air proving too much for old lungs, and then he realised where they were. He gave the great hall a quick glance and saw that most of the village had somehow managed to fall asleep and that his coughing fit had woken no one. Carefully they returned to their beds and settled down to catch whatever sleep they could before the morning sun woke them.

Early the next morning, a small group of men returned to the village to bring more supplies. The panic of the previous day seemed far from their minds as they led their horses and the carts attached to them into the village. They laughed and joked about the adventure of it all. Yet once they arrived in the village square, a solemnity came over them and they hurried to fill the carts with bags of flour, barrels of fruit and vegetables, ale and dried meat. They even loaded a cow and two sheep onto one of the sturdier vehicles and managed to shoo a couple of chickens in as well. Other supplies such as rope and candles were then gathered, and more torches. Everything they could think of and lay their hands on was thrown into the back of one cart or other.

Then with great haste the small band of men made their way back to the castle, their carts rattling over the corrugations and stones in the dirt road while the wheels groaned under the weight of their loads. Fortunately, they weren't too far from the castle gates. But the sound of galloping hooves gave them a scare nevertheless. The small convoy stopped and the men readied themselves to fight.

"They're here!" shouted Will as he appeared over a rise to the side of them. "Dozens of the scoundrels!"

Once the men were inside the relative safety of the castle gates, they were closed and locked, and a large pole was dropped onto two metal hooks which had been securely attached to each gate. This would give the barrier extra strength against the Viking horde. The same was done to the massive front doors. They too were locked and bolted and secured in any further way that they could be. Some of the younger teenage

boys, eager to be a part of the excitement, began to barricade the doors with furniture they had found in the Earl's library. Of course, many of his books were destroyed in the process, but they would only have ended up as fuel for the fire anyway so no one was concerned.

"Attention!" Damon called out to the restless crowd before him. "Will has returned with the news we have all been dreading. The invaders are perhaps an hour's ride from here. The best that we can hope for is that our village is ransacked and burnt. The worst is that they decide to investigate the castle."

A collective gasp rose from the villagers and some of the women began to sob.

"However, the castle is vast. Not only is the building itself immense, but parts of the castle go back into the mountain. But there is another option and one which I think will offer the greatest chance of remaining undetected."

He stepped aside and let Klune take the floor. "I suggest we hide in the towers," he said simply.

There was an immediate outcry.

"But we'll be trapped up there!" one villager called out.

"Yeah! And then what'll we do? Fly away like your uncle!" another spat viciously.

Klune hung his head for a moment and Lily moved to his side and placed a loving arm around his waist.

"They're frightened," she whispered.

"Now that's enough!" Damon boomed, stepping in front of Klune. "Klune has lived with us for ten years now and has been nothing but a model citizen. Some of you have even gone to him for help at one time or another. You should be ashamed!"

The point was well taken. Time was running out for all of them.

Klune spoke again.

"In some of the larger towers there are secret compartments. They are very narrow but we can escape to them if the Vikings come looking for us. If we can hide ourselves there and give them no reason to think that we haven't all fled, we may just escape their barbarism."

"But what about the livestock? And the carts?

They'll know someone has been here," one of the women called out.

"Yes," Klune agreed, "and whoever it was will have fled with the rest of the village."

"But the gates are blocked and the front door bolted. From the inside!" shouted another who thought he had found fault in Klune's plan.

"So whoever lived here escaped via a secret tunnel. These are warriors, people. They are not going to waste their time searching for villagers that might be miles away. They will take what they want and move on to the next village."

The villagers nodded.

"Now let's get organised. Those northern devils will be upon us any minute. I want everyone to gather what they need and assemble at the top of the main stairs. The only way to get to the towers is from the second floor. You'll need blankets and as much food and water as you can carry."

As the villagers busied themselves gathering what they needed and hiding their valuables, the sound of thundering hooves filled the great hall and sent shivers of terror through each and every person. Lily pulled Jude and Heron into her skirts, cradling the back of their heads with her hands. She looked across the hall to where Klune was standing and although he was trying not to show it, she could see that he was frightened too.

Klune smiled weakly at Lily, and then cleared his throat.

"Stay away from the windows!" he shouted. "Let's get moving. Everyone to the top of the stairs!"

The villagers swarmed towards the stairs, pushing and jostling old friends and neighbours in the race to get to safety. Klune showed Lily and his children to the nearest door and ushered a small group of twenty in after them. When Klune eventually joined them there would be twenty-four people in that small space making it a bit cramped but not unendurable.

Lily slowly led the small group up the winding stone staircase, not quite knowing where she was going herself but knowing that the others were looking to her for strength and guidance. She had to keep her wits about her and show

foresight enough to duck when she came to each narrow window in the tower, no more than a narrow slit in the massive stone walls but a chance for an eagle-eyed Viking to spy their movements.

Klune, meanwhile, was showing the last of the villagers to their hiding places. Since there were more villagers than towers, he had to show a sizeable group to his uncle's secret den behind the library. There they would have to stay locked in until someone came to let them out again. Their only consolation was that theirs was the most secure hiding place of all, with almost no chance of ever being discovered.

After closing the door securely, Klune ran back to the second floor and to the tower door. Locking it securely behind him, he bounded up the stairs, taking two and three of the stone steps at a time. Through the narrow windows he caught glimpses of the enormous dust cloud thrown up by the columns of Viking warriors on their horses and heard the clinking of horse brasses and metal swords against metal shields. He paused for a moment as the first of the barbarians transformed Will's house into an inferno. He could do nothing more than shake his head and guess what other horrors they had up their sleeves.

Down in the village great cheers rang out as the main hall was set alight. A dog, frightened and desperate, scurried out from behind a barrel of spring water only to be decapitated by the keen edge of a Viking sword. Other livestock fled into the forest as more and more of the village buildings were torched. Only the inn was spared the arson's torch for within its walls was a bounty every Viking worth his horns dearly loved getting his hands on – ale. By nightfall the men were drunk and roasting lamb in the embers of the village.

A keen wind carried snatches of their drunken revelry to the tired villagers in the towers of the Earl's castle, keeping them awake and terrified. They could only imagine what had happened to their homes and their few meagre possessions, though they had to remind themselves that they still had their lives. So far.

When the sun came up on a new day the vil-

lagers were torn from their broken sleep by a sound that thundered up from the front gates of the castle. The Vikings had arrived. Their battering ram hit its target again and again with regular, monotonous persistence. Finally the sound of splitting wood ruptured the air. The metal hooks were torn off, releasing the massive log which had kept the gates secure. It fell to the stone path with a loud, dull clunk and rolled off to one side. The Vikings cheered.

Bror, chieftain and leader of the party, shouted an order and his men, tanned from weeks spent in the sun and buoyed by recent victories, surged forward into the castle grounds. With axes and swords raised high, they stormed the double doors of the castle, fearing nothing and eager to relieve the impressive building of any riches it might still hold within its walls.

It took little effort to break down the front doors and once they were open the Vikings swept inside, whooping and shouting as they ran into the great hall. Bror stood still under the great arch, motionless as his men swarmed into the enormous hall. He pointed and shouted and immediately one group of men took to the stairs. Another order was barked and a smaller group of men ran down into the lower levels. Those who remained had already begun ransacking the library. They had little regard for any of the Earl's possessions, smashing the furniture into pieces and then using the broken and splintered pieces to start fires into which they threw all the books they could find. Soon the whole room was a smoky scene from Hell with flames licking dangerously close to the tapestry which hid the secret door.

Down in the darkness, the group of villagers hiding in the Earl's secret room huddled together, comforting each other and trying to stop themselves from crying out. A few of the women whispered prayers as they clutched their children to them. The men stood looking up in the direction of the door, waiting for a crack of light which would indicate they had been found. The tension was maddening.

The smaller group of Vikings now dashing along the corridors of the lower levels were soon to regret that they had ever joined the raiding

party. The stench didn't bother them. They had smelled worse. Besides, they were warriors, conquerors descended from conquerors, and they were fearless. A stench, even as pungent as this one, was not going to stop them. Nor were the metal locks on the cell doors. It was not unusual for gold and other valuables to be hidden in such places and the Vikings knew this full well. One after the other, they brought their axes down on the padlocks, smashing them open.

One of the larger men, Lars, blonde and powerfully built, kicked the first door in with such a force that it swung right back and hit the inside wall. He immediately heard a sniffing sound and turned to look at the other men, but they were busy with their axes. He looked back again into the shadows that filled the small space on the other side of the door.

"Come out!" he ordered as he stepped towards the door. "Come..."

Before he could finish his sentence, something had streaked out of the shadows and landed upon him with such a force that it knocked him backwards; and even before he had hit the floor the mutant creature had torn a strip of flesh from his cheek and throat and was in the process of devouring it. He screamed in agony. His hands punched and ripped at the beast, tearing its flesh, but his attack only served to make the beast wilder. In seconds his screams had become no more than gurgles as blood filled the gaping hole where his throat had been. Through eyes wide with terror he watched the voracious carnivore swallow more and more of his flesh until the pain melted into nothingness and his spirit left what remained of his body.

The other men had spun around to see what was happening, but the creature had moved like lightning. Before they could raise their axes it had torn Lars' throat completely out, almost severing the head, and was now eyeing them all. The men rushed towards the creature, their battle cries deafening in the narrow corridor, but one by one they were picked off by more of the creatures who had now found their way out of the cells.

The smell of blood soon become overpowering, driving the mutant dog-beasts into a feeding

frenzy. Nothing that moved was safe. They even tore ribbons of flesh off each other and the death cries of the men were soon intermingled with the yelping and snarling of injured animals. With powerful jaws, they bit through muscle and through bone which splintered and stuck in the roof of their mouths. With their faces reddened by Viking blood and their eyes glinting in the dying light of the dropped Viking torches, they looked demonic. And their appetites had only just begun to be quelled.

Then the beasts heard the sounds echoing down the steps from the level above and they paused.



From their positions in the tower tops the villagers could hear a lot of what was happening below them, including the doors to their towers being hacked open. The time had come to move into the secret stairwells which curved around the outer edge of each tower.

High up on the wall, where it couldn't be accidentally knocked, was a slab of stone smaller than the rest. Klune reached up and pressed it hard. At first nothing happened and then there was a creak and a grinding sound as a narrow door slid open to reveal a cobweb-filled space behind it. One by one Klune ushered the villagers into the cramped and claustrophobic space which would hopefully keep them safe. Then, as he stepped into the tiny space, he checked the area for anything they had left behind. There was nothing. He could hear the Vikings clambering noisily up the steps; the metal tips of their swords clanging on the stone and their grunting and cursing. They would soon be only centimetres away from each other. It was time to close the door.

Klune gripped the handle on the back of the door with both hands and pulled for all he was worth. It was difficult to move since his shoulders were so broad, but the sound of the approaching Vikings gave him the burst of strength he needed to close the door securely, thus setting the secret stone into place and hiding them completely.

Hegor, the muscular, scarred second-in-charge, burst through the unlocked door with a grunt of exertion. Through beady eyes, hidden in the shadows of a low brow, he scanned the space at the top of the tower. He raised his nose and sniffed the air like an animal would sniff the wind for scent of prey. But his nostrils smelt only the alpine air mixed with traces of smoke. He looked up at the beams and tiles which comprised the roof and then out through each of the four glassless windows but could see nothing worth investigating further. He roared his disappointment as he pushed his way back through the group of men surging through the small entrance at the top of the stairs. Then, muttering an expletive, he began the long descent back to the second floor.

Angered by time and energy wasted climbing the many hundreds of steps to the top of the tower, Hegor crashed through the door at the bottom of the stairs enraged, and was instantly met by a scene of bloody carnage. His men lay scattered and dead in pools of blood. Some had been dismembered and others had been partially eaten. There were men still clinging onto the last remnants of life, moaning pathetically as the life force drained slowly out of them and across the cold stone floor. Hegor surveyed the scene and let forth a blood-curdling yell.

From the side there was a blur. A flash of teeth and searing pain. Two beasts were upon him, ripping flesh and crushing bone. Crimson blood from his wounds poured into the crevices of his eyes and through the blood he saw the dog-headed mutants, one more animal than human, snarling down at him as others came to join the feast. One of the beasts was only human from the hips down – a dog with human hind legs and the smallest stump of a tail sticking out above its pink, fleshy buttocks. The other was more of a mixture. It had the head of a dog but also a giant horn protruding somewhat awkwardly from its forehead. Its arms were a cross between a dog's leg and human arms, withered and pathetic limbs which were stronger than they looked.

Hegor's men shrieked like village women as they watched the creatures tearing the flesh from their second-in-charge. They turned on the spot

and fled back up the stairs, trampling each other and pulling each other back in their panic to distance themselves from the beasts. But there seemed to be more and more of the creatures, hideous deformities with an instinct to kill appearing from every conceivable entry point. Having killed every living thing they had come across, including both livestock and Viking alike, they had converged at this one point. This is where the stink of blood and flesh was strongest. This is where they sensed life.

The beasts immediately leapt onto the stairs, savaging anything that their mouths came into contact with. There were no survivors. So efficient were they at killing that their strong jaws and razor sharp teeth made short work of the few remaining Vikings and it wasn't long before they had gorged themselves into a stupor, returning to the bottom of the stairs to sleep.

Klune, noticing the noise had died down, assumed that the Vikings had finished exploring their tower and had moved on to other parts of the castle. Carefully he pushed the hidden door open just a crack while at the same time motioning for the others to remain where they were. There was no point in endangering the others if he was wrong. He peered around the edge of the stone door and at a glance he could tell they were alone. So far, so good.

With the greatest of stealth he began to descend the stairs, his senses alert for the slightest sign of danger. But there was only silence, which he considered neither a good nor bad omen. Silence could mean anything. He continued downwards, as silently as the cat after an unsuspecting mouse. The Vikings were not to be underestimated.

As he neared the door at the foot of the tower stairs he came across a mutilated and faceless Viking body. Two metres away there was another, and another. Klune furrowed his brow. It didn't make sense. Who could have done such a thing? Surely they hadn't turned on their own. Then right by the door he came across the remains of three more Vikings, one piled on top of the other; all faceless and bloody.

Feeling sick to his stomach, Klune stepped over them to the door, which was wide open so

already he could see part of the carnage that waited for him on the second floor landing. His heartbeat quickened and a rush of adrenalin flooded his veins, adding to the sense of danger that was already engulfing him like the very air he breathed. Was that the sound of someone snoring? He stepped silently out into the room and saw them immediately. Asleep at their kill. His uncle's experiments. Someone had set them loose and now they were all going to pay.

He backed into the stairwell hardly daring to draw breath. He had momentarily forgotten the small pile of Viking bodies and stepped onto them, almost losing his balance and falling. But he didn't. He paused for a brief few seconds then hurried as quietly as he could up the stairs. If only his uncle were here, he thought to himself as he shut the tower door securely behind him. If only he could somehow call his uncle back, everything would be alright then. But why should his uncle return? The villagers had once forced him to flee the only place he had ever really felt comfortable. The Earl was not going to hurry back to help them.

With his mind full of thoughts, Klune sat down by the far window and closed his eyes. Where are you, Uncle? Where are you? His mind was shouting this thought over and over, the urgency and desperation evident in every syllable until they began to fade away into the darkness behind his closed eyes and he fell asleep.

He was awoken by the sound of flapping wings. He had no idea how long he had slept but the sun was high in the sky and the area at the top of the tower was completely shaded. Klune looked in the direction of the sound and saw to his surprise a raven sitting on the sill of the window to his left in the midst of ruffling its feathers and preening.

"Uncle?"

The jet black bird regarded him with a beady yellow eye and with a hop, jumped off the stone sill. By the time its feet touched the floor it had transformed into the tall, lean figure of the Earl, who stood there with a crooked smile on his pale white face.

"So I am here," the Earl said finally as he held

out a frail, bony hand to help his nephew up. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

Klune took a moment to look at his uncle before replying. Nothing about him had changed. It never did. The long black hair which framed his pale face was the same length it had always been; the ruby red lips and black-lined eyes were unchanged; and his fingers were still a jeweller's delight of emeralds, rubies and gold. Though maybe there was the hint of a stoop developing, Klune noted.

"You're looking well," he commented.

"Thank you Klune. However, I doubt you called me back to comment on my appearance," the Earl replied as the smile on his face slid away.

Klune nodded. "No, I didn't. I needed you back to subdue whatever it is that is roaming downstairs. Those beasts, those, those... things you were experimenting with, have been freed. They have killed and eaten an entire army of Vikings and without your help will do the same thing to us."

The Earl's smile returned, though it was neither warm nor pleasant. What it was, Klune concluded, was smug.

"They will, will they? Well, it seems you and your 'friends' are in a spot of trouble."

"Not if you can send them back to the dungeons where they belong. I know you can do it."

"Of course I can do it!" the Earl snapped. "I created them! They are mine to command!" He took a second's pause, his tone becoming suspiciously calmer. "What's in it for me? I see no reason to help the very same people who drove me from my home out of the goodness of my heart."

The Earl did have a point. And he knew it.

Klune struggled to find an answer that would appease his uncle.

"Okay then," he began, buying himself a few extra minutes. "What if I were able to convince the villagers to let you return to your home? On condition that you never again interfere in their lives or cause any of them harm."

The Earl scratched his chin, raised an eyebrow for effect then finally nodded. "You have yourself a deal," he answered. "I will do what you

have asked provided you can complete your end of the bargain.”

Klune held out his hand for his uncle to shake, to seal the agreement as gentlemen did. However, the Earl disregarded it and instead flung himself into the stairwell and flew like the wind to the second floor.

His arrival drew snarls of irritation from the dog-beasts slumbering amongst the corpses, but the Earl was not afraid. Even when they began to arise, their ears flattening back against their deformed skulls and their teeth bared and eager for more killing, the Earl stood his ground. The creatures were wary of this man who seemed unafraid of them, though their sole instinct was to kill and they continued to approach, their jaws dripping with saliva and Viking blood.

“Be silent!” the Earl commanded, daring any one of them to defy him with eyes that burned red hot.

The creatures stopped in their tracks.

“Be gone! Back to the dungeons!” he shouted, and with a clap of his hands the creatures slunk back towards the top of the steps which led to the ground floor. The Earl clapped his hands again and the beasts started and under the influence of the Earl’s magic hurried down the steps to the ground floor. The Earl followed.

“Be gone!” he repeated, though the creatures were reluctant to return to their prisons. They milled around on the top step, nipping at each other and snarling weakly, glancing down at the darkness at the foot of the steps but unwilling to go.

The Earl clapped his hands again and the sound was like an explosion. Sparks flew off his hands and landed on some of the beasts, singeing their fur and leaving tiny black burns on their exposed flesh. Knowing they were beaten, every one of the creatures turned on their heels and fled to the safety of their cells. Gliding through the air as though he were part of it, the Earl followed to ensure that every one of the mongrel creatures had returned to their cells. With one dramatic sweep of his arms the solid oak doors swung shut, imprisoning his macabre creations once more. Then he replaced the broken padlocks and, holding an open palm against each

one, fused the metal shackle to the lock so that no key or Viking axe could smash it open again. The creatures were back to living on rats and bats until their whimpers and howls faded and their lives ended. The Earl turned his back on them with ease. He had, after all, finished with them.

When the villagers finally emerged from their hiding spots they were tired and sore, but thankful to Klune for still being able to draw breath. Yet their gratitude soon turned to hostility at the sight of the Earl emerging from the shadows.

“What is he doing here!” Harad demanded to know of the man responsible for the death of his wife.

“Yeah!” cried the others. “Let’s get him!” someone else called from the back of the crowd.

There was a roar of approval and the villagers surged forward. Someone threw a shoe at him, which he ducked. The Earl could have so very easily destroyed them all then and there, but he had made a promise to his nephew and his word was his bond. At least to his family.

“Listen!” Klune shouted. “Listen to me, please!”

The shouting and jeering died to a few whispered comments. They allowed their saviour to talk.

“Listen,” Klune repeated. “This man has just saved our lives. All of our lives!”

“But he killed my wife!” Harad countered.

“And my daughter. My baby!” Shona’s mother, Semma, shouted.

“Again, I must ask you to listen,” Klune continued. “I have lived amongst you for a decade now. I know you are good people. I understand why you would have reason to hate my uncle, but hasn’t he been punished enough?”

One or two villagers made anonymous by the crowd shouted “No!”, but Klune ignored them and continued.

“Doesn’t a man have the right to prove that he is sorry? Besides, we are sheltering in his castle, drinking water from his well and he did save us from those beasts which in turn saved us from the Vikings.”

“And whose beasts are they?” another villager retorted.

"I know. I guess I can only ask you humbly to consider what my uncle has done for you this day and ask that he be allowed to return to his castle. He has given me his word he will not interfere in your lives if he is left alone. He is an old man, possibly with not many years left to him."

There was a joyful cheer from the villagers. Not the reaction Klune had wanted, but perhaps understandable.

Standing partly hidden behind his nephew, the Earl frowned. He was not impressed by this talk of his death. He had spent so many years cheating the Grim Reaper that he was not about to succumb to the scythe just yet.

"Please!" Klune said. "This man is my uncle."

The villagers stood silent for a while, some even feeling ashamed of their behaviour, then some towards the back began to peel away. Others soon followed. They busied themselves with gathering up their belongings while their children, with an abundance of stored energy, chased each other through the hive of busy adults.

"I think this means you can stay," Klune surmised. "Though it'd probably be best to retire to one of the upper levels until they have gone."

The Earl turned without saying a word and disappeared up another flight of steps which led to the third floor. He was not amused. He refused to feel grateful for being allowed to stay in his own home and his contempt for the villagers had grown tenfold in the space of the tick of a clock. They were all fools to him. Had he been in their position he would not have entertained the thought of being so generous, even if it had been begrudgingly.

"Cretins!" he snarled.



The ensuing weeks were spent rebuilding the devastated village. All other work was abandoned as the community worked together to replace the buildings lost in the Viking invasion. Friends and strangers from neighbouring villages, spared the Viking onslaught, rallied to help with what was going to be a mammoth task.

It was the least they could do for the residents of Chestnut, who had stopped the Vikings cold.

With winter approaching there was an added urgency to their work, but at least the new buildings would be sturdier, better constructed and better insulated against the chill of winter. Some of their homes had been two or three hundred years old, so the new techniques that were employed to ensure stronger, more weather-resistant dwellings were welcomed wholeheartedly. But these new techniques made the villager's task more laborious, especially with the provision of materials. Logs from the forest had to be felled and cut into workable timber; wooden tiles were to replace the thatch; mud by the barrow load had to be transported from the mountain streams; and huge bales of straw had to be imported from the farming regions down on the flats. Miraculously the final roof was finally being tiled as the first snowflake of winter fell.

The village of Chestnut had been completely rebuilt and the result was beautiful.

Then something very peculiar happened. To celebrate the restoration of their village, a great feast had been planned. Everyone was invited, even the Earl.

He greeted the invitation with due suspicion. When Klune handed him the handwritten card he initially considered it a joke, but Klune convinced him that the invitation was genuine. The Earl cautiously agreed to attend.

On the day of the feast the sky was relatively clear with only a few dark snow clouds hanging ominously around the mountain peaks. The village beneath was bustling with activity. One group of men was using the left over wooden planks to construct long tables which were set up in the new town hall. Although only crude constructions, they were sturdy and sanded to such a degree that the surface almost gleamed. Once completed the village girls covered them with cloths and decorated them with floral centre-pieces, pine cones and candles. It was left to another group of men to slaughter a small number of sheep and chickens, which were to be spit roasted over an open fire. Meanwhile, their wives baked bread and prepared pailfuls of

peeled vegetables. Even the children were set to work, although they were happy to be a part of the preparations, collecting eggs for custard and running errands.

Klune and Lily rode into town on their horse-drawn cart early in the afternoon. While they sat up front, Jude and Heron sat on the barrels of cider which had lain safely in the darkness of their underground cellar during the Viking raid, their mouths watering at the aroma of their mother's apple and cinnamon pies. It seemed that everyone in the village was doing their part to ensure the feast was the best one they'd ever had.

The sun was nearing the end of another day's work and the villagers were beginning to congregate in front of the town hall. A small band of musicians had set themselves up by the door of the hall and as they played a selection of traditional jigs, the villagers danced joyfully around the village square. Everyone looked smart. The men had worn their best clothes and the women had put flowers in their hair and splashed themselves with scented water, which those watching them dance caught whiffs of as they were twirled around the square by proud husbands and beaux.

Those women who weren't dancing started bringing the food to the tables. In through the back door they entered, carrying trays laden with roast chicken packed with herb stuffing, baked vegetables and mouth watering sauces. Will was just outside the back door and was in charge of the spits. He turned the meat to perfection, roasting whole sheep evenly and carving off great slices which he put on trays for the women to take into the hall.

It was while the celebration was in full swing that the Earl appeared. Dressed in black with a bright red cloak held securely at the shoulders by bright, gold clasps, he cut a striking figure. He did his best to force a smile but it disappeared as the band stopped playing and the dancers stood like statues staring at him. He swallowed hard.

"Good evening, Uncle!" Klune said as he walked towards his uncle. "Glad you could make it."

The Earl's face seemed to brighten somewhat

though his narrow eyes belied the discomfort he was feeling. He knew he should have stayed at the castle. He could have watched the festivities from his library balcony. Damn Klune for talking him into attending.

"What are you all staring at," Klune barked, suddenly irritated at the rudeness of his fellow villagers. "You invited him and now he has come."

Damon stepped forward.

"You are quite right, Klune. Welcome Earl. Please come and join us. It's a pleasure to have you."

The looks on the other villager's faces were a message, loud and clear, that Damon was alone in his courteous greeting.

"Play on!" Damon commanded the band and they immediately struck up a merry reel which soon had the villagers whirling around the makeshift dance floor, smiling and forgetting about the presence of the Earl. Even Klune, whom Lily thought was allergic to dancing, got caught up in the fun.

"Shall we?" Klune asked crooking his arm in Lily's direction.

"My pleasure," she replied, taking his arm.

The dinner was delicious. Everyone had worked up enormous appetites with all the activity of the day. The Earl tentatively sampled a small mouthful of his dinner, quite expecting it to have been poisoned, but when he didn't keel over onto the fresh, polished floorboards of the new hall he found his dinner very palatable.

The cider and what was left of the ale flowed freely all night. Some of the older teenagers walked around the tables with large ewers, filling everyone's cups so that they were never empty and sampling some of the alcohol themselves. Even the Earl, who usually abstained from alcohol, found himself getting quite tipsy on just the smallest amount of cider.

"See Uncle," Klune whispered, "I told you there was nothing to fear. I think they really have forgiven you."

The Earl was not as convinced as his optimistic nephew. Drunk he may have been, but a fool he certainly wasn't. How could anyone forgive a man they had accused of such hideous

crimes? Even though he had played an indirect part in their losses, he knew the villagers weren't stupid. They knew who had been at the root of their misery.

The night wore on. The full moon was slowly arcing across a bejewelled sky. By ten o'clock most of the women had taken their children home to bed and those who hadn't stayed up to continue drinking with their husbands. It was not long before midnight when one of the serving women passed an inebriated Earl another mug of cider. The Earl took it without a thank you and lifted the amber brew to his lips, letting it run down his gullet in a golden river. The woman watched from a discreet distance as the Earl emptied the contents of the mug into his stomach. Then, snorting her satisfaction, she picked up her tray and continued serving.

Within minutes of finishing the cider, the Earl

was frothing at the mouth; his throat burning as the poison began to eat into the soft tissue of his oesophagus. Frantically he clawed his throat, scratching it with his long, sharp nails, drawing blood and injuring himself even further. His eyes bulged as he struggled to suck enough oxygen into his lungs to stay alive. Then a convulsion had him in its grasp and he fell backwards in his chair, hitting his head hard on the floor and drawing the attention of everyone around him.

Klune took a few seconds to realise what was happening. He'd been drinking a lot too, although it was obvious what had happened. The convulsing, the reddish-pink froth gathering on his lips and his flushed complexion meant he had been poisoned.

"Uncle!" he screamed, dropping to the floor where his uncle lay painfully dying. "Get me some water. Get the healer!"



Will, who had been enjoying a few pints of ale after his work at the spits, rushed to Klune with a jug of fresh spring water, but as Klune slowly trickled the cool liquid into his uncle's mouth he realised there was nothing to be done. His uncle was dead.

Klune hung his head. Tears collected in his eyes, stinging them. He didn't want to cry in front of all these people but the injustice and the loss were too overwhelming. Even in the haze of his grief he was still able to realise that his uncle had been right after all. He'd been a fool to believe such simple folk would forgive such a barbaric deed. How could you forgive a murderer? But it was the deception that set his blood to the boil. The lies and the trickery. Had they all been involved or had it been a minority?

He balled his hands into fists. The veins in his neck stood out as he gritted his teeth. He lifted his head and slowly rose to a standing position.

"Whhhyyyyy!" he screamed, his face contorted with rage. "If you didn't want him here, you shouldn't have invited him!!!"

"Not all of us had a say in who was invited!" said a defiant voice from the back of the hall. It was Semma, Shona's mother and the woman who had served the Earl the poisoned ale.

Klune pushed past the people surrounding him and stormed over to the courageous woman, who was now beginning to regret opening her mouth at all. Several men close to Semma stepped forward to stop Klune should he attack her. Klune was not usually a violent man, they knew, but neither had any of them seen him lose his temper before.

Klune stopped only a few inches from Semma and stared at her, his eyes wide and wild. Semma placed a hand defensively on her hip and did her best not to look as frightened as she was. She stood her ground, her breathing becoming shallow and more rapid. She could hear him breathing and feel the force of each breath on her face. She wanted to step back, to escape whatever Klune had planned for her, but she was frozen to the spot, mesmerised by the hatred in Klune's eyes.

He leaned in closer to her until their noses were nearly touching.

"I hope you're satisfied!" he spat. "I hope you can sleep more easily now that you too have become a killer!"

He pushed past her, making sure his shoulder connected with hers. Semma stumbled backwards into the wall. Her shoulder throbbed but inside she heaved a sigh of relief that a bruised shoulder was the extent of her injuries.

Klune left the building.

★★★

In the days immediately following the death of Earl Dingen there was a distinct atmosphere of solemnity in the village, not so much for the Earl but for Klune and Lily. Lily herself was worried. Her husband had not returned from the castle since taking his uncle's body there the day after the celebrations. She had tried to visit him, but the front doors had always been locked.

Klune had decided to bury his uncle in the crypt, deep in the heart of the mountain. It was the only way he could be assured that his uncle would not be disturbed and that he would rest in the place that he loved the most – his castle.

The funeral itself was small. A handful of villagers attended, Damon and Will and their families, Lily's aunt and her family, and some of the younger villagers. Only Lily brought flowers. Amarth, the village elder, led the ceremony and when it had finished and the last of the guests had shuffled out of the castle gates, Klune locked them for the final time. His uncle was now at peace and no one would ever disturb him again.

Klune walked down the dirt road leading away from the massive front gates until he came to the main road. He looked up at the great building and remembered all the time he had spent within its walls. He looked up at the towers, where the cranes were now nesting and where the whole village had only recently sheltered from the Vikings, and let a tear fall. He sniffed them away and wiped his face with the sleeve of his shirt. Then he swallowed hard, turned around and began walking home, towards the cottage nestled amongst the apple trees. There was no need to hurry. ☐

IT WON'T STOP RAINING.

THE HAT

Ante-Natal Anxiety

The Ancient Mariner

London in January seemed like another planet. I spent my days wandering aimlessly around the frost-bound parks. London roared past me, complacent, self-obsessed, entirely unaware of the horrors that threatened to engulf it, that might yet emerge triumphant, if we failed. The city was living in a cosy bubble of ignorance where monsters had already been banished to fairy stories and science-fiction B-movies. A few months ago, Freddie and I had been amongst them, drunkenly weaving our way through these very same parks. Now I knew how precarious this comfortable metropolitan existence really was, and what powerful forces were conspiring to open the doors to chaos and insanity.

And still we did not know whether Miss Carstairs and I had done enough. My mind kept drifting back to my last memories of Peru: the burning island; the human figures running through the hell we had set loose on them; the

glowing, smouldering carcass of the Lake-mother. The intolerable smell as its flesh cooked. It was not only the monster's flesh that was consumed in the blaze. Most of the Vrtaal could have easily saved themselves by leaping into the water. Few did.

We spotted dozens of eggs, some in flames, being hauled into waiting canoes. Could anything, or anyone, have survived that inferno? On that question, the Ministry was infuriatingly silent. Miss Carstairs' time was taken up by a series of inconclusive committee meetings from which I, still regarded as an outsider despite my recent experiences, was excluded. I was desperate for any real news and pressed Miss Carstairs for details whenever we met.

"Nothing concrete as yet," she said gruffly over dinner at a little bistro we had begun to frequent after her long shifts at the Ministry. "We're chasing up several leads. Apparently some Peruvians have been spotted coming through customs at Dover, but no sign of the eggs. Could be they're the advance party. Or else

YOU WON'T STOP SCREAMING.

HATCHLING

John Greenwood

not Vrtaal at all, but some other rival group. Can't say much more than that at present. Official protocol, you know? I'm sure you understand."

I nodded, but the truth was that I failed entirely to understand the reasons for such secrecy. Miss Carstairs and I were, after all, the only ones who had witnessed at first hand that blasphemous nativity scene on Lake Titicaca. But beyond my initial debriefing, and after my carefully composed report had been typed and mimeographed by a Ministry secretary, it seemed that I was surplus to requirements.

It was not only the fate of the eggs that kept me awake at night. What had become of my friend and rescuer Ricardo? Had any of the other prisoners managed to swim back to the shore, unnoticed in the chaos of the fire? Above all, there was the larger question of the Vrtaal. Yes, we had dealt the first blow, but it would take a good deal more than a couple of Molotov cocktails to topple an organisation that had burrowed its way into the heart of governments world-

wide, and which was probably, even now, shipping several well-guarded and mysterious crates across the Atlantic. Meanwhile Miss Carstairs and her colleagues churned out agendas and minutes in their underground maze of offices.

I had a standing invitation from Hollings to take up residence again in the old "guest room" that Freddie and I had briefly occupied before our Peruvian escapade. But that place harboured too many unpleasant memories, and I had no desire to be faced every morning by that empty bunk above me. Freddie might have survived my assault, but whether he could have outlived the blaze was far from certain. If he was still alive was he, as Miss Carstairs had implied, beyond redemption, one with the vile purposes of the Vrtaal, or was there some small shred of humanity left within him? I didn't want to think about these questions, though they hung in the air at my every step. I did not want to be confronted by Freddie's ghost, to be reminded of my own guilt, of all that had been left unsaid and unsettled between us.

I went to stay with Monica. I went under protest, at Hollings' urging, to make enquiries on the Ministry's behalf. The house itself was as pale, austere, and peerlessly beautiful as its occupant, and stood at the end of a leafy avenue that was always silent and empty bar the twitter of sparrows in the box hedge.

"Freddie? Freddie Simlow?" asked Monica. "Good heavens, I haven't seen him for weeks. Why do you want to see him? Does he owe you money?"

"No... no," I stammered. "He's a sort of friend of mine."

"A sort of friend? Yes, I suppose that just about sums Freddie up, doesn't it. Well, is that all?"

I meant to ask her to call if Freddie did make an appearance, but Monica's disdainful manner made me doubt that she would agree to that, or worse, that she might nod, and close the door and forget that I had ever existed. Although I had only just met Monica, and her attitude had been glacial to say the least, the prospect of her forgetting my very existence already caused a little twinge.

"Yes, I said, "I suppose that's all."

Had I a flat cap in my hand, I would have wrung it.

"Well, don't just stand there, come in. I'm missing a fourth hand for my bridge game. There's gin and vermouth if you're interested."

She motioned me inside with the casual gesture of one used to being obeyed.

"It's ten in the morning!" I protested as I hung my overcoat on an art nouveau coat stand in the hall.

"Is it?" Monica led the way into the drawing room. "I never know. I refuse to have clocks in the house. They disturb my concentration. All that ticking. Abominable."

In appearance Monica was exactly how I'd imagined her, only more so. She wore a grey silk dress so elegantly simple that it was impossible to think of it in connection with anything so base and worldly as a sewing machine, or a seamstress for that matter. It could only have blossomed into existence, whole and perfect like the petal of an Amazonian orchid. Monica wore

it as one might slouch around in an old threadbare dressing gown. She was a sloucher without equal.

From the crisp neckline emerged the marble white line of Monica's neck, complementing her art-deco living room. I found myself almost unable to draw my attention away from it. She wore her hair piled up on top of her head in a graceful tangle and wore her face in an expression of faintly disdainful ennui.

In the drawing room a selection of artistic types, men and women stamped from the same mould as Freddie, lay sprawled over sofas, smoking and clutching highball glasses.

A portly man in a uniform standing next to the sideboard handed me a glass of my own. I introduced myself and tried to shake his hand, but he declined with a muttered, "No, sir." I later learned that he was the butler.

A young man with wavy hair and tweed suit said, "Who's this queer fish?"

He had his feet up against the mantelpiece and I could not help noticing that he wore no socks or shoes. It did not appear that any bridge game was imminent, for which I breathed a small sigh of relief, having never moved in those circles where it was necessary to know how to play. Still, it was disconcerting to be labelled a queer fish, particularly by a man in bare feet.

Monica smiled and clinked glasses with me as she threw herself down on the other end of the sofa.

"I don't know. One of Freddie's sort of friends, so he claims."

An impish girl with bobbed blonde hair struggled to rise from a deep leather armchair that threatened to swallow her up.

"Don't be so beastly, Geoffrey," she said. "He seems perfectly normal to me."

Throughout this exchange I stood in the centre of the drawing room, shuffling my feet on an oriental rug. I took a sip of the drink and immediately coughed. It was far stronger than I had expected. I had survived incarceration in a prison beneath the surface of Lake Titicaca, witnessed ritual murder and been confronted with a giant man-eating woodlouse, but a plummy accent and the right school tie was sufficient to

render me tongue-tied, testament indeed to the power of the class system.

The blonde girl, who turned out to be called Harriet, made me sit down and told me that she had had, at one time, what she described as “a bit of a thing” with Freddie.

“We might have been engaged for a short while. I don’t remember. But thank heavens he called it off, the wretched boy. Oh, it was all an age ago. He really was the most dreadful bore. Not at all like you. I can’t believe you’re really friends with him. How is he nowadays anyway?” she asked, grinding out a cigarette.

“I believe he may be dead,” I said, looking grave.

She began to laugh, then saw my expression and put her hand across her mouth. “Really? How extraordinary! But what makes you say that? How can you be sure?”

“I’m not,” I said with a shrug, wondering if I had already said too much. I had come here to look for evidence of Freddie’s survival, but instead here I was spreading news of his demise. I asked myself how I could skirt any more inconvenient questions about the manner and place of Freddie’s death, but Monica saved me the bother.

“Why are we still talking about Freddie?” she moaned. “I’d almost succeeded in forgetting about him.”

“Yes, by all means,” said Geoffrey. “Death is always such a dreary topic of conversation, don’t you think? Rather *morbid*, I should say.”

“*Le mot juste*,” said Harriet, exhaling smoke with her eyes closed. I realised that I was amongst idiots.

Whether my hostess was as equally idiotic as her guests I never fully decided. I suspected that she had intelligence enough, but refused to use it out of good manners. Perhaps that was why she always looked so unutterably bored.

But gin and vermouth can make even the most stupid companions seem interesting and vivacious, especially when consumed before lunchtime by one not used to such excesses. When I woke the next morning, in unfamiliar surroundings, my drinking companions were all

gone, apart from Monica, whose bed I had shared.

The act itself I remembered only as in a dream, as though watching myself on a cinema screen heavily obscured by a fog of smoke exhaled by the rest of the audience. But it had been real nonetheless, as evinced by Monica’s orchid petal dress draped across the bedstead like a sloughed skin. The only evidence of its former occupant was the sound of a bath being filled next door.

With the odd lucidity which immediately precedes a really vicious hangover, I donned a Chinese silk dressing gown that I found on the back of the door, and tiptoed out into the corridor. I found the bathroom door ajar, and as I knocked a strange and uninvited question popped into my head. What if Monica herself were one of the Vrtaal, and this whole encounter a honey trap, in the manner of Russian spies in novels? But no: if the Vrtaal had wanted to get to me, they could have done so with ease. I was not a dangerous man, and thanks to the secrecy of the Ministry, I possessed no information worth extracting, through torture or debauchery. Still, I was reminded once more that my life was no longer as straight-forward as I had always taken for granted. A vast, invisible spider’s web of intrigue and counter-intrigue surrounded me on all sides, and that I had not yet become stuck fast in its strands was entirely accidental. I was still a marked man, marked by the outrages I had witnessed, and also by those I had perpetrated together with Miss Carstairs. In short, there was no going back to Kershaw Grammar School.

The naked figure of Monica seated in the bath was an additional reminder that my life had changed irrecoverably, and inexplicably.

“Oh, it’s you,” she said, opening one eye. “I wondered whether you’d still be here.” It was impossible to tell from her tone of voice whether she was pleased or disappointed.

“Yes,” I said, averting my eyes, ridiculously, to study the towel rail with unusual intensity.

I was thinking of going,” I said, hesitantly, guessing that this was probably what she wanted to hear.

"Going where, darling?" asked Monica, tapping cigarette ash into an empty soap dish.

I opened my mouth and then faltered. Where exactly was I planning to go? Back to the Ministry? But I had already ruled that out. The idea of spending all my waking hours in that airless rabbit warren made my flesh crawl. Then should I retreat to the bed and breakfast, adequate, clean, quiet and thoroughly depressing, that had been my home since my return from Peru, all paid for by the Ministry?

"I don't really know," I shrugged.

Monica stood up, magnificently, the cigarette still hanging from her bottom lip.

"Well then, stop being so silly and hand me a towel," she said. I almost tripped over my own feet in my haste to obey, for reasons too entwined to untangle: the wish to appear gentlemanly, a belated, quixotic desire to protect her modesty, combined with a contrary urge to touch again that alabaster skin, and the doglike devotion of a worshipper to his goddess. Perhaps all of these, or none. I know only that I felt the blood throbbing in my cheeks as my fingers grazed the tips of hers. Then she wrapped the bath sheet adroitly around her head and stepped gracefully onto the tiles, and into my arms.

I spent the next fortnight with Monica, in a delicious haze of inertia, but I was relegated to the spare bedroom, at least for the purpose of sleeping. Monica's bedroom was a sanctuary of solitude into which few were ever permitted, and those rarely. For one who spent the majority of her waking hours entertaining groups of smart, loud people, she was an oddly solitary creature, a locked room, despite all she gave of herself, physically to me, and socially to others. I never heard her talk about herself, and nobody ever seemed to ask her. The people who populated her life, the artists and gallery owners, journalists and dealers, were all quite busy enough talking about themselves to ask. And Monica was a good listener. Perhaps that was why she was so universally admired. One of my abiding images of Monica is of her standing, chin in hand, cigarette clasped delicately between two long fingers, her head tipped slightly to one side, as some intense young man with a beard and an

inflated sense of his own talents gesticulated at her. Monica would furrow her brow in intense concentration before politely extricating herself from the conversation and moving on to her next potential protégé.

I myself stood to one side at these functions, an outsider with no connection to the art world except through my affair with Monica. I was an oddity but not interesting enough to be a curiosity. Few of her bohemian friends could have imagined that there was anything between us, so utterly unsuited did we appear. Monica was always simply Monica, and there was never any need to distinguish her with a surname, if she had one, for I never learned it. She was the doyenne of the avant-garde and a power-broker of no small influence, while I was every inch the provincial schoolteacher, and despite a new suit bought on Monica's credit in Saville Row, the old leather-elbowed tweed showed through somehow, perhaps engrained on my features.

Not that I was aware of any mockery at these cocktail parties and bridge evenings and exhibition openings. In the circles through which Monica glided there was no shortage of targets for mockery. Or perhaps there was something else in my expression during those first few weeks back from Peru, something apart from the schoolmaster, a reflection of the horrors that I had seen, and those I anticipated for the future, which jarred and disturbed those who tried to strike up conversation with me. I felt like a modern-day Ancient Mariner who failed to stoppeth one of three, burdened by terrible secrets but lacking the will to divulge them.

No amount of time spent with Monica, alone or with her friends and clients, could make me forget the fate which my father had promised for mankind. My nights were tormented with visions of the Lakemother's progeny swarming out of the sea onto an English beach, and feasting on the unsuspecting bank holiday revellers, while I stood helplessly by, unable to stop the carnage.

Standing helplessly by was a pretty accurate description of my waking life too. A strange inertia had overcome me. I was enveloped in a viscous grey fog that hindered both thought and

action. It was easier to shrug and accept another cocktail from Monica's butler, and do nothing. An amateur Freudian who engaged me in conversation at one of Monica's soirees diagnosed me, rather hastily I felt, as a morbid depressive. Exactly what that meant I did not know, and suspected that my analyst did not either, but the words seemed to chime with my general mood. My landscape had become devoid of contours, of gradient. It was all a desert, featureless, boundless. But this unhealthy state of indifference, whatever the cause, was soon to be shaken apart by a chance meeting at the opening of one of Monica's new galleries.

I had been lodging with Monica for nearly a month when it happened, and my contact with Miss Carstairs and the Ministry had been increasingly sporadic and irregular. I could not help feel a certain amount of guilt towards Miss Carstairs. Although our relationship had never strayed beyond the bounds of the Platonic, from our very first meeting I had harboured a foolish romantic attachment to her, as I did with every attractive, unattached young woman who drifted through the small sphere of my acquaintance. It was an unhealthy habit, and one that I seemed unable to break. Naturally these infatuations led precisely nowhere, and the young lady in question was usually saved from any embarrassing declarations by my own abject cowardice, but I had almost convinced myself that with Miss Carstairs things could turn out differently. For one thing, we seen the atrocity of the Lake-mother's birthing with our own eyes, and survived. And then again, Miss Carstairs and I had spent more time alone together than I could remember spending with any woman who was not either a close relative or Ursula herself. And even Ursula did not allow such intimacies as dinners for two in secluded bistros, or indeed any intimacies at all. It had been a love affair of unrelenting frustration, and I remember a feeling akin to relief when Ursula finally announced the path that God had chosen for her, and down which I would not, she knew full well, follow her.

Ursula became a missionary, and for all I knew a missionary's wife too, somewhere in

deepest Africa, or Siam, or some other far flung place replete with heathens to be saved. I did my best to forget the details, and buried myself in my studies of Shakespearean theatre, where my female company was limited to Rosalinds and Portias, inventions of a man I could readily analyse and understand.

Miss Carstairs on the other hand, was unfathomable. Her commitment to the Ministry was unshakable. It was impossible to imagine her in the role of wife or mother. She nevertheless invited me on a regular schedule of dinner dates, walks around London's parks, and visits to the capital's great museums. What we found to say to each other I struggle to recall. I never neglected to ask her what progress had been made in the pursuit of the Vrtaal, having more than a passing interest in the subject myself but she kept tight lipped about the goings on in the Ministry and rarely let slip more than the vaguest hint. On one occasion she happened to mention that Professor Grunewald, whose clutches I had evaded in the Sussex Downs, had been spotted once again in London, apparently no worse for his motoring accident and in the company of a number of men in traditional Peruvian dress. That news alone was enough to set my mind on edge, and for the next few days I saw Grunewalds skulking in every tea room and tube train, before the merciful fog of inertia and habit obscured these furtive hallucinations from view. At other times, Miss Carstairs overwhelmed me with questions about the most obscure subjects: my earliest memories of my father, my colleagues at school, even Ursula came under her scrutiny.

"I'm just interested," she said coolly, as we strolled alongside the Serpentine, watching children feed the ducks. "I just want to know what makes a man like yourself tick."

"Oh, the usual things," I replied. "I have fairly simple needs: a roof over my head, a little money, friendship, love..."

My speech trailed off as we both looked out over the grey, glassy water. I waited for her answer, but none came. She put her hands in her pockets and wandered away in the direction of

Oxford Street. I followed mutely after her, for no intelligible reason.

My first suspicion was that she had, through the Ministry's intelligence network, found out about Monica and our cohabitation. I had taken few precautions to disguise the affair, as the haze of indifference and gloom continued to follow me like a personal cloud.

Escaping Naseby

That very evening, the gathering storm broke. It began as just another one of Monica's soirees. A group of Oxbridge educated daubers had spent the previous twelve months spoiling a series of perfectly good white canvases in a more or less recognisable way, and now they had jointly authored a manifesto explaining the importance of this work. Monica had been collecting the Neo-Antiquarians' work longer than anybody. With her usual impeccable timing, just when everybody in London could talk of nothing else, she decided that she was bored of her Neo-Antiquarists, and would sell them all off. On the opening night her gallery was packed with potential buyers. I took up my usual position in the corner, clutching a flute of champagne, trying to avoid catching anyone's eye.

A young man with a sardonic expression, whom I recognised as one of the chief authors of the Neo-Antiquarian manifesto, was making a beeline for me. I turned to study the painting behind me, a series of gritty, blue black swirls reminiscent of a bad storm at sea, and immediately inducing mild seasickness, but the artist was not to be put off.

"So you're Monica's mystery man," he said, nudging my elbow. "We're all fascinated. Well done."

I turned. "It was certainly never my intention to draw attention to myself."

The young man, his face clean-shaven, pinched and pale, sculpted hair shining black and solid with hair cream as though set in aspic, snorted with amusement.

"Well, exactly," he said. "That's what's so interesting about you, don't you know? All artists are exhibitionists. In such company a man like you stands out a mile, if you don't mind me saying so."

"Not at all," I said, irritated by his familiarity.

All around us in the chilly, whitewashed cube of space, artists and those who lived off the talents of artists were standing in knots of cigarette smoke and laughter. I couldn't spot Monica, unmistakable that evening in a velvet cocktail dress of scandalous cut.

"So what do you think of all this? Do you even have an opinion?" asked the young man, taking in the whole roomful of canvases in a vague sweeping gesture.

I hesitated, made a sucking sound with my teeth. The truth was that nobody had ever sought my opinions on the art and artists that Monica was fostering, and I had been thankful that my ignorance had not been exposed to general ridicule.

"They're certainly interesting..." I began. "I mean, I'm no..."

"Interesting?" snorted the black-haired man. "Do you really think so? I mean, is that your honest opinion?"

"Well, yes..." I said.

He raised his voice. "Well, do you know what I think?" He then used a coarse phrase I had not heard before, and cannot reproduce in print. Suffice to say that several in the vicinity turned to see who it was who had polluted the refined air of the gallery with such a noxious exclamation, then turned away quickly when they met the man's eye, and began to raise their eyebrows at one another. The black haired man shrugged. "And I wrote the manifesto! It appears I am in a critical minority. You look like you're about to faint, my friend. Have I scandalised you? Or are you merely apoplectic? I take it you disagree with my assessment of the work on display."

"Well, it's not so much that...are you an artist yourself?" I asked him, changing the subject to one that I hoped would be more congenial.

"Of a kind," he said darkly. "I consider myself more of a collector. But of real art, not this directionless daubing."

Although I heartily wished our conversation to end, I found myself saying, "And what kind of art are you interested in?"

The young man leaned over. His breath smelled strongly of garlic and unidentifiable spices. "Tell me, have you ever come across the work of the Russian Artist V.I. Scherlasky?"

I was about to shake my head, but then recalled where I had heard that name before. Of course, there had been a number of Scherlasky pieces bequeathed in my father's will, his faked will.

"I know him only by reputation," I said. "I cannot claim to have studied any of his pieces."

"I, on the other hand, have made a very careful study of them," said the young man, lighting a cigarette with tapering, womanish fingers.

I was immediately convinced that I was in the presence of one of the Vrtaal. I should have known it earlier – there was about this young man an air of unease that spread itself to all in his vicinity, and was as pervasive as his exotically tainted breath. But even if my suspicions were to be proved right, what could I do about it? Attempt a citizen's arrest? Wrestle him to the floor? I could hardly count on the assistance of Monica's guests. My ramblings about an international cult of maverick meteorologists would have been met with disbelief and ridicule. My actions would probably be ascribed to some new form of Dadaist theatre. I could hardly expect any of those present at the gallery to have ever heard the word Vrtaal, let alone understood why its mention made wiser men shiver with dread. I had never mentioned to Monica my misadventures in Peru, and she seemed satisfied to know close to nothing about my past. Moving in such circles as Monica frequented, it was easy almost to forget that the Vrtaal had existed at all, and some mornings on waking I nearly convinced myself that the whole ordeal had been merely an unusually vivid nightmare. The name of Scherlasky had shaken me roughly awake, and I blinked blearily at the humourless smile of the Vrtaal adept.

"How fortunate you are," I replied. "Ever since I heard of Scherlasky I've wanted to see his work in the flesh, so to speak. I've seen a few

poor quality reproductions, black and white photos, no more."

Now I had the young man on the back foot, although I had not a clue why. He furrowed his delicate white brow and pursed his lips.

"Reproductions?" he said. "There are none as far as I am aware..."

"Oh, it was only a snapshot really," I said, pushing the lie further to see what effect it would have. "One of his religious works, I think."

The young man sneered, a gesture his face seemed perfectly designed for. "He only ever painted religious works," he said.

"Oh yes of course, how foolish of me," I said, feeling that I was involved in a game the rules of which had been kept secret from me. "I must have been thinking of someone else."

"I don't think Scherlasky could ever be confused with any other artist," said the man loftily. "He's unique."

"Quite, quite," I conceded, glancing around the room and spotting Monica at the centre of the room, surrounded by hangers on who were busy laughing at something she had just said. She caught my eye and gave me a questioning look. As the young man bent to stub out his cigarette in a glass ashtray, I shrugged back at Monica, to tell her that I knew no more about this odd character than she did. He hadn't even introduced himself.

As though reading my thoughts, the man stood up, a fresh cigarette smoking between his thin lips, and offered me his thin hand.

"I'm Naseby, by the way," he said in an off-hand way, as though anxious to dispense with an unpleasant chore. "F.R. Naseby."

I shook the hand, which had a surprisingly strong grip. "Willoughby," I said, nodding. I had never heard Monica mention the name, nor had Miss Carstairs or any of the Ministry drones spoken of it in the context of the Vrtaal.

"So, you have had access to a private collection of Scherlasky's?"

"In a manner of speaking," said Mr Naseby. "My own, as a matter of fact. I'm a collector."

"So you said."

A cool hand at my elbow told me that Monica had come to rescue me.

Empty glass in hand, she smiled lopsidedly and draped one bare arm over my shoulder. "Can I borrow you for a moment, dearest?" she asked.

I turned, a little taken aback. She had never called me "dearest" before.

"There's a telephone call for you. Do forgive me, Mr...?"

"Naseby," said Naseby. "And there is nothing to forgive."

Monica led me away through the chattering crowd to the telephone table in the hallway. She closed the door behind us.

"Who is that dreadful little man you've been talking to?" she asked. "There's something very unpleasant about him."

"That's Naseby," I said.

"So I gathered. And who is Naseby?"

"I don't know," I said, "but I think he's bad news."

"He certainly wasn't invited," said Monica. "I've got a good mind to throw him out on his ear."

"Don't do that," I said, "Not yet. It could get rather nasty."

Monica, never content to be contradicted, curled her lip. "Well, I'll let you deal with him, darling." She turned on her heel and left me alone with the telephone.

I already had a suspicion who might be on the other end of the line. Only Miss Carstairs could have known my whereabouts.

"Simon," she said, a little irritably. "What's going on?"

"Not a great deal," I answered. "Why, what's the matter? Is there a problem?"

"Could be," she said in clipped tones. "Where are you now?"

"At an art gallery,"

She tutted. "Yes, I know that much. I meant is there anyone there with you, right now?"

I could not help but wonder whether there was a hint of jealousy in this question: had Miss Carstairs discovered the nature of my relationship with Monica? But I was flattering myself. The Ministry had probably had me under surveillance ever since my return to London. Miss Carstairs may have known all about Monica, and

was simply indifferent to the fact. It was a depressing thought.

I said, "No, I'm quite alone. You can talk freely."

"Grunewald's back," she said curtly. "And we think he's on your trail. Don't know what he wants with you, exactly, but we thought you ought to know."

"Well, thanks for the warning."

I was not entirely surprised at the news. Ever since I had found out that Grunewald was still alive, I had half expected to bump into him on the tube, or find myself once again bundled into a car at gunpoint. "I shall take extra precautions."

"That won't be sufficient," said Miss Carstairs. "We're sending somebody round to pick you up, for your own protection. You'll have to come back to the Ministry and lie low for a while."

I brided at this. I was a free man, not a Ministry employee, and certainly not at their beck and call. After all, Miss Carstairs had kept me in the dark for weeks, refusing to take me into her confidence about the latest developments in the hunt for the Vrtaal and the missing eggs. And now they expected me to submit to house arrest, hidden away in one of their depressingly functional "guest rooms"? Perhaps life as Monica's consort had spoiled me, but the idea made me feel slightly nauseous.

"Is that strictly necessary?" I asked. "I'm sure I can look after myself."

Miss Carstairs's reply was brusque. "Well, I'm not, and neither is my superior. You don't know what these people are capable of."

It was the final straw. I replied, with some heat, that I was perfectly well aware what the Vrtaal were capable of, having seen with my own eyes their worst excesses on Lake Titicaca, unless Miss Carstairs had forgotten my presence at that small incident of human sacrifice. Without giving her time to reply, I wished her all the best in her hunt for Grunewald and the remaining members of the cult, and told her that she needn't concern herself for my safety any longer. I replaced the receiver before she had a

chance to speak, and returned to the gallery with my heart beating uncomfortably in my chest.

Bridges had been burnt. And the thing about burning bridges is that while it rules out at least one course of action, *viz* retreat, the question of what path to follow next is often far from certain. I might have rejected the Ministry, but I had no idea who, if anyone, I could turn to. If there had been one lasting psychological effect of my time in Peru, it was that my ability to trust others was severely corroded. The man I had considered my closest friend had been willing, at the drop of a hat, to see me imprisoned, mistreated and ultimately killed in the most abhorrent circumstances imaginable. Who could I now trust? Monica? Yes, to an extent, but no further. Monica kept me around, I was well aware, because I was uncomplicated, docile, phlegmatic. I was her evening's rest after long days spent in the chattering whirl of London's art world. But should she discover that I was caught up in a murderous international conspiracy, and hunted by maniacal woodlouse worshippers, she would drop me faster than last season's ball gown.

I scanned the crowds again. Naseby was easy to spot: he was the only person in the room not engaged in conversation, and stood awkwardly alone. As soon as I spotted him, he caught my eye and held it in his uncomfortable gaze. Had he somehow overheard my telephone conversation with Miss Carstairs? It was impossible of course, but since Peru less and less seemed beyond the bounds of possibility. I had to get away from here, from Naseby, from the Ministry, even from Monica, who had not noticed my presence.

I made for the door, sidling through the knots of artists and dealers. All ignored me, apart from Naseby, who managed to block my exit.

He tried to smile, but the result was not good. "Leaving so soon?" he asked.

I blushed. "Yes, awfully sorry. I've got a few things to sort out. Can't be helped."

"A pity," he said. "We were just getting acquainted. I always relish the opportunity to discuss Scherlasky with another enthusiast. There are so few of us around, you know."

"Yes, yes," I stammered. "Well, you know, another time perhaps."

"Perhaps," said Naseby. He snapped open a black leather wallet, and took out a calling card. "Perhaps you would like to continue our discussion further. At my private gallery."

"That's very kind..." I began, shaking my head.

"Please," said Naseby. "I insist. One rarely has the chance to study genuine Scherlaskys. I do not extend such invitations lightly, you understand."

I took the card. Naseby's name, along with those unexplained initials, was embossed onto thick cream board, together with a central London address.

"That's very kind," I said. "I'll certainly make every attempt to visit."

I had no intention of doing so, and was intent on getting out of that place with all speed, never to see Naseby or any of Monica's other guests again.

Naseby looked disappointed. "I can assure you that it would be worth your while, Simon," he said as I squeezed past him into the lobby of the gallery.

"Good day, then," I called over my shoulder as I escaped into the street, and fresh air. It was only when I was in a cab, speeding towards Monica's flat, that I began to wonder how Naseby knew my first name.

A sleek, white Rolls sat in Monica's road, on the opposite side of the street. I had never seen that car before, but its size and opulence were enough to put me on my guard. I asked the taxi driver to carry on round the corner.

"If anyone asks who your last fare was," I said as I leaned forward to put a more than generous tip into his hand, "it wasn't me. Understood?"

The taxi driver, a rotund fellow in a flat cap, sighed and nodded a little wearily, as though he was a tired of these silly intrigues. But he took the money, and set me down out of sight of the malevolent Rolls.

Standing at the street corner, I peered through iron railings and tried to determine the shape behind the steering wheel. Was it Grunewald? I was too far away to be sure that there was any-

one in the car at all. The street lamps illuminated only the vaguest of shadows through the car's rear window.

Very quickly I came a decision. My possessions in the flat were few; none were irreplaceable. There were one or two suits, expensive gifts from Monica, which would have come in handy, but hardly worth risking my neck for. I turned away quickly before the Rolls had a chance to notice me, and walked briskly away from Monica's street. As I walked, I counted up all the money I had on me. It wouldn't last long.

I'd underestimated the price of a train ticket to Leeds. The one-way fare left me with barely enough for a cup of stewed tea in the Kings Cross waiting room. I found myself in an empty carriage on the overnight Edinburgh flyer, watching London flash past the window, and wondering how much my wristwatch would fetch in a pawnshop.

I would return to Yorkshire, to my schoolmaster's cottage, and throw myself on the mercy of the headmaster. I had no illusions that he would offer me my old job back, and I was not certain that I would have accepted it in any case, but there still remained the distant hope that I could appeal to his sense of fellow humanity, however attenuated by his thirty years managing a school of adolescent boys. I meant to persuade him to let me stay in the empty cottage. It was unfurnished and damp, but had a roof overhead, and might be a useful bolt-hole away from the Vrtaal and the Ministry, however temporary. Cresswell could easily refuse, and probably would. He might even call the police to have me ejected from the premises, or the psychiatric hospital, depending on how lurid an account of my unexplained absence I gave him. On that I was undecided.

If that strategy failed, I would try some of my more sympathetic colleagues. Webster might be convinced to let me occupy his sofa for a few nights, and to keep my presence a secret from the head teacher. And it occurred to me that Collins owed me a small sum of money, which previously had seemed too small to be worth the trouble of recovering, but which in my current

straits might make the difference between salvation and destitution.

I took my shoes and socks off, and placing them squarely in the doorway of the compartment, proceeded to stretch out across three seats, tipping my hat over my eyes. It was a trick Freddie had taught me to discourage other passengers from intruding on one's solitude. And indeed, as we stopped at Clapham Junction, the door slid open, and I heard a man's voice say, "Look there's room in this one, dear."

"It smells a little odd," said the woman. And then, "Oh! Oh, dear," as she almost tripped over the source of the trouble in the doorway. "Let's keep looking," she whispered. "I wouldn't want to wake this gentleman..."

The door was quickly closed again, and I could hear a muted altercation in the corridor, before the couple moved on down the car, seeking more salubrious accommodation.

I may have had the compartment to myself, but I couldn't sleep. A part of me, the irrational, rodent-like, fearful part, was terrified that I would awake to find myself hogtied by the con-dor-hooded agents of the Vrtaal, or a murderous hand clamped immovably over my airways. Another part, more rational if no saner, was rehearsing over and over again the dreaded conversation with my employer that I had privately committed myself to. Beyond that, I had not the smallest notion what course of action I would follow, nor did I trouble myself to consider it. I was wise enough to understand that there is only so much uncertainty that the mind can deal with at one sitting, and I had no appetite for any more, particularly those larger questions about my father, his cult, the potential survival of the Lakemother's spawn, and what this would mean for the survival of England, of humanity itself. I was aware that my flimsy hold on sanity depended on me not thinking about these vitally important questions. Worrying about what the headmaster might berate me with, about how much my wristwatch would really fetch at a Leeds pawnbrokers, was infinitely preferable to considerations of the apocalyptic horrors that lay ahead.

I managed to doze off around dawn, but was

awoken by another passenger entering the compartment, undeterred by my shoes standing guard in the doorway. From beneath my hat, I saw the back of a crumpled suit as the man fussed with his luggage in the overhead rack. I pretended to be asleep, but he seemed to have no understanding of railway etiquette, and began loudly to address me in a jocular tone.

“Almost missed it!” he exclaimed, sitting down on the opposite seat. I saw gnarled old hands resting on the knob of a black cane between his knees.

“Quite out of breath.”

A white handkerchief appeared from his waistcoat pocket.

“Wasn’t sure the old girl would make it, but she’s a Rolls, you know. They’re big, but they can still beat most of the cars on the road on a good stretch. Beat the midnight train from Kings Cross to Peterborough, at any rate. Then again, I’ve got a good driver.”

I lifted the hat and sat up straight. Professor Grunewald smiled and tipped his in turn.

Reliving the Past

“We do keep bumping into one another, Mr Willoughby. At least we know we won’t have any tumbles into the ditch this time.”

I looked towards the door, and saw it blocked on the other side by a bulky man with his back to us, fists like prize hams folded serenely behind his back.

“Smith, my driver,” explained Grunewald. “A versatile man.”

“What do you want with me, Professor Grunewald?”

I glanced around the compartment, looking for an exit, a weapon, something that would give me an advantage over this cunning old man.

“Only to talk, Mr Willoughby, only to talk. We did not part on the best of terms, did we?”

“I assumed you were dead,” I said.

Outside the window, a rural station flashed by. Rain had begun to streak the glass.

“Assumed or hoped?” asked Grunewald, removing a pipe from his inside pocket and tapping out some old ash onto the floor.

“Any reasonable man would hope to see the death of a Vrtaal agent,” I said, glowering.

Grunewald had been scraping out the inside of his pipe with a penknife, but now he looked up with an expression of surprise.

“So you really thought I was in league with them?” he asked. “I would have given you more credit than that, Mr Willoughby. You struck me as a sensible man, unlike your unfortunate friend Mr Simlow.”

I decided to ignore the dig about Freddie’s fall from grace, and asked, “If you’re not from the Vrtaal, then who the Devil are you? And why were you so anxious to separate me from the people at the Ministry?”

Grunewald, now stuffing his pipe with shreds of tobacco from a leather pouch, chuckled quietly to himself. “The Ministry? So that’s what they’re calling themselves now, is it? Quite clever really. You have to give them credit for that.”

“Those are my friends you’re talking about.”

Grunewald struck a match against the heel of his shoe. “Let me assure you that they’re no friends of yours. You are useful to them, that’s all. Temporarily useful. You will find that when you are no longer of any use, then...” He blew out the match with a slightly effete gesture, pursing his wrinkled lips.

I shook my head angrily. “Ridiculous! Absolutely absurd! The very suggestion!” I exclaimed. I turned away and stared out of the window into the wet gloom.

“Face facts, Mr Willoughby,” he continued. “Are you sure that these people have been absolutely straight with you? Have they taken you into their confidence?”

I refused to meet his eye, and turned my mind to figuring out how I could escape from this wicked old man when we reached my destination.

“They’re a Government agency,” I replied, distracted. “Of course, they can’t divulge their secrets to everyone. But mark my words, they

have you under very close surveillance, so you'd better not try anything."

As soon as I had spoken I knew I had said too much. I resolved not to let slip any more clues about the Ministry and their work. What if Grunewald decided to use more direct tactics to extract information from me? Perhaps Smith's versatility extended to interrogation. Every man has his breaking point, and I had no illusions about my own ability to withstand such abuse. Should I try to get off at the next station, leaving them behind? But how to get past Smith, whose massive back still blocked the doorway to the compartment? Perhaps if I made a sudden dash for it I could shove the guard aside, at least long enough to make my escape down the corridor and raise the alarm. I tried to remember where I had seen an alarm cord in the carriage. Or should I throw myself from the train while it was still moving?

Suddenly Grunewald was on his feet. He lunged at me, grabbed me by the shoulders, and glared into my face.

"Government agency?" he roared, eyes bulging from his reddening face. "Get a grip, Willoughby. Stop lying to yourself! These people aren't who they say they are!"

I tried to push him away but he held onto my shoulders with his bony knuckles.

"What have they done to you, man?" he shouted. "Have you been brainwashed? Or is that floozy stringing you along?"

"She's not a..." I began, before remembering myself. I clamped my mouth shut, but it was too late.

"So it's the woman, is it?" said Grunewald, releasing me and turning away with a sneer. "An old trick. I suppose you're in love with her, and hope she will return the compliment? Dear, oh dear, Mr Willoughby." He shook his head and puffed angrily at his pipe. "We have a great many things to put right. I suppose I only have myself to blame." He looked suddenly so very weary, a man burdened with dreadful responsibilities.

Mollified, I said, "Why blame yourself? And for what?"

Grunewald drew himself up. Even at his age,

he was still pushing six feet, an imposing figure. "I have overestimated you, Mr Willoughby," he said in a business-like manner. "That can't be helped now. When I recognised you aboard that dinghy, lobbing burning bottles at the shore, you struck me as a man of mettle, exactly the sort of man we need in this fight against the Vrtaal. Your father too, in his own perverse way, is a man apart from other men. But sometimes these qualities skip a generation. I see now that it was all bravado for the benefit of your female companion."

Flushed with anger, I rose from my seat. Somewhere in the pockets of my coat was the fishbone shiv that I had been carrying around with me like a primitive talisman, sole reminder of my friendship with its maker. If I had had more of my wits about me, I might have done for Professor Grunewald as I had for Freddie back on the floating islands. Instead I fumbled and got my fist stuck in my inside pocket.

Smith stuck his head around the compartment door.

"It's alright, Smith," said Grunewald, waving the bodyguard away. "Mr Willoughby was just having a little flashback." He smirked and tugged his beard, but his gnarled hand shook, and I could tell that I had made an impression on him. Smith shrugged and returned to his sentry post. The two of us remained standing.

"I warn you not to bring Miss Carstairs' name into this again," I said

"Is that what she's called? Well, that saves me another tiresome job, so I shall give you another chance."

I waited until Grunewald had taken his own seat before I consented to sit down.

"Chance at what?" I asked.

Grunewald eyed me thoughtfully from across the compartment as though weighing up his options.

"Look here, Willoughby," he said. "I've done everything I can to help you out. Alright, so you wrote off my car and nearly killed me, but I'm willing to discount that. You weren't in possession of all the facts..."

"Nothing's changed there," I interrupted.

Grunewald smiled and continued, "In any

case it showed me you were a man of resourcefulness and general gumption. The fact that you fell into the hands of Miss Carstairs and her cronies was unfortunate, but perhaps unavoidable. They have almost limitless resources..."

If they're not working for the Government, then who on earth are they? What are their aims?"

"Their aims coincide with my own, to some degree," said Grunewald.

"Which are?"

"To foil your father's plans for the overthrow of human civilisation. To wipe the Vrtaal from the face of the earth. That has been my sole objective these thirty years, ever since I last saw your father, at least, the last time I saw Alex Willoughby, my old friend and colleague. The one who goes by the name of the Stormking hardly deserves to be called human."

His words made me sit up sharply.

"You knew my father?" I asked.

Grunewald looked out of the window across rows of red terraces blanketed in fog. "We're pulling into Leeds," he commented, and almost as he spoke the train's brakes began to squeal, and I felt myself gently pressed back into my seat. "This conversation will have to wait," he said. "We must be on our guard now. It's entirely possible that our arrival has been anticipated."

"I told nobody where I was going," I said.

"I found you, didn't I?" said the old man, shuffling to the door. He muttered something to Smith before beckoning me into the corridor.

"All clear," he said. "We'll take a cab from outside the station. It's a risk, but I have had no time to make arrangements. I'll explain everything later." He put his hand on my shoulder. "All I ask is that you trust me."

I nodded but kept my lips sealed. I had no intention of following this sinister old man and his hired goon into a taxi. As I climbed down from the carriage, I scanned the empty platform for an escape route. Short of clambering down onto the track, there was only one direction, towards the ticket barriers. There were a few guards smoking in a doorway, but no passengers, no crowds to lose myself in. Grunewald seemed to take an age leaving the train, as he and Smith

fussed with their luggage. I was surprised at how many bulky suitcases he had brought with him and wondered why he had not left some of them in his car at Peterborough, or wherever he had boarded the train. Unless the contents were too valuable to be let out of his sight, or too dangerous.

Smith trotted off down the platform in search of a porter, and I stood quietly by as Grunewald went through all his pockets in search of his ticket.

"Damn and blast these suits," he muttered. "I have more pockets than any man could reasonably require. It's no wonder things go astray..."

Smith was out of sight, and Grunewald distracted. I looked across the tracks and spotted a doorway on the next platform. I edged away from the old man, then scrambled down the edge of the platform onto the greasy black railway tracks. In a moment I was at the other side, and about to haul myself up onto the next platform, when I saw a large pair of black boots ahead, and heard Grunewald's voice behind me.

"Help Mr Willoughby up, would you Smith?" said the old man. "He seems to have made a rather serious error of judgment."

I turned and spotted the dull glint of a revolver in Grunewald's fist.

I felt its muzzle in the small of my back all the way out through the station forecourt.

Little had changed since I had last been here, to see Ursula off when she left for the Mission centre in London, and from there to destinations unknown. The same old lady in the newspaper stand by the taxi rank sat in her headscarf, smoking and drinking tea from a Thermos. The same half-dead derelict pigeons scattered at our approach. I recognised the pub opposite the station where I had sat alone and got blind drunk that afternoon, after Ursula's train had pulled out. Bad memories flooded around me.

As the car pulled out of the station and began to wind its way through the city centre, I turned away from the window and closed my eyes.

"Purely for insurance, you understand," Grunewald was saying as he stuffed the gun back into the pocket of his overcoat. "I don't mind admitting to you that I have never fired a

gun at another human being. We shall find somewhere comfortable to hole up for a few days, anyway, and then consider our options. I have some friends in London who we should try to make contact with."

Smith, sat in the front passenger seat, gave the taxi driver instructions which I didn't overhear. Soon we were in unfamiliar streets. We crossed a bridge over a canal, and wound between factories on either side.

"What do you want with me?" I asked.

"You're asking the wrong question," said Grunewald, irritatingly. "You should ask, 'what do the Vrtaal want with me?'"

I shrugged. "I'm my father's son."

Grunewald shook his head. "You will forgive me for using the vernacular of modern youth, but so what? Why the faked death? Why the elaborate sham of the will? Why the indecipherable notebook?"

"You know about the notebook?" I asked.

"I know of its existence," said Grunewald. "But I have not had the chance to study it."

"Why did my father suddenly decide to take such an interest in me, a son he had abandoned decades ago? I can't answer that. My father has done many strange things in his life, not all of them rational."

Professor Grunewald shook his head impatiently. "He may be an abnormal man, an unreasonable man, but I do not believe that your father is insane – he is not some kind of lunatic like..."

"Like my mother?"

Grunewald looked genuinely contrite. "Forgive me, I did not mean to draw that unhappy comparison. How is Elizabeth faring? Any improvement in her health?"

"I cannot see how that is relevant," I said icily, remembering that it had been several months since I had visited the asylum.

"What I meant to say is that your father must have had some reason to bait the hook in the way he did. He was taking a massive risk, you know, drawing attention to himself like that simply in order to meet you. There must be something he wants, something only you possess..."

Grunewald looked out of the window, lost in ruminations.

"But what?" I asked. "I have nothing. I know nothing. I am nobody."

I don't think the old man heard me, for he suddenly barked, "What the Dickens! Where are we? We're going the wrong way! Smith, you idiot, what did you tell the driver?"

He leant forward and jostled Smith's shoulder, but his hand came away red and wet, and Smith's head slumped against the side window.

"What the Dickens?" Grunewald repeated, staring at his bloodied hand. My hand was already on the door handle as I saw Naseby's reflection in the rear-view mirror, a skeletal leer. Then I was rolling in the road, head tucked in to my chest, arms around my knees. When the sky had stopped spinning, I scrambled to my feet and made a painful sprint for the pavement. The ground pitched and yawed. A car horn honked, and there was a grinding, whining crunch somewhere behind me, a long way away.

I never reached the pavement. I felt a weight on my back and the road came up to meet me. Tyres swerved and screeched, inches from my face. I was sweating profusely, and there was a queer smell in the air. When I put my hand to my head, it felt clammy and greasy, but there was no blood. An oily film covered my palms.

There was a bang. "Is that a gun?" I asked aloud, delirious. "Who's firing guns?"

"Stay down and keep quiet!" barked Grunewald. I rested my head against the tarmac.

"Now get up!" ordered the Professor.

I groaned and started to protest, but he hauled me to my feet. "Run, man, run!"

"I'm tired," I told him, but felt myself pushed towards the pavement.

We dodged a gaggle of horrified old ladies and turned a corner into a busier street. A man in a smart black suit tried to stop me, and grabbed my arm, shouting, "Hey! What's the matter here? What's going on?"

Grunewald pushed him aside and steered me on through the crowds, looking behind him every few moments. Was there somebody following us? Was Grunewald still on my tail? But no: Grunewald was here now, helping me, stop-

ping me from wandering into the traffic. I couldn't hold my thoughts together and they threatened to spill out onto the pavement, which swam and lurched sickeningly beneath me.

Grunewald directed me through stained-glass and brass doors into the cool interior of a pub.

"Put this over your mouth," said the Professor, as he handed me a handkerchief, "and keep your hat pulled down. You'd best go off to the gents to clean yourself up a bit. I'll get the drinks in. We'll be safe here, for a while. Off you go."

The gents were empty. When I looked in the mirror I understood Professor Grunewald's concern: my face was encrusted with blood that was still welling up from a gash on my lip. I had grit stuck to my grazed cheek, and my shirt was streaked with dust and blood. I looked the very picture of a dissolute bar-room brawler, and not a very good one at that. Cold water on my face helped to reduce the nauseous dream-like feeling, and a few minutes' patient scrubbing improved my appearance so that I was no longer in fear of the landlord ejecting me from the premises. Holding onto the cold marble wash-basin, I looked at myself, rubbed the unshaven chin, the ashen skin.

What was I doing here? I began to doubt that I should ever have left London, and Monica. Now I was adrift again, and surrounded by enemies and uncertainty, and I was not the man to deal with such things. I was a schoolteacher from a second-rate Yorkshire prep school, and that is all I was meant to be. This cloak and dagger stuff was not my province. I decided that I would tell Grunewald and walk away from the whole thing. It was the only sensible option. Come what may, whether the Vrtaal were defeated or not, it was not my responsibility. I had done my part, out in Peru. Now others, abler and bolder, could step forward to take on my father and his cronies. I would go back to Cresswell and beg for my job back. If that failed, I would seek employment elsewhere, or join the queues at the Labour Exchange. At least there, I would not be in danger of being stabbed or kidnapped or eaten by giant woodlice. Boredom and despair were the worst I could expect, and I already had plenty of experience of both.

Grunewald had installed himself in the snug, and had two large glasses of scotch lined up on the table in front of him.

"Drink up, laddie, you look like you need it," he said.

As I did so, I cursed myself for being so trusting. What if this old man had slipped me knock-out drops? What reason did I have to trust him?

I recalled the car crash.

"I'm the one who should be buying you drinks," I said. "You probably saved my life back there."

"You can return the favour another time," said Grunewald. "Anyway, I don't suppose you have much in the way of funds, unless I'm mistaken?"

I looked sheepish. "That's true," I said. "How did you know?"

"The ticket office attendant told me that you paid for your fare up to Leeds with a large handful of loose change."

"But if there's any way I can pay you back..."

"For the drinks or for saving your life?" he asked, narrow-eyed, and I stammered until I realised he was joking.

"Don't worry yourself about it. You did half of it yourself. Quick thinking that, exiting the vehicle. Takes guts too, throwing yourself out of a moving car."

"My guts are still feeling it," I confessed. The alcohol was certainly helping to mask the symptoms, but my sense of balance was still off, and whisky was hardly going to put that right. "If it hadn't been for you, that bullet might have found its target."

"Bullet?" barked Grunewald. "What bullet? There were no bullets."

"But I heard a shot..." I protested. "At least I thought I did."

"Your father would never allow it," said Grunewald. "He wants to keep you alive, at least for now."

"You said on the train that there's something I have, something he's looking for," I reminded him. "But he must be mistaken."

Grunewald shook his head grimly. "Your father rarely makes mistakes. He's meticulous to the point of obsession. Always was. That's what

made him such a good weather forecaster. When I knew him..."

The barmaid came over to collect our empty glasses and Grunewald suddenly went quiet.

"We'll have another two of those," I told her, then turned to the old man. "I think it's time you explained how you came to know my father."

Grunewald chewed his beard for a moment, sighed, then retrieved his pipe from the breast pocket of his jacket.

"Alex Willoughby was the most brilliant meteorologist I have ever met," he said. "We worked together at the Met Office, the Yorkshire branch, for many years. I was his boss, for a while, but we were good friends. This was a long time ago, after the Great War. I came back from France having spent most of the war in surveillance work, and this stood me in good stead when my old sergeant recruited me onto the staff of the meteorological office. They were happy times and I enjoyed my work.

"But Alex was never content. He was a driven man. Weather forecasting in those days was inexact – still is to some extent. He often said that if we were real scientists we'd be able to predict when and where every raindrop was going to fall. Over the years he got a bit of a reputation for eccentricity, and for a nasty temper, especially when we made bad predictions. He worked too hard, sometimes staying at the office all night, making calculations according to his own systems that nobody else believed in or understood. I told him to ease off, but he never listened to advice. I wasn't the only one who thought he was on the verge of a nervous breakdown. I remember your mother coming to see me in the office one morning, begging me to make Alex take some holiday. She was carrying you at the time. Alex was leaving her alone in the house for days, weeks at a time, while he spent his weekends on mysterious field trips, taking measurements at rain gauges up and down the country. I didn't interfere. I suppose we were all a little bit afraid of Alex. He was a man with determination in his eyes, and perhaps even back then, madness too. But he was charismatic, and people who talked to him found

themselves agreeing with him, and doing his bidding, almost despite themselves.

"I remember when you were born – you were a week old before he even mentioned it, and it came as a great surprise to everybody. Nobody in the office except me knew that Elizabeth was expecting. But to Alex – well, I'm sorry to say this..."

"Don't spare my feelings," I said. "I never had any illusions about my father's attitude towards me. Go on, please."

At this point the barmaid brought over another round of drinks, and Grunewald waited until she was well out of earshot before continuing.

"Forgive my paranoia," he said as we sipped the whisky. "It's an old habit, but one that has saved my neck on a number of occasions. But yes, you're right. Alex had little time for his family, and soon after that none at all, for his obsession took a new twist. He burst into my office one morning and announced that he had decided to learn Latin, Classical Greek and Russian, simultaneously mind you. He hadn't the patience to tackle one language at a time. I remember sitting there as he pulled out huge textbooks from his briefcase and thumped them onto the desk between us. I told Alex that this was a very interesting hobby, but wondered what relevance it held for forecasting the weather. 'None whatsoever,' was his reply. 'Trying to predict the weather is a futile endeavour, and I have abandoned it.' I expressed my surprise, and asked him whether he was then here to hand in his notice. He informed me without the slightest degree of embarrassment that he would continue to collect his pay cheque, as he would still need to use the office's reference materials and equipment. I expected that our conversation would end with his immediate dismissal, but I was prepared to humour him for a few minutes longer. I suppose I was curious about how your father intended to spend his time, now that he had apparently proved the futility of weather prediction.

"Alex, is this a joke? A late April Fool's gag?" I asked, although Alex was not known for his sense of humour.

"Is controlling the weather a joke?" he asked

me with some heat. 'Would it be a great lark to direct the rain and winds as easily as a policeman directs traffic?'"

I sat amazed, my drink untasted in my hand. "Is this true? My father had already joined the Vrtaal so early?"

Grunewald shook his head. "No, no, not back then. At that point he had merely convinced himself that our weather systems could be mastered, and like he said, directed to his own ends. He blathered on to me about the benefits to the economy of a controlled and planned agricultural sector, of the economic miracle that could be wrought in this country. 'Well, that all sounds very attractive,' I commented to him, 'but these ideas belong to scientific romances and cheap fiction. I cannot conceive of how your ideas could ever be realised.'

"I remember the look of pure contempt on your father's face. 'You may not be able to conceive of it, but I can! It is all a matter of will, will and imagination. You lack both, Grunewald. You have the mind of a bureaucrat, a petty functionary, not that of a visionary.'

"I have to say that I took exception to this, and lost no time in telling him so.

"Just wait, Grunewald!" he yelled at me, really red in the face. 'I have seen the vision, god damn it all! A vision of the future! Even a man of your limited intellectual capacity should be able to grasp that!'"

Grunewald puffed on his pipe and raised his eyebrows at me. "Another one of these?" he said, shaking his empty glass at me.

I nodded, and he caught the barmaid's eye, who came over once more with fresh glasses.

"Well," said Grunewald, once we had privacy again, "I had had just about all I was going to take of his impertinence. It had gone quite beyond a joke. I told your father that I was terminating his employment with immediate effect, and asked him if he would be so kind as to empty his desk. He would receive, I said, his full salary for the month, even though he had worked barely a week of it. The man turned such a vivid shade of beetroot that I thought he would either burst or assault me."

"Which was it?" I asked.

"Neither," said Grunewald. "What he did next was quite unexpected. He actually asked me if I would lend him a hundred pounds, before the end of the week. A hundred pounds! And after all he had flung at me! A hundred pounds was a very considerable sum of money, and I doubt I would have been able to procure it at short notice, even if I had been of a mind to agree to the loan, which I most certainly was not. I asked him what on earth he needed such a large sum of money for. He told me, very calmly, as though our recent contre-temps had never taken place, that he needed the money to bid on a painting that was being put up for sale at Sotheby's in a week's time."

"A Scherlasky," I said.

"A Scherlasky!" said Grunewald. "So you knew about this?"

"No," I admitted. "It was a guess. But that name seems to crop up rather often around my father." I went on to explain about my earlier encounter with Naseby at Monica's exhibition. "But I've never even seen one of these paintings."

Grunewald waved his pipe dismissively. "A minor figure in 19th Century Russian art. Tried to start a neo-Byzantine school of religious painting, but it fell flat. He's always been considered a bit of a curate's egg."

"So why are the Vrtaal interested in him?"

Grunewald hesitated.

"Surely I of all people have a right to know," I said. "I won't tell anyone – not the Vrtaal, not the Ministry, not even Miss Carstairs."

"Oh, if they thought you knew anything they would get it from you soon enough," said the old man. "Promises mean nothing in the face of such means as they are willing to employ. It's not that I don't trust you," said Grunewald. "I just don't want to put you in any more danger than you are in already."

"Why would anyone in the Ministry want to hurt me?" I asked. "You said yourself that you share the same goals."

"Up to a point," conceded Grunewald. "We both despise the Vrtaal, and wish to see their extermination, but that is where we part company. I am afraid to have to tell you, Simon, that

your friends form a Ministry in more ways than one. In truth they are a religious organisation, a cult."

"Another cult?" I snorted. "Impossible!"

"Why?" asked Grunewald. "Because they wear Saville Row suits instead of animal skins, and hold board meetings instead of human sacrifices? Carstairs and Hollings may dress and behave like civil servants, but few Government employees worship a giant armadillo that they hold responsible for most of the Earth's seismic activity!"

My mind was awl with these improbable revelations, but in the midst of my astonishment, I recalled one thing with steely clarity. Freddie had read something remarkably similar in an old copy of the *National Geographic* during our flight out to Peru.

I told Grunewald what I could remember of it. "Of course, I took no notice of it at the time," I said.

"It's likely that the magazine was planted there for you to find," said Grunewald. "It was certainly not a genuine issue of *National Geographic*. If it was, I would have read it, believe me."

"But why? Why would they leave clues like that lying around?"

"A form of hypnotic suggestion," said Grunewald. "I imagine that they were trying to accustom you to the central tenets of their religion, with a view to converting you at a later date."

I still could not believe that Miss Carstairs was a rival cultist, but I was too exhausted and confused to argue the point with Grunewald any longer.

"You were going to tell me about this artist, this Scherlasky fellow," I reminded him.

"I would rather not," said Grunewald. "Some images, some ideas, once they have entered the mind, are impossible to exorcise. I would spare you such nightmares."

"I would have thought that was my decision," I said.

"Very well," said Grunewald, "but I warn you that the details are distasteful in the extreme."

The Life of Scherlasky

"So Scherlasky was a member of the *Vrtaal*?" I asked.

"Not in an official sense, no," said Grunewald. "But he has become their patron saint, if you will. The early part of Scherlasky's life is of little interest. As a young man from an aristocratic family fallen on hard times, he entered a seminary in St Petersburg and trained to join the priesthood some time in the 1860s. But he was a talented draughtsman too, and several charcoal sketches of his family remain in private collections.

"In 1869 the Tiber, swollen by the weeks of torrential rain, broke its banks, flooding the family estate and drowning his beloved younger sister. Weeks later Scherlasky left the seminary, and swore never to enter a church again.

"He drifted west. There are sporadic references to him in the diaries of society notables in Moscow, Prague and Venice. He ended up in Paris where he settled for a time. By then he had become a dissolute, cynical man, a frequenter of brothels, opium houses and the races. Having spent what remained of his family's money, he scraped a living drawing portrait sketches of society ladies. For a few years he enjoyed a dubious reputation as a wit and raconteur, albeit of a sardonic and merciless sort, and also as a drunkard. Even by the standards of Paris bohemia in the 1880s, he was noted for his degeneracy and cowardice. It was reported in the local press that after challenging a young army officer to a duel by pistol, he failed to turn up at the appointed hour, with the result that his second was shot dead.

"Then, in 1884, quite without warning, he left. His disappearance was noted by the authors of Paris scandal sheets, but soon forgotten, and Paris moved on to other distractions."

"So what happened to him?" I asked.

Grunewald shook his head. "There are guesses, speculations, rumours, but little evidence. He spent some time in North America.

Perhaps it was his intention to emigrate there, but if it was, he soon changed his mind, because in 1891 he rented a suite of rooms in a building just off Russell Square in London, which became both his home and his laboratory for many years. Where he carried out most of his experiments.”

There was something ominous about the way that the old man pronounced that last word.

“What sort of experiments?”

“Of the most abominable kind,” was all his reply.

I gripped the table top and leaned forward. “You must tell me everything!” I whispered angrily. “I have a right to know these things! I have placed my trust in you, now you must do the same in me!”

“It is not that I don’t trust you, Simon,” said Grunewald. “I only want to protect you, your sanity, from things which have driven reason from the heads of the most reasonable men. It is, I fear, revelations such as these which led your father down his dark road.”

“And my mother?” I had to ask, wondering whether her madness could be explained in this way. “Did she learn these secrets too?”

“I could not possibly answer that,” said Grunewald. “I don’t imagine that Alex ever confided in your mother, certainly not about the project which was to take over his life.”

“Well, my father made his choices,” I said. “And I hope I am a stronger man than he. Whatever horrors you have been hiding from me, I must know everything.”

Grunewald continued his narrative.

“Soon after his arrival in England, Scherlasky applied to join the Royal Society, and was rejected. He wrote letters to every prominent naturalist in the country, promising to reveal the extraordinary secrets he had discovered during his researches. He hinted at the possibility of controlling the weather, of directing the location and amount of rainfall, citing the potential benefits to the nation’s agriculture and economy.”

That seemed no great surprise to me, nor particularly horrifying, but I was puzzled about one thing. “But why write to naturalists?” I asked. “What interest could they have in his research?”

Grunewald took up the story again. “Scherlasky had obtained, from somewhere, a large breeding stock of crustaceans, which he kept in a specially constructed pool in the basement of his apartments.”

“Bathynomus giganteus!” I exclaimed. “The giant isopod!”

“Certainly that is what these creatures resembled, and many of Scherlasky’s correspondents dismissed his claims for this very reason. Of what possible value, as one naturalist put it, could these isopods be? Scientifically speaking, the species was of little interest. But Scherlasky was convinced he had discovered an entirely new species, one with very distinctive properties. It was on these sea creatures that he conducted his experiments, making exhaustive notes.”

“How did you come to know all of these details?” I asked.

Grunewald scowled, and I immediately regretted my interruption. Did he think I was accusing him of making this up?

“Thirty years of research,” he said curtly.

“Do you still have copies of those notes?”

“His diary is in the archive of the National Gallery,” said Grunewald.

“I didn’t mean to impugn your sources,” I said quickly. “But if you have managed to learn all this through your own efforts, how come the Ministry, with all their resources, don’t know it too?”

“Perhaps they did, and weren’t willing to tell you the whole story,” said Grunewald. “Then again, the Ministry, as you call them, have not always been so interested in the Vrtaal’s activities.”

“Miss Carstairs told me that they were sworn to the Vrtaal’s extermination,” I said, “I cannot believe she would tell me a bare-faced lie.”

“Oh, she has not lied to you,” said Grunewald. “At least, not in this case. But the Vrtaal are merely the last on their list. They’ve been saving the worst until the very end.”

Before I had a chance to question him further about this, he said. “But we are getting ahead of ourselves. You want to know about Scherlasky, so I will tell you. As I said, he had imported live

isopods into the country, and was breeding them in his London laboratory for experiments. What kind of experiments? A myriad of procedures, some pointless, some insightful, some appallingly cruel and unnatural."

"So he managed to breed them successfully?" I asked. "Miss Carstairs told me that nobody had ever seen the hatchlings before."

"Oh yes," said Grunewald nodding gravely. "He managed it in the end. When the first eggs hatched, he recorded the event in his diary, and drew detailed sketches of the larvae."

"What did they look like?"

Grunewald didn't answer straight away. "I remember when I saw that page of Scherlasky's notebook. I was sitting in the archive of the National Gallery, but I could not help crying out loud with fear. Beneath the sketches, Scherlasky had recorded that it was the happiest day of his life. I tore that page out, while the archivist was distracted, and later burned it. I'm sorry. I had no choice. Don't ask me to explain..."

Grunewald trailed off, and we sat for some time in uncomfortable silence before he remembered himself and took up the story again.

"Scherlasky was a genius, but he was not by nature a scientist, and he had an imperfect grasp of the scientific method. He had the mind of an artist, and continued to pursue his art during this period, beginning a series of religious paintings. Apparently, he had renewed his faith, after a fashion."

"The crucifixions!" I exclaimed. "Naseby told me about them."

Grunewald nodded. "Most of them are now in the hands of the Vrtaal, having been bought or stolen or their owners recruited into the cult. One or two still exist in private collections."

I had a sudden revelation, and asked, "So that is what was in the crate? The one Smith took off the train?"

"Ah yes, Smith. God rest his soul," said Grunewald glumly. "But you're right, yes. I own... or rather owned... an original Scherlasky. I bought it with the sole intention of preventing it from falling into your father's hands."

"And my father left you several more in his will," I pointed out.

"I wish I'd had a chance to study them before your friend Hollings stole them from the warehouse. I don't suppose you managed to see them, did you? They may contain a vital clue in this mystery."

I shook my head. "I never saw them," I said. "But why would my father want to leave you clues? What possible reason could he have had for giving you the painting?"

"I cannot begin to guess," said Grunewald. "Alex was always a man of inscrutable motives. Perhaps he was just mocking me, letting me know that he has won, and I have lost. Perhaps he's right. I have failed. Naseby will have got hold of the last painting, no doubt."

"If he survived the car crash," I said. "We don't know what happened back there. The police may have taken it away as evidence."

"Whatever happened, the Vrtaal will get hold of that painting sooner or later. They have sleepers in all walks of life, ready to do their bidding. The police force are no exception. No, that last bargaining chip has been lost now." Grunewald looked dejectedly at his pipe, which had gone out.

"But why are they so anxious to get their hands on the paintings anyway?" I asked. "Are they so interested in crucifixions?"

"Only incidentally," said Grunewald. "Scherlasky left copious notes about his grisly research, but his key discoveries he kept to himself. By the time he had made any progress with the isopods, he had given up trying to interest the rest of the scientific community in his endeavours. It is rumoured that just before he died, he left clues in some of his paintings. There are certainly some unusual elements in his later religious works, more suited to a Boschian vision of Hell than the crucifixion of Christ. Others maintain that this was a symptom of the madness taking hold of him, that the lobsters, the floods, the deformed angels of his later works, are just the products of a disordered mind."

"How did he die?" I asked, trying to picture in my mind the gaunt Russian, ensconced in his laboratory, gazing at an unfinished canvas with

blood-shot eyes that had seen more than they could bear. "Madness doesn't kill. Or did he take his own life?"

"The coroner recorded a verdict of death by misadventure," said Grunewald. "I have seen the original form in the Public Record Office. A parasitic infection was how the coroner worded it. Perhaps he misunderstood, or deliberately concealed the real reasons, out of sympathy with Scherlasky's family, or a simple sense of common decency. The truth is far less palatable."

Grunewald finished his drink before continuing. "I told you that Scherlasky believed he had discovered a way of controlling weather systems. It was while he was employed on a fishing trawler off the coast of Florida that he first noticed the giant isopods. He must have been at a low ebb, financially and morally, for the work of such men was punishing, dangerous and poorly paid, and very ill-suited to a well-educated Russian aristocrat. But in his diary, amongst his complaints about the smell of dead fish, and the poor morals of his fellow fishermen, he records his interest in the strange creatures, resembling giant woodlice, that were often dragged up in the nets along with the catch. The fishermen hated them, as the isopods often made a feast of everything else they found in the net, and could ruin a whole day's catch in the space of a few hours unless promptly discovered and thrown back to the sea. But they caught the imagination of the Russian exile, to the extent that he drew detailed sketches of these other-worldly beasts in his diary, along with notes about their habits. Perhaps he saw in them a reflection of monsters that lurked on the other side of his eyes. Whatever the reason, Scherlasky noticed that these creatures tended to mass in large swarms near to the surface whenever storms threatened. Yet the giant isopod is naturally a dweller of the seabed, rarely venturing far from the bottom.

"When he asked the other fishermen about this curious phenomenon, they answered that the creatures sensed the stormy waters near the surface and drifted up to feast on fish disoriented by the swell. This explanation struck the Russian as absurd. For one thing, fish were not made dizzy

by waves, however severe. And for another, the gatherings always took place a few hours before a storm broke. By the time the first gusts of wind and drops of rain began to fall, the creatures had long since returned to the comfortable darkness of the sea bed.

"Scherlasky had also seen slicks of strange, iridescent film coating large areas of the sea whenever these creatures congregated. His workmates told him that this was just phosphorescence, but Scherlasky was not convinced, and took several samples of seawater back to his dilapidated lodgings in the nearby town to study further."

"I've seen it!" I could not help exclaiming. "The *Vrtaal* were collecting some substance from the *Lakemoth*! Almost as if they were milking it. But what is it?"

"Of course, Scherlasky hadn't the means to analyse his samples. He barely had the means to keep body and soul together, if we are to believe his diary entries. Several times he was reduced to stealing fruit from orchards to feed himself. But somehow, with the starvation wages paid him by the trawler owner, he scraped together enough funds to have the samples sent away for analysis by a professional chemist in Chicago. He waited three months for the results. When they arrived, the verdict was unambiguous: the seawater was mixed with unnaturally high levels of silver iodide."

"Silver iodide?" I asked, trying without success to remember anything my old Chemistry teacher had taught us. "What is that?"

"A compound, rarely found in nature. A lesser man might have assumed that this was a simple effluent from the crustaceans, a by-product of the isopods' digestive process, perhaps."

"You make it sound like you admire the man," I observed.

"Far from it!" replied Grunewald sharply. "He was a psychopath and a monomaniac. There is nothing to admire in that combination. But there remained a residual level of rare insight. One might even call it genius."

"Genius?" I snorted.

"You must remember that Scherlasky was not like your father," said Grunewald. "He was not a

member of the Vrtaal, and it is extremely unlikely that he had ever heard the name. Although they existed during his lifetime, the Vrtaal were moribund and insular, far from the monstrous threat they have become today. Scherlasky made his discoveries independently of their hateful rituals. He may not have been the best of men, but there were many worse. Yes, he was dissolute, but in an age of dissipation, he fades into the background. He had, you must understand, until this point committed no crime."

"Until this point?"

"That's right," said Grunewald. "Here Scherlasky began the downward spiral that would lead him to London, and to his death. He had become convinced that the isopods were emitting silver iodide onto the surface of the sea in order to affect the weather. Each individual produced only a few teaspoons of the substance in as many hours, but in their thousands mile-wide slicks could be observed in the hours leading up to a major storm.

Scherlasky was not familiar with the works of Darwin, although *The Origin of Species* had been published two decades previously. Faced with the puzzle of apparently purposive, collective action by these small-brained crustaceans, Scherlasky did not think in terms of natural selection as the motive force, but instead nursed the idea of a hive mind. En masse, he insisted, these creatures formed a sort of meta-consciousness, a personality that exceeded the sum of its parts."

"Surely he was wrong! Crustaceans controlling storms at sea! Madness!"

"Madness yes, but mistaken? No, at least in his fundamental assumption," said Grunewald,

"I can't believe it!" I said. "If this is true, why has nobody else since discovered it? This Scherlasky was mad, you have said so yourself. Why trust the journals of a madman?"

Grunewald held up his hand to silence me and glanced sideways towards the bar. "Don't look," he whispered. "Keep your eyes on me."

When I heard Naseby's voice I stared straight ahead, hardly daring to breathe.

I heard the barmaid calling into the back

room. "Rodney! He's from CID! They're after a couple of escaped convicts! Will you come and have a word?"

There was no need to wonder what the description of those escapees would be. "When you went to the lavatory, did you notice a back door to this place?" asked Grunewald in a whisper.

"Yes, I think so."

"I need more assurance than that, laddie," said Grunewald, looking sideways to the bar again, where the landlord had emerged from the back room and was talking to Naseby. Although I couldn't make out the words, I grasped the gist of their conversation.

"Yes, I'm sure there was," I said, trying to sound certain.

"Right. Good. You go first, I'll follow you in a moment. Not yet!" He grabbed my arm as I was about to sidle out from my seat. "I'll tell you when. Right, go!"

I stood up on legs that wobbled with adrenalin, and walked as normally as I could manage in the direction of the gents.

Miraculously, nobody stopped me. But beyond the door, I realised my mistake at once. Grunewald joined me in the grubby, grey corridor.

"Is that what you call a back door?" asked the old man ruefully, pointing up at the tiny, dirt-obscured window of glass about six feet up. "Nothing for it," he said. "Give me a boost up."

Somehow, after a lot of cursing and sweating, we both got through that tiny gap, and I dropped down a few feet from the window-ledge into a concrete yard full of empty beer barrels and wooden crates. It had begun to rain, a light, penetrating drizzle. I pulled my overcoat around me.

"What now?" I asked.

Grunewald rattled a metal gate, but it was padlocked. "We need to get away from here," he said. "This Naseby character won't give up, not until he's got what he's after, or he dies in the attempt. We need a hideout."

"A hotel?" I asked.

"No use," said Grunewald, picking up one of the wooden crates, and putting his foot against the corner of it. "Now that they know we're

here, the Vrtaal will have agents checking every hotel in the city. Especially if they found poor old Smith's wallet, with the hotel reservations inside."

Grunewald put his weight against the side of the crate. It splintered and cracked. He wrenched free a plank.

"This should do it," he said. "Give us a hand here, lad."

He inserted the plank into the padlocked loop of chains that kept the gate locked. Each of us took one end, and we twisted the wood until the chain snapped under the strain.

We emerged on a dim street beneath a railway bridge. I swallowed hard and said, "I've thought of somewhere we can go."

We spent the rest of the day on the bus. As we wound through the suburbs of Leeds, the rain grew heavier and heavier. By the time we alighted, we had to run through a torrent for the cover of a bus shelter. I looked across the road at the familiar, monumental Victorian brick facade.

"Are you sure about this?" asked Grunewald, shaking his umbrella.

"It's fine," I said. "I do this every month. It's part of my routine."

Grunewald shrugged, and put up the umbrella again. "Very well!" he said. "Let's make a dash for it!"

We ran out across the puddles towards the main entrance of the Marrison Insane Asylum.

Visiting Family

"I haven't been here for many years," said Grunewald as we stood at the reception window, dripping rainwater onto the linoleum. Outside I could hear the drainpipes already overflowing.

The receptionist recognised me. "We missed you last month, Mr Willoughby," she said. "Your mother was so disappointed."

"Couldn't be helped, I'm afraid."

I knew full well that my mother wouldn't have taken the slightest notice if I had decided never to visit her again, but the receptionist's words

still stung me, and I had to remind myself that last month had been the first time I had missed one of our appointments in five years. And I had a cast-iron alibi: at the time I was being kidnapped by a gang of Peruvian bandits.

Grunewald and I sat and dripped on the plastic chairs in the waiting room, while we waited for Dr Campbell to arrive.

"I wonder if she will recognise me," said Grunewald.

"She doesn't recognise her own son," I warned him.

We lapsed into silence, each wrapped in his own thoughts, listening to the rain pounding the rooftops. On the walls of the waiting room were hung faded Constable prints, the glass frames thick with dust. Now and then a raised voice reached us from somewhere in the building. Sometimes the voice was masculine, authoritative, and I pictured a man in a white coat and intellectual bushy beard, brandishing a hypodermic needle. At other times the voice was reedy and desperate, probably a patient.

The atmosphere clearly disturbed Grunewald too, because he threw yesterday's *Daily Mirror* back onto the coffee table in front of us and said, "Do you always have to wait this long?"

"Depends what state she's in," I said. "Sometimes I don't get to see her at all, if she's asleep, or has to be sedated."

Dr Campbell came in, rumpled in face and dress, a pile of manila files under his arm.

"Mr Willoughby! Very glad to see you. Mrs Willoughby will be so pleased!"

I forced myself to smile and shake his hand. Every time the same charade.

Campbell turned his furrowed, balding brow on Grunewald and gave me a puzzled look. "And this is...?"

I introduced Grunewald as an old friend of my mother's.

Campbell looked uneasy. "Well, Mr Willoughby, as I'm sure you're aware, all visitors have to make appointments well in advance."

"Yes, of course," I said, "but in the circumstances, I thought, well, could you not make an

exception? Professor Grunewald has come a long way.”

Grunewald caught Campbell's sour expression and said, “Don't worry about it, I'll be fine here.” He made to sit down.

Campbell chewed his fingernail for a second before saying, “Well, I think on this occasion we can be a little flexible, yes? Professor Grunewald is an old friend? Well, that is marvellous. Who knows, it may reawaken some dormant memory. It's not unknown in cases such as these.”

He ushered us into a perfectly empty white-washed corridor. I listened to Campbell talking about my mother's progress with half an ear. It was all nonsense. My mother had neither improved nor deteriorated to any noticeable degree in all the time she had been incarcerated. She had only grown older. All Campbell's talk of dormant memories was, we both knew, a professional pretence that had to be maintained, the fiction that the inmates of Marrison were there to get better, to heal, and eventually to rejoin their families and communities. The truth was that they were here precisely to keep them away from their families and communities, to protect the rest of us from their madness and misery.

This was the part of the visit that I liked the least. The less disruptive inmates were allowed to wander the corridors at their leisure, and they exercised this right with gusto, shouting and hollering to one another, and to other parties not visible to the rest of us, wandering in their pyjamas and institutional dressing gowns, some schlepping very slowly along the edges of the walls in slippers, others sprinting barefoot from one door to the other in short bursts of speed. Several people tried to approach us, to detain us on business of the utmost urgency, but Dr Campbell brushed them aside with practised ease and an aloof, professional smile, assuring them that he would be along to see them later to discuss whatever pressing matters they needed to bring to his attention.

Soon we left all this frantic activity behind, as Campbell led us up a familiar staircase into another wing, where the most seriously unstable patients resided. Here the silence was broken

only by the occasional sob or cough from behind an unmarked door. Most of the patients in this ward, I knew, were kept heavily sedated to prevent them harming themselves or others. Many of them lived in virtual seclusion, rarely if ever emerging from their rooms. My mother was one of these.

“Some signs of improvement,” said Campbell, as he almost always did. “Small steps, but that's only to be expected. And small steps in the right direction are always better than none, eh Mr Willoughby?”

I nodded and smiled, and that was as much as I could manage. I looked at Grunewald again, and saw that his face had lost some of its colour. For a split-second I wondered about the exact nature of the relationship between the two of them, all those years ago before my father vanished. The avuncular boss? The family friend? More than that? It was too much to consider. I concentrated on preparing myself for the visit. I knew what to expect, more or less, but somehow it always came as a shock.

Campbell fussed with the lock for a few moments before opening the door to the small, white box room. She sat on a wicker chair with her back to us, looking out of the window over fields which were rapidly becoming a series of small, muddy lakes. She must have heard us come in, but she showed no sign of it, and remained focused on the view.

There was a grey iron bed, neatly made, but no other furniture or decoration. Everything that entered my mother's room had to be assessed as a potential danger, or a potential weapon. Her moods were not always so passive.

“Mrs Willoughby, your son is here to see you,” said Dr Campbell brightly, as he always did, as though he expected her to turn and greet me. But she never did.

I stepped forward and pulled up a straight-backed chair from the wall. The haggard, wrinkled face that would not meet my eyes was not my mother's, but a crude parody of it, devoid of expression. She had the kind of absent look that people assume when they are talking on the telephone, and perhaps it was true that her concentration was fixed on other voices than ours.

"I've brought a visitor to see you," I said, knowing that she would not respond. "Somebody you haven't seen in a long time. Professor Grunewald."

Grunewald, came forward and, rather pointlessly, offered his hand.

My mother sat up very straight. "Hello Henry," she said immediately, in a voice that was cracked with disuse but still sharp. "What terrible weather we've been having."

I looked up immediately at Dr Campbell, whose bushy eyebrows had shot up. He stood with his arms folded, shaking his head. "Well, this is... unprecedented..." he managed to say, then dashed out of the room saying, "I really must go and fetch Dr Harrison. He must witness this... it's just as I always said..."

Then he was gone, running down the corridor, leaving the three of us alone. I gave up my chair to Grunewald, who sat face to face with my mother.

"Yes, a nasty bit of rain, alright," he said. "But we'll come through it alright, shan't we?"

My mother shook her head sadly. "Such a long time," she said, but I could not be sure what she was referring to.

"How've you been, Elizabeth?" said Grunewald.

"Not so good, Henry. Not so good. A bit under the weather, you know!" she said with a little laugh.

"I'm sorry to hear that," he said. I turned to the window, and tried to put my thoughts in order.

"And who is this gentleman you've brought with you?" said my mother.

I didn't turn round, but carried on gazing at the waterlogged fields beyond the hospital.

"Don't be dim, Elizabeth!" Grunewald scolded her gently. "This is your son, Simon, of course! He's come to see you!"

"Yes, of course," said Elizabeth, acquiescing but clearly not understanding. "So, when are you weathermen going to do something about this wretched rain?" she asked, and they both laughed. It was clearly an old shared joke.

"That's no longer my bag," said Grunewald. "I gave up the forecasting game a long time ago,

Elizabeth, just after... well, a good many years ago."

"You mean, just after Alex disappeared," she said. "You don't need to mollycoddle me, Henry. I'm not a baby, you know."

"No, quite," said Grunewald, at the same time as four suited, bearded figures appeared breathlessly in the doorway.

"Quite unprecedented," Campbell was panting.

The four of them crowded into the room, and I was gently elbowed into the corner as they craned their necks to get a view of my mother's extraordinarily normal behaviour.

"Interacting with others... totally self-aware..." Campbell muttered to himself. "As if nothing had ever happened to her..."

"So what's your trade now, Henry?" asked my mother urbane, as though she were at a dinner party, rather than sat in her dressing gown surrounded by psychiatrists.

"Rather an odd one," said Grunewald. "Not much money in it, I'm afraid. Quite dangerous to boot, and I'm sure Simon here will back me up on that."

"Is Simon here?" asked my mother, and I turned round to look at her. Her face was full of animation as she spoke to Grunewald. "Tell him he mustn't go out playing in this weather. He'll get ever so muddy, splashing about out there in the field."

Grunewald looked at me, and I turned back to the window. Clearly Dr Campbell may have overstated the extent of my mother's recovery. But he was right in one respect: it was as if the last twenty years had not happened. And perhaps it were best that she did not remember, but continued to dwell in this limbo amidst the fog of madness, like an island of silt thrown up unexpectedly by the turbulent currents of a river: a refuge, but one that could not last long.

I heard Grunewald say, "Elizabeth, I'm looking for Alex. I've been looking for him for a long time."

Dr Campbell stepped forward anxiously. "Now, Mr Grunewald, we don't want to upset Mrs Willoughby, do we? She's made a lot of progress today, and we don't want to tire her out.

I think it's best if we keep away from topics that might disturb her."

"It's Professor Grunewald, actually," the old man corrected him, "and I have no intention of disturbing anyone unnecessarily..."

"I'm glad we understand each other."

"What I am asking Mrs Willoughby is absolutely necessary, whether it disturbs her or not."

"What is it, Henry?" she asked, gripping his sleeve. "What's the matter?"

"He's hunting us down, Alex is. I think he's after Simon. He's going to take Simon away, Elizabeth!"

"You mustn't let him! You mustn't!" cried my mother. "He's no good, he means no good for anybody."

"You have to help us, then!" said Grunewald. "We need your help!"

Campbell pushed his way forward and tried to manhandle Grunewald away from my mother, who was in tears, her hands covering her face.

"Somebody go and get the wardens!" Campbell shouted to his colleagues. "This man is causing a disturbance. Mr Grunewald we must ask you to leave the premises!"

Grunewald wrestled himself free of Campbell's grip.

"As I told you before, it's Professor Grunewald, and I have no intention of going anywhere until I have finished speaking to Mrs Willoughby!" he barked, straightening his jacket. "What you fail to realise is that the fate of the nation is at stake! Hidden, evil forces are watching, waiting for England's downfall! The beasts will roam the streets, and we will all be prey! That is what the future holds for us, unless we act!"

He was red-faced now, pointing an angry finger at Campbell's chest, who had stopped listening. I guessed that he had probably heard many a similar diatribe from his patients, He slipped something from the pocket of his suit and, with a casual gesture as though he were bending to tie a loose shoelace, he leaned forward and plunged a hypodermic needle into the old man's thigh.

"Not the first time we've had to section a vis-

iting member of the public," he joked to the other two psychiatrists who stood behind him, a little awe-struck at their boss's swift action. "Well, are you going to lend a hand?" he asked.

Grunewald was looking at his assailant with a dreamy, slightly irritated expression, before his knees buckled and his eyes rolled up in their sockets. Campbell's assistants rushed forward to clasp the old man under his arms, and drag him onto the bed. I stood rooted to the spot throughout, too shocked to react, until my mother let out a piercing scream and began to windmill her arms in front of her face. I bent down at her side, trying to calm her down while the room swarmed with uniformed wardens.

I managed to hold my mother's arms down, and said, "Not now, mother! Don't make a scene. I'll explain everything later!"

"Don't let them take him!" wailed my mother. "Don't let them take him!"

I wasn't sure whether the object of her concern was Grunewald or me. I felt Campbell's hand on my shoulder.

"Mr Willoughby, I'm sure you'll agree that we should cut short your visit," he said. "I think Mrs Willoughby has been upset quite enough for one afternoon, yes?"

I stood up, and put my hands in my pockets, but said nothing. It seemed disloyal to poor old Grunewald, unconscious on the bed beside me. But to object was, I feared, to invite the same treatment for myself. What rational objection could I possibly bring? That we really were all in danger from a secret cult of woodlouse worshippers, led by my father? I could barely believe it myself, and I had seen the evidence of their malice with my own eyes. Grunewald's behaviour had been eccentric to say the least, not calculated to make a good impression on the staff of Marriston.

Campbell was preparing another dose of sedative, presumably for my mother, tapping the glass of his hypodermic with his fingernail. For a split-second it occurred to me that perhaps these suited, bearded psychiatrists were in fact Vrtal agents in disguise, and that Campbell's needle was intended for me, but I told myself

that until I saw evidence of evil intent, I should not jump to the most paranoid conclusion.

I looked Campbell in the eye. "Thank you, Doctor," I said. "I do apologise for the melodrama, and I wish this could have been done without subterfuge, but I could think of no other way of getting him the help he so urgently needs."

I could see that I had taken Campbell off guard, and he stared at me for a moment. I leant down close to where mother was sat, her face now in her hands, sobbing in ragged gasps. I took her one of her old hands in mine and tried to get her attention.

"Sorry, Mum," I said quietly. "It'll all be over soon. Try to be patient. I'll be back to see you soon."

"Keep away from him, Simon," she said, gripping onto my hand fiercely. "Don't let him find you."

Campbell was kneeling on the other side of my mother's chair, administering another dose of sedative, not listening to our conversation.

"But why?" I asked her. "Why is he looking for me? What have I got that he wants?"

"I told him not to do it! I told him!"

"What? Tell me, quickly mother, I have to go!" I whispered.

"You must believe me, Simon, I tried to stop him," she said. Already her words were slurring and her eyes had begun to drift away from mine.

"Won't be long now, Mr Willoughby," said Campbell. "She'll have a good long rest. I think we all could do with that, eh?"

Mother tugged at my sleeve again.

"You had an operation. Do you remember? To have your tonsils removed? You were so small. How old were you? Seven years old? Eight?" Her words were those of a drunkard now, as she drifted in and out of consciousness.

Campbell looked down with mild curiosity. "What's she babbling about?" he asked.

"I'm not sure," I said. "Just memories, reminiscences, you know."

Mother's head fell back against the back of her armchair with a soft thud, and she sighed and smiled at me with tired eyes, and there was still something of my mother in that smile. "He kept

saying it was a present," she murmured. "A present for his son. But what sort of a present is that for a boy? I ask you..."

She waved her hand in a gesture that was never finished. I looked up to see her eyes closed and her head flopped awkwardly to one side. I reached forward to move make her more comfortable, but Campbell stepped between us.

"The staff will take care of her, Mr Willoughby. Leave all that to us. We'll make sure she comes to no harm."

I stood up, looking down at the sleeping woman who, for a few minutes, had been my mother again.

Campbell put a fatherly arm around my shoulders and turned me towards the door. I caught a glimpse as I left the room of Grunewald lying flat out on a gurney, ready to be wheeled out into the corridor.

"Come down to my office," said Dr Campbell. "We've got some paperwork to sort out. Do you need a handkerchief?"

I put my hand to my forehead and it came away wet and greasy.

"Just perspiration," I said, but the smell of the stuff was vaguely familiar and unsettling.

I mopped my brow with Campbell's handkerchief, fighting off a bout of nausea.

"I'm just a bit run down," I said to him. "It's been a trying few days."

An hour later I stood in the reception, shaking his hand and looking around for the umbrella I had left there.

"We'll be in touch shortly," smiled the doctor, handing me an envelope which contained copies of the forms I had just signed, placing my father, Alex Willoughby, in the care of the Marrison Insane Asylum.

"I admire your courage," said Campbell. "To have both parents committed – well, it seems like fate has dealt you quite a poor hand, but you've borne it with fortitude. Very rare for psychosis to strike twice in that way, and your father is an unusual case too. In all my years as a practising psychiatrist I haven't come across a system of delusional belief quite so fiendishly absurd."

"Yes, it is rather far-fetched isn't it?" I replied,

fastening up my overcoat, still soaking wet from earlier in the day. "But he believes it all very earnestly."

"Of course, of course," nodded Campbell sagely. "They all do. But to have disassociated himself from his own identity, to assert that the real Alex Willoughby was in fact the head of an evil organisation called... what was it? The Vrtaal? That's a new one on me. I think we shall have our work cut out. Of course, we'll keep you informed of your father's progress."

Now it was my turn to nod and say, "Of course, of course," although I knew full well that in my mother's case no significant progress had been made over all the years she had been committed, until today.

"Good luck to you, Mr Willoughby. I hardly need to tell you to keep a stiff upper lip."

Soon, but not soon enough, I was free of him, and of that benighted place, and running back through the downpour towards the bus-stop.

It was only on the bus that I realised how completely alone I was. My reasons for hoodwinking Dr Campbell were complicated and I did not pretend to understand them myself. It seemed that Grunewald was destined for a period of bed-rest in the care of Campbell and his colleagues, and there was nothing I could do to prevent that without casting doubts upon my own sanity. In a way I was glad to be rid of the old man. He had been dogging my steps ever since this debacle began, and his hectoring tone and intense stare had become very draining. That in itself was no excuse for having the man sectioned, I admit, but his incarceration had not been my idea. I had simply not objected to it.

Nor was I entirely sure that Professor Grunewald was as rational as he pretended. There was something about him that did not seem entirely in control, a monomaniacal passion that he had nurtured over the years. Hunting the Vrtaal, and unearthing their secrets, had been his life's work, he had claimed, and such close proximity to unearthly horrors could not fail to shake even the sturdiest temperaments. It was this bloody-minded aspect of Grunewald's character that had showed itself to such poor advantage in the way he'd spoken to my mother.

I had not liked the way he spoke to her, although I could see, if I tried, why he had thought such treatment necessary. That too might explain why I had left Grunewald lying drugged on a hospital gurney, and why I was now sat alone on an otherwise empty bus that wound its way through one of the worst rainstorms I could remember, towards Leeds.

What was my plan now? I had none. It was late afternoon. I had skipped lunch and was feeling light-headed. I must have dozed off briefly, lulled to sleep by the insistent drumming of the rain on the bus windows, for when I awoke, I was nearing my old place of employment, Kershaw Grammar School. By now the pupils would have finished their prep lessons, and would be getting washed for dinner. In normal circumstances I would be enjoying a few minutes' peace in the staff room, perhaps a quick look at the Times Crossword, which I never finished, before dragging myself reluctantly to the dining hall to supervise the mob. A life of predictable pleasures and predictable miseries, circumscribed by the Headmaster's all-powerful timetable, beyond whose boundaries no one, staff or pupil, dared stray. I had always been taught and sincerely believed that this kind of regimented life prepared the boys for the world of work and family, and the responsibilities they would have to shoulder in their adult lives, and was unquestionably a good thing. Whether it was a good thing for grown men to live in this protective bubble of rules and timetables was more open to question.

Now that I was living in exile from that world, I missed it. I was cut adrift from the certainties that anchor other people to their allotted stations. Could the Vrtaal ever be defeated, or would our monarch be replaced by a giant woodlouse, or worse, by my father? I didn't know. Would the sun rise tomorrow? I could not really say. Had any of my adventures in Peru and elsewhere really taken place, or was I too losing my mind, following squarely in my parents' footsteps? That, too, was unanswerable.

The school was almost hidden from view by a row of conifers, but at a certain bend in the road the clock tower came into view before hiding

again behind the curve of the hillside. The school itself was a good two miles' walk from the nearest bus-stop, isolated from the nearest suburbs by a moat of waterlogged fields and football pitches. Just then I saw two pupils trudging along the grassy verge, soaked to the skin without their raincoats. What on earth did they think they were doing out at this time, and so unsuitably dressed? My first instinct was to get off the bus and chase after them, but I thought twice. I was no longer a teacher at Kershaw, and had no authority over its pupils. And why should I care whether two boys were playing hooky? They looked like fourth formers, and were so busy splashing in puddles and kicking water at each other that they hardly noticed the rain pounding down on them. I envied them.

My train of thought led me to reminiscences of my own boyhood, at least those happier times before my father disappeared and everything began to fall apart. My mother had talked about the time I'd had my tonsils out – I hadn't thought about that for many years, but now the memories returned unbidden. What had my mother said? My father had given me a present? Had he? It seemed unlike him.

As I delved deeper a picture emerged, a tiny miniature in watercolours, framed in heavy gilt wood, perhaps no more than five or six inches square. I knew the painting very well – a depiction of Noah aboard his ark, crowded in on all sides by dozens of pairs of animals. Had this really been a gift from my father? I honestly could not remember, but if it had not come from him, then where?

My mother never had much time for religion. Nor did my father, at least until he discovered the Vrtaal. So why would he have chosen a biblical theme for his son's gift?

The whereabouts of the painting was no mystery. It had sat in my classroom ever since my first term at Kershaw Grammar, and had become so familiar a fixture as to be practically invisible. I had placed it on top of a low bookcase in a feeble attempt to brighten up the mood of the room, which had the oppressive, stark air of a prison ward. Other pictures, also biblical in inspiration, had joined it during those first few months of

enthusiasm, when I had fervently believed both in my mission as a teacher, and in the redemptive power of the Christian church. In the stony ground of Kershaw both notions had quickly withered, but back then I hoped I could inspire in the boys the sort of muscular Christianity that had been sweeping the English departments of universities nationwide. These stirring pictures of Noah braving the floodwaters, of Isaac preparing to sacrifice his son, and blind Samson wreaking havoc in the temple, had become sun-bleached and dusty over the years.

The school bus stop approached, and on an impulse I stood up and rang the bell.

"This isn't Leeds," said the conductor, needlessly, as I stepped off the platform onto a squelchy grass verge. "Your ticket's valid until Leeds." The old man squinted at me under his peaked cap, clearly wondering what kind of madman would be alighting in the middle of nowhere, and in the middle of a rainstorm.

"I know," I said. "I've got some urgent business."

The conductor pulled the rope to signal the driver. As the bus pulled away, he called after me, "Well at least find somewhere out of sight. You dirty bugger."

Old Haunts

The road wound through a wood, and trees closed overhead. I did not see the two schoolboy truants again, but they were not my quarry; I was after the painting. The more I thought about that gift of my father's, the more details sprang to mind: the figure of Noah, his monomaniacal staring eyes, the angels hovering in the rain clouds above, holding aloft scrolls that bore what writing? Some passage from the Bible? A Latin inscription? That I could not recall. But what struck me with the force of lightening were the peculiar creatures that congregated around the hull of the ark, half-human, playing in the wake of the boat. As I boy I had assumed they were mermaids, or mermen, but now I remem-

bered that they were not half-fish, but half-crustacean. I struggled to bring the image into focus, but I was exhausted, and my mind drifted onto other topics, absurd ideas that come to one on the verge of sleep. Had I really remembered the painting correctly, or had my traumatic experiences on Lake Titicaca distorted the past?

I estimated that I was a mile now from the school gate, but the storm and the night blotted out any landmarks that might help me, and at times I began to doubt even that I was on the right road. I could be certain only that I was on a road, travelling deeper into the blackness, wet and shivering.

My suspicions grew firmer the further along that black road I walked. That little painting, now gathering dust on top of a bookcase in my classroom, must be a Scherlasky original. Moreover, I convinced myself that somewhere in that painting lay the key to this whole riddle. In that tiny watercolour the Russian madman had hidden his final, abominable secret. Was it in the inscription carried aloft by rainbow-winged angels? It could not be that easy. There must be some deeper meaning. Perhaps concealed within the crush of animals aboard the ark was a fiendish rebus. Then again, I could not recall ever looking at the reverse of the painting. What might be recorded there? My mind raced through possibilities.

I must have looked a sight by the time I rolled up at the school gates. Wild-eyed, unshaven, hair plastered across my forehead with rainwater, clothes streaked with mud. I slipped past the porter's lodge unnoticed. Thankfully too, the headmaster had not thought to change the locks to the main gate. I knew the grounds of the school as well as anyone, and having hunted down many a truant and clandestine smoker around the grounds, I knew every hidden corner, every shadowy escape route. My cautiousness was probably misplaced: the dormitories were dark, and only the headmaster's office window was illuminated, with the curtains drawn across. I dashed across the playground, around the art block, and skidded down a steep grassy bank, ensuring that my jacket as well as my trousers were thoroughly soiled, before finding myself

on the right side of the building, just where my classroom looked out onto the football pitch.

All the doors were locked of course, and I only had keys for the main gate, and to the teachers' cottage on the far side of the grounds. How had I overlooked this vital detail? I crouched under a stunted tree, trying to find some shelter from the worst of the rain. Now the water hit me in large, intermittent splashes. I was on the verge of giving up, but I had nowhere to go back to. I was homeless, friendless and penniless. I could simply lie down in the mud and wait for the caretaker to find my lifeless, soggy corpse in the morning.

I did not lie down in the mud. Instead I broke a window, opened the latch, and hauled myself into my classroom. The room was dark, and I barked my shins on the boys' desks, which made a dreadfully loud scraping noise on the wooden floor, as I felt for the light switch on the opposite wall.

At first I thought I must have got the wrong classroom. The teacher's desk was in the wrong place, and the bookcase had been moved into a corner. The boys' desks now faced the windows. But that long, undulating crack in the plaster was unmistakable. I had spent many an unhappy hour contemplating that wall while invigilating examinations.

It was my classroom, but it had been renovated. The walls had been repainted a startling white, and a large, colourful map of the world stretched across one wall. On the blackboard was evidence of a history lesson, the Wars of the Roses, but I did not recognise the handwriting.

So they had replaced me! Some other fellow now occupied my desk. I opened the desk drawer and confirmed my suspicions: the muddle of old chalk, broken pens and confiscated knick-knacks had been cleared out, and a single-volume dictionary in red leather binding had taken their place. I had no real cause for indignation. I had taken leave to put my father's affairs in order, and never returned. Even the most patient headmaster in the world – and the headmaster of Kershaw Grammar was never in the running for that title – would have found it

hard to keep my position open in such circumstances.

A noise in the corridor made me panic and throw the light switch again, and I stood and listened in silence, breathing as softly as I could, until I could convince myself that I had heard no more than a mouse scurrying under the floorboards. The school was riddled with vermin, and the boys found great sport in catching mice, which they either kept as pets, or tortured and killed, depending on their character.

Once the light was back on, I saw the worst of it. I traced my hand in the dust along the top of the bookcase, and saw the clean shapes where the picture frames had stood. Why had they been removed? And what had become of them? Tossed out in the rubbish? Every new teacher likes to stamp his character and authority on a classroom, to sweep out all signs of the old order. I had done the same myself when I entered the profession. I opened the sliding glass doors and searched the shelves within, but there were only the old battered anthologies of poetry.

Frantically I checked a dozen places in the room, but found nothing. The Scherlasky, for that is what I was now convinced it was, had been taken and dumped. Or stolen.

The wind had begun to whistle through the broken pane of glass, and I worried that the noise would wake somebody. I flicked the light switch and in the darkness clambered backwards out of the window.

I turned to find the wrong end of a shotgun a few inches away from my nose. On the other end stood a small dark figure whose face was lost in the hood of a cagoule.

I wondered whether the hooded figure was trying to gather the courage needed to blow my head off, but when a flash of light came, it was the lightning, not the discharge of a shotgun or anything metaphysical.

"Miss Carstairs!" I exclaimed. "What are you doing here?"

I had only caught a brief glimpse of her face in the lightning flash, but now that I knew it was her, even in this blackest of nights.

She refused to acknowledge me.

"What are you doing here?" I asked. "Have you been following me?"

A thought, a very vain one, occurred that she had been following me across the country to declare her love for me, now that I was no longer in Monica's sphere of influence.

"Are you alright?" shouted Hollings. "Have you seen him?"

"Yes, everything's fine," said Miss Carstairs.

"Try not to shoot this one," said Hollings.

"This one?" I asked.

"Keep quiet," said Miss Carstairs, her face still in shadow. "You're in a lot of trouble."

Hollings strode over in a voluminous cape. He pulled his hood down.

"Good work," he said, patting her on the shoulder.

"Do you mind not pointing that at me?" I asked, reaching out gingerly to push the barrel of the gun aside. "I'm not going to try any funny stuff. You can trust me."

"I thought we could," said Miss Carstairs. "But now I don't know what to think."

I shrugged. "Do you think we can go somewhere out of the rain?" I asked. "I'm not really dressed for this."

I had stopped noticing how wet I was. I could hardly remember what it felt like to be dry.

"Did you get what you came for then?" asked Hollings abruptly.

"Not exactly. How long had you been watching me?" I asked Miss Carstairs, who must have seen everything from the window.

She said only, "Search him."

Hollings scratched his head. "I don't know, Mary," he said. "Maybe he's right, we should do this in the car. It is a watercolour after all. Can't risk damaging it."

"So we're looking for the same thing," I said. "But I'm afraid I have to disappoint you. It's already been taken, or thrown away. I don't know where it is."

Miss Carstairs thought about it for a moment. "I don't believe him," she said to her colleague. "We'll take him back to the car. We'll get to the truth soon enough. And keep your damn mouth shut in future, Henry."

Hollings flinched but didn't answer back. He pushed me in the direction of the front gates.

"No need for that," I told him. "I know my way around."

We marched across the back field between the north wing and the dormitory, making no attempt to conceal ourselves.

"You know you're wasting your time with me. The painting was already gone when I got there. I have no idea where it is now," I said as the headlights of a car came into view, just outside the visitors' entrance. "Wouldn't it be a better use of your time to try and find out what my father is up to, rather than following me the length and breadth of the country?"

Still nothing, and Miss Carstairs was too far ahead of us to hear me.

I wondered how they dared leave the headlights on without fear of attracting attention.

"Get in," said Hollings, holding open the door of the purring Bentley.

From the warm, dry interior, I watched Miss Carstairs and another caped figure climb the steps to the front door of the school.

"Am I a hostage, then?" I asked.

"You'll keep quiet if you know what's good for you," snapped Hollings from the passenger seat.

The driver, his face hidden from me, didn't say a word, and stared straight ahead. Looking out of the side window I could see that there were two sets of headlights gleaming on the driveway. So Miss Carstairs had not come unprepared. They were taking this seriously. If the Ministry had tailed me since my disappearance from Monica's, then they would know all about my dealings with Professor Grunewald, whom they believed a dangerous Vrtal agent. I started wondering how they could have made such a fundamental error, with the resources at their disposal. It could not have been difficult to discover his real purpose. But it seemed there was no love lost between the Grunewald and the Ministry, if that was indeed their real identity. I saw now that they had probably been stringing me along the whole time, feeding me a series of convenient lies to keep me on side. But who

were they? Grunewald had never managed to tell me.

There was a sliver of light in the darkness, as the front door of the school swung open, and I saw the familiar profile of the caretaker in silhouette. He spoke to the group of caped figures. I wondered what they were saying, but it was pointless to ask Hollings.

Whatever their excuse, it would certainly bring the headmaster downstairs. He would recognise me if I could get his attention. He could raise the alarm. Hollings and the driver were lighting cigarettes, and while they were distracted I decided to take my chance.

The rear doors of the car had been locked from the outside.

"I wouldn't bother with that," said Hollings, not even looking. "Did you think we'd just let you get out to stretch your legs? You've underestimated us."

The headmaster appeared on the porch, holding an oil-lamp. He stood talking to the circle of caped visitors for a time, then one of the figures broke away from the group and walked back to the car, while the others were ushered into the school.

Miss Carstairs opened the back door and climbed in beside me, pulling back the hood of her cagoule and brushing dark, wet strands of hair away from her face.

"Any luck?" said Hollings from the front seat.

"They're going to have a look around," said Miss Carstairs. "We put the wind up him: said there was an escaped psychopath in the grounds."

"Take a look around for what?" I asked.

Miss Carstairs ignored me. "He wanted to call the police," she told Hollings.

"Oh?" he asked, worried.

"But of course, we are the police, aren't we?"

"Don't you want to go with them?" asked Hollings, as we watched the hooded figures troop into the school, closing the door after them. "I can handle things here."

"The headmaster wasn't too happy about a lady wandering around the boys' dorm," she explained. "If it's there, they'll find it."

I tried to look through the side window, but I

could see very little beyond the curtain of water sluicing across the glass. Would this rain never stop?

Half-hypnotised by the drumming of rain-drops on the roof, I fell into a meditative state, and remembered my dream of the previous night. I was stumbling through muddy undergrowth, an unseen and unstoppable predator closing in. Then a thought made me sit up straight and smile to myself.

“You’re all wasting your time,” I said.

Miss Carstairs rounded on me angrily. “We’ll deal with you later,” she said. “I know how much you like the sound of your own voice. Well, you’ll get plenty of opportunities to talk during your interrogation.”

I ignored her implied threats and continued. “You won’t find it. It’s either been thrown away, or more than likely, the Vrtaal have got it.”

Hollings turned around in his seat to stare at me. “What the...”

Miss Carstairs cut him off with a mere look. “If you know the whereabouts of that painting, you may be able to prolong your life for several hours.”

“It hardly matters now, does it?” I said. “It’s already started.”

“What do you mean?” said Hollings.

“The Great Flood. The Vrtaal already possess the secret of weather control. Look at this rain? Can you remember such a rain? There’s no let up. He’s flooding the whole country.”

“He’s lying,” said Miss Carstairs, turning away from me. He’s trying to throw us off the scent. Nice try. You’re not as stupid as our research had indicated.

“Let’s get back to base,” said Hollings. “We can search him there and start the interrogation.”

Miss Carstairs shook her head. “No rush. He hasn’t got the painting. That much is true even if everything else he’s told us is a lie.”

I said nothing and looked at my feet.

“How can you tell that?” asked Hollings.

“If he really had the painting on him he wouldn’t be sitting there so peacefully,” she said. “I’ve met quite a few Vrtaal agents in my time, Hollings. They’re fanatics, pure and simple. He wouldn’t hesitate to kill any one of us, or

himself, if that would prevent us from getting our hands on the lost Scherlasky. No, he’s just stringing us along, wasting our time.”

I shook my head and couldn’t help snorting. “Nonsense! That doesn’t make any sense at all.”

“Did you say something?” asked Miss Carstairs archly.

“If they’d wanted that painting, why didn’t they come straight to me, years ago? I’ve been working at this school for years. It’s not exactly a secret. And wasn’t it Alex Willoughby himself who’d given it to his son as a present? Why didn’t he just take it back? Come to think of it, why did he give it away in the first place, if it’s so damned important? And why on Earth would they need it back now? Surely if Alex had owned the painting previously, then whatever secrets it contained would be well known to the Vrtaal now! They’re not after the painting!” I shouted, realising that it had been staring me in the face all this time.

For a moment Hollings and Miss Carstairs just stared at me. Miss Carstairs opened and closed her mouth, but nothing came out.

“Do you think there’s any truth in it?” asked Hollings, looking to her. “I mean that stuff about Alex Willoughby giving the painting away?”

She shook her head decisively. “It’s all lies,” she insisted, but looked less than certain. “We’ll sort this out later. Have you got it to hand?”

“What?” said Hollings. “Oh, that...” He reached down and passed what looked like a handkerchief to Miss Carstairs.

In one swift gesture, Miss Carstairs took hold of my hand, leaned across me, and whispered into my ear, “We’ll continue this conversation later.”

I turned to face her, but she clamped the handkerchief over my face. I breathed in fumes, and toppled headlong into darkness.

Emergence

I was hardly surprised, on waking, to find myself back in the Ministry. I was wearing a pair of

pyjamas, and my old, wet clothes had vanished along with my wallet, my watch and all my other personal possessions. I had been put to bed in one of their utilitarian guest rooms, a bunker of whitewashed concrete furnished with a camp bed, a white hand basin and toilet, no windows, and a metal door.

I knew the door would be locked, but I had to try it anyway. Then I hammered on it for a good thirty minutes, and yelled and screamed for a good thirty more, before I felt short of breath and had to sit down on the bed.

How had my life become so complicated so quickly? I tried to untangle the threads in my mind, looking for a way out of the web. The starkness of the room, its lack of distractions, would help me to clarify my thinking.

I began to take stock of my life. My father was a madman, a megalomaniac, a cult leader intent on the destruction of England, and perhaps the wider world too. To what end? But for men such as Alex Willoughby, the power to destroy is an end in itself. Where was my father now? Still in Peru, ruling as *El Alcalde* over the residents of Juliaca, and as the Stormking over his horde of fanatical cultists? More likely he was closer to home, the better to supervise the inundation of the British Isles. If he was in the country, he had kept out of sight so far, preferring instead to send his cronies to harass me. But what purpose of his could I possibly serve now? He had already been offered one son, and a willing volunteer at that, in the form of Freddie. Perhaps Freddie had not measured up to the tasks demanded of him, whatever those might be, or else his deception had been discovered.

Either way, the *Vrtaal* were still hunting me, and I could not think why I would be of the smallest interest to them unless they knew that I was Simon Willoughby. Were they after the painting, the missing *Scherlasky* that had been sitting undisturbed and unnoticed on top of my bookcase for years? I no longer believed so, and my remarks to Miss Carstairs and Hollings in the car had been in earnest. The painting was a red herring, and that the Ministry were still trying to acquire it was evidence only of their ignorance. The *Vrtaal* endgame had already begun. Here in

my cell, deep under the streets of London, I couldn't hear the rain, but I didn't doubt it was still pouring from the sky.

How long could this weather go on? Britain's lowlands would become vast lakes; thousands would be made homeless, or even drowned; the emergency services would be unable to cope; civil unrest would grip the larger conurbations; the Government would be pushed to collapse. Perhaps all that had already happened. I had no idea what was going on above me on the surface, or how long I had been locked up here. As I was washing I found several small pinpricks on my upper arm, evidence of needles. I might have slept for days, drugged.

I wondered what would become of Grunewald. He would stand as good a chance of survival as anybody. If anarchy really did reign above, then all the better for him. Would institutions like *Marriston* continue to lock up the insane when the whole country was going mad? Perhaps optimistically, I pictured Grunewald making good his escape as the wardens and psychiatrists abandoned their posts in the general panic. He would surely not leave my mother to the mercy of her fellow inmates. None of these flights of fancy gave me much reassurance. There was no scenario which did not involve, to a greater or lesser degree, chaos, death and misery for the greater part of humanity.

I myself had had my fair share of chaos, and misery, over the last few months, and I imagined that death would arrive before too long. If the building had been abandoned by its staff, then I would starve. Otherwise it was unlikely that the Ministry would allow a suspected *Vrtaal* agent to live longer than he was useful.

I could not decide which of these fates was preferable, but I did not have long to ponder. Soon enough a key scraped in the lock, and the steel door banged open to reveal Hollings accompanied by two large, unsmiling men. They blindfolded me, helped me to my feet, and the four of us marched out, down the corridors of the Ministry on a winding route that I failed to memorise.

When the blindfold was removed, I saw Miss Carstairs and Hollings sat behind a desk side by

side, shuffling papers as though I were about to sit through a job interview.

I try not to remember the hours I spent in that room. There was no torture, but the Ministry made use of every other method in their repertoire. All were, of course, useless. I knew nothing worth the telling, though the Ministry refused to take me at my word.

Where was Alex Willoughby now? What was the method the Vrtaal used to control the weather? Which port would the Vrtaal use to bring the Lakemother's eggs into the country? Whitby? Liverpool? Kings Lynn? Where was the missing Scherlasky painting now? How long had I been a member of the cult? Who were the other members of my cell? Was Monica involved?

I remember Miss Carstairs's face leaning over me, as cold and impassive as a scientist looming over a specimen. "We're getting nowhere," she said to Hollings behind her. "He's leading us round in circles. We shall have to put him in the dark room."

Hollings said, "But it'll take too long! We've no time for messing about! It'll be too late, the whole country will be underwater!"

Miss Carstairs glared at him. "Wait for me outside," she said.

Hollings made to protest, then thought better of it, scraped his chair back and crept out of the room.

"What did he do wrong?" I asked, when we were alone.

"Giving aid and comfort to the enemy," said Miss Carstairs, turning away from me and walking back to her seat. "No matter. We'll fix you, soon enough. I don't think it will take as long as Hollings fears. The dark room has quite an extraordinary effect on people. I've been testing it out on a number of subjects, and the results have been most encouraging." She consulted her wristwatch. "And I think we should get started as soon as possible," she said. "I'm rather tired and could do with a drink."

The dark room was not only dark, it was silent, and it was not only dark and silent, but I could not move a muscle. I was bound to a bed. I could not feel any straps, but nor could I move

my arms, legs or head, so I knew that there was some force holding me down. After a brief struggle, I gave up trying to get free. Nor could I even call to or curse my captors, for a gag was stuffed into my mouth.

Darkness, silence, immobility. This was the last resort of my Ministry interrogators. I had read about sensory deprivation interrogation techniques in Stalin's Russia in a sensationalist newspaper article. Now I tried to recall all I could about that article, but concentrated thought was impossible in these circumstances. I drifted in and out of consciousness, and soon could not tell when I was awake and when asleep. Thoughts mingled with dreams, and things appeared, some beautiful and some horrible, that could have been fantasies, or hallucinations, or real objects held before me by my enemies. I had conversations with my father, my mother, both very much younger, with Professor Grunewald and Miss Carstairs, with my old friend Ricardo from the underwater prison on Lake Titicaca, with Freddie, even, who appeared in his full Vrtaal regalia and asked to borrow ten guineas off me to buy a girl an engagement ring.

In between these periods of chaos there were moments of intense lucidity, when I felt every sensation on my body more acutely than I had ever done in my previous, complacent life. No physical movement was possible. Every finger and every toe had been strapped firmly into place. The only thing I could do was breathe, or hold my breath, and that only for a short period. I began a game of seeing how long I could hold it, but then forgot what I was doing and fell asleep.

Time melted. Nothing happened or was ever likely to. I could not tell whether it was night or day. Perhaps hours had passed. Perhaps months, years. Perhaps I had merely fallen asleep for a few moments and dreamt it all.

Why did I not get hungry or thirsty? That puzzle occupied my mind for a long while, until I solved it with the notion of a drip, a tube pushed under the skin of my arm, keeping me alive. I tried to work out where the drip might have been inserted, but could feel no pain. Had I been

anaesthetised? Sedated? What did they want from me? When would my interrogation recommence, and what kind of story could I concoct that would satisfy them? And would it have made any difference had I known the answers to any of their questions?

Time passed – what else could it do? I heard noises, voices. Miss Carstairs spoke to me from tinny speakers located close to my head. My mother called me to dinner. The Headmaster was addressing the assembly about a grave breach of discipline in the fifth form. My father was reciting weird incantations in a foreign tongue, bringing down more rain upon poor, drenched England. The voices quarrelled with each other, shouted, and were at last silent.

Next came an intolerable itchiness that spread over my entire body, like ants running across my skin, biting and stinging, or like pins and needles amplified a hundred times. The itching became a pulsating, and the pulsating slowed and deepened until it became a glowing. My whole body was radiating energy with a steady pulse. I almost believed I could see the deep red glow emitted from my face and chest.

The glowing sensation reached a sort of crescendo. I felt my body softening, melting, dissolving into the rhythm, until I was nothing but energy beaming out invisibly into the dark cell.

Finally there came what I can only describe as a scabbing over. It was as though I was becoming encased in a tough shell, shielding my inner self from all the distractions and irritations that had plagued me before. I was shrinking, becoming concentrated, boiled away to my essence, just a sliver of a self wrapped in layer upon layer of leathery armour. My breathing became slow and shallow, as though I hardly needed the oxygen any more. My thoughts followed suit, and I was aware of a vast, empty clarity. Nothing much mattered now.

And in that state of nothingness I stayed, until somebody flicked a light switch.

I squinted and shut my eyes. The light was still unbearably harsh, and instinctively I tried to put my hands to my eyes, but found it impossible, and instead rolled sideways and landed on

the floor. I scurried on all fours away from the searing light, into a dark corner.

Somebody had set me loose! At once my thoughts began their headlong rush once more. I could feel the cold concrete beneath my hands and feet, felt rusty muscles complaining, felt the taste of dank air in my mouth, and smelled the swirling dust. Gradually my eyes adjusted, and I saw more than blinding light. I turned and saw a doorway, and a dark figure framed in it, hand across mouth, eyes staring.

I recognised Miss Carstairs from the sound of her scream. Her silhouette vanished, and I dashed after her, into a cold corridor inches deep in brown, foul-smelling water. So the floodwaters had penetrated the labyrinth of the Ministry. I waded through it, pushing past floating chairs, submerged typewriters, mimeograph machines, bureaucratic flotsam and jetsam. There were other things floating in the water that I tried not to look at too closely.

I was lost in the maze. I guessed that the water level must be rising. Miss Carstairs had vanished, and though I listened hard for her footsteps, there were no sounds other than the lap and dribble of water against the walls of the corridor.

Strangely, I didn't panic. I was calm, and that in itself was odd. Perhaps the dark room had transformed me, stripped away the old, neurotic, cowardly man, to reveal something solid and new.

I was looking for steps leading upwards, and after a few dead ends I found them. I scrambled up out of the rising water. Rain still poured down the walls and dripped through cracked ceilings. I moved quickly, exploring corridors and rooms, creating a mental map of the floor. The Ministry complex was organised according to no regular plan, and there was no single stairwell leading to the surface. Instead I found a deserted labyrinth. Apparently the Ministry had been evacuated, and I had been forgotten in the panic, or else deliberately left to drown.

Everywhere there were doors left ajar, papers strewn in doorways, and in one office even a tea tray with mugs of cold tea and a plate of biscuits. I was powerfully hungry, and snatched the bis-

cuts from the plate with my teeth, not bothering to pick them up. The hours spent fed by drip may have kept me from starving, but my body still needed the old-fashioned form of sustenance.

On the next level up the decor changed, and the atmosphere with it. Here I found wood-pannelled alcoves populated by marble plinths and busts, portraits of unsmiling Victorian patriarchs in dark oils, past grantees of the organisation, I presumed.

This was one area of the Ministry that had been missed off my guided tour. There were deep carpets on the floor for one thing, and an air of reverential hush. In a side-room I found the walls crowded with framed maps of South America, and bookshelves stacked with volumes on seismology. Then, carved into the arch of an elaborately chiselled doorframe, I saw the armadillo, its limbs bound together like a tied hog. I stopped to stare at that strange image, and understood that Grunewald had not lied to me. The Ministry were not all they made themselves out to be. The further I explored this wing of the Ministry, the more I realised just how right the old man had been. The armadillo was repeated in paintings, sculptures, and what I could only describe as altarpieces.

Eventually I penetrated into the central chamber, an octagonal room set with rows of hard pews surrounding a vast armadillo carved from some flinty, mirror-like black rock, and raised on a stone plinth. I saw the armadillo motif everywhere: carved in relief into the wooden wall panels, even woven into the pattern of the carpet. I was, I realised, in a chapel. I found it hard to imagine Miss Carstairs and Hollings kneeling here before this idol, praying to the great armadillo that lay trapped beneath the earth's crust. And praying for what, exactly? For earthquakes? What kind of believer would wish to bring such wanton and unpredictable destruction to the earth?

Rivulets of water trickled down the oak wall panels, snaking round the raised outlines of an armadillo, and spreading a dark, damp patch across the carpet. I was still horribly thirsty, and without thinking about it I rushed over to the wall and sucked up the trickle of water. It tasted

clean enough, and I lapped it up noisily, but the next moment a sudden scream made me freeze. I shuffled round to see Miss Carstairs framed in a doorway, with half a dozen Ministry men rushing into the room.

"You said you hadn't been followed!" yelled an older man, a stranger to me, but clearly senior to Miss Carstairs.

"I thought... I thought not..." stammered Reed. She stared with fearful eyes.

Hollings pushed past the crowd to confront me. Clumsily he wrenched a revolver from his inside pocket and pointed it at me.

The older man stepped forward and put his hand out to hold Hollings back. "Are you sure this is him?"

"It's him! Of course it's him!" said Miss Carstairs. "How could it be anybody else!"

I tried to raise my hands, to show I was unarmed, and walked slowly towards them, but Hollings pushed past his boss.

"Get back!" A shot rang out, but I thanked God that Hollings was no marksman. The bullet lodged itself somewhere in the wooden panel behind me.

"Please, don't shoot!" I tried to say, "I'm not armed!" But my throat still felt dry and sore, and I could barely speak. My voice emerged cracked and strange.

Whether or not I was understood, Hollings was not persuaded, fired again, and missed again. Unless Hollings was disarmed, the next bullet would surely find its target. I leapt at him.

"Jesus Christ!" yelled Hollings. He stepped backwards in a panic, throwing the gun in the process and tripping over his boss who managed to stop his fall.

"Out! Out! Lock the doors!" barked the senior man, and Miss Carstairs hustled the rest of the Ministry men back out the way they had come. I rushed to follow them, but the door slammed in my face, and I heard a key turn in the lock, and a dozen footsteps racing away.

I turned and looked around the octagonal chamber for another exit, but there was only the way I had come, and that led back down, underwater. I scratched along the wood panels, searching for some hidden catch, some clever

mechanism that would open another hidden door, but there was none. I was trapped. The black statue of the armadillo seemed to hover over me like some malicious predator, and in its gleaming surfaces I fancied I caught a fleeting reflection of a creature horribly familiar, antennae waving, mandibles opening and snapping. I span around, but no monster stood behind me. Was I losing my mind? The Lakemother was dead, I reminded myself. I had watched it burnt alive. But there were always the eggs. The eggs were still unaccounted for. Had they hatched? If so, I thought, then we were all doomed. But there was still a chance the brood had not yet emerged, and could be destroyed. I vowed to myself that if I ever escaped from this subterranean labyrinth, I would track them down. I would torch the whole clutch.

In the meantime I had to stay sane. I at least was not being eaten by giant woodlice. As for the rest of London, of England, I could not say.

I thought about the way I had come up. There were no unexplored corridors, no doors left untried. The only route I had not thoroughly explored lay four floors down, a set of concrete steps leading into the water. By now the whole corridor would be totally submerged, but perhaps it led back up to another exit elsewhere. It was a slim chance, but a chance nonetheless. I began to retrace my steps.

I had never been much of a swimmer at school, so I had every reason to be apprehensive about what I would find on the lower levels. It was worse than I had anticipated. The water had risen almost a full storey behind me. I would have to swim underwater, while at the same time navigating the twists and turns of the Ministry's corridors, making sure that I did not make a wrong turn, and hoping that I would find an air pocket before my lungs gave out.

As I waded down the steps into the water, it struck me that I would probably die here.

The water was shockingly cold, but once I was fully submerged, my body began to warm up to compensate. Swimming underwater was surprisingly easy, and I wondered why I had never tried it before. From the surface the water had looked murky and dark, but I had little diffi-

culty seeing where I was going. I glided around corners, pulling myself along using door handles to thrust away from. I felt strong and graceful.

My breath held for longer than I had hoped too, and I found a lift shaft with several seconds of breath to spare. I bobbed on the surface, filling my lungs, as I looked up into the vertical corridor of the lift shaft. Far above me, on one of the upper floors, a tiny rust-coloured square marked the underneath of the lift car. Sounds of running, dripping, lapping water echoed down the shaft from every floor. I wondered whether, if I just floated here on the surface, the rising water would gently lift me up to street level. But that tactic held its own dangers. What if I failed to force open the outer doors that led from the lift shaft to the corridor?

I had a better idea: I could climb. There was no maintenance ladder running up the side of the lift shaft, but a series of metal girders and struts provided several easy holds. It was a long way up, and there was no guarantee that the doors would open, but what other options did I have? I could continue to explore the flooded levels, looking for a new stairwell, but it was an uninviting prospect, and I had a powerful urge to get up and out of the rising water. I heaved myself onto the first steel strut, and began to climb.

My old enemy vertigo barely troubled me as I made rapid progress up to the next level. Climbing felt exhilarating. It was almost as easy as crawling along the floor. My original plan had been to force open the doors at the next level, but by the time I reached them I had changed my mind. What was the point in that, when this vertical tunnel might well take me all the way up to street level? I looked through the sliding metal-grille doors into another nondescript, austere corridor. I could see no signs indicating what level I was on. For all I knew, I was still deep beneath the surface.

I pressed on, enjoying the physical exertion. Soon I was very nearly dry again. The brown square of the lift car slowly grew, and I counted each set of sliding grilles that I passed. By the time I could touch the lift car I had climbed nine storeys, but could have easily tackled another

nine without breaking sweat. I wondered at my body's capacity for such feats of strength and endurance when placed in acute danger.

There was a narrow gap between the lift car and the wall of the shaft, and through this I squeezed, emerging onto the roof where the car was suspended on two thick, greasy steel cables. As I had suspected and hoped, the lift manufacturers had built an emergency door into the roof. It was designed to be used from the other side, by passengers trapped within, but I quickly pried it loose and clambered down into the car.

The lift had its own set of doors, and these were locked shut, but somehow I managed to pull them apart, and slip through the gap. The doors slammed shut after me, and I squinted, blinded by a powerful light. When my eyes adjusted, I found myself in the opulent marble lobby of the Ministry, the very same place Freddie and I had first set foot in months ago. The place was deserted, but daylight streamed in through the revolving glass doors. I stood for a moment lost in thought, considering my next move. I had crawled upwards through ten storeys of pitch darkness, but had managed to see without the slightest trouble. Had there been some hidden light source back there in the lift shaft?

I dared not linger too long. I was still on the run, and now there were two organisations hunting me down, for reasons that I still hardly understood. The Ministry thought I was an agent of the Vrtaal, in possession of Scherlasky's last secret. The Vrtaal thought – well, I couldn't even begin to guess their intentions.

Whatever their plans, they had made an impressive start. Outside the Ministry the road was awash in several inches of water. Drains overflowed, and cars stood abandoned in the street. Somewhere nearby I heard the whine of a fire-engine, and glass breaking, but saw no human life. The area had been evacuated. Shops stood with their doors open, water lapping over the sills, but there were no signs of looting. The rain continued unabated, and the sky had turned an ugly shade of puce, clogged with churning, doughy clouds.

A Homing Instinct

So this was what the end of the world looked like. It was rather a disappointment. No divine hand reaching down through the clouds to pluck out the elect, no angels of death nor of mercy. Just a lot of dirty water, and that was enough to wash away all that humanity had built in its brief reign over the Earth. I wandered in a trance down the street, following a wide, shallow river that had replaced the road.

At the corner I spotted a dishevelled man in a mac running out of a butcher's shop with a leg of pork under his arm. My first reaction was outrage, but I quickly realised how pointless that was. Why not allow a man a last taste of meat before the sewage and filth engulfed us all? And, apart from my Ministry tormentors, he was the first human being I had seen for a long time.

I shouted to him, and began to jog down the street. I wanted to ask him where everyone had gone, what was happening. Was the rest of the country faring any better than this? Did the King still sit on our throne, and the Prime Minister in 10 Downing Street, or had my father supplanted both?

The scruffy young man turned and uttered a horrified cry.

"It's okay! I'm not the police! You're not in trouble!" But my voice was still dry and reedy from the hours spent in the dark room, and my words did not carry. The man dropped his prize into the knee-deep water and stumbled away in a panic, almost tripping over his own feet and landing himself in the murk along with his ruined meat.

I dashed after him, waving and hollering, but he was too fast for me, even in the rushing water, and when he rounded a corner and vanished I knew I would not catch him.

Was this what my father's machinations had reduced a once proud nation to? And where were the teeming London crowds? Dead? Evacuated to the country like wartime urchins? Lost in melancholy thought, I let my feet guide me, and when I looked up, I found myself at Monica's flat, on the banks of the Thames. The last time I

had been here, the river had been half a mile away, but what had been a sluggish brown ribbon was now a torrent, greedily sucking up tributaries from adjoining streets and swelling out across the South Bank. I saw the spire of St Paul's Cathedral stranded like an island in the stream.

Monica's flat stood four doors up from the encroaching Thames. I knew I would find the place empty, but I found the urge difficult to resist. The front door was ajar. That in itself was worrying. She had probably left in a hurry. The hall carpet was damp, but the water had not yet done too much damage here. I scampered up the stairs, calling her name, but the house was silent. It didn't look like she had done much packing: her fur coat still hung on the hook in the hall, and I had rarely seen her outside without it. In the bathroom I understood why: Monica was lying in the bath fully clothed, a red hole in her forehead. I backed out, mind a blank, unable to process what I had seen. In the guest bedroom I found two more corpses: young men in evening dress. They had all been killed in the same way. Someone had been looking for me, I guessed, but I was no longer so certain that my father was responsible.

I couldn't stay in that house for another moment, and raced back outside. The edge of the river seemed to have grown closer in the few minutes since I had last looked. What was I doing here? Now that I had escaped from the Ministry's underground dungeon I had allowed myself to drift. The spectacle of apocalyptic London had stripped me of any sense of purpose. Other lives were in peril, and it was up to me to save them. My mother was still locked away in the insane asylum. Grunewald too, for all I knew.

But perhaps many more lives hung in the balance.

If only I knew the location of those eggs!

A waft of rank sewage blew across the monstrous Thames, and I turned away repulsed, but then turned back, and analysed the foul wind. I smelled fear, human fear, and mud dredged up from the deepest, oldest drains, I caught the scent of rats, of rotting human bodies, and very

distantly, of the sea. And I smelled the Lake-mother.

Her eggs were nearby, I understood. The wind was heavy with her gross odour. Sniffing the air, I sensed the direction: downstream. Without hesitation, I waded into the water, and began to swim with the current.

The current was strong, and the water carried along a multitude of debris. There were more bodies than I could count, so many that I became immune to the sight, and only shrank away when they bobbed too near. But there were more surprising objects too: I spotted an upright piano, and even a red London bus which tumbled through the waves before tipping and sinking into the brown water.

The most heartening sight on my journey was a boat, a tiny wooden dinghy painted blue, probably salvaged from a boating Half a dozen children paddled it with planks and bits of driftwood. I called to them, and began to swim in their direction, but they did not see me until I was very close.

When they finally spotted me, they children let out a chorus of shrill screams, and one small boy, who could not have been older than seven or eight, fell backwards overboard with fright. Instinctively I reached out to grab him, but one of his friends managed to hold out an oar for him to grab before the strong currents carried him away or under. The poor wretch was hauled back in by a dozen hands.

The children were still looking at me with horrified expressions, and I tried to wave my friendly intentions.

"It's okay, I'm not trying to hitch a ride!" I shouted, but the roar of the surf swallowed my words, and the younger children continued to cry, while the older ones flung their paddles at me, shouting and yelling.

"Your paddles!" I cried. "Don't lose them! You'll need them!"

I considered trying to drag the whole boat back to the shore, but I doubted that I had the strength for it, and in any case the little boat had already drifted a good distance away.

With a heavy heart I turned my back then and sniffed the air again, catching the scent of the

Lakemother. Survivors of the flood, like those stranded children, wouldn't stand a chance unless I destroyed those eggs.

The river widened and darkened as I swam. Soon I would reach the sea, but the stench of the Lakemother, unmistakable on the wet, stinging wind, took me in a different direction.

I swam upstream along a broad tributary that cut through Northeast London, and took me out of the metropolis, into the suburbs. Here the flooding was more patchy. Some estates were underwater, with only the top storeys or even the roofs of terraces showing. In other neighbourhoods I found whole communities out in the street, passing buckets from hand to hand. I was gladdened to see that there were still some pockets of civilisation left in the country, that people were still willing to co-operate in the face of adversity, unlike the children on the boat who had fought me off like animals.

There was something of the spirit of the blitz alive amongst those suburban householders, chatting over mugs of tea while knee-deep in water, refusing to hang their heads. But while these people looked friendly enough, I steered clear of them. Some instinct told me that a stranger might not be welcomed with open arms. They would be worried about looters, and I was anxious not to be mistaken for a trouble-maker. My reasons for keeping myself hidden were not entirely rational. Something about the crowds made my heart race with fear.

Now and again, I heard an unsettling sound in the distance, the put-put-put of an outboard motor. No matter how far I swam, the sound seemed to follow me.

I skirted the edges of villages and towns, and ducked down beneath the water whenever I heard voices. One time, swimming through a flooded field, somewhere in Kent, I was surprised by a young boy who emerged suddenly from behind a stand of trees. He stood at the edge of the water, and we stared at each other silently for a moment before he raced off, shouting for his father.

I swam and rested, and swam again. I ate fish and eels, which barely made a dent in my appetite. Every so often, I caught the faint sound

of a motor, but the boat it was attached to always remained out of sight. I had reached Suffolk now, which had been reduced to an archipelago of tiny islands amidst an ocean of floodwater. Whole villages were deserted, ruined, or submerged. I went whole days without spotting a single sign of human life. It was easy to imagine that I had been transported back into some pre-historic era, until the top of a windmill or a stretch of fence emerged from the surface to spoil the illusion.

The stench of the Lakemother was constantly with me now, and I knew that the eggs must be near. Would my father be there too? I considered what I would do if I found him. I could not imagine that he would be there alone. The Lakemother's eggs were a precious commodity, and I anticipated a large Vrtaal entourage in tow.

It took me a while to notice that the rain had stopped. At first I was jubilant, and filled with hope: perhaps the Vrtaal had exhausted all their supplies of silver iodide. Sooner or later the floodwaters would subside, rivers would drain into the sea, and the country could begin its recovery. All was not lost: I had seen that for myself. Civilisation had survived, at least in the minds of men if not in their institutions.

But my initial optimism faltered. I wondered whether this was merely another stage in my father's plan. What would come next? A plague of the Lakemother's offspring? Well, there had been no sign of them yet, and if I had anything to do with it they would never see the light of day.

Norfolk was still a lake, and even though the sun had been shining for several days, the water levels were not obviously dropping. I found myself drawn towards the coast. I could taste a faint tang of salt in the water as I pushed east towards Kings Lynn. The growl of the outboard motor still haunted me. Sometimes now it sounded very near, as though it ought to be within sight, but thick banks of tall reeds and bull rushes obscured my view, as well as providing me with hiding places. I spent more and more time in hiding, sitting perfectly still, listening. I no longer doubted that I was being

followed. I didn't feel comfortable swimming out in the open water. It was too exposed.

The spire of a church sat on the horizon like a beacon, and I steered towards it. I had lost count of how many days I had been in the water, and my strength was beginning to ebb. I only hoped that my instincts were not mistaken. The church was not the only building to escape the water: it was surrounded by a small island of stone cottages. The town, what was left of it, was silent, deserted. I needed to find a safe refuge, a place to rest, to build up my strength while I worked out my plan of attack. The whole town reeked of the Lakemother now, an acrid, sickening stench in the water and in the breeze. It was all-pervasive, and ceased to guide me to its source.

Emerging onto dry land after so long waterborne, the streets felt strange and hard. I explored the dead town on foot, and felt uneasy and an uncomfortable drying out sensation. So it was a relief when I discovered what seemed a perfect hide-out: a derelict boat-house, partially submerged, where I could lie comfortably in the shallow, lapping water, in the gloom, listening out for any approaching intruders. Through gaps in the wooden slats of the walls I had a good view of the surroundings. It was an unobtrusive house, half-hidden by reeds and an overarching willow. Even better, there was just one exit to guard: barn doors that led out onto a muddy gravel path.

I had seen no sign of the Vrtaal yet, but I had no doubt they were near. Perhaps this was just one of their strongholds. Other eggs might have been dispersed across the country. I would have my work cut out if that was the case, but surely I was not alone in wanting to rid the world of the Vrtaal.

I thought again about Miss Carstairs and her colleagues at the Ministry. So they had kept quiet about their peculiar religious inclinations, and yes, they had tortured me and left me to drown in their dungeon, but their aims and mine still coincided, I thought, to a certain degree. My romantic intentions towards Miss Carstairs were long dead. I thought less and less of that kind of thing, and times I had spent with Monica seemed like scenes from another life. Perhaps I had

become so used to my own company, that the idea of being so close to another human being was queer, even repulsive.

I spent a whole day fishing, laying in stocks of crabs and eels before I withdrew to my deliciously dark house to rest, and wait. The Lakemother smell was everywhere now, in the water, on me, in the air. I stopped noticing it. For a long time, all I heard was the slap of water against the walls of the boat house.

Then, a familiar, unsettling growl grew in volume, as a motor boat approached. Was it the same vessel that had dogged me across the country? This time the voice did not recede, but came nearer and nearer. The voice of the motor was joined by other voices too, human ones.

At first I wondered why I could not understand what the men were shouting to one another. Then I realised that they were not speaking in English, but in Spanish.

Were they hunting the Vrtaal? Were they the Vrtaal, hunting me? I could not say, nor ask them, nor make myself understood. The sound of the motor was abruptly cut, and there was a period of shouting and the sound of reeds crushed underfoot. I backed into a dark corner of the shed, as I watched the doors swing back, and blinding daylight flooded in.

It only took a glance at the first man's profile, angular and noble, for me to realise that these were Peruvians. They were dressed like gauchos, wearing leather fedoras and roughly woven, multi-coloured ponchos. They moved briskly about, tying ropes, blowing cigarette smoke, shouting instructions and complaints, too busy to notice my presence. I was reminded of my kidnappers, Mr Boss and the rest of the bandits.

I understood that they were preparing to store their boat in here. It was the perfect place to keep it out of view, but ready to flee at short notice.

They struggled to drag the boat up out of the water. I tried to count the voices, but it was a bewildering task, and I was too flustered to think clearly. What if I was discovered here? Would they assume the worst? I had little hope of defending myself against men like these. Were

they bringing the eggs, or taking them somewhere else?

For a moment, I was left alone in the boat house. Excited by the possibility that my goal was so close at hand, I began to creep out of the water, sidling along next to the wall of the boathouse. There was a conveniently located crack between the slats where I could observe what was going on outside. I reached up to peer through the gap.

Half a dozen men stood waist deep in the reed-clogged shallows, struggling with a small fishing dinghy. All but one were hard-faced Peruvians, swathed in dripping wet ponchos. The last was an Englishman, at least by his dress, a tweed suit, wax jacket and waders, a rifle strapped across his back as though he were out for an afternoon's duck hunting. He stood with his back to me, a little stooped, out of breath, one hand on his chest. One of the Peruvians dropped his rope and went over to the old man, putting a broad hand on his shoulder. As the white man turned his head, I gave an involuntary cry of recognition. Of course, it was Grunewald.

I had shouted out loud with joy and surprise, but a horrible, strangulated squeal emerged instead. What was wrong with me? Had I contracted some throat infection from the water? Floodwaters were notoriously unwholesome.

At once there was a cacophony of angry cries from beyond the wall. I heard Grunewald's whiskery voice crying in triumph. "That's one of them! Very close! Quick, in the boathouse! Surround the building!"

I heard the clunk of the rifle before I lost my head and made a dash for it.

Far from blocking my path, the first man flung himself flat against the wall of the boathouse to let me through, a look of terror on his face. Outside I confronted another two Peruvians armed with branches. I dodged their blows easily and scampered between them.

As I ran down the muddy path, I heard Grunewald's voice bellowing behind me, then a series of rifle shots. I dared not turn round, but I knew Grunewald and the others were still in pursuit. What had made the old man turn on me like

that? Surely he had recognised me as I emerged from the darkness! Did he think I had deliberately abandoned him at the Marriston Asylum?

I realised that the gun was probably being reloaded, and redoubled my efforts. Instinctively I headed for the Church spire, which was visible from all over the island. If the Vrtaal eggs were anywhere, it would be there. If I could only reach them, then Grunewald and his men might understand that I was on their side.

I had spent so long in the water that movement on dry land quickly sapped my strength. My legs slipped and skidded on the muddy surface. I reached the brow of a hill, and could see the whole of the Church, or at least what was still above the water, which reached halfway up the stained-glass windows along the nave. With any luck all the entrances would be well underwater: my pursuers would have a harder time than me gaining access.

As I was just feet away from the water's edge, pain lanced through my back like lightning. I heard the thunder of Grunewald's rifle, and knew I had been hit, a lucky shot.

It wasn't over. Somehow my legs were still moving, the road still beneath my feet, and the church spire loomed above me. I splashed into the water with enormous relief, swimming down with powerful strokes, feeling waves of pain pulsating through me from the bullet wound.

I dove down, into the silence and darkness. The pain was easier to bear, down here in the gloom. A few shafts of light from the surface flickered down, illuminating a stone porch. Typed notices were still attached to a cork notice board with drawing pins, advertising the Christmas raffle, asking for volunteer flower-arrangers for the altar displays, giving the times of Sunday services. All cancelled now, all irrelevant, the congregation gone, the lucky ones evacuated, and the rest at the bottom of the lake. I expected to join them soon. I was losing blood fast. I could taste it in the water.

But there was a job to do first. I swam through the stone porch, and squeezed through the open door, into the drowned building.

The church was alive with activity. Dozens of isopods had gathered here. They swarmed

around the pillars. The tiled floor teemed with them, antennae waving excitedly, in a feeding frenzy. I looked to see what they were eating, then quickly looked away. I swam up to the surface.

It was like surfacing in a swimming pool. My splashes and ripples echoed from the oak roof beams. There was a logjam of dark pews near the altar, and water-logged hymn books clogged the surface of the water like dead leaves on a pond. One of the isopods, a crustacean as large as a man, addressed me from atop the pulpit.

"Welcome, brother," she said. "You're rather late. You've just missed the hatching, I'm afraid. They're up in the bell tower, out of harm's way. They can't live in the water yet, of course, not until they're grown. You look like you're not long out of the cocoon yourself."

"I came out of a dark room," I said. "I'm swum a long way."

"We all have," said my sister. "But we're all together now, at last. Why don't you go and pay your respects to the newborns? Just follow those stairs to the top."

It hurt to climb the stone steps, spiralling upwards. I left my blood on every step. I was dying. At the stop step I sank to my stomach. It was agony to breathe. I looked up to see a vast black bell in a small stone chamber, with arched windows offering glimpses out onto endless stretches of water. Cold air whistled through the chamber.

A few feet away the shadows hovered around a still puddle that had gathered where a flagstone was missing. My throat was parched. I shuffled forward on my bleeding carapace and bent down to drink. The Lakemother gazed back up at me from the other side. I twitched my long antennae, and the monster copied me. In my reflection

I saw mandibles opening and shutting like a lobster, and the bulging, malevolent eyes of a bluebottle.

A sound roused me, a familiar cry. There, in the corner, were the eggs, grey leathery sacks, torn and flaccid.

With my mandibles I pushed aside the slimy remnants of the eggs. There, lying on the bare stone, were six human babies, three boys and three girls. One of the infants opened his eyes, saw me, and began to cry. The others followed suit, writhing with their tiny wrinkled hands in the air. How could they survive? We had no way of feeding them. I closed my eyes and tried to shut out the sound of their crying.

I came to when I heard the gunshots. I was too weak to move. The shooting seemed to last a long time. I heard my brothers and sisters slaughtered, and could do nothing about it.

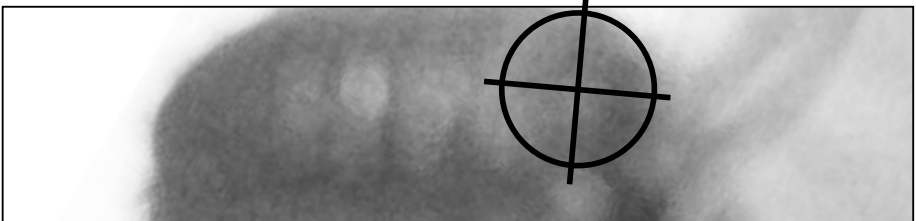
The Peruvians began to shout as they climbed into the bell-tower and found me lying there. They shouted even louder when they saw the babies I was desperately trying to shield.

The men stood around, waving their guns, but I knew they would wait for Grunewald's instructions. He took a long time climbing the stairs. When he emerged, he was leaning on the arm of another young Peruvian man whose face was suddenly familiar to me.

All I could do was wave my antennae as Grunewald came forward cautiously and gave me a kick. When I failed to respond, he gave the order, and the younger men leaned over me to scoop the children into their arms, wrapping them quickly in the folds of their ponchos.

I saw Grunewald hand the rifle to his companion. And I saw the face of my friend Ricardo as he took aim.

TRF



The Quarterly Review

Mass Effect

Bioware (dev.)

US, Xbox 360

Star Trek games always seem to disappoint. Bafflingly, they nearly always seem to be based around huge ponderous spaceships blasting chunks out of each other (though I seem to remember a first person shooter based on Voyager a while back). That stuff used to be great fun when it appeared in the programmes and the early movies, at least until it started to be shown up by the more epic, frantic and exciting space battles of Babylon 5, but it was far from the crux of Star Trek's success. The true appeal of Star Trek lies in the human – and alien – interactions: emotion, drama, punch-ups, moral dilemmas, romance, conflict, humour, and, last but not least (and the one that seemed all too often forgotten in recent iterations of the franchise) sex appeal. Mass Effect is a game that relegates the huge spaceships to cut scenes and concentrates on the stuff that really made Star Trek great, adding to it huge lashes of the good stuff from Battlestar Galactica, Babylon 5 and Star Wars, not to mention a big dollop of prime David Brin. It's the most "sci-fi" game I've ever played, and I think many science fiction fans would get a great deal of pleasure from simply watching the cut scenes edited together into a movie, never mind actually playing the game.

But let's move onto the game anyway, because it is worth playing! However, it says much about it that after 80 hours of playing it I feel barely qualified to comment. I've gained about 840 of its 1000 achievement points and yet, without mastering the sniper rifle, using the full range of biotic attacks, or partnering up for the game with Liara the lovely Asari or Wrex the unlovely Krogan, I feel that there's a lot left for me to do.

Reactions to the game (leaving aside the hilarious "porn simulator" nonsense brewed up by idiotic American conservatives) have tended to follow a certain pattern. Initially most people tend to be underwhelmed – you can see that in Edge magazine's disappointed seven out of ten, in reactions from gamers on Digital Spy, and in the negative review from distinguished Xbox writer Dean Takahashi. I felt the same way.

At first to me the fighting felt uncontrolled, the weapons unbalanced, the graphics a bit too choppy. I don't like to play strategy games that don't give you time to make decisions – I'll always prefer turn-based to real-time strategy games. I didn't feel like I was ever in control of events during Mass Effect's combat.

Then, a mission or two into the game, I realised that while selecting my weapons and powers the game was paused, and I could move the cursor around with the joystick to pick out different targets for my attacks, and the attacks of my team. Suddenly, from being a bunch of buffoons chasing robots round and round crates, we became a crack tactical squad, knocking enemies flying with our telekinetic powers, lifting them into the air, blowing up their guns, and knocking them down with our shotguns. From that moment the game got better and better. There's a sheer glee to unleashing one powerful attack after another (balanced with the tension of anticipating the equally powerful attacks of your enemies) that makes Mass Effect a wonderful and addictive game to play.

That pretty much seems to have happened to everyone. In the latest issue of Edge the game is described as "the absolute best flawed game of the year". A poster on Digital Spy who started a thread by the name of "Mass Effect – Yawn-or-Rama" in December returned in January to say he now loved it. And Dean Takahashi posted a follow-up review explaining how wrong he had got it the first time around.

One reason for such changing views is the process I mentioned above – simply getting to grips with the mechanics of the game. Another reason is that the game gets more and more enjoyable the stronger your powers get.

This adds immensely to the game's replayability. If you choose, you can start a new game with the character and equipment with which you ended the previous one. So if you built up the appropriate abilities in the previous game, you can start smashing robots into walls like marbles from your very first encounter with them. Hence my second play-through was when I began to really love the game.

It's a fairly short game, by RPG standards, which at first I thought was a bad thing. My first play-through, checking out every anomaly, scanning every planet, chasing down every mission, only took about thirty hours; and I tend to play games quite slowly. My second, a sprint through the main missions on a higher skill level, skipping through the conversations I'd already heard, took just twelve hours.

At that point, what had seemed a failing in the game, became a plus point: it's a game that's designed to be replayed, to be played through and through as different characters, with different powers, and in different ways.

It's hard to say why I think that's a good thing, because I don't like watching movies I've seen before, and I don't like reading books I've already read. So let me give you an example of a game that takes a different approach: *Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*. I love the *Elder Scrolls* series of games, and I've put over a hundred hours into this one, but if there's one thing I'm not massively keen on, as a former player of traditional paper and pencils role-playing games, it is that you can do absolutely everything the game has to offer in a single play-through. You can play as a warrior, rise to the top of the fighter's guild, and then join the mage's guild too and rise to the top of that, often bludgeoning your way through the tasks assigned because your magic won't be up to it. That's great fun, of course, such free-spiritness is integral to the game's design, but it bothers me because with every additional career ladder you scale in

Oblivion, the less sense you have of yourself playing a role, the more you're just playing a game. (Of course, that was partly my fault for choosing to play *Oblivion* that way: I could easily have started a new magic-based character to play the mages guild missions.)

The converse is true of *Mass Effect*. If you're playing as a soldier, you don't get telekinetic powers of your own. You have to choose teammates whose abilities will complement your own. Next time around, you could have your own telekinetic powers, or you could specialise in technical attacks, or you could continue to build the talents of your existing character. The length of the game means that it isn't a chore to start over, but rather something to relish. It's more akin to starting a new game of *Civilization IV* than it is to restarting a *Final Fantasy* game.

All in all, *Mass Effect* has been a fitting end to three or four of the best months of gaming I can ever remember: *Halo 3*, *Bioshock*, *The Orange Box* and *Mass Effect*, not to mention a couple of brief dalliances with *Pixeljunk Monsters* and *Pro Evolution Soccer 6*. The last time I enjoyed gaming so thoroughly and unreservedly for such a long period was probably back in the 1980s, after my Dad brought home a ZX Spectrum and two C90s full of copied games.

Reflecting on that a couple of nights ago, I began to wonder: if you had a Spectrum that could run *Mass Effect*, what length cassette would you need to load it? – *SWT*

Back to You

Fox
US, TV, 30mins

I previously wrote that everything good & interesting about *Superman Returns* could have been done just as well in a low-budget indie movie. Well, my point is proved by *Back to You*, a new US sitcom. Kelsey Grammer plays a newsman who returns to his home town and old job after a long time away, only to find that he unwittingly left behind a child. The mother hasn't married a hunky X-Man, but apart from that... – *SWT*
