

Pangea
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Pangea and Almost Back

By

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Pangea

and almost back

as told by

M.A. Singh

Author's Note

I can't say how I met Freddie O'Toole. That would put the lives of too many good, and some not so good people, in grave danger. Even though many of them are already dead, it is a risk I am not prepared to take.

It is enough for now to simply say that I have met Freddie and that at the end of that amazing encounter, he looked me in the eye like a Lycaenops at lunchtime and cried, 'Singh, you are the most splendid fellow I have ever met!' (He was a very perceptive young man.) 'I beg you; write my story for me, before it's too late!'

Having not much else to do, I felt obliged to say yes.

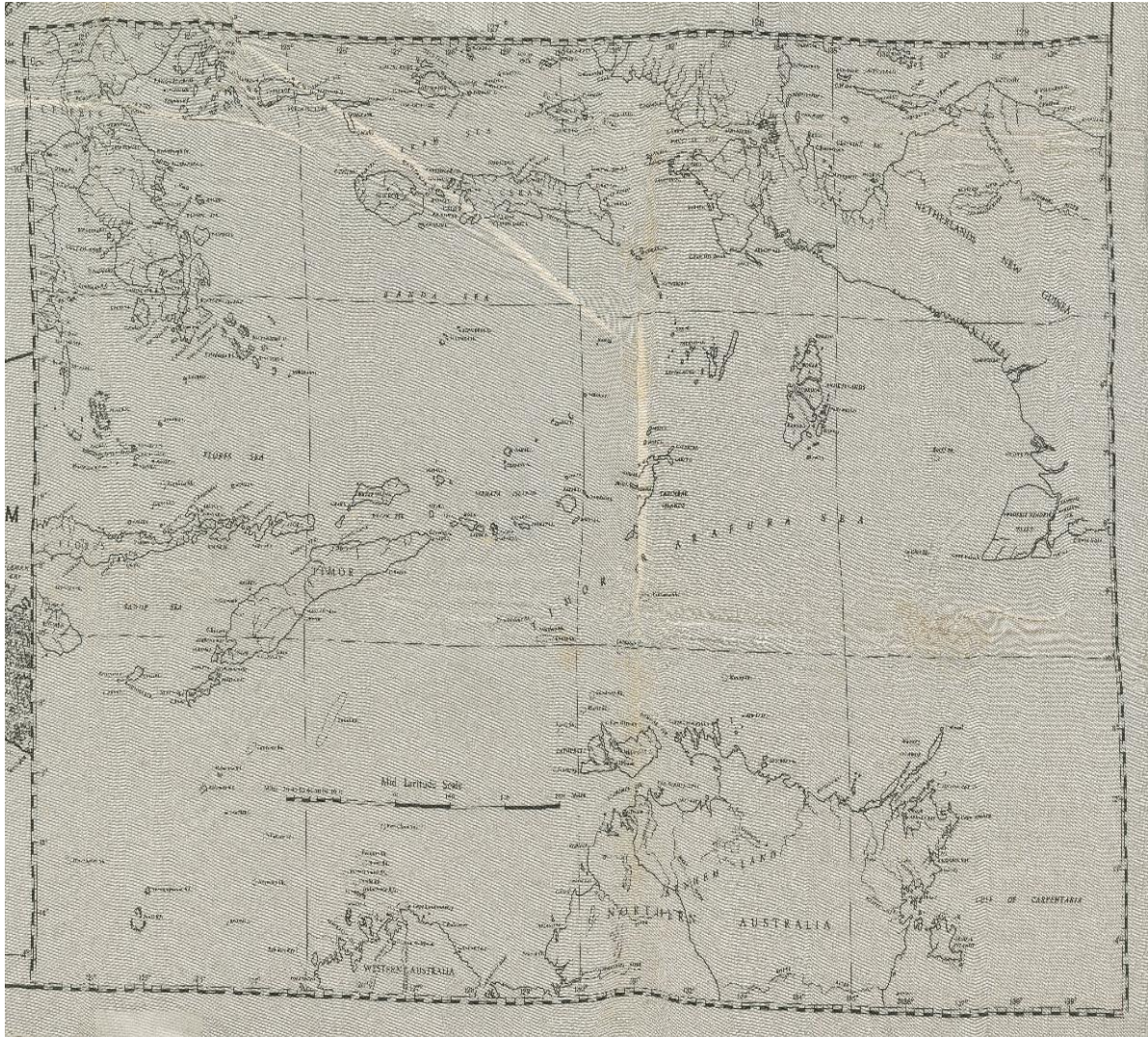
'But there is a catch,' I quickly added. 'We are both only human and there will be times, when even your memory'—I tapped his head—'let alone my memory of your memories'—I tapped my head—'may be a little iffy. At those times, I can promise no more than to simply make do as best I can. At other times, to join the whole thing up, I may need to add a little here and there. I can see no other way round the thing than that.'

'That will do me Singh,' cried Freddie, shoving a scrappy and curiously stained and smelly notepad into my hands. 'Just write the blazing thing near enough, and I shall be happy enough.'

I stared at the notepad for a few moments, wondering about the crusty stains splattered across its cover, and when I looked up, he was gone.

This is a story without a real beginning so I might just as well start with the day that the travelling carnival arrived in town . . .

Part One: An Unfortunate War



1. Professor Dupler's Bungalow, Darwin * Holocene¹, 1942 A.D.

Polishing skulls is not a big job in most households.

Not so in Professor Dupler's.

He had the second largest collection of human skulls outside the British Museum and—at the exact moment I have chosen to begin this account—Freddie O'Toole was polishing one of the ugliest skulls in that collection. Yellow as old toenails, with a large gaping hole just above the eye sockets, about the same size as the head of a Tongan battle axe. Whale bones, tied by dead vines, filled the gap where once there had been a nose. Spooky white feathers hung from the scalp, where once there had been hair.

Freddie shivered as he placed the skull into a box marked 'done', and screwed the lid back on the Professor's secret skull polish. The fumes were making him feel a little woozy.

He had been working on the skulls all morning at an old card table which wobbled on granny-legs near the front window. He liked to work there so that he could sometimes stare through the dusty pane of that window and dream about being somewhere else. That is exactly what he was doing after finishing that last skull, when a sudden noise caught his attention.

'What's that?' he asked the other occupants of the room.

Neither of them heard him, so he stood up, walked out onto the veranda, and peered into the grey heat blurring the ends of the street. Everything looked so exactly like it always did that he thought his ears were playing tricks on him.

'Blazes,' he muttered, stomping his feet on the grey timber boards.

¹ Current Epoch of the Quaternary Period—11,700 years ago right up to now. (Editor)

Then, just as he was about to return to the skulls, a dented, red-dusted truck turned into the street. It was soon followed by more trucks and cars, some even more badly dented. Most of them were towing just-as-smashed-up caravans. Their horns honked, and a megaphone from the top of one of the caravans bellowed that:

‘THE TRAVELLING CARNIVAL IS BACK IN TOWWWWWN AND OPEN FOR BUSINESS ON THE FORESHORE THIS VERY AFTERNOOOOON!’

Freddie raced inside to tell his guardian.

‘Professor Dupler, the carnival is in town—can I pleeeeeease go?’

‘What was that?’ cried the Professor.

Freddie had lived his entire life with people who never heard anything he said the first time round.

‘Can I please go to the carnival? It just drove down our street and it’s going to be open this afternoon.’

The Professor had not seen the carnival go by because he was hidden behind a pile of books at what should have been the kitchen table. In one hand he held a sketch of petroglyph carvings that he had been studying for the better part of the morning. In the other he held a cup of tea with which he had already managed to stain the sketch, several books, and his safari shirt.²

Apart from his new glass eye, the Professor was an ordinary looking fellow of average height with a bushy, grey beard. The scrap of face that hid behind that beard, was slightly scrunched; making him look like he had just lost something of great importance. He

² The books were still laid out on the table when I visited the house after the war as part of my investigation into the disappearance of Professor Dupler. Of particular interest were Colum O’Toole’s *The Coincidence of Mysticism* and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s *The Lost World*. The petroglyph sketch, however, was nowhere to be seen. (M.A. SINGH)

was the sort of man who did not normally approve of anything that you or I might consider fun. It was, therefore, quite a surprise to Freddie when the Professor stuck his head out from behind his pile of books, pointed his new glass eye at him, and said, 'yes.'

'Do you mean I can go—*today*?' asked Freddie, looking doubtfully at the Professor.

'I can't see why not,' said the Professor, scratching at his beard and almost smiling. 'It will be a valuable learning experience.'

Freddie screwed up his face. He knew there had to be a catch.

'But—before you go—make sure you put your backpack in the tray of my utility. I am expecting a telegram at any moment giving us the go-ahead for the expedition I have been telling you about.'

Freddie cocked an eye so high that one of his ginger brows lost itself in his ginger mop of hair. The Professor *had* promised to take him on an expedition that summer. When he had first told him, Freddie had shot from his chair like the Flash and packed his things that very night. He had not even minded that the Professor had refused to give the exact location other than to say it was somewhere in the East Indies, which is, of course, a rather large place.³ It was also the place where his father had disappeared seven years earlier but Freddie had tried not to think about that.

Instead, his dreams had been filled with monkey-swinging jungles and tiger-stripes rippling through thick, swaying grasses. As the summer dragged on, however, the expedition was looking more like just another of the Professor's empty promises.

³ The East Indies is made up of over 24,000 islands between India/Malaysia and Australia. (Editor)

‘Gruntenguile will accompany you to the carnival, of course,’ added the Professor. He grabbed his cane from the side of the desk and pointed it at Gruntenguile as if there were someone else in the room of the same name.

‘Gruntenguile,’ groaned Freddie. ‘*Why?*’

Gruntenguile was Freddie’s crusty manservant and had been ever since his father had returned with him from an expedition to the East Indies just before he had disappeared. Freddie had been stuck with Gruntenguile ever since. He was a very short, dark fellow with a grizzled beard like a badger’s backside. He farted almost as often as he breathed and was, in Freddie’s opinion, the grossest and most useless manservant ever.

‘Wouldn’t it be better if Gruntenguile stayed back and tidied up the place a bit?’ asked Freddie. The kitchen bench was covered in three layers of rotting food and grotty utensils and, from where he was standing, Freddie could count the carcasses of at least six dead cockroaches. The most likely cause of death—food poisoning, from Gruntenguile’s cooking.

‘The house is fine, Little Boss,’ said Gruntenguile, slobbering on a candy cigarette while exploring his belly button for fluff. He was laying on the sagging couch, which was also Freddie’s bed. ‘Besides,’ he continued in his disarmingly perfect English, ‘My work contract states that my job is to keep you alive and how can I do that if I am not by your side . . . grrrnt?’

‘But it’s only a carnival?’

‘Pifflegrunt,’ said Gruntenguile.

‘He’s right you know,’ said the Professor, as if anyone can be right when all they say is ‘pifflegrunt’. ‘Besides, there’s a most unfortunate war going on, in case you hadn’t noticed. We could be attacked at any moment. Here’s some money—make sure you get yourself something healthy to eat.’

2. The Carnival

Later that day, with Gruntenguile doing two steps to his one beside him, Freddie strode to where the carnival had pitched its many-coloured tents on the Darwin foreshore.

Things, if they moved at all, moved slowly under the hot sun. Even the red dust stirred by slow-moving trucks and cars took its time to settle.

‘Do you ever feel like you should be somewhere else?’ asked Freddie.

‘Like sleeping on the couch? Yes, I do . . . grrrnt.’

‘That’s not exactly what I meant,’ said Freddie. ‘I was thinking of somewhere a little less bug-eyed boring.’

Gruntenguile glanced up at Freddie with his sharp, bright eyes. They seemed a little oversized for the rest of his face. ‘Grrrnt . . . perhaps if you had been somewhere a little less *bug-eyed boring* you would change your mind.’

Freddie frowned his disagreement.

‘Besides, Little Boss, we are going to such a place right now,’ said Gruntenguile, pointing ahead to where the carnival was already in full swing.

The sounds of that carnival had been growing louder with each step. At the same time the crowd had been swelling and as it did so it seemed to charge towards the tents faster and faster as if there was a prize for being there first. (Which there wasn’t.)

Looking around, Freddie saw families walking, hand in hand, and children looking excitedly up at their parents. Some cast strange glances at Gruntenguile—perhaps wondering if he were with the carnival. For a moment, a leaden feeling weighed on Freddie’s heart, but he shook it off, as he always did, and kept walking.

He was glad that he did because soon he was walking beneath a large flapping banner which read:

Swami Sittami's Carnival of Curiosities

The first thing Gruntenguile did when they got inside was remind Freddie of the need to eat.

‘What?’

‘Let’s eat . . . grrrnt,’ said Gruntenguile.

‘Do you honestly think that’s a good idea?’ asked Freddie.

‘What do you mean . . . grrrnt? If you don’t eat . . . you die.’

‘Yes, but in your case Gruntenguile, if you don’t eat you don’t . . .’

‘Don’t what?’

‘Pass quite so much . . . gas.’

‘Little Boss, you make me laugh. The things you worry about . . . The expulsion of a little biological gas is perfectly natural. Ah here we are! Real food!’

Gruntenguile stopped in front of the sweets stall. It was a caravan with a large open window and a narrow wooden counter. Leaning on that counter was a runny-nosed girl sucking on a Choo Choo Bar.

Freddie’s hand slipped to the pennies in his pocket as he ran his eyes over the wall of treats behind the runny-nosed girl. There were not so many thanks to the war but at last he found what he wanted. It was a plain white and purple lettered bar of Cadbury’s Ration Chocolate. He pulled three pennies from his pocket, slid them across the counter, and pointed to the chocolate bar. The girl wiped her nose and bit Freddie’s pennies before handing over the bar of chocolate and, surprisingly, the half-penny change.

Freddie was about to tear the wrapper off and eat it straight away but Gruntenguile stopped him with a wave of his hairy-backed hand. ‘Save it for later,’ he said.

‘But it will melt,’ said Freddie.

‘Not if you put it in this.’ Gruntenguile handed Freddie a silver bag with a draw pull at the top.

‘What is it?’ asked Freddie.

‘A bio-freeze bag—you should never leave home without one . . . grrrnt.’

‘Where do you get this stuff?’ asked Freddie, popping his chocolate into the bag.

‘Never you mind, Little Boss,’ said Gruntenguile. ‘Now, let’s buy some lunch.’ Then, turning and pointing to the mountain of fairy floss in the machine, he said, ‘I’ll take the lot.’

The runny nosed girl twirled all of the fairy floss onto just two sticks and handed them over. Then she stared blankly for a moment before turning to serve the next customer.

‘Let’s go,’ said Gruntenguile.

‘How do you do that?’ asked Freddie, when they were out of earshot.

‘What?’ asked Gruntenguile from behind his giant cloud of pink sugar.

‘Buy stuff and then get the seller to forget that you haven’t paid!’

‘Is that what happened, Little Boss?’ asked Gruntenguile, poking a winking eye out from behind his fairy floss.

Freddie would have insisted on a better explanation but at that moment they arrived at the attractions board.

Gruntenguile read them out loud.

‘World’s Fattest Man—on lunch break . . .

‘Strongman—not feeling well . . .

‘Swami Sittami—see the Swami lay on a bed of nails, walk a ladder of swords, and perform surgery on himself. Not suitable for children. Starting now!’ Gruntenguile looked at the pink cloud hiding Freddie. ‘This looks perfect . . . grrrnt,’ he said.

He thought for a moment, then, seeing how quickly the tent was filling, he paid the man at the door a shilling and stepped through the opening into the tent. It smelled of incense and stale sweat.

‘Get those spots down the front . . . grrrnt,’ said Gruntenguile.

Ducking to the side, Freddie dashed to the front row and claimed the middle seat. Gruntenguile sat down beside him, stuffing the last of the fairy floss into his mouth. This would normally have caused Freddie some concern, but he had already been distracted by a more disturbing sight.

3. Swami Sittami

Directly in front of Freddie a crate stage rose about a foot above the trampled buffalo grass that carpeted the tent. On that stage stood a stretcher like those used in hospitals. The difference was that this one was not padded on top but covered with pin sharp nails pointing upwards into the dimpled and tattooed back of Swami Sittami. The Swami's eyes were closed as if he were sleeping but his shallow breathing suggested otherwise. His body and legs were naked and joined in the middle by a large, white loincloth.

'The heat in here is "in-tents",' said Gruntenguile running a snotty handkerchief across his bristled face. The other members of the audience were also mopping their brows as they sat down but Freddie noticed not a single drop of sweat on Swami Sittami.

Soon everyone was seated except for some boys at the back who were still fighting over their seats. The biggest of them—a freckled boy whose pants were pulled tight under his stomach by straining suspenders—was the first to claim his seat and notice the Swami. 'I don't get the point,' he shouted, nudging the boy next to him in the belly with his elbow. 'Get the point,' he repeated, noticing the blank looks on his friend's faces. 'Get . . . the . . . *point*.' The repetition was useless.

'Get on with it,' cried the boy next to him, rubbing his belly.

'If you insist,' cried the Swami in a voice so deep and splendid that the audience was hushed to silence. At the same time, he lifted his body from the bed of nails like Count Dracula rising from his coffin.

'This demonstration will not last very long—'

'Jip!' yelled the freckled boy from the back row. Some in the audience glared at him but he did not notice.

‘But,’ continued the Swami, ‘I hope you think about the things I show you for the rest of your days. Who knows? Something may even prove useful.’ He flashed his dark eyes across the audience but Freddie thought they rested on him for a second or two longer. Below his right eye was a quarter moon tattoo. It reminded Freddie of something but he could not think what.

The Swami lifted himself from the table and in three steps made his way to an A-frame ladder. Freddie had not paid it any attention before but he could now see that the rungs of the ladder were short swords with their curved and very sharp blades pointing upwards.

‘Would someone be so kind as to check the blades before I climb this ladder?’

‘I’ll do it,’ cried the freckled boy at the back, springing to his feet.

Then he scrambled and pushed his way through the crowd to get to the front. Finally, he reached the stage. He hopped up and ran his eyes along the length of one of the blades. Then, grinning stupidly at the audience, he ran a plump, pink finger along the same blade, before quickly pulling it away as it sliced into his pudgy flesh. ‘Ouch!’

‘Are you satisfied that the blade is razor sharp?’ asked the Swami.

‘It’s sharp alright,’ he said, sucking the blood from his finger.

‘Thank you. You may sit down.’

‘I might just sit down right here,’ said the boy. He winked at his mates in the back row and plonked himself down on the stage, right next to the ladder.

‘As you wish,’ said the Swami, turning and raising a foot to start his climb.

But before he could place it on the first rung, the boy shot out both hands and grabbed hold of the Swami’s foot. ‘Just checking,’ he said.

‘Do not worry about my feet,’ said the Swami. ‘I climb this ladder with my spirit; not my feet.’ The Swami then stepped onto the ladder and, rung by rung, climbed to

the top. Once there he sat and crossed his legs; swami-style. Closing his eyes, he meditated for a few moments while the boy closely inspected the sharp lines of contact between the two top blades and the Swami's buttocks. He was completely confounded. The crowd gasped and squirmed in their seats. Once this gasping had faded to stunned silence, the Swami's eyes sprang open and he climbed back down, flicking his fingers at the audience to show that applause was quite beneath him. The boy made his way back to his seat, shaking his freckled head at his mates.

'I have just one more demonstration,' said the Swami. 'Does anyone have a crown coin in their pocket?'

'I have!' Again from the freckled boy at the back. He found one in his pocket and held it up as undeniable proof.

'Could you please check the date on your coin and then inform the venerable members of the audience of that date.'

It was dark at the back and it took a bit of squinting and checking from his mates until he finally announced, '1939'.

'May I now borrow that coin?' asked the Swami. No one could refuse such a voice.

The boy flipped the coin with his thumb to the stage where it was caught by the Swami. This in itself was enough for some in the crowd to break into applause.

The Swami was not one to beat about the bush. He briefly raised the coin to the audience and then threw it into his mouth. He swallowed and shook his head. 'Would anyone like to inspect my mouth to check that I *have swallowed* the coin?'

'You never said you were gunna do that!' cried the boy at the back. 'I coulda bought a week's worth of candy cigarettes with that!'

Freddie hopped onto the stage and inspected the Swami's gaping mouth. There was nothing there apart from a couple of gold fillings and tonsils. Freddie turned and gave a thumbs-up to the audience before hopping back into his seat. When he turned back to the stage the Swami's eyes were closed and he had fallen into a deep trance. His body was as thin and still as a corpse but for one arm and hand which took on a life of their own, like a snake that had been grafted to his body. The fingers of this hand were joined at the tips, making a shape like a snake's head and they worked their way in a prodding, circular motion into the Swami's stomach, until, as sure as Freddie lived, and to the gasping amazement of the audience, the Swami's hand cut into his flesh.

Freddie saw blood oozing out and soon even some guts. The Swami's hand twisted round inside him and Freddie watched with his mouth open so wide it was a small wonder his brains did not slide right out. A lump was moving across the Swami's taut brown stomach. It moved in searching circles until it suddenly swelled as if the Swami had clenched his fist and then slowly he drew his arm out of his gut. Freddie looked for mirrors or anything else that might be tricking his senses but he could see nothing; only the steaming hand of the Swami holding the freckled boy's slimed and bloodied crown coin before the stunned audience. The Swami wiped the crown on his loincloth, leaving a pale red stain, and threw it back to the boy in the back row. 'Is that your coin?'

The boy showed the coin to his mates as if he had lost faith in his own eyes. They nodded their heads. He turned back to the Swami and said, 'It's my 1939 King George crown . . . as sure as I'm sittin' here.'

'Thank you for your time and open minds,' said Swami Sittami before bowing grandly and climbing back onto his bed of nails. Once there he closed his eyes and this time Freddie had no doubt that he intended to take a nap.

There were a few seconds of stunned silence after this abrupt end to the show.

This was broken by a low and tight screeching noise.

‘Gruntenguile!’ said Freddie. ‘Couldn’t you wait till we were outside?’

‘It’s not me, Little Boss,’ said Gruntenguile. ‘It’s the air raid siren.’

4. Escape

Outside the tent the air raid siren was drowned by the screams of the escaping crowd. That sound was like an avalanche rolling through the exit and Freddie rolled with it until he made it outside. For a moment he stood, staring at his shaking hands and waiting for his brain to start working again.

Men, women, and children ran in every direction, yelling at daughters, sons, brothers, sisters, friends, even people they had just met, to keep moving. Freddie felt like he was the only one who could not move. Glancing about him, he looked for some clue to help him decide what to do next. Then, out the corner of his eye, he saw something racing his way. It was a big American car like those he had seen on Dick Tracey films at the Star Theatre. It was bullet-grey like it had not been painted and was heading straight for him. People in its way had to dive to the side or be run over.

Freddie stared at its hard, silver bumper as it flew towards him. There was no doubt that it was intent on running him over, but he could not move.

‘Can you see now why you need a bodyguard, Little Boss?’

Freddie looked down and saw that Gruntenguile was still by his side. It was nice knowing someone was there, but what could he possibly do?

The car was closing fast.

Freddie could almost see his reflection in the silver bumper when, suddenly, a black flash appeared to the side. The crowd split to let it through and Freddie saw that it was Professor Dupler’s jet black utility. The drivers of the other car did not see it until it was too late. They looked across just as the Professor rammed the front end of their car, buckling their fender and sending it into a flip. The Professor had always been an impatient and often angry driver but Freddie had never seen him do anything like that before.

Recovering control of his utility the Professor swung the steering wheel to the left. The tyres slid into the damp grass, ploughing furrows as they went. Crunching back a gear or two, he sped to where Freddie and Gruntenguile were waiting.

‘Get in!’ he cried, leaning across and flinging open the passenger-side door.

Gruntenguile hopped in first and, noticing that the cabin was filled with stuff from the Professor’s office, he yelled for Freddie to hop in the back.

‘Why is it always me that has to ride in the back?’ complained Freddie.

But there was no time to argue as the utility was taking off with or without him. Freddie scrambled over the side of the tray and landed alongside Roger, the Professor’s display skeleton, and right on top of a jungle machete. Luckily it was inside a thick canvas sheath.

Overhead, between 8,000 and 9,000 feet, the enemy bombers flew in neat formation. Unseen from below, the bomb bay doors opened and released their deadly droppings. Before they were half way to the ground the planes circled back to the aircraft carrier, making room for the next wave.

The bombs rained through the steel-grey sky onto the harbour, growing bigger as they fell, until finally they hit their targets. Explosions scattered shards and shattered bodies and black plumes of smoke billowed skywards. The smell of burning oil choked the air.

Sniffing the air, the professor yelled, ‘I hope that’s one of the oil tanks on the harbour and not us!’

Struggling to drag the machete out from under his backside, Freddie wished the Professor cared as much about him as he did about his utility.

Looking back towards the harbour he saw sailors aboard another ship running like ants before a big storm. A plane strafed them with machine gun fire and the ants stopped

like they had been sprayed. Freddie turned away. His stomach heaved. Sweat beaded his brow. All about him, houses blazed and sparks plumed out from them. The smoke was everywhere now, stinging Freddie's eyes and choking his breathing.

The Professor looked at nothing but the road ahead. He dodged bomb craters and kept his precious utility as far from the flames as possible. One bomb landed near the back wheels and the shock waves sent the utility flying a couple of feet off the ground. Freddie and Roger the skeleton bounced high into the air. If Freddie had not grabbed hold of Roger's shin bone it would have been the second end of him.

Through all this it was pedal to the metal all the way.

The screaming planes and the explosion of bombs crashed together in a deafening roar which grew louder and louder. 'Blazes!' cried Freddie every time a bomb exploded nearby. 'Blazes . . . blazes . . . blazing blazes!'

Freddie felt like he had asked Professor Dupler what was going on but then he realised he had only thought about asking. Clambering to the driver's side window he peered into the cabin. Professor Dupler's good eye ran laps in its socket like it wanted to escape, but his glass eye stared coolly at the road ahead. Gruntenguile sat alongside him reading a book.

'Who was in that grey car?' shouted Freddie.

'What?' shouted the Professor.

'The grey car! Who was in the grey car?'

'I would have thought it was more of a silver colour, not unlike the war-paint used by Kokonoko—'⁴

'Silver, grey, polka dot, who cares?' cried Freddie, banging his fists on the side of the utility.

⁴ The Professor was much given to pompous anthropological references like this. (M.A. SINGH)

‘It’s important to be accurate,’ cried the Professor. ‘But as to who they are? I’m not sure. I’m new to this game and I’m not sure who else is playing.’

‘Do you at least know where we’re going?’ yelled Freddie.

‘What?’ shouted the Professor. ‘You’ll have to speak up. I can’t hear you over all the explosions.’

‘Where are we going?’ Freddie almost shouted his tonsils out his throat.

‘The expedition, Freddie! I reminded you again just this morning. I wish you’d pay attention.’

‘Did the telegram come through?’

‘Not exactly,’ replied the Professor, ‘but if we don’t go now, we may not get another chance. By the way, your backpack *is* back there somewhere, I hope.’

Freddie looked down and found his backpack where he had put it that morning, but it was now squashed under a pile of artefacts. It contained no more than a change of clothes and a few survival items; a toothbrush, a torch, a Band-Aid, and a note pad and two pencils. Reaching back, he opened the pack and shoved the bio-freeze bag containing his chocolate bar inside.

‘It’s here!’ cried Freddie. ‘But where are we going?’

‘Our first stop is the civil airport—’

‘Won’t that be a target for bombing?’

‘Yeeees . . .’ drawled the Professor. ‘That is definitely one of the downsides of this plan, but where else are we going to get a plane?’

‘A plane? You expect us to *fly out* on this expedition—in *the middle of a bombing raid?*’

Freddie looked across at Gruntenguile, hoping that he might be more reasonable. It was then that he noticed the title of his book—*How to Fly a Plane: A Beginner's Guide*.

Freddie flopped back onto the tray of the utility and looked up as another squadron of bombers flew overhead. There was a flicker of movement on the underside of the planes. The bombs dropped and, once more, black dots choked the sky. The free-falling bombs were even more terrifying than the explosions. When they exploded you at least knew that they had missed you. When they were falling there was no telling where they might land.

Nearing the airport, the smoke grew thicker and blacker. Surely they were too late.

The speed sign on the locked gate read 15 MPH. Professor Dupler crashed through it at 80. Inside, diesel-stained workers ran in all directions. Fire engines screamed. Smoke billowed. Fire crews did not know which flames to get to first. As one fire was put out, many more were ignited. An officer ran from a building and signalled for the Professor to turn around but he careered past him and turned on two screeching wheels in the direction of the hangars. Most were alight but one seemed almost okay, with only a slight puff of smoke trickling from the back end.

‘Looks like it’s our lucky day,’ yelled the Professor.

Professor Dupler parked the utility some distance away. He hopped out and ran straight to the front to check his newly dented fender.

‘If I catch up with whoever started this damn war—’

‘Professor, we must hurry,’ cried Gruntenguile, who was already half way to the hangar.

Freddie was not far behind him. He had his bag in one hand and the machete in the other. Something told him it might come in handy. By the time he reached the hangar,

Gruntenguile had already opened the door. Peering into the dusty darkness Freddie saw a small plane. It was a De Havilland Moth bi-plane. A nice enough plane for delivering mail to outback stations but it looked antique alongside the quick and deadly A6M Zero fighters that were now buzzing overhead.

Gruntenguile held his book open in front of him as he checked the fuel tank and inspected the propeller. Nodding like it was a good thing that the plane had both of these items, Gruntenguile turned to Freddie and asked, ‘Have you ever flown in a plane before . . . grrrnt?’

Unable to speak, Freddie shook his head.

‘That makes two of us,’ said Gruntenguile.

Freddie turned to the Professor. ‘Are you kidding? Gruntenguile can’t fly a plane. He can’t even operate a broom!’

‘You may find that Gruntenguile surprises you in the days ahead, Freddie. He is a rather unflappable fellow and that is something you will need. Besides, this is no time to be a worrywart. There is too much at stake!’

‘He’s right . . . grrrnt,’ said Gruntenguile. ‘Let’s climb aboard.’

Gruntenguile walked Freddie down the side of the plane and gave him a lift up onto the lower wing and into the front seat.

‘Why am I up front?’

‘It’s best not to have the pilot shot. According to this book, I can fly it from the back seat.’

Gruntenguile hopped into the back seat and propped his book open on the dash behind the steering wheel. At the same time the Professor raced to the front of the plane, Gruntenguile gave him the thumbs up, he cranked the propeller, and the plane roared into life.

At that same moment, it suddenly dawned on Freddie that there were only two seats.

‘Where are you sitting, Professor Dupler?’ yelled Freddie.

Professor Dupler looked up at Freddie from the floor of the hangar but he seemed a lot further away.

‘I probably should have told you earlier.’ The Professor yelled to be heard over the roar of the engine. ‘I am not coming. It’s just not . . . possible. You will receive two sets of instructions. It is not wise to know everything at once. The first set of instructions and a map are in this envelope. Do not look at either until you get to your first destination. If you are in danger of capture, destroy them both as best you can.’ The Professor handed the envelope to Freddie before stepping back from the plane and flourishing his cane in the direction of the bomb-ploughed runway to indicate that it was time to get moving.

The most recent wave of bombing had stopped and a fresh squadron of planes was growling over the harbour.

‘Time to go,’ yelled Gruntenguile. ‘This lot is coming in low. I’m guessing that means dive bombers.’

‘Good luck,’ yelled the Professor, jumping clear of the plane as it drove onto the runway. ‘Don’t worry—when the time comes—you’ll know what to do . . . I think.’

‘What time?’ yelled Freddie. ‘And *how* will I know what to do?’

‘You . . . just will. The trick is to trust in your instincts,’ yelled the Professor. Then he hesitated as if struck by a sudden doubt. ‘. . . And one more thing . . . Don’t trust . . .’ The 60 horse-power engine roared and swallowed the end of the Professor’s sentence.

‘Don’t trust who?’ But Freddie could not even hear himself. The engine was screaming and rattling like a banshee and he watched helplessly as the Professor slid away from him. His glass eye; trained to Freddie like a lizard’s to a fly.

Gruntenguile never gave the Professor another thought. He could see the enemy Zeroes bearing down on them. He prodded Freddie in the back and pointed ahead.

‘Say what you like . . . grrrnt; they are beautiful planes,’ he said, whistling admiringly. ‘Who knows where progress will take the human race . . . grrrnt?’

Freddie didn’t say anything but he was thinking that progress was going to get them killed. He had always fancied himself to be brave at heart, like Captain Marvel facing the Scorpion’s curse, but at that moment his courage deserted him. His heart beat hard against his rib cage. His skin prickled. His mouth ran dry.

The Zeroes were coming in low and strafing the tarmac with their 7.7mm light machine guns. Freddie looked down at the plywood fuselage of their biplane. It offered no protection.

Gruntenguile stopped at the head of the runway and they both peered into the cloudy confusion of smoke and attacking warplanes. Freddie had an even better view in the front seat.

The air whizzed with bullets.

Oily smoke stung and wrung tears from Freddie’s eyes.

Gruntenguile had only one plan, if you could call it that: fly low and hope anyone attacking them ran out of ammo. He revved the Moth and waited.

‘Why are you waiting?’ yelled Freddie.

‘Take-offs are not ’til the next chapter.’

‘What?’

‘Just kidding, Little Boss! I’m waiting for the right time . . . grrrnt.’ As he spoke, Gruntenguile flicked through the pages of *How to Fly a Plane: A Beginner’s Guide*.

‘See how they’re wasting ammo. Soon as they’re almost out we’re going . . . grrrnt.’

‘But where are we going?’ screamed Freddie.

‘I can’t tell you that until we get there, Little Boss. In fact, I can’t tell you anything. My job is still just keeping you alive.’

‘Well if you take a look around I think you’d have to say that you’re not doing a very good—’

‘Hang on, Little Boss!’ yelled Gruntenguile, crunching the gear lever forward. The plane started to roll slowly down the runway. At first, Freddie thought they would never make it into the air but slowly the Moth gathered speed with a fury of noise and rattling and acceleration before suddenly hopping a couple of times, shaking like it was about to fall apart, and, finally, jumping up into the air like a startled goose. It dipped back to the runway once and Freddie braced himself for a crash but the motor growled with determination and they soared upwards over the stringybark trees and wrecked planes at the end of the runway. At the same time, *How to Fly a Plane: A Beginner’s Guide*, was caught by a gust of wind and blew out the back of the plane.

‘Damn!’ cried Gruntenguile.

‘Damn what?’ asked Freddie.

‘Damn good take off,’ said Gruntenguile.

Gruntenguile kept low and headed straight for the coast. There was so much confusion and smoke that Freddie thought it was possible that they might even sneak out unseen. That thought dropped to its knees in a hail of bullets when, looking ahead, he saw a Zero bearing straight towards them.

Gruntenguile tapped Freddie on the shoulder and handed him a flare gun.

‘This is all we got?’ yelled Freddie.

‘Not unless you thought to bring something better, Little Boss.’

The *ack-ack-ack-ack-ack*, of machine gun fire ripped the air. Gruntenguile banked the Moth and Freddie fired the flare directly at the Zero. It exploded in a burst of orange smoke just in front of the cockpit. The Zero swerved off course and careered past them.

Glancing down, the Zero pilot noticed a jet black utility parked on the runway just ahead. Not wanting to waste the opportunity, the pilot unleashed the remainder of the 20 mm shells from his wing canons.

A few seconds later the Professor's prized utility flew upwards—not in one piece but many. Looking back, Freddie saw no sign of the Professor.

Tapping Freddie on the shoulder to get his attention, Gruntenguile pointed down and Freddie saw that they had reached Fannie Bay. The wide ocean was screaming for them to hurry. He felt a moment's relief before foolishly glancing behind and seeing the Zero loop back for another run at them.

Ack-ack-ack.ack-ack—

Freddie turned around so that he could not see the plane approaching. He braced himself for a shower of bullets in the back and the end of everything.

Ack-ack...

Then nothing.

'Ha Ha!' yelled Gruntenguile. 'He's out of ammo.'

Freddie looked back and was surprised to see that Gruntenguile was standing. He was even more surprised by what Gruntenguile did next. He pulled his pants down to his knees and pointed his hairy backside at the enemy plane. 'You need some target practice my friend . . . Have a crack at that . . . grrrnt,' he yelled, pointing to his rear end.

'Best not to upset him,' yelled Freddie.

Gruntenguile pulled his pants up and sat back down. The sound of his gruff laughter mingled with the sounds of war as the plane flew through the smoke billowing up from the harbour and into the stormy haze building over the Timor Sea.

*

On the bomb-wrecked runway behind them Professor Dupler paid no attention to the danger still exploding around him. His good eye stared at the mangled hub cap in his hand. His glass eye followed the black speck of the plane as it disappeared into the tropical sky.

5. Arnhem Land (northern Australia) * September, 1941 A.D.

5 months earlier

Freddie had only ever been on one other expedition.

Five months earlier Professor Dupler had taken him on a field trip up the Alligator River. At the time he had not wanted to go.

‘*Why* do I have to go?’ he had whined.

‘Yours is not to reason why, Freddie,’ said the Professor. It was his usual response and it always caused Freddie to wonder why he could not reason why.

‘But . . . I’m scared of alligators,’ said Freddie.

It was true. As a child, Freddie had taken the bother to write a list which he had titled ‘Reptiles to Avoid in my Lifetime’. It was a big list and included scientific names in brackets, as well as details that might prove useful if he were attacked. Alligators had made it to that list even though they were shy creatures who slept most of the time. Freddie simply did not like the look of them.

‘Don’t be ridiculous—there are no alligators,’ said the Professor, knitting his brows at Freddie’s stupidity, ‘only crocodiles. There is an excellent book on them in the library—I suggest you read it before we leave.’

Freddie had already read the book and knew quite well that they were crocodiles. The two species of alligator lived thousands of miles away in China and America. Freddie also knew the story about how the river had been incorrectly named in 1820 by its white ‘discoverer’ Phillip King, who mistook the crocodiles for alligators. He just liked to bait the Professor every now and again and the easiest way to do that was to pretend to be stupid. As much as he did not like alligators or crocodiles, however, they were only a smoke screen. They were not the creatures he most feared.

Doctor Blight, Hoogleraar van Nutt, Lord Poonsonberry, and the other famous anthropologists who would be joining Professor Dupler on the expedition were the creatures he most wanted to avoid.⁵

Freddie tried a different tack. 'But I'll be the only one my age that's going.'

'Not so,' said Professor Dupler, fixing his glass eye on Freddie and smiling like he had good news. 'Doctor Wong is bringing her daughter.'

The air whooshed from Freddie like he'd run over a seven-inch nail.

'Lucy Wong! You can't be serious!'

Being an only child who did not attend school, Freddie had very little contact with other children. The only other young person he had seen much of over the years was Lucy Wong. Her mother, Dr Wong, had similar research interests to Professor Dupler and they sometimes worked together. She was a nice woman with round spectacles and an expression that suggested that she could never quite believe what she was hearing. Unlike most of Professor Dupler's anthropology colleagues who saw children as human tadpoles, Dr Wong seemed to enjoy Freddie's company. Unfortunately, Doctor Wong never went anywhere without Lucy.

The first time Freddie had met Lucy, he had been guided by the simple belief that there was good in everyone. Stepping bravely forward, he shook her hand. It was soft but firm.

Then, not knowing how else to amuse a twelve-year-old girl, he asked if she would like to take a look at his Buck Rogers comics.

⁵ Anthropologists are social scientists who study humans, both past and present. During this time, however, they were particularly interested in (what they called) primitive societies. (Editor)

‘You are *so* immature!’ she cried. She was right of course—he had only been thirteen years old at the time.

The next time they met he tried to impress her with how many push-ups he could perform. He was not even up to twenty when she huffed out of the room. Another epic fail!

This time she said just two words: ‘*You idiot!*’

‘You . . . *girl,*’ Freddie had said, quietly, as she huffed away.

Further catastrophes followed. Now, just the mention of her name made Freddy so nervous he could hardly remember what she looked like apart from the fact that she wore braces, which looked like the barbed wire barricades that lined trenches in World War One. Bits of food trapped in them looked like little corpses shot trying to make it over the top.

*

Despite Freddie’s objections, the next day he found himself hiking up the face of the Arnhem Escarpment. In patches, he was barely visible against the sandstone slope as he was dressed almost entirely in khaki. Specifically, he wore a khaki shirt and khaki drill army shorts that billowed out like parachutes and made his ginger-haired legs look insectivorous. The only thing that wasn’t khaki was his hat. It was one of those towelling hats often worn by fishermen who do not catch many fish. It was faded green like a little bush on his head and had a broad brim to shade the sun. Whenever Freddie stopped for a drink, he poured some water from his canteen over it to keep it wet.

Freddie’s backpack was extra heavy as it contained not just his things but also the Professor and Gruntenguile’s.

Apart from the heat and the load on his back, however, things were not as bad as they could have been. Firstly, he had survived the Alligator River. Secondly, Lord

Poonsonberry had been unable to make the expedition. German submarines were making it impossible for ships to leave England safely. It seemed to Freddie that Hitler was not such a bad chap after all. Unfortunately, however, there was no thirdly. Doctor Blight and Hoogleraar van Nutt *had* been able to make the expedition. Also, accompanying them was another anthropologist who Freddie had not met before. He was a chubby man with a monocle clenched in his right eye which gave him the appearance of a lopsided Cyclops. The rest of his fat head sat like an egg in an egg cup on a neatly trimmed van Dyke beard. He had arrived at the last minute and almost missed the boat. Everyone else seemed to know who he was but when he shook hands with Freddie he had not offered his name. His fingers in Freddie's hand had felt like raw sausages. A fresh scar that looked like something you should not ask about ran across the top of his right cheek.

These gentlemen had hung about Freddie like one of Gruntenguile's farts for most of the hike but they had now thankfully fallen behind, where he could hear them expressing their surprise at the very existence of Gruntenguile.

'Honestly, if I didn't know better I would say Australopithecus,⁶' said Dr Blight, inspecting Gruntenguile's head.

'More like ze missing link,' said Hoogleraar van Nutt.

'I can assure you I am very typical of my tribe . . . grrrnt,' said Gruntenguile, in the clear English which sounded so strange coming from him. 'Just part of the usual variation in the species,' he added, staring a little longer than he needed at Hoogleraar van Nutt's nose stretching towards him like the Malay Peninsula.

Freddie tried to ignore the ravings behind him and looked ahead to where even greater danger lay.

⁶ An extinct species of hominid that disappeared about 2 million years ago. (Editor)

Lucy Wong, sucking on the same peppermint she had popped into her mouth on the boat (without offering one to Freddie), clambered over the rocks about a cricket pitch in front of him without so much as a drop of perspiration. (Freddie's shirt was dripping like a rusty tap.) At least her braces were gone and, maybe in time, thought Freddie, her mouth might loosen up enough to crack a smile. She was dressed in jodhpurs with leather boots to the knees and a white shirt which still looked freshly ironed. Her hair was tightly braided into two short devil horns that jutted either side of her head. She scampered like a mountain goat up the escarpment, stopping only to allow her mother to catch up. Doctor Wong was not very old, but she was limping and stopped from time to time to rub her injured leg.

Normally she would have been walking with Professor Dupler but on this trip they had not said a word to each other.

This may have been because Professor Dupler was distracted by Doctor Claudia Bufon who was walking next to him, a few paces ahead of Freddie.

Doctor Bufon was a somewhat mysterious newcomer to the world of anthropology who had recently contacted Professor Dupler to discuss his work. The expedition to Arnhem Land had seemed like a good time for them to meet.

Professor Dupler who was never impressed with anyone seemed unusually besotted with her. She wore green coveralls pulled tight around her thin waist. On the river, she had worn a white turban. That had since been unfurled but her black hair remained in a tight bob with the exception of a few loose strands that had wiggled free. She blew these to the side of her face as she spoke to Professor Dupler.

'Shouldn't that boy be in schoooooool?'

'School . . . school . . .' cried Professor Dupler stabbing the air with his cane as if being attacked by schools at that very moment. He was unable to say the word a third time. He pushed his pith helmet, which was much too large for his head, above his hairline, as if

needing to ease the pressure on his cranium at the mention of the dreaded word. ‘Textbook loony-bins ruled by the disciples of straight lines that must never exceed the length of an exercise book! No, no, never; while he is with me he will learn by my method, Doctor Bufon.’

‘And what iiiis your method?’ asked Dr Bufon.

‘Observe and learn,’ said Professor Dupler. Glancing up, he pointed with his walking stick to a bird soaring on the afternoon thermals. Then he turned to Freddie and asked, ‘What bird is that, Freddie?’

‘Red Goshawk,’ replied Freddie, without a moment’s hesitation. It was, after all, a very easy bird to identify.

‘*Erythrotriorchis radiatus*,’ said the Professor triumphantly, as if adding an exclamation mark to his point. ‘It is my favourite raptor, Dr Bufon. Gaze on it while you can. It may not be with us much longer.’

Looking up, she saw the bird. Its burnished and dappled feathers looked magnificent against the stark blue of the sky but she did not look at it for long. Dr Bufon hated birds; they pooped on things and made horrible squawking noises at the most inappropriate times; like in the morning when she was trying to sleep.

‘Yes, but wouldn’t schoooooool . . . get him out from under your feet?’

‘The bird? From under my feet?’ The Professor had always had trouble with the rambling nature of casual conversation.

‘Not the bird, Professor—the boy!’

‘Oh I see. Well—he’s really not much bother. . .’ he mumbled. ‘I have a library of anthropological books for him to read and plenty of useful things for him to do.’

‘So, *whyyy are* you the boy’s guardian?’

‘I am not actually the boy’s official guardian,’ puffed Professor Dupler.

'Reeeally? Then *whyyy* have you got him?'

To Freddie it sounded like someone asking why someone owned a cocker spaniel.

'His father was Colum O'Toole—'

Doctor Bufon's long and elegantly curved eyelashes flicked upwards.

'Realllly—the Colin O'Toole...'

'Colum,' corrected Freddie under his breath.

'... the famous anthropologist?'

'Yes . . . a rather . . . eccentric fellow.'

'Realllly?' said Doctor Bufon. 'I wouldn't know. I have heard of O'Toole but I have never had the pleasure of meeting him.'

'Yes, a curious chap;' continued Professor Dupler. 'As I am sure you have heard. As bald as a Suri warrior on Donga day. And not much of a father, I have to say. He was always getting into fights, and totally useless at looking after young Freddie. They lived next door you know.' The Professor shook his head. 'One time I dropped some Easter eggs over for young Freddie. I knew his father wouldn't buy him any, but when I asked Freddie the next day if he had found any eggs it turned out that his father had eaten them all and made him pick up the wrappers.'

'Reeeally,' said Doctor Bufon.

'Another time I insisted that he buy Freddie a birthday present and guess what he got him?'

Dr Bufon scrunched her face to show that she had no interest in guessing games.

'A bottle of Blarney Whiskey! And a cigar! He was five years old for heaven's sake!'

Doctor Bufon arched her eyebrows.

‘Another time I had to go over and calm him down he was in such a rage with young Freddie. The poor lad had lost something but when I asked what it was he wouldn’t even tell me. That was the kind of fellow he was.’

During this conversation, Freddie’s hand had slid into his pocket and wrapped around his father’s pocket watch. The face of the watch nestled in the palm of his hand while his fingers ran along the engraved names of his mother and father on the back of the watch—Jane and Colum O’Toole—and the date—1921. It was a habit of his whenever he was reminded of his father. He wished he could also be reminded of his mother but he had never met her; she had died long before he could remember.

The Professor’s story had stirred a half-memory in Freddie. He could vaguely remember losing something but could not recall what it was. He could recall only his father’s fury and the veins bulging on the side of his shiny, bald head.

‘I can’t say I was surprised when he disappeared over Timor years later,’ continued the Professor before waving his walking stick at another bird perched on a rock ahead. ‘Jabiru.’

Doctor Bufon nodded briefly at the bird. ‘O’Toole was working with you at the time I believe?’ she asked, returning her attention to the Professor.

‘Yes. I was also part of the search party. We couldn’t find a thing. . .’ He paused before adding, ‘Of course, as you know; the area where he disappeared is swarming with head-hunters. Anyway, I tried to track down some relatives in Ireland. The mother by all accounts had died when the boy was very young in a car crash although . . . there was some confusion over the dates. Terrible record keepers, the Irish! I thought I might come across some distant relative at least but I kept drawing blanks. It was quite a mysterious affair in the end. While all this was happening, he moved in with me. That was six or seven years ago.’

‘I *seeeee*—so how then did you *aquiiiiire* that dreadful manservant?’

‘Gruntenguile? O’Toole brought him back from one of his expeditions. Told me he had no choice. His tribe were about to sacrifice the poor blighter or some such thing. He’s actually an illegal alien. The government doesn’t know a damn thing about him.’

Doctor Bufon looked back at Gruntenguile before casting a quick glance towards Freddie. He smiled at being noticed and she screwed her face into something like a smile back to him. She was a good-looking woman in a round faced, clear skinned, dark eyed, pouting lips kind of way, but Freddie felt uneasy under her cool gaze.

At that moment the Professor and Doctor Bufon caught up with Lucy and her mother. The latter was sitting on a boulder resting her gammy leg. Freddie expected the Professor to say something to his old friend but instead he gazed steadfastly ahead.

‘It appears you have had an accident since I saw you last, Professor,’ said Doctor Wong as the Professor strode past.

The Professor raised his hand briefly to his glass eye. ‘Yes,’ he said. ‘A branch flew back and skewered the old one like a pickle in a jar. Damn nuisance!’

It was not clear whether the ‘damn nuisance’ referred to the skewered eye or Doctor Wong.

This exchange, however, was almost unremarkable compared with the look that passed between Doctor Bufon and Lucy. It was a look so searching and *female* that Freddie had no hope of understanding what it meant. The only thing he could be sure of was that it did mean *something*.

The rest of the climb was made almost in silence. Attempts at conversation faded like the mirages shimmering and disappearing ahead. Freddie sweated so much he thought he might melt before he reached wherever it was they were going. Most of his solid body mass was still intact, however, when they at last stopped at a point where the ground

levelled off slightly some fifty yards or so before the top of the plateau. The entrance to a cave about the size of a car door stood before them. Spider webs netted the entrance and spears of sunlight lit the yellow bellies of their weavers.

The Professor waited for the party to gather in tight. Everyone did so apart from Gruntenguile who settled down on a nearby rock and, to Freddie's annoyance, took out one of his Buck Rogers comics (which he had borrowed without asking), and began reading. The Professor coughed, stared down van Nutt who was still debating the shape of Gruntenguile's head and began. 'What you are about to see, I believe, is *the* most significant anthropological site ever found in this country. Current theories, as I am sure you all know, about the arrival of Aboriginals to Australia guess at around 10,000 years BP.⁷ This has been supported by the earliest known artefacts found at places like Kow Swamp. We also know that this arrival seems to have taken place in a series of waves—'

'I believe there are some, Professor, who now believe in a more ancient date of arrival,' interrupted Dr Bufon, her forehead beaded with perspiration.

'Yes—yes . . .' the Professor nodded, 'but, what I am getting to Dr Bufon; what I am getting to . . .'

Dr Bufon's eyebrows arched upwards and her eyes looked to the sky. She blew the loose strands of hair from her face once more. Freddie saw this and a shiver ran up his spine like a little insect.

'What I am getting to,' continued the Professor, 'is that evidence in this cave suggests a date of arrival much more ancient than even the previous most generous estimates.'

⁷ Before Present (Modern readers of this story will no doubt know that more recent estimates go back at least as far 60,000 years.) (Editor)

The Professor stepped back; his glass eye sweeping his audience. The eyes of his listeners boggled. It was thrilling news.

‘How ancient?’ asked Lucy Wong, her big brown eyes bulging.

Freddie shook his head. A gathering of the world’s leading anthropologists and Lucy Wong is the one asking questions.

‘Now that’s a good question!’ replied Professor Dupler. ‘Perhaps it’s time to go inside and have a look.’ That said, the Professor brushed aside the spider webs and disappeared into the cave like a sideshow magician.

At the same time an overwhelming desire to enter the cave washed over Freddie. It wasn’t the Professor’s speech that inspired him. It was something altogether different. As he stood listening to Professor Dupler it was like something had awakened inside him. It was not so much a thought but a feeling in his gut. The rest of the party, however, hesitated and gathered around Dr Blight, who was closely examining one of the spiders through his field magnifying glass.

‘Doss anyone know vot species is dis? I hev not seen it before,’ said Hoogleraar van Nutt, who had moved closer to investigate.

The fellow with the van Dyke beard stepped forward and examined one of the spiders through his monocle as sweat dripped from the pudgy tip of his sun-burnt nose.

‘I am quite sure they are not poisonous, gentlemen.’

‘How do you know,’ asked Dr Blight, standing a few paces back.

‘It’s a long story but I can assure you, I have seen them before.’

As this discussion took place, Freddie jumped forward to follow the Professor. He would have been the next in the cave had he not been cut off by Lucy Wong.

‘Ladies first,’ she said.

Freddie bit his tongue and let her go in front of him.

Inside, the cave was so dark that he could see nothing for a while. Some light filtered in through the entrance but this was soon blocked by the arrival of the others who had decided to brave the spiders. Outside, Gruntenguile could be heard laughing at Buck Rogers.

The Professor did not switch on his torch straight away. He waited for everyone to squeeze into the cave. As they did, Freddie's eyes slowly adjusted to the dim light and he started to make out a faint shape in front of him. As the outline of that shape became clear, he realised the incredible significance of the Professor's find.

'Blazes!' cried Freddie. 'It's a spaceship!'⁸

Gasps of excitement and disbelief followed this news. Eyes strained to see Freddie's spaceship.

'Calm down!' cried the Professor. "There is no spaceship! If certain people are not going to take this expedition seriously, they can jolly well march back down the escarpment right now and swim back to Darwin for all I care. And good luck to the crocs!'

'You pathetic moron!' hissed the spaceship so close to Freddie's face that he could feel her hot minty breath. His eyes had now adjusted sufficiently to the light to enable him to see two furious eyes in the middle of the spaceship.

'Blazes!' groaned Freddie to himself. It was Lucy Wong. Looking into her glaring eyes he realised that he had only *thought* that she did not like him before. Now she *really* did not like him and there was nothing he could do or say to make amends. Unless, of course, he could travel back in time.

⁸ Freddie's conclusion had no basis in anthropology, or any science for that matter, and was entirely based on his reading of Buck Rogers comics. (M.A. SINGH)

Dr Wong had entered the cave by now and she put her hand on Freddie's shoulder. (Freddie could not imagine how much that poor woman must have suffered over the years.)

Luckily the Professor switched on his torch at that point and held it club-like over his head. As Freddie's spirits sank, his eyes followed the beam upwards. He promised himself that no matter what he saw, he would say nothing.

When the light finally came to rest, it illuminated a sight so extraordinary that the small group inside the cave became as still as the walls that surrounded them. Only their mouths moved, flopping open like clams in a hot-pot. A few tried to gasp but the air needed to do so would not leave their lungs.

Two waves of understanding washed over Freddie at that moment. The first was the jaw-dropping enormity of what he was seeing. The second was a mind-blowing realisation that he knew what it meant.

Freddie glanced around at the rest of the group to see their reaction but after looking into the glare of the torch, all he could see was fuzzy darkness. He was about to raise his eyes once more to the image on the wall when something caught his attention. It was a tiny dot of light reflecting from a glass eye.

6. Timor * 1942

Memories of that earlier expedition to the Arnhem Land cave stirred in Freddie's brain like a spoon in a half-boiled egg as he pulled his backpack on and dragged himself out of the partly submerged cockpit.

'What sort of a landing do you call that?' he spluttered, paddling clear of the whirlpool created by the sinking wreck of the plane.

'A successful one, Little Boss,' said Gruntenguile, spitting a baby catfish from his mouth. '*And* we are roughly where the Professor told me to land, although I wish he'd mentioned that there was no air strip . . . grrrnt. Now, follow me . . . and be quick about it. I'd like to get to shore before the crocs realise they have company.'

Freddie's backpack weighed him down in the water and one hand was clenched around his towelling hat but finally he splashed his way to shore and lay panting on the slimy bank with Gruntenguile alongside him.

'Blazes! What now?' asked Freddie.

'I think it's time to check your instructions and that map the Professor gave you at the airport.'

Freddie reached into his shirt pocket and took out the sodden envelope. He removed the instructions and unfolded them.

'What's it say, Little Boss?'

Freddie stared blankly at the sheet. The ink had run so badly with the water he could not make out a single word.

'Don't worry, Little Boss. If the map is okay, I think we can still work things out . . . grrrnt . . . maybe.'

The map, though smudged in parts, was still readable. It covered an area of only a few square miles. In one corner lay a meandering river which Freddie guessed was the one they had just crawled out of and in the opposite corner, near a smaller river, was a large X which marked their destination. It partly obscured a drawing which seemed to be a sharp weapon of some sort.

‘I guess we should head towards the X,’ said Freddie.

‘Yes, but first I think we should get those leeches off your legs . . . grrrnt.’

Looking down Freddie saw that his legs, from his jungle socks to the hem of his drill pants, were covered in slimy, blood-sucking creatures.

‘Blazes, Gruntenguile, how do you get these things off?’ cried Freddie slapping at his legs.

‘Calm down, Little Boss! Just grab their heads at the narrow end and they pull off quite easily.’ Gruntenguile pulled the first few off and then suddenly stopped, leaving Freddie to finish the job.

After Freddie hurled the last of the leeches into the river he looked up to see Gruntenguile looking up and down the length of the river which curved in either direction into a dark tangle of green jungle. Insects buzzed in the heavy air but apart from that, the only sounds were the occasional shaking of a branch or the shriek of unseen animals. Ripples and bubbles and the occasional splash broke the surface of the river but not a creature could be seen.

Stroking his straggly beard, Gruntenguile looked intently at a point some distance away near the inside bend of the river. At first sight it looked the same as the rest of the jungle but on closer inspection Freddie noticed a scar of broken jungle running in from the bank.

‘It’s okay, Little Boss, I think I know where we are. Follow me.’

Gruntenguile made his way along the bank towards the broken trees that marked the start of the scar. Freddie followed, still glancing down at his white legs now dotted and streaked with blood. He only realised that they had reached the scar when he bumped into Gruntenguile. Looking up he immediately saw why his crusty manservant had stopped in his tracks. Thirty yards into the scar lay the wrecked remains of an aircraft.

‘A DH.85 Leopard Moth, if I’m not mistaken,’ said Gruntenguile.

‘I thought you didn’t know anything about planes?’

‘I don’t,’ he replied, ‘I just know that’s the plane your father was flying when he disappeared . . . grrrnt.’

‘Oh . . .’

Freddie had not cried when his father had disappeared.

Disappearing is not like dying and his father had disappeared a few times before. Besides, no one around him had shown any emotion—certainly not Professor Dupler and his anthropology colleagues. They had been too busy coming up with theories about what might have happened. But now, standing in that heat-steaming scar in the middle of the jungle and looking at the wreck of the plane his father may have crash-landed in, seven years of buried hope welled inside Freddie.

He raced past Gruntenguile, and crashed through the stunted regrowth of the scar to get to the plane. Both wings had been torn off in the crash and the cockpit had been flattened. Jumping up the side Freddie looked into the cockpit not knowing what he expected to see.

For a while he stared through the shattered window in silence.

Then, slowly, he turned around to face Gruntenguile who was still making his way up the scar.

‘Nothing,’ yelled Freddie.

‘Not so loud, little Boss.’

‘Why? I think all the monkeys are already awake.’

Just as he said that, a poison dart whizzed past his ear and thwacked into the side of the plane. Freddie watched the tiny feathers on the end of the dart quiver before turning, to see what Gruntenguile was doing.

He was running.

Freddie took off after him as more darts thwacked into the side of the plane.

Gruntenguile reached the jungle and threw himself into its dark-green embrace. For a moment, Freddie lost sight of him.

‘Blazes,’ he cried, but then to his relief he once more caught sight of his surprisingly speedy manservant splashing ahead of him. Freddie ran as fast as he could. He had to stay in touch with Gruntenguile or . . . he didn’t like to think what might happen.

Sweat sliding down the small of his back like a wet snake, Freddie raced down the sodden trail, slashing his machete at groping vines to clear his path. His heart pounded in his chest. His lungs sucked in the hot, sticky air in short, gaspy gasps.

Swoosh...

Thud...

Twang...

More darts swooshed past him—thudding into the giant trees which lined the trail. One stabbed into his backpack.

Despite all this, Freddie’s mind still tumbled with thoughts of the wrecked plane. Had it really been his father’s and, if so, where were the bodies and how did Gruntenguile know it was his father’s plane?

It may not seem like a good idea to be pondering all these things when you are running for your life from a seemingly blood-thirsty tribe of what turned out to be Snapahuti

head-hunters but it is better than thinking about what might happen when they caught you. Like being hit with one of their darts and dying a painful death in the boggy middle of nowhere. Like having your head chopped off by a blunt axe, and becoming a slave in the afterlife—for all eternity—to the person who chopped it off.⁹

Freddie soon wished however that he had been concentrating a little more because he suddenly realised that he could no longer see Gruntenguile and a fork in the trail loomed ahead.

Left or right? Blazes! He could not afford to get lost now. If he were lost in the jungle it would not matter if he escaped the Snapahuti. He could not survive for long, alone in the jungle with no supplies. He pulled out his map and tried to read it but he was running too fast. The dots and lines and words kept bobbing up and down in the opposite direction from his eyes. Frightened that he might lose it, he shoved it back into his pocket. He reached the fork. Left. A short distance ahead another fork appeared. Turn right. No reason. Just instinct. No time to think.

A branch ripped his army shorts and the blood trickled down his pale skinny leg like an exterior vein.

The ferocious cries of the Snapahuties grew louder but the bends and forks of the jungle path and his agility kept him just out of dart range. Or so he thought.

Swooooshhhh!

A dart pierced his hat knocking it forward. He caught it without losing stride and pulled the dart out as he ran. 'Blazes!'

⁹ There are many reasons for head hunting, from just plain bad manners through to a genuine interest in macabre collectibles, but this was the one most common in Borneo at the time. (Editor)

In the short time he had been in the jungle his hat had already been crapped on by an ill-mannered monkey. Now it had a small hole that would let bugs, and crap, in forever. Still, better his hat than his head. He flipped it back on, pulled it down tight and ran with an enthusiasm that only those who have been chased by a tribe of Snapahuti head-hunters can fully appreciate.

Holding his machete out front to break the slap of low hanging branches, he bounded down the path. His speed and the sweat streaming into and stinging his eyes blurred the path ahead to a jumping jumble of green. Every slender leaf seemed like a dangling viper. His leg muscles burned like they were already being barbequed.

Another fork in the trail sprang in front of Freddie and this time his instincts told him to turn left. He jumped to the left, groaning as his pack dug into his already aching shoulders.

Fuzzy gibbons with white beards and sharp black eyes looked down from the tree tops at Freddie. Humans are so stupid, they must have thought.

Even so, they chattered encouragement as he passed.¹⁰

Freddie would have happily given up a million years of evolution and sprouted a prehensile tail to join them in the tree tops. He no sooner thought this however, when he noticed a change in the world of noise beating about his ears. He stopped to listen. Clutching a dangling vine to steady himself, he held his breath. Slowly, cupping his hand to his ear, he turned around. Suddenly he stopped, thinking he could hear the beating of drums. Then he realised it was his heartbeat. The wet snake still slithered down the crook of his back.

¹⁰ As much as the gibbons may have felt an affinity with Freddie it should be noted that they are not, in fact, Hominids. They belong instead to the closely related Hylobatidae family. (Editor)

Apart from that it was silent. His pursuers must have stopped. Maybe they were regrouping and straining to hear him splashing ahead. Unsure of which path he had taken. Maybe discussing whether he would be best roasted or gently broiled.

His hand once more fumbled in his pocket for the map. It made no sense as all he could see of his surroundings was the spot where he was standing and the trees towering above him and there was still no sign or sound of Gruntenguile.

He was about to give in to his despair when—somewhere ahead—he heard something.

7. A Foot

It was the sound of running water and, if his ears were not playing tricks on him, that meant that the map he was clutching so desperately was making some sense.

He moved forward, skirting a large buttress root, and the forest suddenly opened up into a clearing of dappled light and green rocks. Here the two great powers of the rainforest, sun and water, met and held each other in a clinging, choking embrace.

He knew he had to act quickly but he also knew he had no time for mistakes. Breathing slowly, he filled his lungs to calm his nerves and looked around.

He took the map from his pocket and squinted to read it in the shaded light. He was heartened by the fact that there was a river right there in front of him just like the one which ran past the X on his map.

On the far side of the stream was a pile of boulders like giant steps up the side of the slope from which they had fallen. Checking his map once more, he noticed a cluster of circles piled on top of one another which looked very much like the formation of boulders before him. Scrawled in faded and smeared ink alongside were the words—*Os Passos a Inferno*. Although he did not understand a word of Portuguese, Freddie did not like the sound of it.¹¹

A sharp cry shattered the silence behind him. The Snapahuti had picked up his trail. There was no more time for thinking. Racing forward he splashed across the stream, jumped onto the first rock, and clambered upwards.

¹¹ Timor was colonised by the Portuguese in the sixteenth century. Although they mainly stuck to the coast, Freddie's map and the broken remnants of ten gallon demijohns later found near this site suggest that at least one party of Portuguese ventured inland and stumbled on the discovery that was now within Freddie's grasp. (M.A. SINGH)

pulling the dart out and throwing it as far as he could. Next he looked inside his pack for anything he might need. He was tempted to eat his chocolate bar before it was too late but decided to save it for later. Instead, he grabbed his Band-Aid, his note pad and pencils, and his toothbrush, and shoved them in the pockets of his army shorts. His torch was too large for his pocket so he shoved it inside his shirt. Then he laid his pack as far under a nearby ledge as it would go and pushed a rock into place to hide it. He had just finished when a low rumble shook the air and sent a shiver through the jungle.

He cast one last look at his backpack, wondering if he would ever see it again. He thought one last time about eating his precious chocolate bar, before deciding that he would save it as a reward for his return. He turned, stepped towards the entrance, and lay down in the slimy mud. Then, just as he was about to wriggle in, he saw something a couple of feet down the tunnel. It was a swirling mass of centipedes swarming over a U-shaped object. Looking closer he saw that it was the heel of a boot. Reaching down, he dragged it out. It was an army boot of the type commonly worn by trekkers. There was nothing remarkable about it until he turned it around.

‘Agggh!’ he gagged. He held the boot as far from his nose as he could and peered inside. He could now see the cause of the stench. Inside the boot were the putrid remains of a decomposing foot. Still gagging, he swung the boot as far as he could over his shoulder. Suddenly the tunnel did not seem like such a good idea but at that same moment, something happened to change his mind. He heard the cries of the Snapahuti emerging into the clearing below. Then a new sound exploded across the jungle.

TAT-TAT-TAT-TAT-TAT-TAT-TAT-TAT-TAT-TAT-TAT-TAT-TAT . . .

Since when did Snapahuti head-hunters carry semi-automatic weapons, thought Freddie, as a bullet pierced the brim of his hat, dislodging it from his head. He just managed to grab hold of it as he jumped, feet first, into the tunnel.

To the wide-eyed gibbons, still watching from the jungle canopy, it was as if the earth had swallowed him.

8. The Rest of Him (At least, what was left of it!)

Freddie flew as if sliding down a wet slippery dip until a sudden levelling out of the tunnel caused his backside to dig into the soft mud. He came to a stop about thirty feet down. Wiggling his torch out from under his shirt he switched it on but because of the bend in the tunnel he could not see far. That also meant that his pursuers could not see him and that he could not be reached by either poison darts or bullets.

He had no choice now but to continue squeezing and sliding down the tunnel. The problem was he had expected the tunnel to widen but instead it had quickly narrowed and it now squeezed tight about him. He wriggled a few inches but then no more. He was stuck fast. Something sharp dug into the soft flesh of his backside. He considered the boot he had found near the surface and guessed at what it might be. Then, for the first time in his short adventures, he let his fear take over. Pushing and squeezing his burning muscles in every direction he screamed out loud while the damp clay, which surrounded him, swelled and pushed harder and harder against his exhausted body. His efforts only made things worse but still he pushed and screamed.

It was useless. All he achieved was the loss of valuable energy. Like the Phantom in quicksand, he was not going anywhere in a hurry. Finally, exhausted and defeated, he stopped.

He tried to block out everything that was happening and just breathe for a few moments but it wasn't easy. 'Why me?' spun in his head. Why was he, Freddie O'Toole, caught in that dreadful pickle; wedged in a narrow tunnel where he would surely starve or die of thirst, or, worse still, be slowly eaten alive by the army of bugs he could already feel creeping about him? Why had he not kept Gruntenguile in sight? Why had he not eaten that chocolate bar when he had the chance?

A noise came from above. It was a mixture of rough voices, evil laughter, and nasty activity. Strange how we can tell when people are up to no good. There is a certain tone that is unmistakable and that is exactly what Freddie heard at that moment.

The Snapahuti had retreated into the thick cover of the jungle where they watched from the sweating darkness as a smaller group of much larger men gathered around the entrance of the cave. Freddie did not know who was standing at the mouth of the cave. He only knew by their deep voices that they were men and by the tone of their voices that they sounded like they were not nice men. He was right. They were so not nice in fact that they never left home without a bag of Malayan kraits just in case they trapped some well-meaning fellow like Freddie in a tunnel.¹²

In the squashed darkness below Freddie had no idea what they were doing. He simply knew they were up to no good and that he had to keep moving down the tunnel. He strained and pushed every part of his body in every direction in search of a weakness in the perfect, pounding pressure that surrounded him. It was still no good. He could not move. To make matters worse, his machete was sticking out like a barb into the mud. He wiggled and pulled himself up the tunnel so that the sheath of the machete could lay tight against his leg, but he could not tell if he was making any progress.

Freddie's torch was still pointing up the tunnel and when he stopped to rest he saw that something was moving there. For a moment he thought he was seeing things because it looked like a bent line of white spots was sliding down the tunnel towards him. Then, as the spots drew closer, he realised what they really were: black and white banded snakes. His boyhood obsession with listing reptiles enabled him to correctly identify them as Malayan kraits. A single bite would give him a 50 percent chance of survival—if he received urgent

¹² *Bungarus candidus*—Kraits are a poisonous snake found throughout Southeast Asia. (Editor)

medical attention. Maybe it was luck, maybe it was the encouragement provided by the poisonous snakes sliding his way but Freddie gave one more determined wriggle and this time he felt himself slip a little further down the tunnel. It was only a foot or two but it was something. Encouraged by the movement, he hunched his shoulders as close to his body as he could and wriggled with renewed desperation.

Malayan kraits are shy by nature but Freddie knew that fear and an instinct for survival would result in them making a meal of his face when they found it blocking the tunnel. They were now a few feet away and he could see their beady eyes, as cold as marbles, and flicking tongues, sensing something ahead. They slithered to within less than a foot when Freddie slipped again. A little further this time but another cruel narrowing of the tunnel trapped him once more. The snakes, however, continued to slide towards him. Within seconds they were again within striking distance. They reared their heads; their forked tongues seeming to lick their lips. Freddie closed his eyes for what he believed would be the last time when he heard a rumbling from the world above as the afternoon rains burst over the jungle. The snakes remained poised, about to strike, as water began trickling into the tunnel, filling the space around Freddie. The thought ran through his mind that if he got lucky he might drown before the snakes struck. Instead of drowning him however, the water lubricated the space between his body and the sticky clay walls and he suddenly popped through the narrow part of the tunnel like a rat from a drain. He now found himself rocketing helplessly down a muddy chute with a slither of Malayan krait not far behind. The smooth ride was broken here and there by jagged rocks that tore at his side and posterior, gouging his already-bruised flesh. Shock waves rattled through his bones to his skull and back down to his bum and then back again as the parts of his body competed for their share of the pain racing through him. 'Please make there be something soft at the bottom of this . . . Pleeeeee make there be something soft at the bottom of this . . .'

during that terrifying slide. Given the way his day had been going Freddie felt that there probably would not be a soft landing at the bottom—but he was wrong!

Splish!

Freddie splashed down in a putrid sea of chiropter guano.¹³ A millisecond's relief washed over him at the softness of the landing before he suddenly realised that everything around him was moving like a storming sea. The surface was swarming with bugs, some of which were scurrying up his body and arms on scaly legs.

'Cockroaches,' he said out loud. He almost felt at home.

His second round of relief however was broken by a shower of mud and human bones, which briefly rained around him until a skull rebounded off his own and onto the guano at his feet. It looked up at him as if it were just as surprised as he was.

'Thanks for dropping in,' said Freddie.

The skull stared blankly back at him. The owner of the skull, if my further research serves me correctly, had never been fond of black humour and death had done nothing to change that.

Then, in a flash of panic, Freddie remembered the snakes and splashed and stumbled as quickly as he could to get out of their way. His light picked out a stone ledge which was raised above the sea of guano and which seemed to run along the edge of the cavern into which he had fallen. He reached this ledge, clambered up, and shone his torch back to the spot from where he had fled. The snakes slid down one at a time. Even in the torchlight all that he saw were white spots. Breathing a sigh of relief, he watched them slither away in the opposite direction, gorging on cockroaches as they went.

¹³ Bat crap. (Editor)

In the fresh silence Freddie listened once more for sounds from above. He hoped that whoever was up there would assume that he was now dead. Not so long ago hardly anyone had known he was alive. Why did so many people now want him dead? He shook the question from his head. There were many things about his situation that he would have liked to change, but he needed to focus on the one big positive—he was alive. He knew that if things were going to stay that way he needed to keep his wits about him.

He held the torchlight on the white dots of the snakes until they disappeared into the darkness on the other side of the cavern. By then his eyes had adjusted and he realised that it was not pitch black. Some light was sneaking in from somewhere.

Next Freddie examined his poop-splattered hat and poked his finger in the most recent hole that had been created by the bullet. He wiped it across his pants and then placed it back on top of his head and shone his torch along the side of the cavern, illuminating rocks that had been hidden in darkness for he knew not how long. The beam slid slowly over a rippled, rock wall that could easily have been the surface of a newly discovered planet.

Then, to his surprise, as the beam of light roved further along the wall, the surface suddenly changed. It no longer had the appearance of natural rock but of a man-made wall, flat but not quite. Straining his eyes, he thought that he could see something on the surface. He made his way along the ledge for a closer look; probing everywhere with his torch as he went. Drawing nearer he could see the wall more clearly but it was not making any more sense. Staring hard at the surface of the rock wall he allowed his eyes time to fully adjust to the light and sift through the haze of particles that hung in the air. He had made up his mind to be completely quiet in case his pursuers were still listening from above but he could not help gasping, 'Blazes!'

The wall was covered in petroglyph carvings similar to those that Professor Dupler had recently been studying. They were scoured by the centuries but the images were still unmistakable. This was surely the reason he had travelled so far. This was the discovery the owner of the skull, now housing a family of cockroaches and sinking into the sea of guano behind him, had given their life to see.

He shone his torch up and guessed that the area covered by the carvings stood almost six yards high. Then he shone his torch along the length to get an idea of the complete picture.

An army of figures were carved into the rock. There appeared to be both men and women but there was something brutish about them. Some were running with spears, others throwing spears, or leaping in the air, or lighting fires. It seemed to be telling the story of a hunt and the feast which followed but this did not seem quite right to Freddie. Normally, these types of carvings were found in civilisations that were more recent, more 'civilised'. The scenes Freddie was looking at were more typical of Stone Age cave paintings drawn with ochre and a heavy hand. Not carved in this precise manner.

The torch light continued to move over the figures until it discovered the object of their hunt. It was a huge beast rearing on its hind legs; spears spiking from its mighty chest. Freddie had seen similar scenes before in Aboriginal cave paintings, but this scene was different. The animal being slain was massive and towered over its attackers. That would not have been unusual if it were a woolly mammoth but it was not. It was a lizard, something like a Komodo dragon (also on Freddie's list of 'Reptiles to Avoid in My Lifetime') only four or five times larger. Freddie would have been even more amazed had he not already seen something like it before—in the Arnhem Land cave.

Freddie stared with his mouth wide open for some time. It took a conscious effort to return to his exploration of the other parts of the petroglyph. He dragged the torch

beam away from the creature and stretched it out along the wall until it faded into the darkness. He was about to take another look at the speared animal when his attention was distracted by something else about twenty paces away. He could not believe he had missed it earlier. An object had been suddenly illuminated by a shaft of light from a large crack in the overhanging rock. He shone his torch along the ledge and walked towards the object.

Looking up as he went, he noticed that the crack through which the light was creeping ran for some ten yards through the rock in the roof of the cave. The sun had reached a point overhead perfectly in line with the tilted bedding plane. Water was dripping in from the sudden downpour and the sound echoed in the stillness of the cave.

Even as he drew closer, Freddie was not able to make out what the object was. The sun's rays were too bright after his time spent in near darkness and his eyes could not pick out the detail. It was not until he was standing directly before it that lines and a shape began to appear. The wall was dominated elsewhere by the curved lines of nature, but this object had the straight, angular lines of a device; but not a machine as Freddie or you and I know machines.

On closer inspection it seemed to be an outcrop of crystals, spearing out from the wall at odd angles and lengths. In the centre of the cluster, a single transparent crystal stuck out like a sword about a yard from the wall. It looked in colour and transparency like quartz but tapered into a sharp, needle-like point. Freddie once more checked his map and guessed that it was the object hidden beneath the X.

Drawing his eyes away from the crystal, Freddie noticed that the petroglyph figures surrounding it were kneeling before it as if it were some kind of God. Above the sword was another engraving; an eye—human; but not quite. It made Freddie feel even more uneasy.

Freddie had lived with anthropologists his entire life. He had read most of the books in the Professor's library and his mind clicked through his memorised inventory of petroglyphs, but he had never seen anything like this!

He bent forward and ran his eyes along the edge of the crystals. They were razor sharp—as if honed by machinery. But if the object were man-made, he thought, it should be more ordered and mathematical, not the chaos of irregular shapes he saw before him. At the same time the location of the crystals in the middle of the petroglyph suggested that it could not possibly have formed naturally. Later, Freddie would come to understand the absurdity of seeing things as natural or man-made, but at that time, his mind could only make sense of the object by classifying it as man-made.

It was too weird. He glanced suspiciously around the cave. This had to be a joke. A brilliantly planned hoax! Like Orson Welles pretending that the Earth was being attacked by Martians.¹⁴ Surely Gruntenguile was hiding somewhere in the cave and doing his best not to laugh out loud. Freddie shone his torch about the cave one more time but all he could see was rock and darkness. He was alone.

Something cracked under his feet like a snapped twig. Pointing the torch to the ground he noticed to his horror that he was standing on a mouldering pile of human bones. Some were almost white but others were in varying stages of yellowing decay. Those ground into the mud beneath were blackened and so brittle they crunched under his feet like shell grit. Repulsed by the sight of the bones, he returned his attention to the sword-like crystal.

¹⁴ On October 30th, 1938, Orson Welles broadcast an adaptation of H.G. Wells' novel, *The War of the Worlds*. Many listeners, tuning in after the show had started, missed the disclaimer at the start, and believed that Martians were actually attacking Earth. This is of course quite ridiculous as Mars has been uninhabited for eons.
(M.A. SINGH)

Just as a wave of understanding had welled within him in the Arnhem Land cave some five months earlier, a similar sense washed over him at that moment.

Deep down, he knew that what he saw before him was real. He knew also that what his instincts told him about the object was real. A creeping chill slid like melting ice down his spine.

He was still staring directly at the tip of the sword when suddenly, something else quite unexpected happened. The already dim light suddenly faded as if an extremely black cloud had passed overhead. This was followed by a slight scraping sound, a sprinkle of rock particles, and an enormous thud of biomass. Freddie was knocked to the ground by over 300 pounds of writhing muscle. The torch was knocked from his hand and flew some distance away where it came to rest, throwing a spotlight on Freddie and the giant snake which had just fallen on top of him. His knowledge of snakes told him instantly that, given its size and his location, it could only be a python. Despite the dire nature of the encounter, he also recalled the scientific name: *Python reticulata*,¹⁵ from his list of “Reptiles to Avoid in My Lifetime”. (Yet another failure!) It was a massive beast, almost thirty feet in length. He knew he had to think quickly to survive but the only thought that he could manage was, ‘Blazes! What are the chances of that? What are the blazing chances of that? How often are you standing in a cave beneath the Timorese rainforest with a crack directly overhead, and how often does a 300 pound reticulated python accidentally fall through a crack like that?’ Freddie screamed the words out loud as he desperately sought and found the snake’s head and grabbed hold of the neck just below the jaw bone.

¹⁵ The reticulated python is the world’s longest snake and reptile. They inhabit the jungles of Southeast Asia and although they do not usually attack and eat humans there are a number of recorded instances. This particular snake must also have been somewhat disoriented after its fall. (Editor)

‘How often do you get attacked by a slither of Malayan kraits and a reticulated python in the same day? What are the blazing chances of that?’ The words screeched despairingly through the cave as the powerful body twined around him. It was a huge, single-limbed, single-minded thing. If only he could grab his machete—but that meant releasing one hand from the snake’s head, and that would surely have been fatal because he was struggling to hold it at bay with two hands. If he let one go the snake would have his head in one bite. Freddie fought suffocation and panic. His mind flew in all sorts of useless directions. Why was he, of the billions of people on Earth, the one standing in that spot, in that cave, at that moment? Why had he saved that chocolate bar for later?

The snake’s head twisted and broke free of Freddie’s grip. It reared above him and briefly caught the light that was still peering into the cave. In that instant Freddie felt totally justified in his long-standing dislike of reptiles. The lower body of the snake wrapped around his torso and squeezed tightly. Soon his ribs would crack like sticks. The snake could feel Freddie’s heart beating and would not relax until that beating stopped. The head plunged and the eyes sent darts of terror through every atom of Freddie’s crushing body. Freddie was a thing to be destroyed; a dangerous living thing that could be a tasty dead thing. Freddie was running out of instants. He saw the descending flash of the fangs and just for the tiniest part of a second, the crystal sword protruding from the wall behind. His mind, almost frozen as it was with fear by now, seized upon that one small chance. Remembering that a snake’s heart lay near the first coil of their body, he regained his hold on the snake and pushed it back with all his might. The giant snake was not done yet, however, and it swung back to break free of Freddie’s grasp. It almost made it but with one last remaining gasp of strength, Freddie forced the snake backwards onto the point of the crystal sword, which ran through the snake with a horrifying ease, piercing its heart and popping out the other side. The writhing of the python’s body sent Freddie flying. He fell backwards onto the floor of the cave and cracked

his head. Had he not been so terrified he may have passed out. Instead, he lay barely conscious on the ground gazing in horror at the snake's head and its dark, piercing eyes. He had survived, but what followed was even more amazing.

As he looked on, the snake began to fade, as if the very atoms that composed it were pulling apart but at the same time contracting inwards to the point of the crystal sword. Freddie blinked in disbelief.

By the time he reopened his eyes the snake had vanished.

9. The Crystal Sword

Freddie eyes remained fixed on the point of the crystal sword which, just moments before, had ended the life of the giant python.

Or had it?

There was no blood. Not a drop. Everything was just as it had been earlier.

In the world above the sun had moved on and the dim light was fading. The grey storm clouds that had saved him in the tunnel a little earlier were now black battleships, booming and cracking over the drenching jungle. Water poured into the cave and filled it with a hypnotic trickling. As the darkness deepened, Freddie felt like he was sinking into a bottomless pit.

Dragging himself to his feet he never once took his eyes off the tip of the crystal sword. His stomach churned and his heart thumped hard against his ribcage but his brain was clearing. He had a weird feeling like he was seeing things from way above where he was standing.

‘Blazes,’ he whispered. ‘I think I know what I have to do.’

‘That would be a first.’ The voice came from just behind him and Freddie wheeled around to see who was there. No one—staring into the darkness he strained for some sign of movement.

‘Grrrnt . . . down here, Little Boss.’

Freddie looked down and there stood Gruntenguile. Being a dark fellow in a dark place he was almost invisible.

Freddie jumped backwards in surprise. ‘Gruntenguile!’ he cried. ‘How’d you get in here with all those . . . killers outside?’

‘I used the stairs.’

'You what?'

Gruntenguile shone his more powerful light into the darkness on the other side of the cavern and there sure enough was a set of steps carved into the rock face. It even had a handrail on the outside.

'Thanks for telling me,' whisper-shrieked Freddie, remembering the killers listening above.

'And thanks for losing me back there in the jungle . . . grrrnt,' said Gruntenguile.

'I'm . . . sorry,' said Freddie. *'I just lost sight of you for a moment and then—'*

'Never mind, Little Boss. We are both here and you are still alive.'

'And it seems we have found what we were after,' added Freddie, turning to the crystal sword.

'Not quite, Little Boss. I am not sure what the Professor's instructions may have been but I think this is just where we start. This sword is just a door.'

'A door?' Freddie turned and looked at the tip of the crystal sword.

'Remember what the Professor said at the airport about following your instincts?' said Gruntenguile. *'I think now is the time to follow those instincts.'*

Freddie screwed his face at Gruntenguile. He had always been a little crazy but surely he wasn't suggesting the thing that Freddie thought he was.

Even as he was thinking this, however, a feeling was growing in Freddie about why he was there and what he must do. His hand moved to his side and without thinking he reached in his pocket for his father's watch and ran his fingers over his parent's names for luck . . . and courage.

Standing in the hollow, water cascading, darkness of the cave he knew what he had to do. He had always known. It was just that the thought was too terrifying. That was the problem—the thought. If he could just banish thought, then he could follow his instincts.

Freddie cleared his head. It was surprisingly easy. Gruntenguile and the rest of the world faded away and all that was left was the crystal sword. He stared at it until he imagined he could see the very last atom on the tip.

It was not the first time he had seen that deadly point.

He had seen it before in his childhood dreams. In those dreams he had stood before that same deadly tip. He had stood there terrified. Knowing what he had to do. At first all he could see was the pointy end of the sword but then the scene would grow and shift like Freddie was a moving camera until suddenly he could see himself standing in front of the sword slowly falling into a deep trance like Swami Sittami. The next thing he remembered was his other self, running forward in an agony of slow motion, like he was never getting there, and then diving into the sword, his chest thrusting forward into the pin-sharp tip. Then the camera would flip back and it would be Freddie himself feeling the sword—actually feeling it—slicing into his chest before waking in a shiver of sweat as the point pierced his heart.

He recalled all of that now and sensed what it meant.

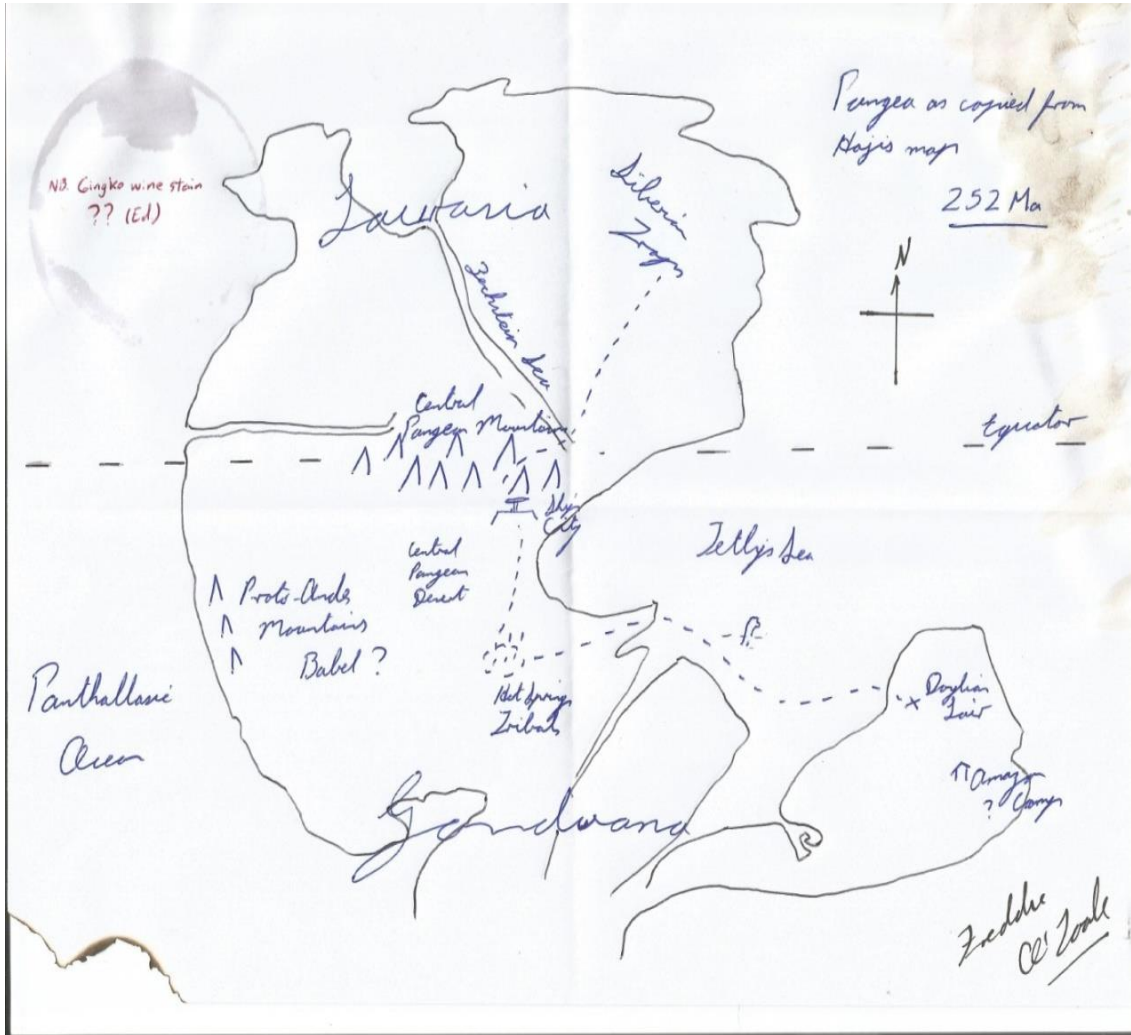
Gruntenguile was right. The crystal sword was a door and his heart was the key.

He cleared his mind and focused on the needle-like point of the sword. His heart was telling him exactly what he had to do. The only problem was it was too terrifying and totally crazy. He could not do it. Shaking his head, he was just about to step back from the sword when, suddenly, Gruntenguile placed both hands in the middle of his back and

pushed him forward into the tip of the crystal sword. It ran through his heart like a hot skewer through a marshmallow.

Freddie told me (and I am quite happy to take his word for it) that it felt like every atom in his body was being sucked like a grain of sand in a whirlpool into a swirling, blackening, cruel centre. Like a plug-pulled ocean. The pain surged beyond description until suddenly, his body was gripped and shaken as if by the most vicious beast you can imagine, and swallowed in a few unbearable bites into . . . oblivion.

Part Two: An Unkind Place



10. Pangea (Gondwanaland) * 250Ma¹⁶

Freddie thought he was dead.

Then he thought that, if he thought he were dead—he probably wasn't.

The cuts and bruises from his recent escapades burned and throbbed. His chest stung all the way through his heart. Recalling the crystal sword, he shuddered—wait till he got his hands on Gruntenguile!

Sniffing the air, he almost puked. It smelled like rotten-egg gas,¹⁷ blended with body odour and bat guano.

Then he heard a faint rustling, like wind through leaves.

His hands were resting on his chest over the point pierced by the crystal sword but he let them slide down to the ground. Spreading his fingers, he felt the soil. It was gritty and wet. Then he opened his eyes. The glare was blinding so he squinted and rolled to his side, shielding his eyes with one hand, while a series of questions rattled through his mind.

Where was he?

Why was he there?

Why had he not asked a few more questions along the way?

He wished that he had been able to squeeze a few more details out of the Professor as to exactly what he was getting himself into. Whatever it was he felt that he was really into it now.

¹⁶ Ma is the preferred abbreviation for 'million years ago' used in this text. It is worth noting also that this date is an approximation and that time itself is considered an absurd concept on the more civilised planets. None of which, by the way, are in our galaxy. (M.A. SINGH)

¹⁷ Hydrogen sulphide (H₂S). (Editor)

The sense of understanding he had briefly felt when facing the crystal sword had deserted him. Now he wanted nothing more than to wake and find himself back in Darwin. To discover that he had fainted from inhaling too many fumes from the Professor's secret skull polish, or been hypnotised by Swami Sittami, and that his adventures had been nothing more than a dream.

The problem was that he was hurting too much for it to be a dream. Any movement caused some part of his body to ache.

Slowly, his eyes focused on a ghostly, shimmering world of light and green. A fern drooping under the heavy rays of the sun swayed suddenly in a gust of dry wind and brushed his face. Further proof, he thought, that he was alive.

Then something glistened above his head; like a drop of water on a leaf. Except—it was too big to be a drop of water. Freddie shook his head slightly and blinked. Opening his eyes again he could unfortunately see more clearly. It *was* an eye and a closer inspection revealed another eye close by. Then reality, in the form of the giant python he had so recently parted company with in the Timorese cave, came crushing down on Freddie.

Over three hundred pounds plus of twisting, crushing, vertebrae and muscle collapsed on top him. 'Blazes,' cried Freddie. 'What are the chances?' He screamed out loud in his despair. 'To have taken that risk! To have survived! Just for this . . .' The only hope he had left was Gruntenguile. Surely he knew what the crystal sword could do and would not be far behind him. Though not the biggest of men he was surprisingly strong. He could do some serious damage to the python if he got his hands on Freddie's machete.

But as precious seconds ticked by it occurred to Freddie that if Gruntenguile did not follow him straight away, the chances were that he was not following him at all.

All he could do now was clutch the narrowing point of the python's monstrous body just below the jaw and hold on as best he could as his strength drained from his

crushing body and arms. What energy he had left he used to scream out for Gruntenguile but to no avail. His grip on the snake and life slowly fading, random thoughts spun in his head like bubbles in a whirlpool, dragging him down, deeper and deeper. The last of them was another pang of regret at not eating his chocolate bar. As he passed out, there was no way of knowing whether he would ever wake again but he did not like his chances.

Freddie would later describe that day as ‘the day he couldn’t die, even if his life depended on it’.

11. Koia

When Freddie woke the only part of his body where he could still feel pressure was his right hand. Someone was holding it.

He did not want to open his eyes after his recent near-death experiences but curiosity once more got the better of him.

At first all he could see was white. A white sky; dirty in patches and stitched at the edges.

No . . . not a sky . . . a tent! Yes, a white hide tent and, to the side, a little blurred, but unmistakable, a human figure. The outer lines of a body danced with the surrounding air as Freddie's sight slowly returned. His eyes sought and found a face.

As it came into focus he wondered briefly whether he was in Heaven with an angel watching over him. Blazes! What were the blazing chances of that? A second glance and he was not so sure.

The face was not sweet and saintly like the angels he had seen in the *Illustrated Bible* in Professor Dupler's library. It was a strong face framed by thick, peach-coloured dreadlocks. Her skin was bronzed and stretched like silk over her shoulder blades and the taut muscles of her upper body. It was still hot and tiny pearls of sweat spotted her skin. She wore a soft leather top like a corset fastened with a leather strap down the front.

'Koia . . .'

Freddie was startled by the sound of her voice. It came from deep down her throat. Looking up at her face, Freddie noticed that it was strong-boned, and beautiful. He shrugged to indicate that he had not quite caught what she had said.

'Koia,' she repeated. Then she smiled like someone who had just been taught how.

Freddie raised his finger and pointed to her. 'Koia?'

She laughed and Freddie smiled, thinking that she was relieved to know that he was alive and well.

He then pointed to himself and said, 'Freddie.'

She nodded but strangely did not repeat the name to check if she had heard it correctly.

'Where am I?' he asked.

She did not reply and Freddie guessed she did not understand a word of English. Maybe that would not be such a bad thing. Here was a beautiful girl, who he could say absolutely nothing to offend. Freddie could have looked at her all night, but she bent down and roughly pushed his eyes shut to indicate that he needed to sleep. He was surprised by the strength of her touch and he was too weak to resist. He gave in without a fuss. He was so exhausted from the events of the last few days that it was not long before he once more drifted into a deep sleep.

Koia stayed by his side, gazing down at him with her piercing grey eyes.

12. An Old Chum

Freddie's eyes flicked open.

Sweat trickled across his face and body in little drops like watery insects. The tent in which he had been sleeping was more like a glasshouse than a shade. It glared above him like a giant light globe. He could no longer smell his own foul odour or bat guano but the air still stank of rotten egg gas. Smoke from a fire had also wafted into the tent. There was another smell as well. It took him a while to tease it out from the more unpleasant odours. It was a sweeter and more familiar smell and it soon set his stomach growling. It was the smell of roasting flesh; maybe chicken. The sweet aroma reminded him of how long it had been since he had eaten. It blew in on a hot breeze which gently whipped the flap of the tent. When this noise suddenly stopped, Freddie glanced in that direction to see why. The flap was drawn back and a head, blurred by light and Freddie's drowsiness, was framed in the opening.

Freddie's head still ached and for a moment he was confused and could not remember where he was. He half expected the familiar forms of his kitchen bedroom back in Darwin to take shape around him, but everything remained strange. His mind racing, he looked back at the head peering through the flap of the tent. It was washed by light but there was something about it that looked familiar. It looked like the girl who had been holding his hand; only older.

'What's going on?' he cried, dragging himself up onto his elbows.

The face disappeared and the flap was left once more to the mercy of the wind until a few moments later when it was flung open again and the face of the girl who had been holding his hand earlier appeared.

Freddie calmed a little. ‘Good . . . morning . . .’ he guessed. ‘How’s the . . . weather out?’ It was a ridiculous question especially considering Freddie believed she could not understand a word he said.

Koia confirmed this by making no reply. She walked across and sat on the edge of his hammock. Then, placing a bowl and cloth on a side table she took hold of his hand as before. Freddie was trying to be calm but her touch caused his heart to race.

‘I . . . I’m feeling better . . . I think,’ he lied.

He was in fact still pretty battered and bruised. A bandage was wrapped around a large puncture wound just below his elbow. There was also a large cut just under his left eye which, though covered in a foul-smelling poultice and his Band-Aid, would leave a permanent L-shaped scar.

L for lucky he would claim.

She smiled, once more like someone who was not used to the expression. Even so it communicated something to Freddie and he immediately felt better. He pulled himself up further so that his back rested on the crumpled animal skin that had been his pillow. His body did not ache quite so much and he was less drowsy than the last time he had woken.

He looked around the tent but the tail of one eye never left the girl. She was really no older than he was. Maybe the same age. . .

Koia placed the bowl and cloth on a small table on the other side of Freddie’s hammock. She sat on a stool opposite. Then, reaching over Freddie, she grabbed the cloth, and dipped it in the bowl. Her biceps bulged as she wrung it out before padding it across his brow.

‘Can you speak English?’ he asked.

She did not reply and continued at her work as if Freddie had said nothing.

As she wiped his face, Freddie cast his mind back over the events of the past few days. He had been looking forward to going on an expedition with Professor Dupler. He had imagined a short safari through the jungles of Asia, not whatever it was that was happening now. Everything was different from what he had expected. Even the air did not smell the same. The thoughts crashing through his head grew too big for Freddie to make sense of, so he gave up and focused on his nurse instead.

She was wearing the same leather corset, loosely tied at the top. Freddie had lived a bachelor's life with Professor Dupler for the past seven years and with his father before that. He was not used to being so close to a girl. Blushing, he looked down. This drew his attention to the fact that she was wearing a short skirt made of the same soft leather. Her legs were athletic and her feet bare and hard as though she often went barefoot.

His inspection completed, Freddie looked up again and found himself gazing directly into Koia's icy, grey eyes. His pulse raced but this time he tried to hold her gaze. 'I'm feeling better,' he repeated. 'I might get up and move about. Maybe have something to eat. Start getting my strength back.'

Koia ignored his remark and continued to rub his face with the damp cloth. It was cool and refreshing and Freddie was enjoying being cared for after the many recent attempts to kill him. Her hands were strong. He could feel this even through the cloth. She moved her attention to his neck and chest and began working her way down his body when Freddie suddenly realised that he was naked. Absolutely starkers! Where were his clothes? He sat up and pointed to his own naked upper body while repeating the word 'clothes'. Perhaps it was the head nodding or maybe his blushing face, but Koia finally understood his meaning. Laughing, she pointed to a wooden stool in the corner. Lying on top of it were Freddie's clothes. They looked clean but there had been no effort to fold them and they lay in a crumpled heap. On top sat his towelling hat. It had been cleaned of crap and apart from the

holes, which were still better in the hat than Freddie's head; it was looking in better nick than the last time he had worn it. Freddie's machete leaned like an old friend on the side of the stool. Beside that lay all his worldly goods: a note pad and one and a half pencils, his scruffy toothbrush, and his pocket watch.

'Blazes,' sighed Freddie.

Turning back to Koia, he pointed to the opening of the tent to indicate that he wanted her to leave so that he could dress. She seemed puzzled that Freddie should feel it necessary that she leave the tent. Finally, with his animal skin bed-sheet draped around him he led her to the entrance and ushered her outside.

'Come back later. I need to get dressed,' he explained.

Koia was still unsure and briefly stood her ground at the door of the tent and once more Freddie felt her strength.

If she had chosen to resist he did not fancy his chances. Instead she smiled and stared deep into his eyes until he thought he might melt under her gaze. That look convinced Freddie that there was something funny going on. Frightening—but at the same time . . . interesting. He had never felt such a connection with another person.

Koia released her hold on him and slipped out of the tent. For a while he just breathed. Then, needing to focus on inanimate objects for a while, he turned around and inspected the inside of the tent.

There was not much to see. The hammock he had occupied for the past few days stood in the centre. Instead of a mattress, a piece of the same white hide as the tent was stretched between two branches that had been shaped with an axe and strapped together with lengths of plaited hide. Alongside the bed was the small table with the bowl of water and wet cloth. Next to that was a three-legged stool. The only other things he could see were a collection of spears not unlike those used by indigenous people the world over. Next to these,

however, leaned a double-bladed axe unlike anything Freddie had seen before. The spears were wooden and primitive. The axe was solid metal from handle to blade. The spears seemed to be designed for hunting and all indigenous people needed to hunt. The axe seemed to have a different purpose altogether. Freddie picked it up and ran a finger down the side of the blade. It was deadly sharp and the feel of cold metal sent a shiver galloping across his scalp. He returned the axe to the exact position it had been before and made his way to his clothes.

Rummaging through the pile he found his underpants and blushed at the thought of someone else having washed them. He hoped it had not been Koia. Apart from that thought, it felt good to be putting on clean clothes. It was like putting on his old self. Once he had dressed he popped his watch back into his pocket, looked towards the flap of the tent and braced himself.

He guessed that he had been resting for two, maybe three days. So far, the inside of his tent and Koia were all he had seen of wherever it was that he now found himself. He made his way to the opening and pulled the flap of the tent aside. He should have waited for his eyes to adjust a little but instead he took a couple of steps before stopping to look around.

First he looked up to see the sun and get a feel for the time of day. It was visible only by its glare in a hazy sky but he guessed it was mid-afternoon. Beneath the sun, grey, pine-like trees surrounded the clearing in which he stood. The wind played an eerie tune as it blew through their stunted branches. Lowering his gaze even further he saw that the clearing was edged by about thirty tents similar to his own.

Then a sudden cry made him look to the middle of the camp where many of the inhabitants were gathered. They were sitting or standing or walking beside a long fire pit that glowed and smoked in a hollowed bed about three feet wide and thirty feet long.

Above the fire pit, a line of charred stakes on each side supported the roasting meal he had smelled earlier. This meal stretched the full length of the fire pit. It was his old wrestling chum, the reticulated python.

13. Polydora

Freddie did not think that he could ever feel sympathy for the giant snake that had twice tried to end his life. But the two occasions that it had attempted to skewer his head like a piece of pineapple with its knife-sized fangs and eat him alive seemed a long time ago now. Also, as much as he hated snakes he had to admit that this one was a magnificent animal.

As he stared a woman strode over to the roasting snake, drew a large blade from a scabbard at her hip, and hacked a big chunk of meat from its side. She bit into the flesh with a ferocity that reminded Freddie of the beast she was eating.

Freddie then cast his eyes over the other inhabitants of the camp. The first thing that struck him was that they all looked similar and it slowly dawned on him that there were no men; only women. The men must be out hunting, he thought.

The women were dressed like Koia in two-piece outfits made from soft leather in various shades of tan. Like many indigenous groups, they appeared lean and healthy.

Near the fire two groups of young girls were throwing spears at each other. They dodged them with uncanny skill and yelled in a wild tongue that sounded like nothing Freddie had ever heard before. Amazingly, the adults ignored their dangerous game.

As he continued to watch on, it also occurred to Freddie that even among the children there seemed to be no boys, except possibly, among the very youngest, where it was hard to tell anyway. By the time he had made this realisation everyone in the camp had noticed his arrival. One by one, they turned in his direction and looked at him as if he might taste even better than the snake.

Freddie had left his tent confidently. Koia's care of him had made him feel that he was in a safe place. Now he didn't know what to do. He stood and stared while the women stared back at him. Drums started up in the distance and Freddie jumped at the sound.

Toom . . . Toom . . . Toom . . . Toom . . . Toom . . . Toom . . . TOOM!

He had a vague sense that this beat may have been in the background from time to time as he lay semi-conscious but he could not be sure. The beat repeated. Six smaller beats followed by a large angry thump as if the drummer had just discovered an unwanted bug crawling across the skin of the drum.

Toom . . . Toom . . . Toom . . . Toom . . . Toom . . . Toom . . . TOOM!

He was still standing dumbly looking at the faces looking at him when Koia came from nowhere and grabbed him, her fingers and thumbs digging deep into his shoulders like pliers. Turning him around she pushed him towards the tent. She clearly wanted Freddie back inside the tent but, as sensible as that seemed, Freddie resisted. He could not go any longer without some answers to the questions that were spinning in his head. Standing before the crystal sword a few days earlier, he had some sense of what might happen, but he would never have acted on that sense. If Gruntenguile had not pushed him, he would have still been standing there.

He was lost, alone, and clueless.

'Who are you? Where? What? *When?*' The last word shrieked from Freddie and drew even more attention. The children and many of the women came closer to hear Freddie's raving.

'*When? When? When?*' Freddie screamed the words into the hot air where they mixed with the rhythmic *Toom . . . Toom . . . Toom* of the drums.

Toom . . . Toom . . . Toom . . . Toom . . . Toom . . . Toom . . . TOOM!

Thwack!

Freddie swung his head around and saw a long metal-tipped spear quivering from the timber frame of his tent, an inch or two from his left ear. He stared at the cold, barbed point of the spear before slowly running his eyes along the length of its shaft to the throwing end and beyond that to the direction from which the spear had been thrown. Twenty yards away, staring at Freddie with impish eyes, stood a girl of little more than ten or twelve years of age. She was covered in dirt and had she not been smiling and her teeth flashing white she would have been hard to see.

The older women laughed at the astonished look on Freddie's face.

Koia controlled herself enough to only smile as she forced him through the opening in the tent. 'Polydora,' she explained.

Freddie took this to be the name of the filthy brat who had thrown the spear at him.

Koia led Freddie to his bed. 'I don't need any more rest,' he protested. 'I'm really okay. If people would just stop trying to kill me—'

Koia forced Freddie to his hammock and pushed him down onto it. He resisted but she was too strong. He flopped helplessly onto the hide which creaked under his weight. Then, to Freddie's surprise, Koia jumped on top of him and straddled his body. The inside of the tent was fuzzy after the bright light of the outside world. Having this wild girl suddenly sitting on his pounding chest made things even fuzzier. Her dreadlocked hair fell on his face. The soft animal fur that was his pillow elevated his head and he found himself once more guessing at Koia's age. Her dreadlocks tickled his nose and he felt strangely terrified of sneezing. Her eyes were grey like quartz and they looked deep into Freddie's. They pierced his heart as ferociously as the spear might have pierced his skull a few moments earlier.

The events of the past few weeks had made Freddie accustomed to uncertainty but even when the python was crushing him he had at least known what he should try to do.

His heart raced so fast it was suddenly using all the oxygen in his body and he thought he might pass out.

He had just made a decision that he needed to do something (he didn't know what) when Koia bent forward, cupped her hands under his head, and kissed him. It was rough but effective. It was no sooner done when she pushed herself back into an upright position. Her eyes tried to catch Freddie's but he avoided her gaze and stared instead, wide-eyed, at the roof of the tent. Outside the drums were still beating:

Toom . . . Toom . . . Toom . . . Toom . . . Toom . . . Toom . . . TOOM!

Toom . . . Toom . . . Toom . . . Toom . . . Toom . . . Toom . . . TOOM!

Then as suddenly as she had begun, Koia raised her eyes and looked around as if she were not quite sure how she had come to be on top of Freddie. A hot gust of wind blew in from outside, tousling her hair. This seemed to rally her thoughts and, looking down at him, she whispered, 'Tonight!'

With that she leaped off the bed with the same cat-like agility she had jumped onto it.

Freddie remained on his back like road kill, watching her leave the tent, her hair falling the full length of her back.

The glare of the outside world lit the inside of the tent for a moment and then the flap fell back and resumed its incessant flailing. Freddie was once more alone, his heart beating at a million thumps a minute.

He had always resisted thinking about girls in much the same way as he tried not to think about the dentist's drill or death or what his father might get him for his birthday. He had always imagined that they would take care of themselves and it had turned out that he was right. But at the same time there was something really odd about what had just happened.

This feeling ate away at him until he realised what should have been so obvious. She had actually spoken a word in English. She had said, ‘Tonight!’

The word reminded Freddie of a song that had been driving him nuts over the radio for the past couple of years.

Someday, when I’m awfully low,
When the world is cold,
Will feel a glow just thinking of you,
And the way you look tonight...

The singer was Fred Astaire and he had first heard it at the Star Theatre in Darwin. He sang the song wistfully for a while before returning to the point of Koia’s using an English word.

Maybe he had not heard her correctly. Possibly he was so wanting to hear a familiar word that his mind had jumbled the letters to make them sound familiar. Perhaps she had really said, ‘toohoo’ or ‘timatee’ or any number of foreign words that could have meant anything. Maybe, ‘We’re having python stew for tea,’ or ‘How about tidying the tent!’

Freddie thought about these things until his brain hurt but he was still no closer to an answer. Time slipped by as he pondered that one word and outside the sun dipped below the horizon. Inside the tent it was as if a light had been turned off and ‘tonight’ seemed to be racing towards him at an ever-increasing speed. Suddenly the flap of the tent was opened and the last pink light of the day spilled inside. Freddie’s heart leaped into his mouth. He turned and smiled only to find the spear throwing urchin, Polydora, grinning at him from her filthy face. She was really quite cute in a primitive kind of way but Freddie felt obliged to give her a haughty look. She was carrying a tray with a bowl in the middle in one hand and a candle in the other. She placed the bowl on Freddie’s table and set the candle alongside. Leaning over and looking into the steaming bowl Freddie guessed the contents—stewed

python—not one of his favourites. He would have killed for that chocolate bar he had left in his pack.

Polydora stood looking at Freddie for a moment with a mixture of amusement and curiosity. She raised her hand slowly to Freddie's head and ran her fingers through his ginger mop of hair.

'It's called hair,' said Freddie, growing tired of his novelty.

Polydora laughed, and walked towards the flap of the tent where she stopped, and, swivelling around, threw an imaginary spear at Freddie. He was embarrassed to say that he ducked. Polydora's laughter rung in his ears until it became lost in the beating of the drums. 'Filthy urchin,' said Freddie. Then he turned his attention to his python stew. It looked disgusting but he needed to keep his strength up. He had not been given a spoon so he raised the edge of the bowl to his mouth. Then, remembering a trick Gruntenguile had taught him for taking medicine; he held the bowl with one hand and used the other to pinch the bottom of his nose. 'Bottoms up,' he said and then, closing his eyes, he poured some of the stew into his mouth. For a moment he remembered what it was he was eating and it almost slithered back up his throat. The first mouthful was the worst; after that the rest of the bowl disappeared pretty quickly. When it was gone he would not have said no to seconds but he was not keen on sticking his head outside the tent and asking.

Instead he lay back on his hammock clasping his hands across his belly which was stretched tighter than it had been for days. There was nothing else to do now other than await the return of Koia and try to remember the second verse of the Fred Astaire song he had recalled earlier.

He was just remembering a few words and trying to tap out the rhythm on the bottom of his hammock when two arms wrapped around him and a hand holding a cloth soaked in a vile-smelling chemical clamped down on his nose and mouth. In his few seconds

of awareness before passing out he heard a voice. He was almost sure it was one he had heard before.

‘I hope this isn’t a mistake,’ it said.

He passed out before he could hear a reply.

14. Sure Death Swamp

Whack!

A blow to the back of his head brought Freddie back to his senses but he kept his eyes closed. A few more bumps later, he concluded that he was laying on a hard surface moving over bumpy ground.

The first thing he thought about after that however, was not his immediate danger, but Koia. Was it night yet? *Tonight?* He no longer cared how Koia had known that word. The word itself was not that important. It was the *way* she had said it.

He could not kid himself for long. The heat of the sun on his face soon told him that the night must have already passed him by. It had to be at least mid-morning he guessed. His thoughts were still foggy but they slowly drifted to his more urgent concerns.

Where the blazes was he now?

Why had he been kidnapped?’

Who by?

He tried to roll over but found himself tightly bound by leather straps across his chest and legs. Wherever he was—whoever had captured him—he decided that it would be best to keep his eyes closed for a little longer.

The only thing that seemed certain was that he was in a vehicle made with little thought for passenger comfort. The heat made things even worse. It must have already been well over a hundred degrees Fahrenheit. Sweat stung the corners of his eyes and slid like drops of mercury across his temples and soaked his matted hair.

Straining his ears, he could hear nothing but the creak of the cart and the dry, dull wail of the wind. After listening in vain for a while, curiosity got the better of him. He was about to open his eyes when a voice broke the silence. Thankfully, almost unbelievably,

it spoke in English. It came from somewhere just forward of where he was lying. He held his breath to catch each word. Apart from Koia's 'tonight' they were the first words spoken in a language he could understand for several days.

'I'm still not sure this is a good idea. I don't believe he will be any use to us,' said the voice. It was clear and certain and the same voice he had heard in the tent. Freddie felt even more certain that he had heard it before.

'Useful or not, I do not think that we could just leave him there.' The reply was in a strange accent that Freddie could not pick.

Why couldn't they leave him there, thought Freddie. As far as he was concerned, things had been going okay. Yes, he had been terrified, but at the same time, he had been looking forward to facing his terrors bravely.

'Yes, but *I know* this person.'

It took all of Freddie's will power not to open his eyes at this news. At the same time, a dark shadow drifted over his heart. Freddie did not know that many people.

A pause followed and Freddie suspected some knowing look was passing between his kidnappers.

'Yes, yes,' said the first voice, 'I know he's *here* and I know that says something . . . *but* . . .'

The speaker fished unsuccessfully for the right words.

'But, *what?*'

'He's just not right for this. Maybe if he were *really* smart or *really* sensible or *really* . . . *something* . . .'

'So we should have left him to his fate?'

'This is a deadly game we're playing. Maybe we do have to make hard choices like that. The stakes are very high in this game and we can't afford to mess things up. People

will die anyway. We just have to make sure that the *right people* live. I don't think he's the right people.'

'I still think the fact that he's here at all is enough to make him the *right people*.'

They fell silent for a while.

Freddie kept his eyes closed. He had a feeling that one or both of them was looking back at him. He held his breath until a sudden jolt threw him upwards. The leather straps dug into his flesh and he crashed hard on the wooden boards beneath him. He needed no more convincing that he was travelling in a cart. There was also no sound of a motor of any kind and this suggested that it was being pulled by some beast or beasts of burden. After a few more minutes, the voice that Freddie was now convinced that he knew, broke the silence once more and said something that set his head spinning.

'I still have my doubts! Yes—he did travel back, 250 million years, *but*—he doesn't seem to know *anything*. Everything seems to be instinct without thought and if we had left him to his instincts back there, you know what would have happened.'

The parts of the sentence either side of 'back 250 million years' faded to nothing.

Did he hear correctly? 'Back, 250 million years'?

Even before his father's disappearance seven years earlier Freddie's life had been mysterious. He had no relatives. That was a fact that came home to roost when his father disappeared and he was left in the care of Professor Dupler and Gruntenguile. Before his disappearance his father's work had been shady—his behaviour even shadier. Professor Dupler's expedition to the Arnhem Escarpment the previous year had caused the fog surrounding Freddie to thicken like a London pea-souper with Jack the Ripper on the prowl. Freddie had put his faith in the Professor even though he was just as shady as his father. His

secrecy over the expedition had meant that Freddie had no clues about where or when he was or why he was even there. Since he had flown out of Darwin, he had been living off his instincts and his desire to stay alive. A few days ago, he had thought it was a long time since he had been to the movies. 250 million years was a lot longer than that—about 2,500,000,000 times longer.

Freddie opened his eyes and found himself lying in the tray of a wooden buggy like the kind you sometimes see in a movie about the Wild West. His head was near the backboard. He raised it gingerly as it was still sore from the bumpy ride and the first thing he saw was his hat, which was draped over one foot. There was no sign of his machete but his other possessions were scattered about near his feet on the floor of the cart. Beyond that, as he had guessed, two people were sitting in the front of the cart. A set of horizontal braids—in outline, not unlike Buck Rogers' spaceship—immediately confirmed his fear as to who one of them was. Freddie groaned.

‘So, you are awake at last!’ said Lucy Wong, still looking straight ahead.

‘Did you just say, “250 million years back in time”?’ Freddie asked.

Lucy swivelled around to face him. The man next to her held the reins and looked ahead. He was wearing a khaki shirt over which two bandoliers of shotgun shells shaped the letter X across his back. A sheath, running half-way down his back, contained what Freddie correctly guessed was a sawn-off shotgun. He also wore a sweat-stained fedora hat.

‘Roughly,’ said Lucy. ‘Where did you think the time portal would take you?’

‘I . . . I don't know,’ said Freddie. ‘The Professor had told me to follow my instincts . . .’ Freddie trailed off, reluctant to tell the truth to Lucy about Gruntenguile pushing him. ‘Besides it's not like it had “CAUTION—TIME PORTAL—LICENSED OPERATORS ONLY” written on it or anything.’

‘When you do things you should know why you do them and what the possible consequences might be,’ said Lucy.

Of the two beings Freddie had encountered from his old world in the past few days, he would have gladly taken the python any day.

‘Can we take a few steps back?’ asked Freddie, drawing a deep breath.

‘Don’t tell me you’re going to start asking some questions?’

‘Yes,’ said Freddie, ‘and let’s start with this one: *What the blazes is going on?*

A week ago, I was living a boring but very safe life in the boringest place on Earth and then—all *this*.’

Lucy looked sideways at the driver.

He gazed unblinkingly ahead for a few moments before saying, ‘We have to tell him sometime.’

Freddie still could not make out his accent.

Lucy was silent for a bit and when she did speak her voice lacked her usual conviction, as if she doubted it was worthwhile telling Freddie at all.

‘You have become a *player*,’ she said at last.

‘What?’

‘You really don’t know?’

‘No, I don’t,’ said Freddie. ‘*That’s why I’m asking.*’

‘A little late, isn’t it?’

‘I would have thought so,’ said Freddie, ‘but according to you I am 250 million years earlier.’

The driver turned and smiled at Lucy. ‘*Touché*,’ he said.

Freddie had a side-on view of his face and saw that he was olive skinned with a Mexican bandito moustache. ‘I think you should slow it down a bit,’ he continued, ‘You

know the dangers of finding out too much too soon. Besides, it might be better for now if you two just learn to get along and stop bickering. If we are not united, we don't stand a chance.'

You tell her, thought Freddie.

The driver turned back to face the road and Lucy made a face at him before turning around to Freddie and asking, 'Any more stupid questions?'

'How about, why have you kidnapped me?'

'You mean, why have we just saved your life?'

Freddie hated people rewording his questions. 'Saved my life?' he said, 'I was getting along pretty well back there, thanks very much . . . until you showed up.'

Lucy turned to the driver, her mouth open; her hands choking an imaginary idiot. Freddie could see the tip of the driver's moustache jiggling up and down.

'Do you see what I mean? He is a fool and we are even bigger fools to take the risk of saving him.'

'What do you think you were saving me from?' asked Freddie. 'An . . . attractive girl . . . not afraid to express her . . . her . . . feelings?'

'We rescued you from Amazons, you fool. They have no feelings. They reproduce by conceiving with males, sometimes captured in battle and—'

The driver swung around and looked sharply at Lucy. She swallowed the end of her sentence before continuing. 'Usually their captive males have to meet certain physical standards but they must be getting desperate. After achieving conception—which they are genetically predisposed to achieve in just one . . . night—the male is ritually slaughtered. His flesh is eaten and his skin used to produce the leather that they wear. Your little Amazon's outfit was most likely her last lover. If we left you there you would have been next season's outfit—and maybe a handbag—within a few weeks.'

The man with the reins turned around for the first time. He wore a faded orange bandana to protect his neck from the searing sun. Beneath that, the top buttons of his shirt were open and revealed a wiry carpet of chest hair and a medallion of some sort hanging from a gold chain. It was catching the sun and Freddie could not make out its shape. The driver nodded at Freddie. 'Pangea can be a very unkind place. Trust us when we tell you, you were in very grave danger.'

'Pangea?' Freddie's knowledge of geography was pretty good but he could not recall any place called Pangea. Maybe he had not heard correctly.

'It's what he calls this place,' said Lucy. 'But if I were you, geography would be the least of my worries.'

'Lucy is right,' continued the driver. 'There are many dangers in Pangea and you were facing one of the nastiest. From the drums and the preparations in the campsite we had every reason to believe that last night was to be your last.'

The words to the Fred Astaire song played to a different tune in Freddie's head.

He had been entranced by Koia and did not want to believe anything bad about her. On the surface, the story he had just heard seemed crazy but, then again, everything that was happening seemed crazy.

'There is no hard evidence for Amazons. They are a part of Greek and later Roman mythology. Besides didn't they cut off one . . .?'

'Breast?' asked Lucy.

'Yes.'

'It seems not.'

'But how can there be Amazons here? How many years back in time?' Freddie was still not convinced about this but played along for the sake of argument.

Lucy was reluctant to answer but a glance from the driver encouraged her to start. ‘Have you ever wondered about the origins of ancient myths? Why similar myths occur in different cultures oceans apart?’ she asked.

Freddie *had* considered these questions before. They were a subject of some interest to Professor Dupler. He nodded.

‘That is my mother’s field. This . . .’ Lucy drew an arc with her hand ‘. . . is the reason for that. From her observations here, she, and others, believe that this is the time when many of these common, so-called myths began.’

As bizarre as what he was hearing seemed and as annoying as he found Lucy Wong, he could not think of a reason for her wanting to deceive him and everything she said seemed to make some sense. Besides, Freddie didn’t have a clue what was going on. It was weirdly comforting to hear any explanation, no matter how insane.

Dragging his eyes from Lucy, Freddie looked at the grain of the timber on the side of the cart. It was untreated and greying as if the cart had been made many years earlier. He stared at it in silence for a while before he was suddenly filled with an overwhelming desire to see what lay outside the cart. The problem was, he could not move.

‘Is there any chance of . . . undoing these straps?’ he asked.

Lucy and the driver exchanged glances that said two completely different things.

‘Please?’ added Freddie, trying not to make it sound too much like begging. ‘I’m starting to cramp and even if I wanted to make a run for it—where would I go?’

Lucy looked around as if seriously considering the question of where Freddie might go.

‘He’s got a point. I think you should untie him,’ said the driver. ‘It might help answer a few more questions.’

Lucy remained silent. Her arms folded.

‘In that case, how about I untie him,’ he said, pushing the reins into her hands. He jumped into the back of the cart and, bending down, loosened the straps around Freddie’s feet. Then moving forward, he untied the strap across his chest. As he did so, the medallion that he wore fell out of his shirt and hung directly in front of Freddie’s eyes. It was a ring with a quarter-moon crystal as the centre-stone and Freddie felt sure he had seen it, or one just like it, before. Then he remembered that it was the same as the tattoo under Swami Sittami’s eye. He was about to say something, but his instincts silenced him. He took his eyes off the medallion so as not to rouse suspicion and looked instead at the moustachioed face of the man bending over him.

‘Thanks,’ said Freddie. His liberator then reached out his hand and introduced himself. ‘My name is Haji,’ he said, ‘and I believe you are Freddie O’Toole.’

Freddie was flattered to be recognised so far from home but he still felt uneasy about the ring. It seemed too wild a coincidence that it was the same as the Swami’s tattoo.

Freddie guessed Haji’s age to be about thirty. He would need to have been at least that old to have had time to grow his moustache. His first guess, based on that facial adornment, had been that he was Mexican but the accent and now the name suggested otherwise. ‘Haji?’ asked Freddie.

‘It is Egyptian, as was my father, but my mother was French. I was born in South Africa but travel under a Maltese passport although I have lived very little of my life in any of those places. Make of that what you will but I think that it has a lot to do with why I now happily call Pangea my home.’ With that strange speech, Haji attempted to pull Freddie up into a sitting position but suddenly grimaced and let him go before clutching his back. ‘Bad back,’ he explained. He stood up, stretched, and gave Freddie a good look-over. ‘That’s a nasty cut you’ve got under your eye,’ he said. ‘It’s going to leave a scar.’

‘You should see the other guy . . . I mean . . . python,’ said Freddie, glancing towards Lucy.

Her back stiffened harder than the boards of the cart.

Glancing at them both, Haji smiled before returning to the front and taking up the reins once more.

Freddie stretched his muscles and squinted up at the filthy sky. It reminded him of London smog as he had seen it in Sherlock Holmes films at the Star Theatre. He doubted that he was anywhere near London, however, because the only thing he could hear was the clunking of the wheels and the squeak of the wooden axle. The lazy silence beyond that told him they were somewhere deep in the country.

It was time he found out. Squinting out the glare he sat up, placing one hand on the side of the cart to steady himself.

At first, he was disappointed. They were travelling through semi-arid terrain similar to country he was familiar with in northern Australia. Parched plains, dotted by small outcrops of rock, rounded into massive marbles by the ferocious winds. The horizon shimmered with heat. There were no trees; only the skeletal remains of bushes that seemed to be losing a dogged fight for life. It was boringly familiar to Freddie. Then he turned his gaze to the other side of the cart and his understanding of everything changed forever.

They were traveling along the edge of a massive swampland. Above the swamp hung a stewing haze of insects most of which were the size of birds in Freddie’s time. Freddie gripped hard on the top paling of the cart. Then he saw something even more remarkable. Plodding along the boggy edge of the swamp were three elephantine beasts. The sight of these creatures told Freddie more than his two travelling companions could have in a thousand words. They were the same or at least similar to the creatures on the walls of the

Arnhem Land and Timorese caves. Those discoveries seemed a long time ago to Freddie now but they did not seem like 250 million years ago.

‘Estemmenosochus,’ said Haji. ‘Their meat is considered a delicacy by the Tribals. They seem slow enough, but try catching one! That particular species is *Estemmenosochus uralensis*, the “crowned crocodile”.’

Freddie could not take his eyes off their hideous faces. They were scarred by territorial combat and crowned by grotesque antlers. Even from that distance, he could see the cruel outline of their pincer-sharp teeth. One of the beasts looked up at the cart and Freddie almost tore the top paling off but he need not have worried. The beast’s curiosity was soon satisfied and it turned back to its grazing. Feeling somewhat reassured that the crowned crocodiles were not going to attack he took his eyes off them and noticed another, smaller species of animal. Most of these were grazing in the middle distance although some had also strayed to the edge of the swamp. They were big lizards one to two yards long with Count Dracula fangs protruding from their scaly lips.

‘What about those smaller lizards?’ he asked.

‘Diictodons,’ said Haji as casually as if he were naming a breed of sheep grazing in a paddock. ‘If you watch them grazing you will notice that they are very mammalian in their habits.’

‘Dinosaurs?’ asked Freddie. ‘That portal has taken me back to the age of dinosaurs?’

Lucy turned around and dropped her eyes and chin at Freddie.

‘No,’ replied Haji, ‘you’re not that lucky. We are much further back than that. We are near what geologists call the Permian-Triassic boundary. We are on the Permian side

of that boundary; the end of the Lopingian Epoch,¹⁸ to be precise. There are no dinosaurs at this time. There won't be for another 20 million years. These beasts—half-mammal, half-reptile—are much older than dinosaurs.'

'Do they eat . . . meat?' asked Freddie.

'Yes and no,' said Haji. 'The Diictodons are herbivores.'

'So they just eat grass?' asked Freddie.

'There is no grass yet. They eat vegetation.'

'What about the big . . . crocodile things?'

'They are also herbivores but they can be very aggressive if you enter their space.'

As if to confirm that point, one of the crowned crocodiles turned on a particularly cheeky Diictodon that had grazed too close. This sent that animal scuttling to the water's edge where it splashed clear of the slower moving crocodile. The scene was so playful that Freddie smiled but suddenly, just as the crocodile gave up its half-hearted chase and the Diictodon slowed down, the water exploded in front of the hapless herbivore. A creature like a tadpole, only the size of a hippopotamus, spouted from the water, threw open a massive mouth, and swallowed half the Diictodon in one vicious, blood-splattering bite. A brief struggle and a thrashing of water followed but before Freddie had time to blink both predator and prey slipped back into the now red-stained, bubbling swamp. The crowned crocodile kept grazing as if nothing had happened.

'Blazes! What was that?' cried Freddie.

'You are a lucky boy! You don't get to see that every day. That was an Eryops—a primitive amphibian. It is one of the reasons we usually avoid Sure Death Swamp.

¹⁸ The Lopingian Epoch (260 – 251 Ma) is the last of the three epochs of the Permian Period. (Editor)

But, don't worry, we are quite safe at this distance. They are very slow and clumsy on land.' Freddie kept his eyes on the surface of the swamp for a while to make sure that was the case. He would have kept his vigil a lot longer if he had not remembered his curiosity as to what was pulling the cart.

When he looked to the front of the cart, he was no less surprised. 'And that?' he gasped.

'That is a Moschops,' said Haji.¹⁹ They are one of the dinocephalians, meaning, "terrible heads"; although we try not to mention it in front of her. We call this girl Mossie. Not very original I know but we have a lot on our plate. They are also meant to be extinct and they would be if they had not been domesticated. That is something we did not consider back at the Academy.'

The beast pulling the cart had a head like a pit bull terrier and a powerful body like a bison. It was covered in a thick layer of matted fur. A long, pointed tail flicked at primeval insects attracted, for some reason best known to them, to its backside. It had no hooves, only four reptilian toes at the bottom of each stocky, slow-moving leg.

Freddie closed his eyes, shook his head and looked at everything again. Nothing had changed. 'So, when you said, "250 million years back in time" you really meant, "250 million years back in time".'

'We most certainly did,' said Haji.

Freddie fell back onto the floor of the cart. He had only just turned sixteen. There were well over a hundred lots of his lifetime separating him from the birth of Jesus. That was a lot but at least he could comprehend it. There were almost *fifteen million* periods

¹⁹ Students of extinct dinocephalians may have already made the connection as to why the collective noun for a group of Moschops is a "haji of Moschops". If not—I hope you have now. (M.A. SINGH)

of time equal to his lifespan separating his birth from the time he appeared to be living and breathing in at that very moment. That was incomprehensible!

He looked up at the glaring sky. It was a sky that had existed millions of years before humans and yet . . . here they were. He touched the side of the cart to confirm its existence. In the background, the Diictodons bleated like sheep.

Freddie crawled to the front of the cart and picked up his father's watch. Flipping it open, he was relieved to see and hear that it was still ticking. The minute hand pointed somewhere near the twelve and the hour hand was approaching ten but of course that meant nothing. He turned the watch over and looked instead at his parent's names on the back. He ran his fingers over their names like a blind man reading Braille.

Haji looked back and guessed at Freddie's thoughts. 'It's good that you are suffering some shock now,' he said. 'Time shock affects everyone in some way. Some never recover. The enormity of it is just too much for them. It's a bit different for me. I'm a palaeontologist.²⁰ I'm like a kid in a candy store here.'

Freddie felt more like the kid who had just eaten the candy store. Leaning over the side of the cart, he vomited until his gut was empty. His organic matter, or at least the stewed organic remains of the python, splattered over the barren Pangean soil. Looking back at his vomit as the cart rolled on, he vaguely wondered if he had just changed the natural history of the Earth.

The two seated in the front of the cart fell once more into silence; Haji because he preferred it that way; Lucy because she suspected that Haji would disagree with her thoughts.

²⁰ A palaeontologist is a scientist who studies the life forms of prehistoric times. It is worth noting that some of his former colleagues have argued that the moment Haji arrived in Pangea he, technically, stopped being a palaeontologist. Sour grapes if you ask me. (Editor)

Her feelings, I imagine, were another matter. Although she had been unkind, she had hoped for more from the pale-faced boy who had just vomited a full bowl of python stew over the side of their cart. Now she seriously doubted whether he had what it was going to take.

15. Doylian Lair

It was late afternoon when the cart came to a stop with a jolt that caused Freddie's head to smash into the floorboards for about the gazillionth time.

Arching his aching back he groaned and wished he was back in Darwin.

He smiled at the thought of home but then remembered that it had been under attack when he had left. By now, it could be invaded for all he knew. That thought made his head spin. There was too much to think about. The world was too big and too many things were happening at the same time. He had to return to the moment. That method of dealing with the world had kept him alive so far and at that moment, staying alive was the only plan he had.

Groaning, he crawled to the front of the cart and gathered his few belongings and shoved them in his pockets. Then, grabbing the side of the cart, he hauled himself into an upright position.

Looking to the front, the first thing he saw was Lucy unhitching Mossie from the cart. She was dressed in much the same way as she had been for the excursion to Arnhem Land the previous year. Jodhpurs, with high boots and a shirt so crisp despite the heat that she could have been an advertisement for laundry soap in a woman's magazine. The heat, however, had forced her to tie a bright checked handkerchief between her pointed braids. She had soaked this with water from her canteen to keep cool. The other striking difference, which Freddie noticed for the first time, was a holster strapped to a wide belt and further secured by two more leather straps which ran around the inside of her leg; one just above the knee, the other around the upper thigh. These straps pulled the holster down, low on her hips. These also seemed a recent addition to Freddie. Inside the holster was a Colt 45 pistol.

The sight of this weapon came as a shock to Freddie who still saw Lucy as a nasty little girl with a face full of braces. He wasn't ready for her to be a nasty young woman with a Colt 45.

Freddie also had a better look at Mossie and decided that its suborder name, dinocephalian, meaning terrible headed monster, was not inaccurate. Mossie was much more lizard-like than he had thought at first glance. Two bony ridges stretched above its eyes like exaggerated eyebrows and when she pulled back her lips to chew on a plant Freddie saw razor sharp teeth. They were well suited to the tough Permian vegetation but scary for handlers. Despite this, there was gentleness in Mossie's movements and an obvious bond between her and Lucy, who she playfully nuzzled as she went about her work.

Lucy led Mossie to a large pen that was really just a narrow, steep-sided ravine jutting back from the main jaw of the canyon towering above them. The front of the pen was secured by timber rails and once Mossie was inside, Lucy slipped these back into place and returned to the cart.

'How are you feeling?' she asked, noticing Freddie's pale face propped over the side of the cart. For the first time she sounded like she was not about to spit on him at the end of the sentence.

'I'm not sure how I feel,' he said. 'How about you?'

Lucy stopped and narrowed her eyes at Freddie.

Placing one hand on a hip and the other on the handle of her pistol, she pondered his question. 'I have had plenty of time to come to terms with all this. I have known about Pangea for a long time,' she said at last.

'How long?' asked Freddie.

Lucy hesitated, angling her head to the side as if the spaceship on top was coming in to land. 'You'll get answers to all your questions soon enough. There is a lot that

you need to learn and it will be better for you if you take it slowly. You've already been sick from time shock. It will be enough for now if you can get down from that cart.'

Anxious as he was for more answers he knew she was right. He also did not want to seem too clueless by pestering her with further questions.

Pulling himself up into a crouching position, he vaulted over the side of the cart. Seconds later, he wished that he had looked before leaping because he jumped right on top of something. It let out a terrified squeal and leaped into the air in fright. Freddie's legs were dragged from under him and he landed on his already battered backside. Looking up he saw a stocky creature like a pig with the face of a chubby budgerigar squealing down the canyon. Looking around he saw even more of these creatures and wondered how he had not noticed them before. They appeared quite docile when not being jumped on.

'Lystrosaurs,' explained Lucy unable to hide a smile.

'Of course,' said Freddie trying to resurrect some lost dignity. Not an easy task when you are lying flat on your back and smelling something you have never smelled in your life before but which you very strongly suspect is fresh Lystrosaur poop. What's more his notepad had fallen from his pocket and landed right in the middle of another fresh pile of Lystrosaur poop. Picking it up he scraped the poop off on his trousers and popped it back in his pocket. His hat had also fallen off his head and landed a few feet away.

After enjoying Freddie's embarrassment, Lucy turned her back on him and started walking up the canyon.

'What about my machete?' asked Freddie.

She stopped and glared back at him suspiciously.

'Blazes,' said Freddie, 'You seem to be armed well enough yourself.' He nodded in the direction of the Colt 45 strapped to her hip. 'Haji said this was a dangerous place but at the same time you have taken my only . . . weapon.' Freddie had to pause before

saying the last word because up to then it had simply been a tool for slashing through vines, and a walking stick for rocky slopes. He had liked the jaunty, pirate feel of it slapping against his leg but had not, until that moment, thought of it as a weapon.

Lucy thought for a moment before stomping to the front of the cart, and reaching under the front seat. She grabbed the machete, which was hidden there, threw it in Freddie's direction, and stormed off.

'Thanks,' said Freddie, reaching down, and picking up his machete. It felt good to have it back in his hand and he swung it about his head a couple of times like a pirate before lacing it through his belt.

The sun had been fierce all day but a line of darkness ran across the ground and shaded him at that moment. Looking up, he saw a grey storm cloud smothering the sun. It was a relief from the heat but made the humidity worse.

The now-familiar smell of rotten egg gas still fouled the air although not as strongly as in the Amazonian camp. He had almost forgotten the smell of clean air. Even here, where the air was at least cleaner, there was something not quite right about it. It seemed thinner as if there were less of something and he guessed it was oxygen. Since waking up in Koia's tent, he had been breathing more deeply. At first, he had thought it was because of his injuries.

Squinting into the shadowy canyon, he saw that Lucy had reached a pile of boulders and rubble. In the midst of this pile, he noticed a dark space, which he guessed was a cave. A wisp of smoke hazed the entrance.

Freddie stepped forward and picked up his hat, which he noticed with a grimace had also landed in Lystrosaur poop. Luckily, it was the same colour. Then he followed Lucy up the canyon.

By the time he reached the cave, Lucy was already inside. Thanks for waiting, he thought. The opening was large enough for him to enter standing up, which he did slowly, giving his eyes time to adjust to the darkness. A downdraft from the back of the cave blew the smoke of a small fire out the entrance and directly into his eyes. By the time he was inside, he was half-blinded. He squinted, rubbed his eyes, and dimly made out four shapes seated around a fire. Two of them were his recent travelling companions.

Lucy sat on a ledge to the side, taking off her boots. Haji tended a pot suspended over the fire on a metal tripod. A spark from the fire briefly illuminated his face and the ring on his necklace, which had once more fallen outside his shirt.

The third person sat well back from the fire and was no more than a shadow.

The fourth person caused Freddie to scream.

16. Tea and Monte Carlos

‘Gruntenguile!’

Seated on a camp chair in front of the fire, with a cup of tea in one hand and a cream biscuit in the other sat his crusty manservant.

‘Where have you been? How did you get here? *Why did you push me?*’

‘No need to thank me, Little Boss. All young people need a bit of a push every now and again.’

‘Not into a crystal sword, they don’t! And why didn’t you follow me and help out with that giant blazing pyth—’

‘Whoa—slow down, Little Boss—all will be revealed in due time . . . grrrnt . . . take a seat.’

‘He is right,’ said Haji. ‘It might be best if you sit down and have a cup of tea first.’

Freddie was not ready to calm down just yet. Miming Gruntenguile pushing him into the crystal sword he glared at him for an explanation.

‘Here’s your tea,’ said Haji, handing Freddie a steaming cup. ‘And—welcome to Doylian Lair.’

‘Thank you,’ said Freddie. He grabbed the enamel handle in one hand and sat down, glaring at Gruntenguile all the while.

He only took his eyes off Gruntenguile when he put his hand down in the middle of a scurry of scaly bugs. Jumping back to his feet he brushed the bugs from his hands and sleeves and spilled most of his tea.

‘Nothing to be alarmed by,’ said Haji. ‘They are only Blattopterans—Permian cockroaches. They are the most common insect in Pangea. So, you’d better get used to them.’

Freddie sat back down as Haji placed the billy pot on a rock near the edge of the fire to keep it hot.

‘So,’ said Freddie,’ returning his attention again to Gruntenguile ‘Where did you get to? I’m guessing you already knew where that crystal sword would take me. Why didn’t you follow me?’

‘I would have but . . . are you sure you wouldn’t like a biscuit with that tea? I brought some of your favourites—Monte Carlos.’

Freddie wished he could have said no to the Monte Carlos but he was starving. ‘Thank you,’ he said.

‘What Gruntenguile is reluctant to tell you,’ said Lucy, ‘is that the crystal sword means of time travel that you used is no longer . . . how should I say? . . . the preferred means.’

‘What? You mean there are alternatives,’ said Freddie turning to face Gruntenguile. ‘Nobody told me that!’

‘I should also tell you that the crystal sword portals have a ninety percent safety rating!’ continued Lucy.

‘Ninety percent sounds all right,’ said Freddie.

‘No, you fool; the ninety percent refers to their fatality rate.’

Sounds numbed and stars appeared on the edge of Freddie’s vision. ‘So how did everyone else get here?’ he asked.

Gruntenguile continued dunking his Monte Carlo and pointed with his non-dunking thumb over his shoulder.

Squinting into the darkness at the back of the cave Freddie could just make out a round object like two dessert bowls placed rim to rim.

‘It’s a GT Turbo,’ said Lucy. ‘They have a zero-fatality rate. They are very reliable and . . . quite comfortable. Some of the later models have built in sound systems.’

‘Mine’s got a massage seat,’ added Haji. ‘It’s *fantastic* for my bad back.’

‘Well, thanks for telling me about them now,’ said Freddie, vaguely wondering what a sound system was and still glaring at Gruntenguile.

Gruntenguile looked at his biscuit.

‘So, you allowed me to travel by that incredibly dangerous and . . . unpleasant means; while you travelled like Buck Rogers in some luxury time-space . . . disc thingy.’

‘Well, the thing is, Little Boss—the GT Turbos are very small. They only carry one person. For us both to get here one had to use the old portal. But that is neither here nor somewhere else, Little Boss. You are living proof that they work just as well . . . grrrnt.’

Freddie was about to ask Gruntenguile how he could have taken such an incredible risk with his life, but he was interrupted.

‘You will soon learn that there is much more to do in Pangea than just getting here, young man.’

Freddie turned in the direction of the voice. It came from further back in the cave and was followed by the ghost of an echo. The speaker moved closer to the fire as he spoke, sat down, and pulled his knees in tight to his chest. A sudden crackle and spark from the fire showed him to be a man with more skin than he needed—like he had recently lost a lot of weight. When the fire died down, all that remained visible was his head, which was slashed with razor cuts.

‘Don’t be so dramatic Count Schnauzer, the boy will learn the state of play soon enough,’ said Haji.

‘Maybe he will,’ said Count Schnauzer. ‘But indulge me a little longer.’ Then turning to Freddie, he asked, ‘Have you any idea why you are here?’

Uneasy silence followed. The fire crackled and the water in the billy made a tinny fizz. Freddie blew into his cup and glanced around the cave. His eyes rested for a moment on Gruntenguile but he had nothing to say and seemed more interested in eating his Monte Carlos before Count Schnauzer finished them off.

‘Have you any idea where—’

‘That’s enough Schnauzer! The boy is still in shock. Give him time to speak.’

A quiet, filled only with the scratching of Blattopterans, scurrying about their business on the cave floor and the wail of wind from outside, followed, before Freddie spoke. ‘All I know,’ he began, ‘is that I was going on a secret expedition with Professor Dupler and at the last minute, Gruntenguile took the Professor’s place. I was told it was best that I didn’t know too much and I . . . believed that.’

‘Grrrnt!’ said Gruntenguile.

‘I know I should have asked more questions but the truth is that weird stuff has always happened to me. After a while you stop bothering to ask what’s going on.’

‘Don’t worry,’ said Lucy, ‘weird stuff happens to most people only they are too dull to notice—’ She suddenly stopped, as if worried about saying too much. ‘What I mean is,’ she continued, ‘that you can tell us things now that you have never told anyone before. Do you think anyone *here* is going to be surprised by a little weirdness?’

Freddie smiled at her encouragement, but he did not really need it. The truth was he needed to talk more than anything, and there was at least one question he was burning to ask.

‘My father was the anthropologist, Colum O’Toole.’ Freddie stopped abruptly to see if the name had caused any stir among his listeners. He glanced quickly around the cave but he was blinded by a spark from the fire. ‘You may have heard of him?’

‘We have Freddie, but I am afraid he is as much a mystery to us as he is to you.’ Haji reached forward and squeezed Freddie’s shoulder.

Freddie breathed in his disappointment and continued. ‘Well . . . I guess you know then that his plane . . . disappeared over Timor on March the fourth, 1935. I was just ten years old. I was shocked, but not surprised. He did a lot of dangerous travel and I had always felt that, someday, something like that would happen.’ Freddie paused again, remembering the day Professor Dupler had told him his father was missing as clearly as his last breath.

‘Get on with it,’ said Count Schnauzer. ‘It’s not like we’ve got ages.’

This was Freddie’s first experience of time travel humour and it flew straight over his head.

Freddie was closest to the fire and it lit up his features. The others leaned back into the darkness.

‘This may sound like an interrogation Freddie but if you want to stay alive here you will need our help and if we are going to help you, we need to know why you are here. So, what can you tell us? Is there anything else that stands out in your memory about your father . . . or mother?’ asked Haji.

‘I can’t remember my mother at all, but I can remember my father very well. He was a . . . “curious chap”,’ said Freddie, recalling Professor Dupler’s description.

‘What do you mean by that?’ asked Haji.

Freddie looked once more around the dark circle of eyes watching him.

‘You can trust us,’ said Lucy.

The fire crackled and flung phantom shadows across Freddie’s face.

‘There was one time . . .’ Once more Freddie paused. Why was he telling stories about his father to these strangers?

‘Go on,’ said Lucy.

‘Well . . . there was one time,’ continued Freddie, ‘when I was quite young that I lost something . . . I can’t even remember what it was . . . but my father went berserk. Like Doctor Frankenstein in a power blackout. I think I was so scared that I blanked the thing . . . whatever it was . . . right out of my mind, for years afterwards.’

Haji looked to Gruntenguile.

‘Grrrnt . . . it was before my time,’ he said.

‘Where’s all this getting us?’ interrupted Schnauzer dabbing his sweating forehead with a filthy rag. ‘All children lose things. This is getting us nowhere!’

‘Just let the boy tell his story,’ said Haji.

Freddie continued. ‘Before my father disappeared he brought Gruntenguile back from an expedition to be my manservant. Then after my father had gone we both moved into the house next door to live with Professor Dupler—’

‘Grrrnt,’ confirmed Gruntenguile. The mention of the Professor’s name also caused an exchange of glances between his listeners. Freddie noticed this but it was too dark in the cave to read what their looks may have meant.

‘Since then I have been more like an assistant to the Professor than a ward. The Professor does not believe in schools so I stayed home. Each day I read from the Professor’s library.’ Turning to Lucy he added, ‘I’ve read most of your mother’s work on the origins of myths. They are my favourite. They seem to make the most sense. They make even more sense now.’

‘There was so much more that she could have written,’ said Lucy before leaning back against the wall of the cave so that all Freddie could see was the vague outline of her head and hair. It still reminded him of Buck Rogers’ spaceship.

‘Last year, Professor Dupler took me on an expedition to a cave on the Arnhem Escarpment. I guess Lucy has already told you that there were cave paintings there unlike any I had ever seen. They were . . . prehistoric. They depicted giant animals which I now guess were the creatures we observed today.’ Freddie turned towards Haji.

‘Estemmenosochus,’ said Haji, nodding.

‘When I looked at the cave paintings I also noticed something else.’ Freddie paused because the next point seemed important, although it would take a while for him to figure out why. ‘I sensed that someone was staring at me.’ He looked at Lucy. ‘At first I thought it was you. I thought you might be death staring me over the spaceship comment . . . which was a total accident by the way. Anyway . . . where was I? Yes . . . I knew it wasn’t you because I could see your . . . silhouette . . . and you were looking upwards. So, I kept looking and that’s when I realised that it was Professor Dupler. He looked away when he saw that I had noticed him and I only caught him for a second, but it was really weird that while everyone else was looking at the cave paintings he was looking at me. He didn’t say anything then, but when we got back to Darwin he started behaving extra weirdly. He was suddenly interested in me and then I found out why. I woke up one morning and he was sitting on the edge of the couch that I use for my bed . . .’

‘That would be creepy,’ said Lucy, shivering.

‘It was,’ said Freddie. ‘Anyway, when I woke he told me straight out that he had observed me at the cave and knew that I had . . . instinctively . . . understood the paintings we had seen there—’

‘When you say understood—what do you mean by that?’ asked Haji.

‘I mean . . . I just knew . . . no, that’s not right . . . a part of my brain knew . . . that the paintings were proof that all this . . .’ Freddie gestured around him, ‘. . . was possible. I knew that time travel was possible the way the Wright brothers knew that air travel was

possible and because I knew it was possible . . . instinctively . . . the Professor invited me on an expedition. He was not very clear about the details and only said that it would be some time during the summer and that it would be somewhere in the East Indies. I had my doubts about whether it would ever really happen because the Professor had made promises before. I kind of believed and didn't believe but . . . I guess it was something to look forward to . . . so I went along with it. At times, I thought he had lost his marbles but . . . the whole world had gone crazy. I didn't believe war planes would fly to Australia and drop bombs on Darwin either.'

The storm cloud that had built earlier had come to nothing and hot dust eddied through the entrance of the cave. It was the hottest part of the day and the fire was still burning. Freddie felt like he was roasting.

'Unfortunately, the Professor had to bring the expedition forward before all the arrangements were properly made on account of Darwin being bombed. I still don't know whether Professor Dupler ever intended to go himself.

'He promised me two sets of instructions. The first he gave to me at Darwin Airport. Those instructions were destroyed when we crash-landed in a river, but I also had a map and . . . I didn't have much time to read it but . . . I managed to find a cave. It was there that I found the crystal sword and . . . here I am. Since then I've been almost eaten by an oversized python and, apparently also, an oversexed Amazon.'

That was as much as Freddie thought he could tell them. He looked down, through the flames, into the glowing embers of the fire and wondered at his own stupidity in travelling so far, and knowing so little.

When he looked back up, he was surprised to see that no one was looking at him. Instead, they were staring at something behind him. He swivelled around to see what it was.

Something was standing in the entrance of the cave, staring at him, with the pleading eyes of a kicked dog.

17. Escape to the Aurora

‘What is that?’

The creature to which Freddie referred stood awkwardly on two legs as if it would have preferred four. It was puffing and slicked with frothy sweat.

‘Don’t worry,’ said Lucy. ‘It’s a Spotter; most of them are on our side . . . we think.’ She pulled her boots back on as she spoke.

The Spotter looked like a hairless dachshund on two longer than expected legs. Its tongue, flopping from its mouth like something it was eating rather than part of its body, gave it an appearance of imbecility not entirely undeserved. Thick, toilet-brush hair sprouted from the top of its head. Freddie later learned that this hair came in a variety of bright colours. In the case of this Spotter, it was a bright red, which clashed with its otherwise filthy appearance.

‘It’s okay,’ said Haji, ‘it’s one of mine.’

‘So . . . what are they?’ asked Freddie.

‘Flea-bitten mutts, that you trust at your own peril,’ snorted Count Schnauzer.

‘Grrrnt.’ Gruntenguile stiffened at the reference to flea-bitten.

Haji and Lucy frowned. ‘It’s hard to explain in a hurry,’ said Lucy. ‘Let’s listen to what it has to say.’

The Spotter took a cautious step towards Haji who reached into his back pocket, grabbed two capsules, and held them in his outstretched hand. The Spotter sniffed the capsules before suddenly snatching them, like a mouse stealing cheese from a loaded trap, and throwing them in its mouth.

Haji turned to Freddie and said, ‘Nutrition capsules—those two will keep him alive for a month.’

This proved to be incorrect, because at that moment, as Freddie was staring directly at the Spotter, the sharp end of a spear burst through its body and a spurt of black blood splattered across Freddie's hat, which lay on the ground at his feet.

Freddie stared at the tip of the spear in horror. He had seen one exactly like it before. It had been in the corner of Koia's tent. The Spotter collapsed and would have fallen face down on the cave floor had its body not been propped up by the end of the spear as it fell forward. Freddie looked around to see what the others were doing and straight away noticed that they were not there. He panicked and his adventure would have almost certainly ended there if Gruntenguile, remembering his work contract, had not raced back to save him.

'This way, Little Boss,' he cried. 'Follow me.'

Gruntenguile took off at a surprising speed for a biped with such short legs. Freddie ran as fast he could but it was not easy keeping up with him. To make matters worse the tunnel was as dark as a black cat's gizzards at midnight. Behind them, a horrible cry echoed through the cave and grew louder with each stumbling step.

YiiYiYiYiYiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii

It was the battle cry of the Amazons.

Very few men have lived to describe that blood-curdling cry.

All Freddie could recall of that escape was a blind scramble and a fear of being shish-kebabbed by an Amazonian spear at any moment. He leaped and scrambled over the rocks that littered the cave floor. His instincts once more served him well, and maybe also a little luck. To stay alive, he had to stay in touch with Gruntenguile who was not easy to see in the darkness. In the echoing blackness above, creatures fluttered and Freddie wondered if the

ancestors of bats existed at that time. He hoped so because he did not want to imagine what else they might be.²¹

After a minute or two, maybe more, Freddie caught a glimpse of a light ahead. It grew brighter with each stride but he was struggling for breath. The cries of the Amazons were like a landslide about to swallow him. Foolishly, he turned to see how close they were. This was almost a fatal mistake, as he did not see that Count Schnauzer had fallen up ahead. The fleet-footed Gruntenguile bounded over him thinking he was a rock. When he turned around, Freddie also mistook the Count for a rock but as he leaped in the air, his foot clipped the Count's head as he was trying to get back to his feet. This had two effects. The first was that the Count collapsed to the floor of the cave and lay there in a state of concussion for the next few minutes. The second was that Freddie tripped and rolled forward. He was half-way through his third roll when he thudded into a wall. The cries of the Amazons were deafening by now and looking back, he could just see the light of their crude lanterns swaying in the darkness. The halos of light were growing larger by the second and fierce, shadows formed in them. Before he had time to think of standing, two small but strong hands grabbed him by the back of the shirt and pulled him up with astonishing strength just as a spear struck the spot where he had been lying.

'Gruntenguile?'

'No, it's me,' cried Lucy. 'Now just lie there and try not to get yourself killed.'

What followed was even more of a blur.

²¹ I have investigated this and I doubt very much that they were bats as the oldest bat-like fossil date to the Palaeocene—a mere 60 million odd years ago. Despite further research, I have no suggestions as to what they may have been. (Editor)

Everything turned upside-down . . . The whole world yelling . . . The criss-crossed surface of a large basket . . . A burst of gas and a bright plume of flame like a flower opening.

In the midst of all this, Haji was yelling, 'Cut the ropes! Cut the ropes! Cut the ropes!'

Looking up, Freddie saw a huge billowing shape fluttering above him. It was then that he realised that he was in the basket of a hot-air balloon.

Bodies brushed about him in the darkness. He thought and hoped they belonged to his companions and that they knew what they were doing.

The only voice he could make out in the din was Haji's. Gone was the calm that had characterised Freddie's brief experience of him. By now he was screaming. 'Damn you Schnauzer, cut the ropes! How many times have we done this drill?'

Freddie heard all of this lying in the bottom of the basket as feet trampled over him and his heart hammered against his ribs.

Haji kept yelling at Count Schnauzer but there was still no reply. Freddie tried to get up but fell back as the basket began to rise and sway. At the same time, it shuddered with the thumping of spears. Somewhere in the darkness, he heard a muffled cry. He did not realise until later that it was Count Schnauzer coming to his senses amidst a throng of screaming Amazons.

The basket was tied by two sets of ropes. The first secured it to the ground. Lucy had already untied those ropes. The second longer set of ropes acted as a safety device and held the basket at about forty feet. It was Count Schnauzer's job to untie them but he had fallen before reaching them. This meant that the balloon would come to a wrenching stop forty feet in the air when they pulled tight. Freddie struggled to his feet once more and looking over the side of the basket, he saw that these ropes were already pulled tight.

Squinting into the darkness, he soon saw the reason for this. Amazons, as nimble as monkeys, were half-way up the ropes. Knives gleamed in their white clenched teeth. Their furious eyes seemed to fly from their sockets towards him. Lucy desperately shook one of the ropes with all her strength but they kept climbing. Haji and Gruntenguile were busy working on one of the burners, which was flickering and looking in danger of going out. As quick as thinking, Freddie unsheathed his machete and leant over the side of the basket. He hacked one anchor rope and then raced to the other side of the basket and hacked the other just above the outstretched hand of the first of the Amazons. She fell to the ground with a terrible cry and shouts that did not bode well for their next meeting. Freddie and Lucy flopped to the floor of the basket and at the same time, Haji and Gruntenguile overcame the problem with the burner.

The flame roared and the balloon floated upwards with a serenity that was weirdly at odds with everything that had just happened. As it ascended, it pulled a canvas cover from the roof of the cave and light flooded in from the furnace of the sky above.

Freddie lay in the bottom of the basket sucking in as much of the oxygen-depleted air as his lungs could take. Someone grabbed his arm. It was Lucy.

‘I’m glad I gave that machete back to you. You may not be as useless as I thought,’ she puffed. At the same time, she smiled.

It was not a big smile but it made Freddie feel as good as it was possible to feel under the circumstances.

Below them, the Amazons squinted into the pale sunlight as the balloon soared upwards.

The sun was going down but the light still seemed bright to Freddie after the darkness of the cave. It also seemed like freedom. For the first time in days, Freddie relaxed and allowed himself to smile. Even Gruntenguile smiled and that was unusual because he

often said that smiling invites disaster and in this case, he was right. More Amazons were waiting above and one of them leaped from the cliff face. It was an enormous leap but not quite enough. She fell short but managed to get a handhold on the side of the basket. Lucy sprang to her feet and pounded her hands to make her let go but she was too quick and instead grabbed hold of Lucy's forearm and held tight. Freddie was slower in getting to his feet. When he looked over the side, he recognised the attacker immediately. It was Koia. Her face was striped in red and yellow war paint and she looked very upset. It suddenly occurred to him that he had stood her up the night before.

'She's dragging me out of the basket,' screamed Lucy. 'Use the machete. It's her arms or my life.'

Freddie turned, grabbed his machete and leant over the side of the basket. He swung the blade downwards but foolishly looked into Koia's eyes as he did so. She had such beautiful grey eyes, like a cool pool on a hot day. Suddenly the blade was hanging in mid-air. He could not do it. He had stood her up on their first date and now he was about to chop her arms off. What sort of a boyfriend was he?

Meanwhile Lucy was slipping further out of the basket.

'What are you doing Freddie? Cut her arms off, now! I can't hold on!'

Still he hesitated. Lucy's waist was now balancing precariously on the edge of the basket. She was about to topple over the side. He had to do something and reluctantly he knew what it was. 'I'm sorry it had to end like this,' said Freddie, meaning every word. He swung the machete towards Koia's straining forearms, but at the last moment, she let go and dropped into the darkness of the cave below. Freddie watched her as she fell and hoped that she would land safely. It did not seem possible but she was a tough girl. Once Koia had been completely swallowed by the darkness of the cave, he turned to Lucy who was lying, breathlessly on the floor of the basket.

‘You hesitated,’ she said. ‘I hope you had a good reason.’

Freddie did have a reason. In his heart, he could not believe that Koia was as bad as Lucy was making her out to be. She had nursed him after he had been almost crushed to death by the giant python. She had cooled his brow with a damp cloth when he was too weak to move. Plus, there was just something about her! Maybe she did intend to slaughter him and skin and tan his hide but relationships are never easy. Freddie guessed it was not a good idea to share any of these thoughts with Lucy.

‘Have you ever chopped someone’s arms off with a machete?’

‘They’re Amazons; you either kill them or they kill you! And what did you mean by, “I’m sorry it had to end like this”? Did you know her?’

‘Of course not I was just . . .’

Luckily, before he could finish, Haji stepped between them and raised a hand in front of each of their faces. ‘Enough!’ he cried. ‘I think you should know, Freddie, that Doctor Wong almost lost her life to Amazons on her last visit. Luckily she managed to escape but she was struck by a spear just below the knee.’

Freddie recalled Doctor Wong limping on her way up the Arnhem Escarpment. ‘I am sorry to hear that,’ said Freddie turning towards Lucy.

She glared suspiciously at him.

‘You two are going to have to learn to get along and trust each other,’ continued Haji. ‘There are so few of us and we have just lost Count Schnauzer.’

At the mention of Count Schnauzer, they all looked over the side of the basket into the darkness of the cave below where they could still hear the wild cries of the Amazons. Freddie did not want to think at that moment what fate may have befallen the Count.

‘I never really trusted Count Schnauzer,’ said Lucy, ‘but, you’re right . . . there’s so few of us left. Everyone becomes . . . precious.’

‘Grrrnt,’ agreed Gruntenguile. In their brief time together, the Count had called him a flea farm on several occasions and a meddling monkey (under his breath) at least once but he was nonetheless upset that he had been captured.

‘It’s too late now. There’s nothing we can do,’ said Haji. He turned back to the burners and opened both valves a little. More gas farted from the bottle to swell the flame and they soared higher into the gloaming sky. At the same time, Lucy cranked a diesel engine into action and gyro blades secured by a network of cables to the sides of the balloon began rotating.

‘Where to now?’ asked Freddie.

‘West Gondwana,²²’ said Haji. ‘Or, more precisely, to the part of it that in our time . . . our other time . . . we call Africa.’

‘But that will take . . . weeks . . . maybe months. What will we eat?’

‘Don’t worry,’ said Haji, ‘I have plenty more nutrition capsules. Each one will last us a couple of weeks. Maybe more if we’re just sitting about not using any energy. Plus, we have a small desalinator.’ He pointed to a spaghetti of pipes in the rigging. ‘It will turn the seawater into drinking water. If that breaks down I have a small supply of hydration capsules although I would rather save them for emergencies.’

‘What about going to . . .?’

‘. . . to what?’

‘. . . the toilet.’

²² Gondwana was the southerly part of Pangea. It broke away from the northerly part known as Laurasia as recently as 200–180 Ma. It included the current-day land masses of Antarctica, South America, Africa, Madagascar, Australia and both the Arabian and Indian Peninsulas. (Editor)

‘You don’t need to go so much when you are on a diet of nutrition capsules, but when you do go . . .’ Haji held up a rope ladder. ‘Don’t worry,’ he said. ‘I’ve thought of everything . . . everything I can think of that is.’

18. Tethys Sea

‘Where’s Freddie?’ Lucy had just woken and the first thing she noticed was that she could only see two of her three companions. Gruntenguile was still sleeping. She did not need to look to find him because he was snoring loudly from both ends. Haji was already up. He stood on the edge of the basket, his moustache blowing in the wind, staring at the northern horizon. In answer to Lucy’s question, he pointed down.

‘What? He’s fallen overboard?’ Lucy grabbed the horns of her hair. She sometimes did that when she panicked, but that was not often.

‘Calm down . . . I’m just exercising.’ Freddie’s strained voice came from below the basket. Popping her head over the side and looking down she saw him clinging to the lower rung of the rope ladder doing chin-ups. He took one hand off the rung to wave at her. ‘I like to exercise in the morning if I can,’ said Freddie, smiling at Lucy. There was something quite charming about the worried look on her face, but it did not last long. It clouded to an expression that was much more familiar.

‘What on Earth do you think you’re doing?’

Freddie was sure he had already told her. ‘Exercising—there wasn’t any room in the basket . . . so I came down here.’

‘Get back up here this instant,’ she cried. ‘There are enough dangers in Pangea without you inventing new ones!’ That said, she stormed to the other side of the basket and sat down.

‘I’d finished anyway,’ said Freddie, though not very loudly. He climbed the rope ladder and clambered back into the basket, avoiding Haji’s arching eyebrows.

By that time, Lucy had taken out a notebook and an RAF issue Biro from her shirt pocket and was scribbling furiously.²³ Freddie wondered whether she was recording every example of his idiocy. He thought of a couple of things to say to her but they all died a cowardly death before they were halfway to his tongue.

Instead, he turned around and leaned on the side of the basket next to Haji.

The first thing he noticed was that Haji's shirt was now buttoned all the way to the top. It raced through his mind that he might be trying to hide the quarter moon ring he had noticed earlier. It could just as easily have been because it was cool at that altitude. Even so, he was hesitant to start a conversation with Haji. Back at the cave, he had told him everything but Haji had told him nothing.

He glanced back at Lucy. He had at least known her longer and maybe she was the one he should be trusting. She paused in her writing and bit the tip of her pen as if she were struggling to find the words to describe Freddie's stupidity. Raising an eyebrow, she shook her head and continued scribbling.

Freddie turned around again and this time he looked at the horizon. Billowing, tar-black clouds smothered the entire northern sky. He had noticed this earlier and had thought it was a storm brewing.

Noticing Freddie alongside him, Haji pointed to the west.

'That's where we're heading,' he said. 'Normally I like to stay in sight of land, but that would take too long. The land which will become your Australia is now way south of us.' Haji swung his arm in that direction. 'Much of the southern half of it is covered in ice. India joins it to the west—'

²³ Invented by László Biro these pens were first used by the Royal Air Force in World War Two. How Lucy got her hands on one is anybody's guess. (Editor)

‘I beg your pardon?’ Freddie was not the greatest geography student, but he was pretty sure that India was some 6,000 miles northwest of Australia.

‘I’m sorry,’ said Haji, noticing Freddie’s surprise. ‘You are not familiar with the theory of continental drift?’²⁴

Freddie shook his head.

‘Continents move, Freddie. They float over the Earth like giant plates and sometimes crash into each other to form great mountain chains like the Andes and the Himalayas.’ While he spoke, he reached into his shirt pocket, pulled out a crumpled map, and handed it to Freddie.

Freddie turned the map to face the sun so that he could see it more clearly. It was hand-drawn and showed a large body of land in appearance not unlike a human skull facing upwards. Across the land was scrawled ‘Pangea’, a name Freddie had already heard on several occasions. Either side of it were two named bodies of water. To the east beneath the spot where the jaw would have hinged was the Tethys Sea; to the west, the Panthalassic Ocean.

‘That is the Earth as it is *now* with the seven continents we know, in our time, joined as one. We are somewhere here over the Tethys Sea,’ said Haji, pointing to a spot on the map. ‘We should reach land somewhere around here, which is now the continental shelf of northern Africa.’

Freddie snuck a sideways glance at Haji before thanking him and handing the map back. He already had doubts about whether he could trust Haji. Now he had reason to doubt his sanity. Australia, Africa, Asia, Antarctica, the Americas, and Europe joined as one?

²⁴ The theory of Continental Drift emerged after World War Two. (Editor)

Continents floating across the Earth and bumping into each other to form mountains? It was the craziest thing he had ever heard.

Freddie continued to watch Haji out the tail of his eye. He was still leaning into the breeze, his slightly closed lashes shielding his eyes, his large moustache quivering like a shaking lunatic.

‘Okay,’ said Freddie at last. ‘I’ve told you everything I know. Which amounts to blazing nothing . . . but . . . I am here in this place where you tell me all the world is joined in one massive lump, 250 million years before my own time, and I still have no idea why.’ Freddie looked straight at Haji as he said this but his face gave nothing away. ‘So—what about you, Haji? Why are you here? I think it’s time *I* had some answers.’

Haji gazed into the distance as Freddie spoke. Before answering, he looked first towards Lucy and then back to Freddie. His hand slipped inside his shirt and played with the ring hanging there. ‘I . . . don’t know everything about this game,’ he said at last, casting another glance at Lucy. ‘But I can tell you some things.

‘Firstly, I should confess that we do know quite a bit about your guardian, Professor Dupler, and his research into the sixth sense and various . . . cultural coincidences.

‘These phenomena have been the subject of research across several scientific disciplines since the early nineteenth century. It was called mysticism back then, and was not highly regarded by the establishment. It was—and still is—considered, the reserve of crackpots.’

‘Crackpots?’ smiled Freddie, still mulling over Haji’s theory of floating continents.

‘Professor Dupler, we believe, was very close to a breakthrough in finding out about . . . all this.’

Lucy continued. 'My mother had been watching the progress of the Professor's work with keen interest for many years. Recently, however, there was a change. The Professor had become secretive and my mother concluded that he was close to a discovery of some kind. She had hoped to learn more about the state of the Professor's research on the excursion to Arnhem Land last year but the Professor was very guarded with everyone on that trip.'

'Except Doctor Bufon,' said Freddie.

'Hmm,' a shadow drifted over Lucy's face at the mention of Doctor Bufon.

'We noticed also that the Professor had a new glass eye.'

'So?'

'A glass eye is often a sign that someone is playing this game, Freddie.'

'Why?'

'We're not sure. There's a lot going on here and we don't know everything.

Sometimes I think we don't know anything.'

'I can tell you,' said Freddie, 'that when he returned from the expedition where he lost his eye he became more intense in his research like he was on the verge of something. I think on the expedition to Arnhem Land last year he was worried about your mother discovering whatever that was.'

'Yes,' said Lucy. Then, hesitating, she looked cagily towards Haji before dropping her head to the side and continuing. 'But what the Professor did not realise was that my mother already knew.'

'Your mother knew about that portal in Timor before Professor Dupler?'

'No! My mother knew nothing of *that* portal. What I am saying is that my mother knew of *two other—GT Turbo—portals*. My mother is a member of a secret society

that has known about all this’—Lucy drew a circle about her with her hand—‘for over a decade. She is a Doylian.’

‘Doy . . . what?’

‘In 1882,’ began Lucy, as if giving a lecture, ‘a group called the Society for Psychological Research was founded in London. The purpose of that group was to conduct scientific studies into psychic and paranormal phenomena. This group was further divided into more specific committees, who investigated particular topics like, apparitions and haunted houses, and telepathy.’

Freddie tried to keep a straight face, as Lucy continued. He never in his wildest dreams had imagined that Lucy, of all people, would be into that sort of mumbo jumbo. ‘My mother became a member of the Telepathy or Thought Transference Committee as it was called back then, while studying at Oxford just after World War One. Some years later, this Committee appointed a group to investigate two brothers who worked in the carnivals up and down England at that time. My mother was a member of that group. These brothers appeared to be typical charlatans and the sceptics in the Society were keen to prove them fakes. The problem was that my mother’s group soon discovered reasons enough to believe they were genuine. For years they tried to get the claims of these men properly investigated but the Society was controlled by sceptics. All they ever wanted was to debunk any claim that challenged the current laws of science. So, after years of in-fighting and in the light of these discoveries, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle led a mass resignation from the group in 1930. What was not so public was the fact that at the same time Doyle formed another group,

which continued its investigations in the utmost secrecy. This clandestine group was known only to its select members as the Doylians.’²⁵

Doylians? Freddie recalled that name from the cave. It sounded like some fancy club where dapper gents wore cravats, smoked big cigars, and talked about India.

‘So . . . the Doylians—if I’m getting this right,’ said Freddie, ‘discovered two of those GT . . .’

‘. . . Turbos.’

‘. . . and travelled back 250 million years to . . . now?’

Lucy nodded.

Gruntenguile gave a semi-conscious grunt that told Freddie he would soon be awake.

‘So . . . what are you Doylians doing here?’

‘It’s not just us,’ said Lucy. ‘There are others with less noble intentions playing this game, and many more who wish they were not playing at all—’

‘Where are they?’ interrupted Freddie.

‘Many live in Babel—a floating village on the coast of the Panthalassic Ocean. I have never been there but I hear it is the strangest gathering of desperate, cut-throat villains you will ever see.’

‘Do you think . . . my father could be there?’

‘Anyone could be there but don’t get your hopes up. We’re not going anywhere near Babel. It is just too dangerous. It is guarded by the most ingenious and cruel booby traps ever invented.’

²⁵ The choice of this name seems to confirm the ongoing leadership of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle of Sherlock Holmes fame. Doyle led this mass resignation from the Psychical Research Society in 1930 purportedly over the exposure by sceptics of several fraudulent spiritualists including William Hope. (Editor)

Looking to the horizon Freddie wondered whether he was only kidding himself. Was there really any chance that his father was still alive?

‘Maybe some other time,’ said Haji, sensing Freddie’s disappointment.

‘Yes, but for now we must stick to our core mission,’ said Lucy. ‘Someone has sent those portals into the future for a reason and that reason, we believe, is that something is happening here in Pangea that could end all life on Earth. Our mission is to stop it.’

‘Stop what?’

‘That!’ said Haji.

Turning he saw Haji pointing towards the black haze smothering the northern sky.

‘What *is* that?’ asked Freddie. ‘At first I thought it was a storm but it never goes away.’

‘Here in Pangea, they call it the Dark Cloud.’

‘*Who* calls it the Dark Cloud?’

‘The several higher species of alien creatures that inhabit the planet at the moment.’

Freddie stared mutely at Haji. This was even crazier than floating continents.

‘Three centuries ago an alien spacecraft crash-landed on Earth. It contained several species but the master species are the Zynes. You have already met several of the other species.’

‘Amazons?’

Haji and Lucy nodded.

‘That . . . Spotter . . . the creature the Amazons speared?’

Haji and Lucy nodded.

‘Most of the species here are also telepathic and translingual²⁶. Some can even read minds.’

‘There’s a difference?’ asked Freddie.

‘Yes; telepathy requires effort from both parties. Mind reading is a higher art, and requires the skill of just the mind reader. We’re not sure who can and can’t read minds so, it’s best to watch what you think,’ said Haji.

‘What do these aliens look like?’

‘They are mostly humanoid and you could easily overlook them in a crowd. There are exceptions though. A Yiaaak for example is—’

‘—Hard to describe,’ said Lucy. ‘I try not to be a specist but it is not easy where Yiaaaks are concerned. Don’t worry though, you are unlikely to see one—most of them are in prison.’

‘What for?’ asked Freddie.

‘Visual assault—it’s a crime in the Ship City. No one is allowed in Zyne society unless they are visually . . . *acceptable*.’

Was she serious? It was getting hard for Freddie to tell and he was still racking his brain over any other unusual beings he might have met.

These thoughts were cut short when a familiar grunt and an explosion of butoxious odours alerted him to the fact that Gruntenguile was awake.

²⁶ This refers to the ability of the tele-communicator to use the language of any creature with whom they are communicating. (Editor)

19. Nessie

‘The master aliens—the Zynes,’ continued Haji, ‘are responsible for the Dark Cloud. They have built a machine in the north—the probe tower—that they hope will capture enough energy from the Earth’s core to repower their ship. That tower is causing the Dark Cloud and unless something is done about it life on Earth will end.’

‘So, what’s your plan?’ asked Freddie.

‘The Zynes,’ said Haji, ‘live in their crashed spacecraft; the Ship City which lies in the foothills of the Central Pangean Mountains. It is closed to outsiders except for once a year when they hold . . . a certain . . . *festival*. The inhabitants of Pangea are divided and this festival is the Zynes’ way of bringing everyone together. It’s like . . . a national holiday.’

Haji paused and Freddie guessed he was deciding exactly how much he should tell him.

‘There is a tournament at this festival and the best performers from this tournament are granted an audience with the Alpha Zyne. The winner gets to name their prize. It can be anything they like. We plan to join one of these teams and if that team wins we can request a tour of the probe tower.’

‘And *if* that team wins and *if* your request is granted, what do you do when you get there?’

Haji stared steadily at the black, billowing cloud over the northern sky and did not reply.

‘What do we do when we get there?’ repeated Freddie.

Haji clutched the ring beneath his shirt. ‘That was . . . that was Count Schnauzer’s area of expertise,’ he said.

‘So, you only have *half* a plan?’

‘At the moment it is better than *no* plan and at the moment there is enough to do just getting a place in the tournament. It is not the sort of thing you turn up to uninvited.’ Haji let go of the ring and ploughed his fingers through his hair instead. ‘That is why we are travelling to Africa first.’

‘Who do you expect to find in Africa, 250 million years before our present? The earliest fossils found there are half men, half monkey and they only date back three to two million years. They also have a brain capacity about a third that of modern man’s.’

‘Yes, I know all that,’ said Haji pulling at his moustache, ‘but you keep forgetting where and when you are. We will not be finding primitive “monkey men”. Instead we will find a group of Tribals.’

‘Who are . . .?’

Haji turned first to Gruntenguile but he grunted and looked the other way. No one could appear more disinterested in what was going on around them than Gruntenguile.

He turned next to Lucy. ‘Perhaps you should answer that question,’ he said. ‘How would you describe them, Lucy?’

By now, Lucy was cleaning her revolver. She looked through the barrel at Freddie as she replied. ‘They are a sub-species of the Zynes although . . .’

‘Although what?’ asked Freddie.

‘Well, I can’t say for sure but I have heard they have some powers that are superior to even the Zynes—psychic powers—which they only ever use in extreme circumstances.’

‘So how did these Tribals get to Africa?’

‘They were originally called Subzynes. When the Zyne spaceship crash-landed . . .’ Lucy swayed her head as she pretended her hair was crash-landing. Freddie pretended not to notice. ‘. . . the tight social structure between the Zynes and Subzynes was fractured.

The Subzynes had always been the workforce of Zyne society. They respect the technical genius of the Zynes but when their spaceship crash-landed on Earth some of them lost confidence in the Zynes. They rebelled and abandoned the spaceship to establish their own groups south of the Central Pangean Mountains. These Subzynes are now called Tribals. They live not unlike more recent hunter and gatherer societies.’

‘What about the rest of them?’

‘Most of them still live around the spaceship. Like peasants around a medieval castle, I guess. They mostly farm for the production of nutrition capsules and biodiesel for the Zynes’ machines.’

‘So why do the Tribals that have left the Ship City go back for this tournament?’

‘When we land in Africa you will see the reason. Food is scarce and the Zynes reward all competitors with nutrition capsules—enough to keep their groups going for a year.’

‘So, what do the Zynes get in return?’

‘They win,’ said Haji.

‘But what exactly is this tournament? Is it like a sports day?’

‘Mmmm . . . *something* like that,’ said Haji.

‘Okay,’ said Freddie, ‘so we win this sports day, request a trip to the Probe Tower, shut it down—even though we don’t know how because we’ve lost Schnauzer—and save the world. That sounds great, but there is one small detail I think you have all missed. We all know life on Earth continues to exist—millions of years from now! How can it end *now*, when it continues to exist—*in our time*?’

Lucy gave Freddie one of her more searing looks. 'It's a little more complicated than that and, to be honest, I don't understand it properly myself. Before the Arnhem Land expedition did you think that time travel was even possible?'

Buck Rogers flashed through Freddie's mind.

'What else don't you know about time?'

Freddie did not know what to say. In his desperation, he glanced at Gruntenguile but he remained silent.

'I know that what we have just told you sounds crazy but . . . crazy stuff happens all the time and what we really understand of the universe amounts to a flea's hair in a herd of elephants.'

Gruntenguile grunted.

Freddie turned and leaned on the edge of the basket and gazed ahead. The sea still shimmered brightly in the morning sun, but it was suddenly broken by a dark shape a short distance ahead. 'Blazes—what's that?' said Freddie.

The others rushed to the side of the basket.

Freddie's eyes focused and the shape below took on the form of a question mark. As the balloon drew nearer, it became even more distinct. Then, when they reached a point almost directly overhead, it looked upwards and Freddie could actually see its eyes as the creature turned to look at them.

'Is that what I think it is?' asked Freddie.

'Grrrnt,' said Gruntenguile.

'Apparently there are still some of them left,' said Haji. 'The Scots call one of his descendants the Loch Ness Monster. I prefer plesiosaur.'

As they floated past, they cast a shadow over the shining creature. In retaliation for this outrage, it whipped its neck back and showered them with a spray of snotty water.

Then it took one final steady look at the strange aliens in the wicker basket, held aloft by nothing more than hot air. Its upper lip slid over its sharply pointed teeth as if it were smiling and it slid back into the slimy sea.

20. Land

2 months later

One morning Gruntenguile was the first to wake.

He stood, farted, pointed to the west, and said, 'Africa . . . grrrnt!'

Springing to his feet, Freddie's eyes followed Gruntenguile's pointing arm and saw a long dark line of coast wrinkling the horizon.

Haji and Lucy were not far behind him and soon they were all staring through the crisp morning air at the edge of that massive and mysterious continent.

They were as silent as the dawn breaking around them until Haji spoke. 'It all depends on the Tribals now,' he said. 'And we'll soon know if they are with us or . . .'

Freddie took his eyes off the coast and turned to his companion but Haji did not finish the sentence.

Part Three: An Unnecessary Cataclysm

21. Africa

The plains of ancient Africa were not what Freddie expected.

He had imagined dense jungle similar to that which he had seen in Timor and in *Jungle Jim* films at the Star Theatre. Instead, a hot and dry plain similar to northern Australia or the Serengeti Plains in modern Africa spread beneath the Aurora. There were trees but they were spindly and did not like each other's company.

'Progymnosperms,' cried Haji as if he had just spotted something spectacular. 'They are the first true trees and the ancestors to the pine trees which later dominate so much of the Earth.'

A few dry streams wound like dead snakes with their repeating pattern of caked mud across the plain. Their courses were marked here and there by giant trees with broad, pale leaves that rose some thirty to forty yards high.

'Gingkoes,' explained Haji. 'They have survived through to our time—maybe because their fruit stink so badly.'

'I find them quite aromatic . . . grrrnt,' said Gruntenguile, breathing deeply. His time aboard the Aurora having been largely spent sleeping; the sighting of land had given him new energy.

'They grow in China,' said Lucy. 'Those trees look practically the same.'

'There are both male and female trees,' said Haji. 'Do you know how to tell the difference?'

'The female trees are bad drivers?' suggested Freddie.

Gruntenguile grunted and chuckled. Not from the joke but his anticipation of Lucy's response.

Cocking her head, she glared at Freddie.

‘No,’ said Haji. ‘The female trees produce seeds; the males produce pollen.’

Freddie shared Haji’s excitement as much as he could.

As they drifted slowly inland, Freddie began to notice that there was one big difference between the landscape below and northern Australia or the Serengeti Plains. He could not see any animals. There were animal pads but no sign of any creature that might have made them.

It was not until they had travelled many miles that they discovered a muddy waterhole with a small herd of what appeared to be hippopotami, except that either end of them looked like it had been honed to a point in a giant pencil sharpener.

They were about six yards long with grey leathery hides. They were also filthy and busy burying their long snouts into slimy, black mud searching for food. They looked up at the Aurora with a casual lack of interest as if nothing could ever surprise them. From growing up in northern Australia Freddie knew what cattle looked like when they were short of feed and these beasts had the same hungry look.

‘Jonkeria,’ said Haji. ‘Another creature I have discovered way outside the fossil record. Although I doubt they can survive much longer.’

‘Poor things,’ exclaimed Lucy.

Surprised by her tender thought, Freddie glanced towards her. A tear was trailing down her cheek. Was she crying or was it just the wind?

‘What?’ she said, glaring back at him.

The wind, he decided.

Turning to Haji he said, ‘I can see why the Tribals still need the Zynes’ nutrition capsules.’ The terrain looked too arid to support anything but the very toughest plants and animals. What could have made the Tribals want to move to such a barren place?’

‘By the way,’ said Freddie after they had travelled inland for well over an hour, ‘how do we find these Tribals?’

‘We don’t,’ said Lucy.

‘They will find us,’ said Haji.

A short time later, there was a sudden change in the scenery below. The desert abruptly ended and jungle began. The thick canopy of that jungle hid everything beneath it.

They had travelled about half a mile over this jungle when an arrow pierced the air with a gentle whiz directly in front of them.

Freddie threw himself to the floor of the basket. ‘Get down! We’re under attack!’ he cried. Looking up however, he could see that none of the others had followed his prudent example. Instead they were standing, fully exposed, watching the arrow fly upwards. When it reached its zenith, something unfurled from the shaft and puffed upwards. Blushing with embarrassment Freddie realised that it was a parachute. They were not under attack. It was a prehistoric airmail service.

The arrow was well aimed because, as the balloon moved forward, it descended and intersected perfectly with its path. Haji reached out, grabbed the arrow, and unfurled the message. It was written on a rough sheet of paper like papyrus.

Peering over Haji’s shoulder Freddie could make neither head nor tail of what was written.

‘This looks promising,’ said Haji.

‘Why? What does it say?’ asked Freddie.

‘I wouldn’t have a clue. I can’t read this stuff. I just mean that it’s a good sign that this arrow was used to deliver a message rather than to kill one of us.’

Gruntenguile grunted his agreement.

‘It’s time we returned to *terra firma*,’ said Haji. He turned and switched off the gas and the Aurora began its slow glide to Earth like a bird returning to nest. As it descended, its passengers leaned over the side for a glimpse of whoever had shot the arrow but they could see nothing but a swaying sea of green and a small clearing.

‘I think I can get us down there,’ said Haji, switching on one of the gyro blades to steer them in that direction.

Freddie had never landed in a balloon before but he could see that it was touch and go. They were dropping too fast and scraped the treetops. The basket lurched forward almost tipping them out but, gripping the sides of the basket and each other, they managed to hang on. Once they were clear of the trees, the ground seemed to rear up at them.

A thick grove of *Glossopteris* ferns surrounded the clearing. Beneath these, smaller and bushier plants provided plenty of cover for whoever had shot the signal arrow. It occurred to Freddie when it was much too late that it was the perfect spot for an ambush.

22. Meeting the Tribals

Staring into the wall of bushes that surrounded them, Freddie could see nothing. If there were anyone there, they were well camouflaged.

Seeing Freddie's worried look, Gruntenguile placed a hand on his shoulder. 'It's okay, Little Boss. No need to worry . . . grrrnt.'

'How do you know?' whispered Freddie. 'There could be anyone or . . . anything . . . hiding—'

The basket hit the ground with a jolt, tilted sideways and was dragged along for a stretch as the balloon was caught by a sudden gust of wind. Haji threw out an anchor and there was a further jolt as it took hold. A flurry of action followed as the gyro blades were shut down and various bits and pieces secured. The balloon collapsed below the tree-line and fell to Earth, as if exhausted after its long journey. As it settled over the stunted vegetation of the clearing, so too did an eerie silence.

Freddie and his companions, held their breath, traded glances, and listened. They could hear only the faint yowl of wind through the ferns.

Then after a few seconds, Freddie started to get the uneasy feeling that someone was standing behind him.

'Turn around slowly,' said Gruntenguile, who was already facing that direction.

Slowly the others turned as if they were one creature, their eyes widening as they went. Lucy's eyes bulged even more than usual as she glanced at Freddie.

'Stay calm,' she whispered.

You don't say, thought Freddie. He already knew he had to remain calm. People respect calm. He hoped Tribals did as well. When he saw what was standing behind him however, calm was not so easy.

A group of about twenty Tribals stood with their spears pointing directly at Freddie and his companions.

The best way to describe them would be to say they all looked—if not exactly like—very similar to . . . Gruntenguile.

Freddie turned to Lucy. 'Over the Tethys Sea when you said I had already met *several* species of alien—were you including Gruntenguile?'

Lucy nodded.

'Is that true, Gruntenguile?'

'It depends on what you mean by an alien. The fact that I come from somewhere else makes me no less Australian than you—'

'Silence!' A sharp voice returned their attention to the Tribals who shook their spears to emphasise the order. Behind them, prancing excitedly, were a few sweat-shiny Spotters. Panting hard, their rough, saliva-dripping tongues dangled from their snorting mouths.

The Tribals were all short, though not quite as short as pygmies. They were also extremely hairy and this was made even more obvious by the fact that they were wearing nothing more than loincloths similar to those still worn by indigenous groups in many parts of Freddie's world. Their faces were also human with the most notable difference being that, like Gruntenguile, they had bigger foreheads, which shaded their eyes and gave them a slightly threatening appearance. Like the slow-chewing beasts Freddie had already encountered, their skulls seemed doubly thick as if bashing heads was the favourite pastime

of the Permian period. The Tribals standing before them were also striped with mud, which had camouflaged them in the dense bush.

At first, Freddie felt reassured by the fact that they looked human. Then he reflected on the humans who had tried to kill him and he was not so sure.

After a few more seconds of staring at each other, Gruntenguile raised his hands in the air and grunted for the others to do the same.

Once their hands were in the air one of the Tribals, who was no taller but much stouter than his companions, ordered them to step clear of the basket. Though small, his voice commanded attention and this caused Freddie to study him a little more closely. His face was heavily scarred and there was a dent above his right eye as if he had been struck with a hard, heavy object. He was the only Tribal there with his hair tied up. It was secured by what appeared to be a human tibia bone although Freddie did not want to jump to uncharitable conclusions. His beard dropped the full length of his chest and was tied in two places.

‘We come in peace,’ said Freddie, feeling ridiculously like Buck Rogers.

‘Don’t talk,’ said Lucy. ‘They don’t trust us and they trust us even less when we’re talking. Say nothing until they take us to their chief and then, say nothing and let Haji do the talking.’

The situation must be serious, thought Freddie, if even Lucy was to remain silent.

The Tribals did not search Gruntenguile but they carefully frisked the humans for weapons. Their hairy hands tickled over Freddie and pulled his machete from its sheath.

‘It’s okay Freddie, we’re perfectly safe . . . I think,’ said Haji. As he spoke, another Tribal dragged Lucy’s pistol from its holster. Another took Haji’s sawn-off shotgun and twirled it recklessly, causing Freddie to duck when he saw the barrel pointed in his direction.

‘It’s okay,’ said Haji. ‘It’s never loaded.’

In the balloon Haji had not shaven and the effect was that he now looked strikingly like a Tribal himself; only taller.

Once their weapons had been taken, the Tribals’ leader nodded some orders before turning and disappearing into the thick bush. The remaining Tribals then urged Freddie and his companions to follow. As Gruntenguile walked past, Freddie gave him a withering ‘I can’t believe you have been an alien all these years and never told me’ look.

Gruntenguile grunted. The truth was that Tribals do not care much for ideas about some creatures being this, and some being that. The only division they have is; creatures they eat, those they eat with, and those that eat them.

They headed down a path that was more like a tunnel as the bushes arched overhead. This path went for about a mile before it started to drop down even more steeply into a hidden valley. As they descended into this valley, the temperature dropped.

‘It’s a microclimate,’ whispered Lucy, forgetting her rule about not talking.

Freddie nodded and showed a brave face. The truth of the matter was that he was enjoying the cool as much as he could, as he imagined himself boiling in a pot once they arrived at the Tribals’ camp.

After hiking for about an hour, the trail suddenly opened out into a more sparsely wooded area which would have been pleasant had the trees not been the smelly ginkgoes they had seen from the air a little earlier.

Under these sprawling trees, they found a scattering of bark huts. At first, Freddie saw no particular order in their location but then noticed that they followed overflow channels from a hot spring. These channels meandered in all directions through the clearing. The huts were crudely made and smoke and steam drifted from openings in their roofs.

Grimy faces peered out of windows. Excitement rippled through the camp as news of the captives spread.

Unlike the Amazon camp, there were a mixture of sexes and ages moving about. The children seemed even grimmer than the adults and they ran at their heels as they entered the camp.

Sitting in the centre of the camp like an over-greased hub, was an old man who Freddie guessed by his venerable appearance and lack of activity must be their chief. His expression remained the same as they approached— somewhere between boredom and sleep.

The leader of the group who had captured them stepped forward and gestured to the prisoners. No one had spoken on the journey to the camp and Freddie remembered what Haji had told him about the alien's telepathic powers.

After exchanging knowing looks and nods with the leader of the hunting party, the Chief looked Freddie and his companions over one at a time. First, he had what seemed to be a very agreeable exchange of glances with Gruntenguile. This seemed to put him at ease.

It was only possible to tell who the Chief was looking at by the direction of his eye sockets as his dark eyes were hidden under a larger than usual ledge of forehead.

He looked only briefly at Haji. He had met him before and seemed amused that he had returned.

A longer time was spent inspecting Lucy. This could have been because she looked so remarkably un-hairy in her present company. Also, her large, bright, brown eyes seemed to be popping out of her head when seen next to the hollow gaze of the Chief. Lucy even smiled and Freddie wondered when she had been practicing—certainly not while he had been looking.

The Chief looked at Freddie last and gave him an even longer going over than Lucy. Freddie fidgeted under his gaze but, remembering his manners, took off his hat. The Chief continued to stare at him from the dark depths of his eye sockets.

‘How do you do?’ asked Freddie.

‘Don’t talk!’ hissed Lucy.

Freddie bit his tongue and held the Chief’s steady gaze as best he could.

‘You must be hungry!’

Freddie was surprised that he had spoken but even more so by his accent. It was Irish. Had he somehow found his way to the secret land of the Leprechauns? Then he remembered what Haji had told him about telepathic aliens being translingual and therefore able to speak the language of anyone they were communicating with or mind reading. What Irish accent Freddie had he had picked up from his father and he was surprised that it sounded so strong when mimicked by the Chief.

Haji and Lucy both nodded that they were hungry. Starving in fact! Not for nutrition capsules, but real food. Nutrition capsules had kept them alive during the journey on the Aurora but they had been raised on fresh food and they were craving its aroma and taste and the pleasure of actually chewing food and tasting the juices in their mouths.

Gruntenguile grunted.

‘This is an occasion I think for a wee feast,’ said the Chief and a strange feeling washed over Freddie that this remark was directed more at him than anyone else but he could not think why. Soon he could not think of anything much except for food and that word ‘feast’, suddenly sounded like the most beautiful word in the English language.

‘What are we having?’ asked Freddie, forgetting the rule about not talking and his usual good manners in his excitement.

‘It depends on what you catch,’ replied the Chief.

23. Hunting Party

Freddie had played at hunting before.

Professor Dupler had worked for a while in an Aboriginal community two hard days in a Land Rover out of Darwin. It had been a smoky place hidden in a great forest of stringybark trees stretching for miles in every direction.

Freddie spent his days there playing with the Aboriginal boys and sometimes they went hunting. At first, this did not go so well. He could never see the prey and he always seemed to tread on something that made a large cracking noise and sent every animal in Arnhem Land running off into the undergrowth. His clumsy ways caused a lot of grumbling among his hunting companions. He was about to be banned from these hunting trips when Gruntenguile gave him some advice.

‘To catch an animal, you’ve got to think like that animal. Stop thinking civilized, and use your instincts. Think like the animal you’re hunting . . . grrrnt.’

This was not easy advice to follow but, like everything, Freddie gave it a go and slowly he improved. He started thinking outside his own head and looking with more than just his eyes. Soon he was as silent as any of his companions.

Their hunting was not all play and some days they were rewarded with some small game: a brush-tail possum, or bandicoot, or goanna, or maybe even a magpie goose if they were lucky. His hunting companions, however, soon noticed that although Freddie was a dead eye with his spear when throwing at practice targets he never hit a live one. They did not say anything. Why would anyone with a tucker-box full of canned food and flour and tea and who knows what, need to hunt anyway?

Freddie was thinking of those happy days as he and Haji set out with the Tribals’ hunting party in the early afternoon.

Lucy was not allowed to join them because it was the custom with Tribals for the men to hunt. The women spent their days collecting firewood and insects. She was not happy with this custom.

‘I should be the first person going,’ she protested. ‘I would be more help with my Colt 45 than Haji with his ridiculous pea-shooter or you and your . . . oversized pencil sharpener.’

‘It’s a machete,’ said Freddie. ‘Besides, we must respect the Tribals’ customs. Haven’t you read the work of Ebenezer Blather-Skyte?’²⁷

Lucy’s horizontal braids almost started rotating before she stormed off. Luckily, it was around this time that the hunting party began to move.

Bristling with spears, they soon resembled a drawn-out porcupine making their way through the dense undergrowth. It was roughly the same group that had captured Freddie and his companions earlier and was made up of about twenty Tribals and three Spotters who scouted ahead of the main party. They could be seen from time to time darting this way or that and taking an extraordinary degree of interest in everything around them.

The leader of the hunting party was the same stout fellow who had led the group earlier. His name was Raaktu and although the top of his head ended at Freddie’s shoulders, there was something quite formidable about him. Freddie was as glad that Raaktu was out the front, as he was that he was at the back. He was glad also that their weapons had been returned and his machete was patting the side of his leg as he walked. Even so, he was in no hurry to use it. He knew only too well that the difference between his childhood hunting

²⁷ Freddie was foolishly hoping to influence Lucy’s thinking with a reference to the work of the famous British anthropologist, Ebenezer Blather-Skyte who discovered that everything was okay if considered from another point of view. (M.A. SINGH)

and that which he was embarking on now was that they were probably not after anything so small as a bandicoot or a goanna.

After an hour's walk, Freddie turned to Haji and asked a question that had been on his mind ever since they had left the camp. 'What are we after?'

'What was that?' asked Haji. As was often the case, he was buried deep in his own thoughts.

'I was just wondering what we were hunting,' said Freddie.

'It might be a case of beggars not being choosers,' said Haji. 'We are well into a major extinction event. There are still more species alive than I expected but they are few and far between. With a little luck we might hunt some Lystrosaurs like the ones you would have seen outside the Doylian Lair.'

'You mean the pigs with tusks?'

Haji smiled knowingly 'They may not look like much, but those pigs inherit the Earth. They are neither fast nor smart but they survive all this.'

'So why did you say "with a little luck"?' asked Freddie.

'I said that because I think we're after something . . . a little larger. The Chief wants a big feast tonight and that normally means only one thing.'

'Which is?'

'Their most prized food—*Estemmenosochus*.'

'Like we saw before—in the cart—that huge crocodile?' asked Freddie.

'Similar,' said Haji. 'Around here they are a larger species that hasn't turned up in the fossil record yet. I call them *Estemmenosochus haji*—the horned crocodile.'

'Larger?' Freddie pictured the giant creature he had seen earlier and then looked at the primitive spears carried by the hunters. He looked also at his machete and Lucy's insult about it being an oversized pencil sharpener seemed not far from the mark.

Haji's twin braces of cartridges and sawn-off shotgun looked impressive but probably presented more danger to the hunting party than the crocodile.

The Tribals, on the other hand, seemed happy. Their chests were swelling. Their eyes sparkling. They seemed to be having the time of their lives.

Moving silently, they communicated via a combination of hand signals and telepathy.

It was a hot day. Freddie had not known it to be any different during his time in Pangea. The heavily wooded area through which they travelled, however, provided plenty of shade from the worst of the heat. Along the way they even encountered some signs of life. Monkey-like lizards, which Haji identified as Suminia, played in the branches. Haji stared up at the nimble creatures in astonishment until the Tribals prodded him with their spears to keep him moving.

'Wow, I haven't seen them before,' he said. 'Their tails are prehensile. We thought as much but . . . now I know.'

'They remind me of the gibbons I saw in Timor,' said Freddie.

'This is the beginning, I think,' said Haji, 'of the move to the arboreal ecosystem. First creatures crawled from the sea to the land, now they climb to the trees. Soon they will take to the air and one day they will take to space.'

'What do you mean one day? Buck Rogers has been there for years,' said Freddie.

Haji stared blankly and then he laughed. It was the first time he had done so in Freddie's experience of him. 'Yes, of course,' he said, 'I keep forgetting.'

'Shhhh!' hushed the Tribal in front of them, glaring and pointing ahead.

They left the main part of the valley and found themselves in even denser jungle. They did not have to travel through it for long, however, before they suddenly

emerged onto the open plain. It had been getting hotter with each step, but now the heat hit them like a blowtorch. They stood on the edge of the wooded area, which they had observed earlier from the Aurora. Beyond lay the forbidding desert that covered most of Pangea. A dry creek bed ran into the woodlands a short distance away suggesting that the giant saucer of vegetation they were about to leave was an inland drainage basin where water flooded during the violent storms that often wracked Pangea.

They made their way to where this creek met the jungle and scrambled down into the creek bed. It was a good seven or eight feet below the surrounding plains and this meant that they could venture into the desert under the cover of its banks, which were steep and crumbling from the most recent flood. By the time Freddie had reached the creek, the Spotters were already about a hundred yards ahead and peering around the first bend.

Though no palaeontologist, Freddie believed the animals of the Permian had weaker senses and were generally easier to stalk than modern animals. Despite this, the Tribals soon showed by their frowns that they would prefer Haji and Freddie to be doubly quiet after they entered the creek.

From time to time, they scrambled up a scree slope to view the plain above. On one of these occasions, they saw a group of Lystrosaurs and, as harmless as they were, Freddie hoped they would hunt them down because he imagined they would not put up much of a fight. When they turned away from the Lystrosaurs and descended back into the creek-bed, Haji gave Freddie a look which could have only meant one thing. They were after a horned crocodile.

Leaning towards Haji, Freddie asked, 'Where do you find a horned crocodile?'

His days in Arnhem Land had taught him about the link between habitat and animal and there seemed to be no system in the Tribals' hunt.

‘They used to be found near the inland lakes and swamps but most of those have dried up. Now they are most often found wandering about looking for new habitat. We could find one around the next bend or one of them could be wandering on the plain looking for water.’

‘So, it’s like looking for a needle in a haystack?’

‘Maybe . . .’ said Haji; cagey as ever.

‘Why, just maybe?’ Freddie asked.

‘I’m not sure. I’ve only ever been on one Tribals’ hunt before. I remember thinking, just like now, how unlikely it was that we were going to find anything but we did. These fellows may look backward but, believe me; they have some extraordinary psychic powers.’

The Tribal who had hushed them earlier glared back to remind them once more to be silent, and, perhaps also, to not refer to their looks as backwards, and they continued in silence.

Up front, Raaktu kept his eyes on the Spotters who slowed at every bend in the creek to check if anything was ahead but there never was. Whenever a scree slope offered the chance they checked the plain above but as the day wore on it seemed increasingly likely that they would be returning to camp empty handed.

Soon the time of day arrived when the sun sends more visible shafts of light out over the world as if taking a last curious look. Taking advantage of this last light they raised their heads once more over the side of the creek bed. The slanted light made the plains look like the closing scene from a Technicolor western. Instead of a cowboy on horseback, however, a very different creature met their eyes. No more than fifty yards away in a direct line with the setting sun a horned crocodile grazed on one of the tough bushes that stubbled the parched plain. It was similar to the creature Freddie had seen earlier but this beast was

larger and had an enormous horn like a rhinoceros in the middle of its armour-plated head. It was a frightening animal and once more Freddie glanced at their puny weapons. Then he looked for a place to scramble if it attacked.

His cautious reaction contrasted with that of the Tribals. Their eyes pushed forward in their bony sockets and their bodies steeled for action. They swapped quick glances and hand signals, most of which were directed at a line of boulders that ran out from the creek to a large pile of rocks about forty feet high. Freddie guessed that the plan was to sneak closer to the beast using the rocks as cover. What would happen after that he could not imagine. A lot would depend on how the horned crocodile reacted and Freddie suspected that its reaction would not be good.

Raaktu completed his instructions with a shake of his clenched fist and five of the Tribals including Gruntenguile snuck over the edge of the creek bed and scurried to the first boulder, looking like flitting shadows against the fading sun.

Haji turned to Freddie and whispered, 'When they are ready, our job is to scare the crocodile towards them.'

'*We* are going to scare *that*?' asked Freddie.

Haji grinned and placed a hand on his shoulder. 'Yes,' he said. 'There has never been a more terrifying creature than bipedal humanoids and we are about to prove that once more.'

The Tribals crept ever closer to the pile of rocks concealed by the long shadow it cast as the sun continued to slide towards the horizon. The ripping of the dry bushes by the horned crocodile and the crunch and grind of its razor-sharp teeth were the only sounds Freddie could hear over the thumping of his heart.

The Tribals reached their ambush point behind the pile of boulders, which was about thirty feet behind the crocodile. At the same time, the beast looked up and snorted a

puff of snotty steam from its scaly nostrils. It sensed something was wrong and looked nervously about, but it was already too late.

The Tribals leaped over the side of the bank as one and raced towards the crocodile; breaking into an ululation like Indians on the warpath in the afternoon matinees. As Freddie jumped up to follow, fearing more than anything to appear cowardly, he saw the crocodile stamping its front feet into the ground and lowering its horn to charge.

There followed a long moment which seemed to last forever when they raced towards the crocodile, hoping it would turn and run. For some reason, it seemed unwilling to do so. It stood firm on its massive legs and stared down their charge. Then it reared, balancing on its long, pointed tail—like a big red kangaroo standing its ground. Still they ran forward. The Tribals shook their spears in front of them as they ran headlong towards the crocodile. Freddie drew his machete from its scabbard. Haji plucked his sawn-off shotgun from his shoulder holster, grabbed two cartridges, and cracked open the breach. He loaded as he ran and, pointing just above Freddie's head, he fired. Freddie wished he had been prepared for this as the explosive sound and the whoosh of pellets caused his heart to skip a few thumps. It was shocking enough that he was where he was. Add to this the fact that he was charging a fully-grown horned crocodile with nothing more than a machete in his hand. Then someone fires a sawn-off shotgun over his left ear!

Luckily, however, the sound of the explosion also settled the crocodile's mind. It pivoted on its back legs, thumped to the ground, which shook from the impact, and took off in the direction of the boulders where the remaining Tribals lay in wait. Haji reloaded and fired another volley from his shotgun but at least Freddie was prepared this time. The whole world ran and jumped and dodged before his eyes. Freddie was aware only of his legs running, his heart thumping and his hand clenching tighter and tighter on the handle of his machete.

Despite Freddie's terror, everything was going as planned and the crocodile had almost reached the point of ambush when it suddenly stopped and skidded to a halt. This was totally unexpected. None of the Tribals hiding in the rocks had yet shown themselves but maybe it had sensed that something was not right. Seeing that the animal was not venturing any nearer, however, they charged out from behind the rocks and ran towards the crocodile, which seemed confused as to what action to take next. Both groups threw themselves on the beast at the same time and it appeared to have given up. It looked to the sky as if only God could help it now and Freddie watched in horror as Raaktu flew into the chest of the crocodile. Three lines on its hide met at that point. It was its Achilles' heel and the metal tip of Raaktu's spear pierced the hide and dug deep into the mighty animal's heart. That was all it took. The crocodile did not even look down at its hurt. It kept looking upwards.

Everyone else but Freddie was so intent on finishing off the crocodile that they did not think to follow its line of sight. If they had, they would have seen the same thing as Freddie.

Sitting atop the largest of the boulders was the first and Freddie hoped the last Gorgonopsian he would see in his lifetime. It also may have been the last in existence. The lack of game had decimated the numbers of larger predators and the Gorgonopsian had been one of the largest. The Gorgons in mythology were so hideous that anyone that looked upon them turned to stone. So it was that Freddie turned to stone as he looked up at the Gorgonopsian. It was almost as large as the horned crocodile, only every part of its body seemed designed for killing. Massive claws, four on each pad, clawed the edge of the boulder. Its skin was somewhere between scaled and bristled so that it looked like a goanna crossed with the wildest of feral pigs. Its head was really just a massive set of jaws with the other parts, mainly fierce beady eyes and flaring nostrils, squeezed in on the upper edges of

the top jaw. The flaring bristles on the back of its neck told Freddie that it was about to attack.

Freddie turned around looking for Haji. His shotgun was the only weapon they had that he thought might cause some damage to a beast that size. That is when he noticed that Haji had stopped some thirty yards back, happy to be a spectator to the final act of the kill. Freddie tried to yell a warning to the Tribals but nothing escaped his mouth. He raised his machete and pointed dumbly at the Gorgonopsian. The expression on Freddie's face was most likely the same as the one he had recently observed on the face of the now-dead horned crocodile. For a few seconds more they faced off. Then the Gorgonopsian snarled, baring two sabre-like front teeth, and leaped on Freddie, just as the sun dropped below the horizon.

24. Return of the Hunters

It's not like Freddie was not used to being unconscious. Unconsciousness, he claimed, was not always such a bad thing in Pangea.

He was only out for a moment this time however, before being woken by a gush of warm liquid like the first squirt of a hose on a hot day. It was blood spurting from the Gorgonopsian's carotid artery. Frozen in fear, Freddie had kept his machete pointed above his head and, as luck would have it, the beast landed on it in such a way that it slashed through the softer flesh under its neck severing the main artery and killing it almost instantly.

Freddie's next memory was being carried back to camp by the Tribals, not on a stretcher as his condition warranted, but triumphantly on their shoulders. Despite his fuzzy condition, one sensible thought occurred to Freddie as he flopped about on the Tribals' shoulders. What were they doing with the horned crocodile that they had spent the better part of the day and risked their lives hunting? The problem of how they were going to get such a large animal back to camp should have occurred to him earlier but he had been too caught up in the excitement and terror of the hunt.

It may have been because he was in shock but it did not seem like long before they returned to the woodlands and began making their way back along the same path that they had set forth upon earlier in the afternoon.

Once back in camp Freddie was met with a welcome unlike any he had ever encountered. Tribals are not the most cultured species, but they do know how to party. Their playful nature, hidden beneath their bony brows earlier in the day, was unleashed by the success of the hunt and the promise of a hearty feast.

Freddie's freak slaying of the Gorgonopsian was considered an act of superhuman bravery and skill by the Tribals. They pushed each other over for the chance to slap his back and grunt their congratulations.

A large fire blazed in the middle of the camp and sparks cracked into the evening sky. Around this fire, a circle of stumps had been placed to serve as seats at the soon-to-be feast which was already causing mouths to water and feet to jig and tongues to wag. Tribals have mastered telepathy, but they do not enjoy it. They prefer to talk out loud—and I mean **loud!**

Amidst all the din, Lucy sat with a group of Tribals women on the far side of the fire squashing Monura bugs in a stone pestle.²⁸ They were making a disgusting black paste with which they intended to baste some of the crocodile meat. Looking up from her work she wondered what all the fuss was about. One of the hunters was walking past so she asked him, 'What's going on?'

'The blood-head Wanderer has single-handedly slain a Gorgonopsian—the fiercest beast in all Pangea.'

A shocked look splattered across Lucy's face like a cream pie.

On the opposite side of the camp the look on Freddie's face was the same. All the yelling and screaming was also doing nothing to ease the shock of having just been attacked by a fully-grown Gorgonopsian. His head was already spinning with the hubbub surrounding him when suddenly another sound was added. It was the sound of something crashing through the trees that surrounded the camp. His first thought was that it was a stampede of some sort. Maybe it was a herd of horned crocodiles or worse still,

²⁸ These primitive insects, in the subclass Apterygota, are related to and resemble modern-day silverfish. Their paste, basted over roasting meat, is very much an acquired taste. (M.A. SINGH)

Gorgonopsians, seeking revenge for the slaughter of their mate. The noise was so terrifying that he thought about running but that would not have looked too good now that everyone thought he was a hero.

The sound drew a different response from the Tribals who turned eagerly in its direction.

Freddie exchanged a startled look with Lucy. She hunched her shoulders. At the same time, she ran out of bugs to squash, so she rose and made her way over to where a crowd was gathering on the edge of the camp. By the time she arrived there the source of the new noise was obvious. A large and extraordinary machine stepped over the rim of trees on the edge of the campsite and stood above the cheers of the Tribals.

‘Well . . . I’ll be,’ laughed Haji. ‘It looks like they have stolen a Spider from the Zynes!’

The Spider was a machine the size of an army tank but perched on top of eight mechanical legs broken into three sections by two knee joints. It was designed for travel in wooded terrain and allowed the controllers of the vehicle to travel above the tree line as the laser-fitted legs made their way through the woods. It was finished in enviro-blend paint which changed colour to match the environment it was travelling through. Like most things manufactured by the Zynes, it was made entirely of adamantium,²⁹ except for one leg section which had been replaced with a sleek, white bone that Haji was at a total loss to identify. A large eye was engraved into its nose, the same as the one Freddie had observed over the crystal sword. Seated on top of the vehicle behind a series of levers and a steering wheel were two Tribals enjoying the glory that came with being Spider captains. Hanging beneath the

²⁹ The existence of adamantium is often incorrectly attributed to Dr Myron MacLain. His connection to events described in this book remains unclear. (M.A. SINGH.)

body of the Spider were the two slain creatures. With the release of a lever they were lowered to the ground.

The crowd screamed hurrahs at the hunters and at Freddie in particular. This made him feel brave enough to join the crowd beneath the Spider and stand alongside Lucy.

With its jaws pulled open by death, the massive sabre teeth of the Gorgonopsian looked even more terrifying than they had when flying towards him. They were horribly stained by the blood and rot of hundreds of kills. The lingering stench of death and a general lack of regard for dental hygiene reeked from its mouth. Its scabrous tongue hung to the ground.

Lucy stared at the terrifying beast in silence before turning to Freddie. ‘You killed *that?*’

‘Yes,’ said Freddie, hardly believing it himself.

‘*How?*’

‘With my pencil sharpener!’

25. A Hot Bath

Freddie and his companions did not stay to witness the bloody preparations for the feast in case it spoiled their appetites. Instead, they followed Raaktu to a pair of bark huts on the edge of the encampment. He had become quite jovial now that the business of hunting was over; although it has to be said that Tribals' humour does not appeal to everyone. It mainly revolves around farting, which they find enormously funny.

When they reached the huts, however, Raaktu became once more the serious host. 'These are for visitors,' he said. His accent, like the Chief's, was Irish.

Freddie and Lucy both stepped towards the same hut. Then, blushing, they both turned at the same time and stepped towards the other hut. Some moments of confusion followed, until Raaktu made the decision for them. He pointed Freddie, Gruntenguile, and Haji towards one hut, and Lucy towards the other.

'The feast starts in half a kill,' he announced before leaving.

'That's Tribals' time for about an hour,' explained Lucy, stepping into her hut.

Haji opened the hide door of the other hut and Freddie and Gruntenguile followed him into a cloud of steam. The huts were built over the channels flowing from the hot water springs. That meant hot baths—twenty-four hours a day—seven days a week. A hot bath, after everything he had been through, seemed like a luxury beyond anything Freddie could imagine. His last bath had been in Darwin the night before the bombing.

The channel carrying the hot water flowed through one side of the hut. On the other side, lay three hammocks similar to the one he had slept on in the Amazonian camp. In the middle of the room was a table. On the table were piles of material that turned out to be Zyne clothes for them to wear at the feast.

Freddie was not interested in any of these things. This was the first real chance he'd had to speak to his crusty manservant since finding out that he was a freeloading alien from the primordial past.

'You've got some explaining to do, Gruntenguile. All these years you pretended to be from some tribe in the East Indies and now it turns out that you are not even from our planet.'

'I beg to differ on both points,' said Gruntenguile. 'I never once lied about where I came from. Before arriving in Australia, I came from the East Indies. And, as much as *you* might think I am from another planet, the fact is that I was born on this planet. Well before you were, Little Boss, I might add.'

'This is too much,' said Freddie. 'Just tell me how my father found you and how he is mixed up in all this?'

Gruntenguile sat down on a wooden bench and dragged his bushy eyebrows down over the tops of his eyes. 'I am sorry, Little Boss, but I am not able to tell you. I am still in your father's service and he shall have that service until I have proof that he is dead. My orders are simply to keep you alive and . . . to tell you nothing.'

'You never told me that last bit before,' said Freddie.

Haji placed a hand on Freddie's shoulder. 'You are lucky he has told you so much. Tribals are the most loyal creatures you will ever meet. If they enter a contract their word is unshakable.'

'Surely he can tell me if my father is alive?'

'That I cannot, Little Boss. This time, not because I won't, but because I don't know,' said Gruntenguile.

'He's telling the truth,' said Haji. 'No one really knows what happened to your father after his plane went down over Timor. I know you must be thinking that he has found

his way here to this time and place. Well, if he has, maybe we will find him, but in the meantime, we have bigger fish to fry.'

As Haji was speaking Gruntenguile stripped and jumped into the steaming stream. Tribals do not expel gases when they are hunting for fear the smell might alert the prey. He therefore had a full day's gas built up and the stream was soon bubbling like a spa.

Despite the butoxious odours, Haji followed him. He peeled off his filthy clothes until he was wearing nothing but the necklace holding the quarter moon ring, and stepped into the water.

'Ahhhhh,' he sighed. 'The greatest pleasure in the universe is a hot bath. Anyone who does not believe that has never been truly filthy.'

Freddie had plenty more questions to ask, but Haji dived under the water and held his breath.

With a shrug, and without taking off his clothes or hat, Freddie followed their lead and walked into the stream. The hot, bubbling water hugged his body like a mother and soon he could think of nothing but how good it felt.

He would know everything soon enough—he hoped.

26. Feast

Freddie stepped out of the hut feeling like Buck Rogers. He was clean for the first time in months and was wearing one of the tight fitting Zyne tops that had been provided. He had also found Zyne pants in the pile but it was too hot to be wearing long pants and the secret pockets in his army shorts were too convenient for carrying stuff. He also still wore his hat, which sagged and dripped after its recent swim.

He made his way to the main part of the camp and the cries of the crowd once more declared that the single-handed slayer of the Gorgonopsian had returned to their midst. Freddie raised his hand, graciously acknowledging their adoration.

‘Get over yourself,’ said Lucy as Freddie, noticing there were no other free stumps, sat down beside her. She was sitting next to the Chief. Typical, thought Freddie.

Lucy had also had a good scrub-up and was shining clean. She wore a Zyne suit with a black V running down from the shoulders, which, to Freddie, looked remarkably similar to that worn by Buck Rogers’ female associate Wilma Deering. Noticing the neat cut of her suit, he suddenly felt that his top did not fit anywhere near as well. The neck was loose and corrugated from being stretched at some point to twice its original circumference and it was frayed at the cuffs.

Freddie shrugged off this observation by remembering that, after all, he was the hero. He smiled at Lucy’s comment and looked around. When you are a hero there’s a lot of smiling to do and Freddie was kept busy for a while smiling at all the Tribals raising their drinks to him.

The sweet smell of roasting crocodile wafted from coal pits that ran along the edge of the main fire, casting a spell of good-will over all.

Haji sat on the other side of the Chief, chewing on a bone the size of his own forearm. The Chief was so absorbed in his story telling that it was a while before he realised that Freddie had arrived.

‘Freddie!’ he cried, when he finally noticed him out the corner of his eye.

‘Grab something to eat.’ He called over a basket of the roasted meat laid out on large glossy leaves. Lucy had already learned to avoid the meat basted in the monura bug paste she had helped prepare earlier but she decided to let Freddie find this out for himself.

To her disappointment, he grabbed an un-basted rib joint.

‘Thank you.’

He took a bite and the juicy flesh fell away from the smooth bone.

‘I was just telling Haji that things grow worse each year,’ the Chief continued.

‘Beasts like this (he pointed to the hide of the crocodile which hung from the underside of the Spider) are getting harder to find. Today we were lucky, but it may be weeks, even months before we hunt another.’

Freddie listened to the Chief while his eyes roved, taking in the details of his surroundings. After all, it’s not every day you are invited to a Tribals’ feast.

He later learned that there were between forty to fifty groups of Tribals scattered to the south of the Central Pangean Mountains. A few had not been seen for generations. Most however, stayed in touch with other Tribal groups. Over the years, these groups had acquired particular names. Sometimes this was based on physical traits, such as the Pygmy Tribals who inhabited the most southerly regions of Gondwana. Most times, however, it described the terrain they inhabited. For example, there were the tough Desert Tribals, and the agile Jungle Tribals, and the Sea Tribals, renowned for their kindness on the Tethys Sea and their piracy on the wild shores of the Panthalassic Ocean. The Tribals group

Freddie had fallen in with was the Spring Tribals. The Spring Tribals were among the cleanest and smallest of the Tribals' groups, being only a few hundred in number.

Describing any group is like painting the ever-changing ripples of sand on a beach. As soon as a brush stroke is made, a gust of wind or a high breaking wave changes the scene forever. Glanced from afar, creatures—human or otherwise—may look the same but each is different and changing in their own way in their own time. This was especially the case with Tribals and particularly so when they were celebrating.

It was a rollicking gathering. They sat in family groups on stumps (some precariously) arranged in a rough circle about three or four cricket pitches across. They swivelled and rolled and bobbed and most were in at least two conversations at the one time. There was a lot of drinking from gourds and an unbelievable amount of farting, all of which was met with a vast repertoire of fart jokes and guffaws of laughter. They were as quaint a race of people as can be anywhere encountered and as near to dwarves or leprechauns as you are ever likely to see. Freddie could not look at them without smiling. Gruntenguile was seated on the far side of the circle and was already laughing and shouting as if he spent every night in their company.

The hunt through the desert had been hot and arduous and it had been a relief to return to the relative cool of the valley. The sun was well and truly set and there was a chill in the air. It cooled the red skin on the back of Freddie's neck and the scaling tip of his nose. Even the full-faced moon seemed in a festive mood.

Freddie was so lost in his enjoyment of the feast that Lucy took it upon herself to tap his head with a rib bone to regain his attention.

‘Ouch! That hurt!’

‘What? A hero like you?’ She pointed to Haji and the Chief. ‘Pay attention,’ she said.

‘I can tell you—it’s going to get worse,’ said Haji wiping the fatty juices from his mouth and shining moustache with the sleeve of his shirt. (Freddie noted that he was showing more relish in eating the horned crocodile than he had in killing it.) ‘We—the Doylians, that is—believe that the Earth is headed towards an unnecessary cataclysm.’ The words hung in the air for a while and Freddie could remember thinking that ‘unnecessary’ seemed like such a prim word to be using in the circumstances.

Seeing Haji’s mouth once more full of meat, Lucy continued. ‘Unless, of course, we do something about it,’ she said. There was a touch of steel in her voice. Her eyes as usual caught more than their share of firelight.

‘It is not the first time I have heard this from Wanderers,’ said the Chief.

Lucy leaned towards Freddie. ‘Wanderers are outsiders like us who have arrived from the future times.’

I never would have guessed, thought Freddie looking back to the Chief. He found that gentleman staring at him strangely and guessed that he did not like others thinking when he held the floor.

‘Our former masters the Zynes are a very . . . powerful species. They see this world differently from you Wanderers. That is why many Wanderers find themselves in the Ship City Brig—waiting to become useful. What makes you think you will be any different?’ The Chief was a short man even by Tribals standards but his voice rang through the chilling night air and caused all eyes to look in his direction. He was impressively dressed for the feast, wearing a thick, fawn-coloured hide, which, by its luxurious fur, Freddie guessed had been killed in the frozen wastes of southern Pangea. His beard, when he was standing, almost touched the ground and was tied with sabre tooth bands. His hair was licked up at the front, and twined around the polished femur of a Thrinaxodon. The Tribals considered these hairy, sharp-toothed carnivores lucky, and evolution would prove them right. To add to his

grandeur, the Chief also sat on a taller stump than everyone else, his feet dangling almost a foot above the ground.

The Chief waited so long for Haji's reply that Freddie expected Lucy to jump in and answer for him but instead she sat with her eyes trained to Haji as if she had no more idea what he was going to say than anyone else.

'The cause of the Dark Cloud that threatens us all lies to the north of the Ship City—it is the Probe Tower that the Zynes are using to steal the Earth's energy. If we don't shut it down soon, it will be too late.'

The Chief waved his hand at this nonsense. 'No one goes to the north. The Dark Cloud is too dangerous. They only let Tribals as far as the Ship City and that is only allowed during the tournament for which our contender leaves tomorrow.' The Chief turned and bowed his head slightly to Raaktu who sat nearby and Freddie took this to mean that he was their champion. 'Beyond the great mountains,' continued the Chief, 'the land is heavily guarded. It is covered in Zyne bases and their technology is far superior to that of any Wanderer we have met.'

'We agree with you,' said Haji. 'If we are to get to the north it must be with the Zynes' approval and . . .'

' . . . The only way for that to happen is to win the tournament and request the Alpha Zyne to take you there.' The Chief finished the sentence just as Haji hoped he would.

'You took the words right out of my mouth,' said Haji.

'I appreciate the capacity of your species to value hope over sense, but what you are suggesting is ridiculous. For hundreds of years—ever since our ancestors and other Tribals left the Ship City—we have competed in the Tournament of Blood. No one ever beats the Zyne champions. They are unbeatable. As advanced as Zynes are technologically, they love nothing more than fighting. When Tribals get together, we dance. When Zynes get

together, they fight. It is an instinct in them like breathing and like all things that are instinctive; they do it very well. The only challengers ever to get close have been the odd Wanderer but whenever that happens, there is always a rule change, or disqualification, or something. The main rule of the Tournament of Blood is that the Zynes must not lose.'

Freddie's ears had been pricking through this exchange. He had been led to believe the tournament was like a sports day. This was the first time he had heard it referred to as the Tournament of Blood and he did not like the sound of it. He had been vaguely expecting high jump competitions, three-legged races, and half-price fairy floss on the way out.

'Tournament of Blood' did not sound like that.

'We Tribals have a saying to describe plans like yours; "It is a beautiful space ship—but it does not fly."' Haji's teeth froze over his bone. The Chief was smiling at him. It was the kind of smile that stupidity in its rarest forms always inspires. Tribals within easy hearing chuckled and some pointed their half-eaten bones at Haji. One even repeated before bursting into laughter, "'It is a beautiful space ship—but it does not fly.'"

'Every Tribals group in the Lowlands,' continued the Chief, 'enters their greatest warrior in the Tournament of Blood and each year they are not just defeated but humiliated. Raaktu has fought for the past five years. Here, he is a champion; in the Ship City, he does not stand a chance. Thankfully, he has the heart of a Lycaenops and is still prepared to fight but to think of winning against the Zynes . . . It will not happen. The idea is too ridiculous.'

For a moment, Haji looked defeated but he was used to things not being easy.

'I agree with you,' he said. 'I do not think that Raaktu can win either. This year, you need a new champion.'

‘Who? No other fighter comes anywhere near Raaktu. Besides, our fighting party leaves tomorrow. There is no time to find anyone else.’

The animation of their discussion had attracted even more attention. Those seated nearest the Chief, stopped their chatter and held their farts.

The question of who should represent them in the Tournament of Blood was a great talking point among the Tribals. Raaktu sat quietly only a few stumps to Freddie’s left. He looked at the bone in his hand and chewed as if not listening, but Freddie could tell that he was hanging off each word. In paying attention to Raaktu’s reaction, however, Freddie did not hear Haji’s reply to the Chief’s question as clearly as he might have.

‘Freddie,’ said Haji.

‘What?’ asked Freddie.

‘Freddie,’ repeated Haji, ‘I nominate Freddie for the Tournament of Blood.’ Then, turning to Freddie, he added. ‘I would have volunteered myself only my back is still killing me. I’d do anything for a good massage.’

Haji’s nomination rippled around the circle of Spring Tribals until it met itself on the other side. There was a second or two of reflection and surprised farting. Then a mighty roar erupted. One of the interesting things about telepathy is that groups can share the same feelings almost instantly. Even the Spotters, who had been lying on the edge of the circle catching bones thrown by their masters, sprang to their feet and danced, although not sure why. Once stated, Haji’s solution seemed obvious to everyone. They needed a champion for the Tournament of Blood and, out of the blue, someone arrives who can single-handedly slay a fully-grown Gorgonopsian. What had they been thinking? Here was their man. In truth, not one of them thought Freddie had a grasshopper’s chance at a frog party, but a full moon was up and their bellies were full of meat, and a good few draughts of gingko wine as it turns out. Besides, it felt good to be cheering.

In the midst of this uproar, Lucy fell backwards off her stump.

Freddie would have found this amusing if he had not just been nominated for the Tournament of Blood. He glanced across at Raaktu. The light of the fire at that moment highlighted his scars and the crater over his right eye. Freddie expected Raaktu to object to losing his job but instead he gave Freddie a gracious nod as if to say ‘well done and good luck to you’, and hoed into his horned crocodile shank.

The Chief hopped off his stump, and raised his hands to silence the crowd. The Tribals hushed quickly although some of the Spotters continued to dance about until brought to order by sharp commands from their masters. ‘A new nomination has been made for the Tournament of Blood. For the past five years, ever since the . . . unfortunate accident, which ended the career of our previous champion, Crakka the Courageous . . .’ Freddie wanted to hear more about this unfortunate accident but the Chief rolled on. ‘Raaktu has been a great champion and, although not victorious, he has fought with honour!’ This was confirmed by a great roar from the Tribals and slaps of appreciation on Raaktus’s carpeted back. The Spotters kicked up their bony heels. ‘But . . .’ roared the Chief, once more silencing the gathering. ‘It is perhaps time for a new champion. The Wanderer, Haji, has nominated Freddie—Slayer of the Gorgonopsian—O’Toole, as that champion.’

The Tribals’ joy swelled and a tipsy ululation erupted around the circle. It grew and spun like a hula-hoop and Freddie’s head spun with it. It felt like the swirling noise might lift them all up into the night sky.

‘The question is—do you accept the job Freddie?’

Although every instinct inside him screamed no, Freddie could not stop his head nodding yes.

The Chief slapped Freddie's back, almost knocking him off his stump.

'Tomorrow,' he cried, above the cheers of the Tribals, 'our new champion departs . . . for the Ship City! Let us all raise our glasses and shout the toast, "A fair fight!"'

Part Four: An Unfair Fight

27. The Ship City

1 week later

Freddie's pocket watch felt as cool and round in his hand as ever. It just wasn't ticking. He wound the crown a few more times and gave it a shake. Nothing. Staring at its white and black numbered face, he tapped the glass and shook it one last time.

Still no good.

It was as dead as a dodo.

It might have been just the humidity but to Freddie it was not a good sign.

'Blazes,' he whispered. 'What a time for it to stop.'

Then, slowly, he looked up from the tiny machine in his hand to the monstrous machine before him.

Before his journey to Pangea, Freddie could never have imagined anything as big as the Ship City.

It was made entirely of the alien metal, adamantium. That indestructible metal had survived a space flight which had begun before the creation of the Earth; 3,000-degree Fahrenheit temperatures as it rocketed through the Earth's atmosphere; and a smashing crash-landing which had gouged a scar in the foothills over a hundred miles long. All this and there was not a single scratch on the massive craft.

The mountainous sides of the City rose to dizzying heights fading into the swirling clouds that shrouded the Central Pangean Mountains. Along its side, rows of rivet heads, the size of truck tyres, ran for miles into the hazy distance. At intervals between the rows of rivets, eyes of crystal protruded from the otherwise sleek lines of the spacecraft. Someone or something, Freddie guessed, was probably looking at him from those eyes at that very moment, but they were so distant he could not tell for sure.

Gazing up at its towering ramparts it seemed impossible to Freddie that such a huge thing could ever get off the ground, let alone fly across a galaxy. How much energy would that take, he wondered?

The very earth beneath groaned under its colossal weight.

Behind Freddie, the scene was very different. Cultivated foothills dotted with Subzyne huts and villages rolled into the distance. The nearest of those villages was a makeshift one made of hide tents, which Freddie and the other challengers had erected the previous day.

That morning Freddie was the first of the challengers awake but others were now rousing and lighting fires for breakfast. One of them spied Freddie in the distance and began climbing the hill on which he stood. When they reached Freddie, they stood silently behind him for a while, their warm breath sending cloudy puffs of mist into the crisp air.

‘Have you ever seen anything as big?’ said Lucy at last.

Recognising the voice, he did not turn around.

‘Has there ever *been* anything as big?’

‘No—it’s the largest creature-made thing in the galaxy as far as we know.’

‘Then I guess I’ve never seen anything as big.’

Freddie hoped that would be the end the conversation. In the days they had spent travelling across the Great Pangean Desert he had hardly spoken two words to Lucy. Even if he had wanted to, there had been few opportunities. The daylight hours were spent riding through dust clouds on all-terrain unipeds. The evenings had been silent and brief. Conversations had been about details like when to rise the next day, and how far they might travel. By sunset, they were lying, exhausted, in inflatable camp stretchers. The only sounds were the howls of animals and the sleeping farts of the Tribals.

‘Look—I know you don’t trust me now, and I can’t say I blame you—as a matter of fact, I see it as a positive development in your overall character—but, I swear, I did not know that Haji was going to nominate you for the tournament.’

When you have been deceived to the extent that you suddenly find yourself up to your eyeballs in some deadly intrigue 250 million years before your own existence, it is very difficult to know who you can and cannot trust.

Freddie turned to face Lucy. ‘So, what did you think was going to happen?’

‘For one thing—when you were nominated—I thought you might say; “No!”—but you nodded your head which even here in Pangea means “yes”.’

‘It was a fairly awkward . . . situation. What else could I do?’

‘Say “no”. You could have said “no”.’

Turning his back on Lucy, Freddie looked once more up at the sheer, grey sides of the Ship City.

‘Look, Freddie—you have to understand that we really don’t know everything. None of us knows who to trust. I have known Haji for a while now but I still don’t fully trust him. But, I do know you owe him your life. He was the one that insisted on saving you from the Amazons. He thought that you might have some inside knowledge on what is happening here. For a while, I thought so too.’

‘How could I know anything?’ asked Freddie.

‘We thought you might have some useful . . . contacts here.’

‘Why would you think that?’ asked Freddie, turning around.

Lucy looked around to check that no one else was nearby. ‘There is another group of . . . beings . . . we have not yet told you about, Freddie. There are some in our time—not many—who are Crossbloods; the offspring of time travelling Zynes and humans. Your father was . . . unusual enough . . . for us, and others to think that he may have been a

Crossblood.’ Lucy waited for Freddie to say something but he was determined not to, so she continued. ‘That would make you also a Crossblood.’

‘So, you thought that would help me win the Tournament of Blood?’

Lucy took a deep breath. ‘Not entirely; Haji had another reason for thinking you might win.’

‘Really? Killing that Gorgonopsian was the biggest fluke of all time.’

‘I don’t doubt that. But, that wasn’t his reason. The reason was that the Zyne champion has been beaten before.’

‘But . . . the Chief said he has never been beaten,’ said Freddie.

‘That is the official line but the Chief knew full well that he had been beaten and, by someone very close to you. He confided as much to Haji before you joined us at the feast.’

‘Who?’ Freddie’s chest tightened as he asked this question because he already sensed the answer.

‘By your father.’

Freddie gasped but his amazement was cut short by a commotion in the camp below.

Woooooofff!

A pile of sticks gathered for a fire had exploded in a giant woof of flames as Gruntenguile ignited it by pyrokinesis.³⁰ He had not realised that Haji had just doused the pile in biodiesel a few moments earlier and was looking for a match. The explosion singed the tip of Gruntenguile’s beard and eyebrows. It also caused Haji to look up from his pocket search and see Gruntenguile’s near miss and beyond that, Lucy and Freddie deep in conversation.

³⁰ The lighting of fires using psychic powers. (Editor)

‘Lucy,’ he yelled, ‘we could do with a hand down here.’

‘Sure,’ shouted Lucy, ‘I’m on my way.’ Then, turning to Freddie, she said. ‘I’d better go . . . good luck.’

‘Wait!’ cried Freddie. ‘There’s just one more thing I have to know. How long ago was that?’

‘Do you mean—was it after he disappeared?’

Freddie nodded.

‘No—it was some time before that . . .’

‘*Before?*’

‘I swear, Freddie, I did not know this until the Chief told us the night of the feast. I’ve been waiting for a moment alone to tell you and this is that moment.’

Freddie was not listening to a word she said. Instead, he was fighting back tears and rage. ‘How could I *not know* stuff like that about my own father? How could I live with him all those years and not know that?’

‘I don’t know . . . but I guess if people don’t tell you things . . .’

Lucy’s sentence was cut short by a dreadful noise like every creaky door that had ever been were opening at exactly the same time.

‘What is that?’ asked Freddie, clapping his hands over his ears.

Lucy pointed behind him to the Ship City. ‘They’re lowering the drawbridge. It’s time to get ready.’

28. A Secret Weapon

By the time Freddie returned to the challenger's camp it was alive with activity. Every Subzyne from the agricultural districts was gathering to watch the entrance of the challengers to the city. That was all they were allowed to see as most Subzyns were only ever permitted in the lower holds of the ship when it was in flight mode.

The drawbridge began its descent from the clouds. Freddie had seen a newsreel showing the giant US aircraft carriers such as the *USS Enterprise* and he described the drawbridge to the Ship City as being at least ten times larger. The noise it made grew louder and he clapped his hands tighter over his ears. Lucy and Haji, he noticed, had brought hyperseal earplugs that blocked the sound completely.

'Sorry,' screamed Lucy. 'I just didn't think to bring another pair.'

As horrible as the sound was, it was nothing compared with the clang of the metal as it finally smashed into the rocky slope on which they stood.

Haji removed his earplugs and walked over to Freddie. 'Are you ready?'

Freddie was not ready but he nodded anyway.

'In that case I think it's time to show you our secret weapon. I'm hoping it might give us a . . . psychological edge.' Haji smiled at Freddie and Lucy looked surprised.

'I swear I don't know anything about this,' she said.

Haji raised his hand and signalled to someone at the back of the massing crowd of Subzyns. This caused a sudden commotion in the crowd and a general parting of the way, starting at the back and slowly stretching to the front row like a big zipper. Once it reached the front, Gruntenguile emerged from the crowd leading a broad shouldered, dull-eyed beast by a short rein.

Mostly the crowd gasped in surprise but a few nodding old-timers knew straight away what was happening. The beast was the finest domestic Moschops to be found at short notice in the Subzyne agricultural districts. Its back legs bulged with mighty muscles. Its chest was so deep it was almost dragging on the ground and, although the front legs were not as impressive, they were just as powerful and quite long. This gave the Moschops the appearance of being a two-legged creature from the front and thrust its chest forward in a most inspiring fashion. At that stage of the Permian you could normally play a tune with a little rubber mallet on a Moschops' ribs but this beast was in such fine condition they were barely visible. The overall effect would have been even grander if its expression were more enthusiastic. Instead, it gazed gloomily out of its deep-set eyes as if it would much rather be somewhere else.

‘What do you think?’ asked Haji.

‘Great—the Moschops is going to fight for me?’

‘That’s good Freddie,’ laughed Haji, ‘and you’re going to need your sense of humour. No! My plan is to create a mental advantage by having you enter the arena riding this mighty beast like Hannibal into Rome.’³¹

‘This “mighty beast” looks a little . . . lacking in enthusiasm.’

‘Don’t worry about that,’ said Haji. ‘It will make you appear ten feet tall.’

A rope ran around the beast’s neck and a rein threaded through eyelets in this rope and along the neck to where they joined a spit-slathered metal bit on which it exercised its tongue. A rope ladder that was to act as a saddle ran around its chest. Haji nodded towards

³¹ Hannibal was one of the greatest military leaders of all time. He invaded the Romans in the Second Punic War by marching his war elephants over the mighty mountains of both the Pyrenees and the Alps into northern Italy. (Editor)

this and grabbing hold of it, Freddie attempted to mount his steed. Unfortunately, as he placed his weight on one rung, the whole thing slipped around.

Lucy and Gruntenguile scrambled to the other side and held the rope steady. Freddie tried again and was soon standing shakily on the shoulders of the Moschops. He gave the crowd the thumbs up. This meant something very different in the Permian but they politely accepted the gesture as a cultural misunderstanding.

Then, Freddie sat down and waited.

The other part of Haji's psychological strategy was to enter the Ship City last. With this in mind, he led the Moschops to the side of the drawbridge and they waited there for the other combatants and their entourages to pass. As they did so, Raaktu gave a brief rundown of each of the groups.

'Desert Tribals; they're as skinny as a stick but as tough as Gorgonopsian leather.

'Swamp Tribals; they do not know the meaning of fear.'

Freddie recalled the Eryops exploding from Sure Death Swamp a few months earlier.

'Cave Tribals; they are almost impossible to beat in the dark, but are not so good in normal light.' As if to confirm this one of the Cave Tribals bumped into his team mate from behind and they fell like dominoes.

'Pirate Tribals; those are from the Panthalassic Ocean. I wouldn't trust them as far as I could throw a Pygmy Tribal.'

Most of the other challengers filing past were scarred veterans like Raaktu; their noses flattened and twisted in all manner of violent ways, and dents in their craniums. Some had chunks bitten from their ears; some did not have ears. Many of them limped already from permanent injuries sustained in previous tournaments.

This evidence of the event's brutality did nothing to calm Freddie's fluttering nerves.

At the same time, however, he also could not help feeling some pride. He was about to enter the Ship City just as his father must have before him, if Lucy was to be believed. Surely, that meant something.

These thoughts crashed about in his head as he watched the remaining challengers pass.

They were not all Tribals.

One of the last groups was led by a sturdy human fellow a little over six feet tall. He was dressed in the style of the ancient Greeks and carried a short but well-worn broad sword at his side. His thick hair and wild beard were black and his skin pulled tight by powerful muscles that started at his neck and went all the way to his toes.

He nodded at Freddie as he passed. 'Agrosios,' he shouted, thumping his fist into his chest. 'Agrosios the Angry!'

Thinking that such an impromptu expression of enthusiasm deserved a reply Freddie thumped his chest and shouted, 'Freddie . . . Freddie the . . . Fearful . . . I mean Fearless.'

'That should terrify him,' said Lucy.

Alongside Agrosios walked two much less impressive gentlemen. They were weasely in build and wore tweed flat caps of a type not trusted where Freddie came from.

'Quite a solid lad, eh Guv?' said one of these gentlemen glancing up at Freddie.

'Forgive my associate's bad manners,' said the other. 'Terry and Bertie—Men-about-Town and Starting Price Bookmakers—at your service. If you'd care for a little

wager; we're your men. At what odds do you rate your boy up there?' he asked, turning to Haji.

Their accents were working class English.

'We give him some chance,' said Haji cagily.

'Well, the best of British to you,' the first speaker replied. They both touched the peaks of their caps at the same time and stepped onto the drawbridge.

Looking back, it appeared that they were now the last of the challengers.

'That must be it. Let's get this thing over with!' said Freddie. He had been sitting on the Moschops' neck with his legs dangling each side but now hopped up and stood on the beast's back. He was about to shake his reins and yell 'giddy-up' when one last group of challengers emerged from the crowd and pulled up behind them. When Freddie looked back and saw who it was, his heart fell from his chest and bounced up and down like a little rubber ball.

It was Koia.

She was dressed, as was the usual custom of the Amazons, in a light leather skirt and bodice. The gap between the two revealed her stomach, which was as tight as a drum and ripped with abdominal muscles like iron rods. Freddie counted six; three either side. Across her shoulders she wore the white skin of an Antarctic Gorgonopsian, slain single-handedly by her in the frozen wastes of southern Gondwana. In her hand she carried the double-bladed axe Freddie had last seen in the tent in the Amazonian village.

'After you ladies,' said Freddie, rather gallantly he thought. He waved his hand for them to pass.

If you ever encounter Amazons—do not call them 'Ladies'. They just don't like it!

Koia and the Amazons surrounding her bristled with shaking spears and wild shouts. For a moment it looked like the Tournament of Blood would start right there and then before they had even set foot on the drawbridge.

A sudden and sharp command given from the front sorted the matter. ‘Go now,’ it said.

Turning around, Freddie saw what he thought was his first Zyne. He looked simply like a blonde-haired man of good build and height, but at the same time there was an indefinable something about him that was not human. Freddie could not put his finger on exactly what it was although it may have had something to do with looking too extraordinarily handsome. His face seemed a perfect combination of the best features of every film star Freddie had ever seen. In his hand he held a lasernator. They were the preferred weapon of Zynes and could be calibrated from tickle to obliterate—the default setting was ‘obliterate’.

Freddie stared blankly until the Zyne, thinking that he was a bit slow on the uptake, repeated his instruction with a few more details. ‘You are to go now, blood-head! The Amazons, as is the custom of our tournament, enter last.’

‘What did he call me?’ asked Freddie.

‘It’s just a name for someone with red hair . . . grrrnt,’ said Gruntenguile.

‘They don’t get too many around here.’

Gruntenguile pulled on the Moschops’ lead and stepped onto the drawbridge. Lucy and Haji followed on either side.

Making his way up the drawbridge, Freddie could feel Koia’s eyes burning two black holes in his back. He looked ahead and tried not to think about what Koia might be thinking.

There was now a big gap between the Spring Tribals' challengers and Agrosios, and the Zynes did not like this gap. They urged them to go faster but a Moschops has only one speed (unless it is being pursued by a Gorgonopsian) and that is not fast. Even so, Freddie could see that Haji's strategy was working. There was a dignity in his lumbering advance that was very impressive. The Subzynes gathered around the foot of the drawbridge looked up at Freddie in wonder and maybe even a little hope. He thought they might offer more cries of support but they were silent. There were too many Zyne guards about by that time.

Freddie studied these guards carefully out the tail of his eye as he made his way past. He hoped to see some reaction to his grand entrance. He thought he may have seen a flicker of something, but when he took a second look their faces seemed as unflinching as statues.

Freddie, on the other hand, felt more uncertain with every step as he edged closer and closer to the entrance which slowly emerged as the clouds lifted. Over that entrance, like a falling bomb, stared the eye symbol of the Zynes. Beneath that a portico of crystal jutted out like the jaws of a snake. As they drew closer to it Freddie could see that it was made of the same crystals that had run through his heart in the Timorese cave.

When they arrived at the entrance the crystals caught the sun and sent crazy slivers of light in all directions as they walked beneath and entered the Ship City.

Inside, it was not dark as Freddie had expected. The Ship City was designed for both space travel and habitation on arrival. The upper skin was therefore retractable and it was now open and letting in whatever grey light was able to fight its way through the hazy sky. The raw, icy slopes of the Central Pangean Mountains soared and spied over the rim.

Ahead lay the grand metal avenue which ran towards the centre of the ship. On each side of this avenue, banks of pipes, like endless submarines, ran for miles. Metal

gangways ran along the top and edges of these pipes and these gangways were filled with cheering, screaming, fighting Zynes. It looked like riots were breaking out.

‘An interesting aspect of Zyne culture,’ yelled Lucy, noticing Freddie’s startled expression. ‘Fighting is their favourite pastime—that’s why they’re so good at it!’

It was so like Lucy to say something like that.

More Zynes flew above them on air bikes not much bigger than their backsides. Some wore black helmets with dark face masks and looked like giant insects. Others wore goggles and flying caps. The avenue, the pipes and everything led towards a central stem that towered into the mists above everything in the centre of the city. The tallest structure on Freddie’s Earth had been the Empire State Building. It stood 102 storeys and 1,454 feet to the tip of the antennae mast in the middle of New York. The Alpha Tower in the centre of the Ship City soared three times that height. At the very top sat a saucer-shaped nerve centre known as the Control Disk. It served as the cockpit when the Ship City was in flight mode and the administration centre when landed. It could also separate and fly independently of the main ship.

The base of the Alpha Stem was surrounded by an open square which was the only public space in the Ship City. It was also the venue for the Tournament of Blood. Scattered along the entrance avenue, massive screens telecast images of everything that was happening. They were not the sort of screens Freddie was used to in the Star Theatre. Those screens had the films projected onto them but he could not see any projectors. The images were coming from *inside* the screen. He was so amazed he forgot his mixed feelings about his companions.

‘Blazes!’ he said, nodding at both Haji and Lucy.

‘It’s really something,’ said Lucy. ‘But you haven’t seen anything yet.’

Each new group of Lowland Champions entering the city was greeted by a fresh eruption of cheers—each seeming louder than the last.

Zynes were busy beings. They worked with a cool and clinical sense that everything they did was moving them forward to some grand, ultimate *thing*. None of them, if asked, could clearly say what that *thing* was but that did not seem to bother them. It was only once every year, at the Tournament of Blood, that they got to unwind.

An extra volume of cheers, like a freak wave, marked Freddie's progress along the thoroughfare.

'This Moschops was a good idea,' yelled Freddie.

Gruntenguile did not have the heart to tell Freddie that Zynes cheer and boo the opposite way around from modern humans. He grunted agreement.

Looking up into the crowd, Freddie pumped his fist and the cheering grew even louder.

'They're going to burst if they cheer any louder,' yelled Freddie. 'Maybe they heard about the Gorgonopsian.'

'That must be it . . . grrrnt,' said Gruntenguile.

'How are your legs holding out up there?' asked Haji. 'There's a way to go yet. Maybe you should sit down.'

'Sit down? No way! I'm standing all the way and soaking it up. This crowd loves me!'

The central square became less of a blur in the distance. Its outline slowly sharpened to a jigsaw of angular shapes where the entrance avenue joined the square which surrounded the central stem. As they neared this point, Freddie noticed a large cage, hanging in the air. It cast a webbed shadow over everything beneath it and sent a chill through him.

As the challengers reached the square they were directed one to the left and the next to the right and so forth until eventually Freddie and Koia stood in the two innermost spots looking directly towards the central stem, which Freddie could now see was made of the same crystal as the entrance portico and the crystal sword.

The pipes that had extended all the way from the edge of the ship turned at right angles when they reached the square and provided a viewing platform that surrounded the entire stem. Only the seriously rich Zynes in the southern section of the Square would see any first-hand action. Everyone else had to be content with watching on one of the many suspended screens.

Inside the square, bollards were scattered randomly. Unknown to the challengers, the Zyne champions had been training in ways to smash opponents into them for months. Lights of every colour imaginable, and some Freddie had never seen, cut the arena into gaudy fragments. The lights moved and pulsed and gave the queasy sense that the square was alive. They blurred and distorted things for the challengers and directed the attention of the spectators. On the inside edge of the square, however, ran the tournament's most famous feature and the one that had inspired its popular name. It was a straight, square banked channel brimming to the top with what appeared to be blood.

'Don't worry,' shouted Haji, noticing Freddie's horrified look. 'It's not real blood; just a bit of theatrics. The eliminated challengers are thrown into the channel and washed from the arena. The crowd loves it!'

'That is so disgusting,' said Lucy. She would have said more if her attention had not been distracted by a flourish of noise and a blinding flash of lights on the side of the stem. The gaudy beams that had been pulsing about the arena suddenly stopped on a metal panel inserted into the crystal stem directly above the challengers. Just as suddenly, that panel

dissolved and a group of guards and officials stepped out onto a balcony that magically appeared before them.

‘The official party,’ said Lucy, peering around the chest of the Moschops who was looking sideways up and down for something to eat.

The guards shielded the main party as they emerged but then stepped aside. Freddie could now see the officials, although not clearly due to the play of lights. The bright lights then flashed to the side and Freddie’s eyes fell on a man standing ahead of the rest.

‘The Beta Zyne . . . grrrnt,’ said Gruntenguile.

The Beta Zyne was older but still more oozingly handsome than any of the Zynes Freddie had already seen.

‘And of course, there’s no need to introduce his special *guest*,’ said Lucy.

Freddie could only just hear Lucy over the hubbub of the Zynes. He had been so struck by the appearance of the Beta Zyne that his eyes had not yet wandered to the other members of the party. They did now.

Standing to the right and just behind the Beta Zyne was a woman; the only woman outside of the Amazons and Lucy, that he had seen since entering the Ship City.

And Lucy was right in saying that she needed no introduction.

29. The People You Meet!

‘Doctor Claudia Bufon!’ Freddie gasped.

The last time he had seen her she had been wearing green coveralls. Now she looked like her clothes had been melted and poured onto her body. She wore black high heeled boots extending to her knees, black leather pants and a tight-fitting silver bodice. A pistol belt angled across her waist and she stood slightly side-on as if the holstered pistol—a Walther P38 semi-automatic—were her favourite accessory. Later events however, would prove that it was not just for show. She also wore a black aviator’s cap with goggles strapped to the front suggesting that she may have been observing them from an air bike as they were making their way down the central avenue. The butt end of a Lasernator strapped to her back protruded over her left shoulder. Her hands, which rested on her hips, were covered in black gloves to the elbows. Above that, to Freddie’s surprise, her right arm was covered in more tattoos than a Maori sailor.

She stepped forward and rested one gloved hand on the handle of her pistol. A sliver of hair, like a filleting knife, fell from her aviator’s cap and dangled over her right eye.

‘What’s she doing here?’ asked Freddie.

‘I’m not sure,’ said Lucy. ‘But I’m guessing that whatever it is; it is not for the greater good.’

Despite Lucy’s surprise at seeing Dr Bufon, Freddie looked suspiciously at her as he clambered down from the Moschops.

Noticing this Lucy threw up her hands. ‘I don’t know how many times I have to tell you, but we don’t know everything. We are just small players. It now appears that Doctor Bufon is a much bigger player.’

‘We’re as surprised as you are,’ added Haji.

‘And do you mind if I make a suggestion?’ asked Lucy.

‘Go ahead,’ said Freddie.

‘If you must gawk at her—close your mouth.’

Any moral high ground he had taken from Lucy was taken back and Freddie was wondering how that had happened when the Beta Zyne stepped forward to speak. The crowd fell silent.

‘Zynes . . .’ Freddie could not see a microphone but the words boomed over the city as if spoken by a giant. ‘Once more we find ourselves gathered for our festival . . . our annual Tournament of Blood.’

The crowd booed and Freddie wondered how they could be so unkind to their second highest leader. He wondered also why the Beta Zyne was speaking English. He later realised that he was not speaking at all but sending his thoughts telepathically in as many languages as was necessary.

‘Welcome also to our Lowland Subzynes’—Zynes refused to accept Tribals as a name—‘and Amazons . . . all of whom we hope will one day forget their trifling issues and re-join us here in the Ship City. I hope it is sooner rather than later . . . or too late. We may not be here much longer.’ He paused to allow time for these last words to sink in. ‘I see also that some Wanderers have found their way to our festival. Some of you are here to test your strength against our champions. Welcome to you. Our tournament is open to all and we’—a crooked smile broke across the Beta Zyne’s face—‘hope you enjoy the experience.’

Zyne humour is famous throughout the universe for not being very funny to non-Zynes. In some parts, what Zynes call humour is considered gloating cruelty. The Zynes

crowding around the arena, however, laughed like a gutbust of Chthonosauri.³² Gruntenguile looked at Freddie, and grunted.

When the crowd died down the Beta Zyne continued.

‘As is our custom we will waste no time in getting our tournament underway. Let me start however by reminding our challengers of some rules. Firstly, only one-on-one fighting is allowed. Any breaking of this rule may result in lasernation and disqualification.’

‘Unless you are a Zyne . . . grrrnt,’ added Gruntenguile under his breath.

‘If there are an odd number of combatants,’ continued the Beta Zyne, ‘challengers must *wait* for an opponent to become available. And finally, and most importantly, combatants are only eliminated once they have been thrown into the Channel of Blood.’

The challengers looked towards the bloody channel bordering the arena and nodded their understanding.

The Beta Zyne smiled and then shared a look with the crowd that only a Zyne could truly understand. ‘We also have a slight change to the rules this year,’ he announced.

Sweat snaked its way down the side of Freddie’s face.

‘This year’s tournament we have decided will be a team event.’ The Beta Zyne ran his eyes along the line of challengers. ‘Your team will consist of your chosen Challenger, of course, plus two extra members of your group . . . randomly selected by . . . our impartial judges.’ The Beta Zyne smiled and a grey shadow seemed to cross his face.

Screaming and booing followed and Freddie assumed that Zynes were also not fond of last minute rule changes.

³² The Tribals’ often descriptive names for many Permian species were superseded by modern scientific names following the arrival in Pangea of Doylian palaeontologists such as Haji. (M.A. SINGH)

‘But Guv . . .’ One of the two flat-capped Wanderers began until a Zyne guard levelled his lasernator at his nose and whatever words he intended to say died in his throat.

Two teams of judges suddenly appeared at both ends of the line and began selecting the extra combatants. Their strategy was soon clear. They picked the two smallest and seemingly weakest members of each group. The crowd roared with each new selection as they steadily worked their way towards the two groups in the centre. They reached the Amazons first and straight away selected a young girl who looked familiar to Freddie. Then with a jolt he realised that it was Polydora, the impish girl who had thrown the spear at him; minus a few pounds of dirt. Koia pleaded with the judges that Polydora was too young but they did not listen. Their decision was final. The second choice was tougher for the judges as the remaining Amazons all looked as strong as Koia. Eventually they chose a woman with a roughly shaven head. She looked slightly shorter but this may have simply been an illusion caused by her lack of hair. She was also older. Somewhere between thirty and forty, Freddie guessed, but it is hard to judge the age of Amazons as they remain very fit their entire lives. Her name was Aella, which in the Amazonian tongue means ‘whirlwind’.

A moment later the other pair of judges arrived at Freddie’s group. Haji stood unusually tall and square-shouldered. There was no sign of his dodgy back and he even took a step forward but the judges ignored him. They may have been put off by his facial hair which made him look like a doubly tall Tribal. They picked Lucy instead. Having observed that their criteria for selection were smallness and apparent weakness, she was furious. She aimed a kick at the shins of the nearest judge but miscalculated and made contact higher than she expected.

‘You just picked the wrong girl,’ she screamed.

Gruntenguile grunted and then laughed. Tribals find injuries to the reproductive organs almost as funny as farting.

Zynes rarely laugh at misfortunes that befall other Zynes. Humour for Zynes is more about bad things happening to 'lesser' species. ('Did you hear about the Yiaaak that got hit by a space truck? He looks a lot better now.') But even some of the Zynes laughed as the judge limped, red-faced towards Gruntenguile.

'You have just picked yourself onto the Spring Tribals' team,' snarled the judge. 'I hope you find that as amusing!'

Gruntenguile grunted. It would be easier to keep Freddie alive if he were competing.

'At least there are three of us now,' said Freddie. 'One for all; and all for one!'

As he said this he looked towards Lucy and was glad he did because she looked invincible with her dark steady eyes and war-like braids.

In the moment that he took his eyes off them, the judges disappeared. This coincided with the even more remarkable appearance of Dr Bufon. During the judges' deliberations she had descended on one of the sky steps that connected the various levels of the Ship City. These steps automatically levitated to wherever they were needed. They were not cheap, however, unless you were a high ranking Zyne. All you needed then was an official chip in your boot. Nearer the ground the step had levelled off to a point just a body-width away from Freddie. He did not see her approaching as he was looking at Lucy. When she suddenly spoke, he was taken by surprise and, turning quickly, found himself looking directly into her smouldering green eyes.

'So, look who proved to be useful!' said Dr Bufon. Her voice was half surprise, half ridicule.

Freddie had never been at ease under the cool gaze of Dr Claudia Bufon and he felt even more awkward under the extraordinary circumstances of that meeting. He was also slightly unnerved by the sight of the tattoos on her upper right arm. Two snakes twined

around a skeleton hanging from a noose. At the top of her bicep they reared outwards with their jaws wide open ready to strike. They were cobra snakes; number one on Freddie's list of reptiles to avoid.

Dragging his attention away from the snake tattoos Freddie tried to look Dr Bufon in the eye. 'I'm pleased to meet you again Dr Bufon but I'm not sure what you mean. All I know is that a lot of really weird stuff has happened since I saw you last. I hope you don't mind me asking you this but . . . what is it exactly that brings *you* here?'

'Don't talk to her. She can't be trusted,' yelled Lucy.

Dr Bufon's eyelids fluttered as if warding off an insect. 'Honestly, if you can't say something nice . . .' she began. She did not finish the sentence however as her attention seemed to be suddenly taken by Freddie's hair. 'You know; some people don't fancy red hair Freddie but I find it absolutely *adorrrable*. I can't keep my hands off it.' Reaching forward she ran her silky fingers through Freddie's hair and shivered. At the same time, she attached a micro-recording device about the size of a grain of sand to his quivering scalp.³³ Even Lucy, who was watching her like a hawk, did not notice. Dr Bufon then placed her hand and outstretched fingers briefly on Freddie's chest and felt the rapid beat of his heart before returning her hand to her pistol grip. 'It is very important that you *surviiiive* this little tournament Freddie,' she continued. 'When you do, we will talk and you can *aaask* me anything you want and I promise *IIIII'll* tell you everything I know. Unlike others I imagine.' Her eyes fluttered like bats towards Lucy. 'Will that satisfy you?' She moved her hand from the pistol to Freddie's chin. When he could not reply, she nodded his head for him.

³³ I asked Freddie why this recording device was not also fitted with a micro-transmitter. His answer was that Zyne technology in the communication area was so advanced that any transmission would almost certainly have been intercepted by multiple sources. (M.A. SINGH)

‘Take *caaaarre* Freddie.’

Then she cast a withering glance at Lucy which reminded Freddie of the way they looked at each other when they had crossed paths on the Arnhem Escarpment. Freddie’s head suddenly felt very heavy without Dr Bufon’s hand there to support it. It remained slightly extended as he watched her re-ascend the stairs to the balcony. The Beta Zyne had watched everything with a face like a blank page. When Dr Bufon returned to her position alongside him he once more addressed the crowd.

‘And now it is time to welcome our Zyne Champions!’

30. The Tournament of Blood

Way above them in the cloudy air, a black object dangled from the side of the central stem. At first it was no more than a dot—like a soaring bird. As it descended, however, Freddie could see that it was a platform enclosed by a wire safety cage. By the time it was half-way down it was also clear that it carried the Zyne champions. The crowd roared louder and louder as it approached. Louder than Freddie had thought it was possible for beings to roar.

‘Makes my entrance look a little lame,’ said Freddie when he figured out what was happening.

‘Your entrance was great,’ said Lucy.

Four words and Freddie found himself not hating Lucy once more. His thoughts about her had been swinging like Tarzan on a vine since arriving in Pangea. At that moment of course, his thinking may have been influenced by the fact that they were about to enter the Tournament of Blood as team-mates. They needed to rely on each other like never before.

As the Zynes descended on their platform, the cage that had been casting a crisscrossed shadow over them since their arrival was lowered into place.

While this was happening Zyne Guards removed the non-competitors and the Moschops.

‘I really wish I were in there with you—bad back and all,’ shouted Haji making his way from the arena. Then, as a last thought he turned back and gave them a final piece of advice. ‘Don’t trust . . . *anyone* . . . but especially the Zynes.’ Then he turned and left the arena with an extra zip in his step as he noticed the cage was almost down.

The next thing Freddie heard was a giant clunk as the cage hit the ground. Now the only way out was the Channel of Blood which flowed under the base of the cage to the area where Haji was now seated. This area was known as the Pit. Once there, the eliminated competitors were subjected to the vilest ridicule from the Zyne spectators. The nastiest remarks were replayed to them on a special screen fixed to the front of the cage.

Looking along the line of challengers, Freddie counted 22 teams of combatants including his own. That made 66 challengers. Most of them, like Freddie, were gazing with wide eyes around the arena.

Everything seemed to be floating and blurry around the edges. Feeling dizzy and needing to focus on something, his eyes rested for a moment on Koia. She seemed cold and hard, but still beautiful in his eyes.

Noticing Freddie staring at Koia, Lucy turned and studied her more closely. ‘They all look a bit alike to me but isn’t that the one that almost pulled me out of the Aurora?’ she asked.

Lying to Lucy was too fraught with danger, so Freddie answered, ‘Yes.’

Lucy opened her eyes wider and turned to Freddie. ‘And is she the one you were looking forward to being cannibalised by?’

That was not the way Freddie liked to remember his relationship with Koia, but he answered, ‘Yes’.

‘You are a naughty boy, Freddie,’ she said.

‘What?’ Shocked by her answer Freddie turned to check her expression. It gave nothing away so he let it slide. There were too many other things to worry about at that moment. The descending platform was one of them.

It had almost reached the top of the cage and Freddie could see the champions more clearly. Even so, he thought his eyes were playing tricks on him. Firstly, he could only

see two of them. Surely if the challengers were allowed teams of three the Zyne champions would be allowed the same number? At the same time, he noticed that they seemed to be blue and—

‘By the way,’ said Lucy, ‘we possibly should have told you earlier but the Zyne champions are a little different from normal Zynes. Their bodies are tattooed with images of those they have defeated and—as you can see—they have additional limbs grafted to their body.’

‘They have four arms,’ gasped Freddie.

‘Yes,’ said Lucy, ‘and four fists.’

Freddie shuddered at the alien appearance of the Zyne champions. Their hexapedal forms made them look like giant bugs. Freddie was almost sick by now with the slow churning of his stomach. The noise reverberating around the square was so loud that it was a uniform roar as numbing as silence. Freddie looked across to see how Lucy was faring. She was saying something to him but he could not hear her over the roar of the crowd.

‘What?’ he shouted.

‘Stay out of the way!’

Freddie nodded but he could not see how that was possible. They were going to be in a cage.

A metallic sound turned his attention to the top of that cage where a gate was opening to allow the platform to enter. The Zyne champions were now close enough that he could see some of the animals and Tribals tattooed on their gleaming bodies and even faces. Their torsos were exposed but beneath this they wore different coloured pants; one blue, the other yellow. Freddie assumed this was to assist the crowd in knowing which was which.

As the platform hit the ground, the voice of the Beta Zyne boomed, ‘Let the Tournament begin.’

‘Good luck, Little—’ began Gruntenguile.

But before the sentence was completed Freddie heard a thud, followed by an enormous gasp as if someone had just had their lungs emptied by a violent impact. He turned just in time to see Gruntenguile collapse to the ground.

Standing over his splattered body was the third Zyne who had just swung into the arena on a rope from nowhere. He was wearing long Zyne pants like the others, only his were red. Above these he wore nothing but rippling muscle and tattoos.

Freddie’s first thought was to run but his legs would not move.

He had expected an unfair fight but he had not expected it to be so brutal.

31. Things Get Ugly

Freddie could not see any of the mayhem erupting around the cage at that moment. All he could see was the red Zyne advancing towards the flattened Gruntenguile.

As much as Freddie wanted to run, his legs would not move.

The red Zyne was a brute of a being; twice Freddie's size and massively muscled. By now he was standing over Gruntenguile and leaning forward to grab his throat.

Freddie had to do something and do it quickly. He had to help his crusty manservant.

He was just about to step towards the red Zyne when something curled around the red Zyne's neck like a lasso. It was an arm. Instinctively Freddie knew it belonged to Koia and this was confirmed when her head appeared over the red Zyne's shoulder. The brute was taken completely by surprise. The challengers do not normally seek out the Zyne champions, preferring to fight against easier combatants until they had no choice but to confront the Zynes.

Koia's bicep bulged around the red Zyne's throat and she pulled her elbow in tight with her other arm to apply more pressure. The problem was that the tighter she pulled the more enraged the red Zyne became. He struggled to reach over his shoulder and get a hand on Koia. She arched her head back to keep clear of his grasp. His lower arms felt back for her legs but he could not reach them. While this was happening, Freddie slowly regained his full senses but he was still not sure what to do. The rules forbade him from assisting Koia and there were no free combatants.

By now the red Zyne's face was almost as red as his pants and it looked like Koia would succeed in choking him out when suddenly, spying one of the bollards in front of him, he rolled forward and slammed Koia into it. This broke Koia's grip and at the same time

the red Zyne pushed himself up with his four arms and sprang to his feet. He turned around and launched a vicious kick at Koia's head but she rolled clear and took the blow on her already bruised back and staggered to her feet. The red Zyne had no qualms about fighting a woman and he charged towards her to finish his brutal work. He had forgotten all about Freddie, and Gruntenguile, who was still lying flat on his back. The red Zyne had assumed he was out cold but Tribals are a tough breed and Gruntenguile was a particularly tough Tribal. As the red Zyne ran past he spun around and swung one of his legs into his path. His bony heel smacked into the red Zyne's ankle like a wrecking ball and brought him smashing to the ground.

'Freddie,' yelled Gruntenguile, 'find an opponent. Seek out one of the Pygmy Tribals before one of the Zynes picks you.'

Yes, of course, thought Freddie. Why had he not thought of that himself? He cast his eyes around the arena. Of the sixty-six combatants who had started the contest about ten challengers had already been eliminated. The two most recent were washing down the Channel of Blood to the roar of the crowd. The other eliminated challengers had been fished from the Channel and now huddled in the Pit copping the crowd's abuse. The first seats were taken by the two flat-capped Wanderers. When the contest had started they had run to the Channel and dived in. The others were Tribals who all looked happy to be where they were despite the taunts of the crowd. There was no sign of Lucy and the thought raced through his mind that she may have already been badly hurt and taken from the cage by one of the air ambulances hovering overhead. Then he looked up and saw her on the netting at the far end of the arena. She was climbing to the top of the cage, pursued by Polydora. It was funny to see Lucy being chased by the much younger and smaller Amazon but Freddie knew it would not be funny once Polydora got hold of her. Lucy's tactic was to avoid early elimination by

staying clear of the other competitors but the roof of the cage was dangerous. A fall from there could cause serious injury or even worse.

Freddie was just starting to get his bearings when someone jumped on him from behind.

Gruntenguile saw this out the corner of his eye but there was nothing he could do. He had his hands full. The red Zyne's ankle had completely shattered and if there is one thing a Zyne cannot handle, it is pain. Springing to his feet Gruntenguile stood over the red Zyne who lay screaming on the ground. Then grabbing the red Zyne by his good foot he dragged him towards the Channel of Blood.

The red Zyne weighed about as much as a well-fed Anteosaur but Gruntenguile was inspired. The Zynes had enslaved his race for eons and he was about to drag one of their champions into the Channel of Blood and eliminate them from the tournament. The red Zyne was made powerless by his pain. His hands squeezed his injured ankle tight to ease the agony.

Luckily, they were close to the channel and Gruntenguile soon dragged him to the edge. Then he stepped to the side of the red Zyne and pushed with all his might until he rolled like a felled log and tipped over the side into the Channel of Blood with a mighty splash.

The red Zyne was eliminated.

'Bon voyage . . . grrrnt,' cried Gruntenguile even though no one could hear. The roar of the crowd was deafening.

The red Zyne floated agonizingly away on the hyper-saline fake blood. But he was not destined for the shame of the Pit. An air ambulance flew in and the medic on-board pulled him from the Channel and placed him on a small open stretcher in the rear of the

vehicle. The crowd cheered their scorn for Gruntenguile. Zynes are the worst losers in the universe.

Freddie heard this and assumed that one of the Zynes had been victorious. He could not see anything because he had been pinned to the ground by Koia, who, seeing that the red Zyne was being dealt with by Gruntenguile, sprang on Freddie and forced him to the ground. She twisted him around and for the second time sat on his pounding chest.

‘I was kidnapped,’ pleaded Freddie. ‘I was looking forward to . . . whatever—’ The rest of his apology however was muffled by Koia grabbing hold of his jaw. She held it so tightly that for a moment Freddie thought she was going to snap his neck. Then her knees came forward and pinned the fleshy part of his arms. That hurt, but that was it.

Once in this position, the pressure eased and Freddie realised that Koia was only pretending to attack him to buy time for them both. A smile started to crack over his face but a frown from Koia told him that was not a good idea. The next thing he thought was that he could not wait to tell Lucy. She had been slandering Koia for months and now it seemed that her feelings for him were real. Not that you could tell from her face. Apart from one knowing wink that told Freddie to play along it was pure Amazonian ferocity. Freddie was not sure how long they remained locked in that position. The danger was, of course, that if it went on for too long the crowd and judges would sense that it was all a sham. During this time Freddie could see the top of the cage where Lucy was scrambling like a monkey to keep clear of Polydora. Her tactic of keeping out of harm’s way by climbing the cage was now looking like the most dangerous option she could have taken. A fall onto the adamantium surface of the square from that height would mean almost certain death.

The other thing Freddie noticed was an increase in the cheering to a cyclonic roar. A few seconds later the face of Gruntenguile appeared over Koia’s shoulder. He wanted

to yell out to him that Koia was on their side and was only pretending to strangle him but he could not move his jaw.

Gruntenguile grabbed Koia and pulled her off Freddie.

Freddie had just enough time to gasp, 'She was just holding me! She's on our side.'

At the same time Gruntenguile looked up and saw the yellow Zyne racing towards him. His tattooed face glistened with sweat and specks of blood.

'Any suggestions?' asked Gruntenguile.

'Yes,' said Koia. 'Attack!' Twisting out of Gruntenguile's grasp she ran towards the charging yellow Zyne. Then, when they were about twenty feet apart, she dived into a star flip. This broke the yellow Zyne's rhythm and he staggered to a halt just as Koia came out of her flip and landed back on her feet. She launched herself at the yellow Zyne, going straight for his eyes; digging her strong fingers and sun-hardened nails deep into his eye sockets.

The yellow Zyne roared, clutching his eyes in agony.

The crowd cheered.

Koia was not so certain about her next move but it was not needed. From the side, Agrosios the Angry launched himself at the yellow Zyne and threw him to the ground. The yellow Zyne wrapped his four arms around Agrosios and applied a double bear hug. A lesser man would have passed out but Agrosios had been left in the wilderness as a baby and reared by bears. He threw his own arms around the yellow Zyne and pulled tight.

Koia thought about helping him but there were too many lasernators already in position. Instead, she looked around for a fresh opponent. Unfortunately, the closest one to her was the blue Zyne who was running directly towards her. He was their alpha champion. She had been eliminated by him in a previous tournament and should have been intimidated

but Koia did not know the meaning of that word. Bracing herself, she glared at the blue Zyne flying towards her like he had been shot from a space cannon.

In the Tournament of Blood, it is a good idea not to focus entirely on one thing. Your side vision is what keeps you alive. A Swamp Tribal had also seen the blue Zyne charging and thinking that he meant to fight him, attacked Koia first. Catching her off guard from the side, he threw her to the ground.

Freddie had seen enough of what was happening around him to know what this meant. Koia was fighting the Swamp Tribal; Agrosios was battling the yellow Zyne. Gruntenguile by now was struggling with a Pirate Tribal. There was only one other opponent in the vicinity for the blue Zyne to take on.

That was Freddie.

The blue Zyne also realised this and decided to put on a show for the crowd. He slowed down and walked in measured steps towards Freddie like he had all the time in the world. His purpose was simple. It allowed time for Freddie's fear to bubble to the surface for the amusement of the crowd. Fear was the only thing that Zynes love more than violence. He slammed his calloused fists together with each step.

Freddie could not help noticing that the blue Zyne was larger than the other Zyne champions. He was also a lot bluer. As well as wearing blue pants his bare upper torso was completely covered in tattoos. As he got closer, Freddie saw that the tattoos included many animals but also the battered faces of an army of Tribals challengers. These tattoos served their psychological purpose. Freddie was awe-struck by the sheer number of the blue Zyne's past victims. So numerous were they that the tattoos had encroached onto the blue Zyne's face which was otherwise square-jawed and handsome.

The blue Zyne's showy advance had one drawback. It gave Freddie time to shake off some panic and think about what he should do. His first thought was that he needed

to be calm. Then, blocking out the roar of the crowd, he weighed up his options. There were only two that he could see; fight or flight. Only one of these seemed sensible given the size of the blue Zyne. He had just made up his mind about this when the blue Zyne lunged forward. Freddie jumped up onto one of the bollards to his right and balanced on it like the Crimson Avenger. This evasion infuriated the blue Zyne. Competitors were normally so keen to be eliminated they offered little resistance. The less they struggled the better it was for them. The blue Zyne lurched to his left but Freddie had already leaped to another bollard. This was a new tactic in the tournament and the spectators hushed as they wondered how the blue Zyne would react. There was something slightly comical about the situation but it did not appeal to the blue Zyne's sense of humour.

‘Make it easy on yourself,’ he snarled. ‘It is only a matter of time before I crush you. The sooner you are floating in the Channel of Blood; the sooner all this will be over.’

What moved Freddie to answer the way he did he did not know. ‘Blurr!’ he blurted, ‘You are the ugliest Zyne I have ever met,’ and, as if that weren't enough, he added. ‘Your face would put a Yiaaak off their dinner.’

When it comes to their appearance, Zynes are the vainest creatures in the universe. The blue Zyne roared and threw himself at Freddie, who had only a split second to leap to another bollard.

The next few moments were the most comic in the tournament's long history as Freddie leaped from bollard to bollard with the blue Zyne chasing him. The bollards had been installed for the Zyne champions to smash their opponents into and it infuriated the blue Zyne to have them used to make him seem foolish. As Freddie leaped clear of his attacker, he caught glimpses of the action in other parts of the square.

The thing which alarmed him the most was that Polydora had caught up with Lucy. They were grappling on the top of the cage like an insect and spider. If either fell, there was little hope for them.

Agrosios and the yellow Zyne were still wrapped in each other's crushing bear hugs. The yellow Zyne had recovered the use of his eyes and his four sweaty arms were applying a pressure that would have squeezed the life out of most men. Agrosios was squeezing just as tightly. Koia was dragging the Swamp Tribal she had been fighting to the Channel by his long beard. Gruntenguile had gotten the better of his Pirate Tribal and was about to roll him into the Channel. The third Amazon, Aella was grappling a sure-footed Mountain Tribal with calves like watermelons. Apart from that there remained probably ten contests still taking place inside the cage.

All of this of course was seen in an instant as Freddie leaped from bollard to bollard and his energy drained in the thin air which contained even less oxygen in the foothills than in the lowlands. The strobing lights were also testing Freddie's balance. Seeing his successful evasion, the Zynes had aimed even more lights directly at his eyes. Too many things were against him. He could not keep it up for much longer. Although it was cooler in the foothills, the temperature was still warm and the increase in moisture in the mountains meant it was also humid. Competitors were shining with sweat and as slippery as eels. So it was that Freddie finally leaped onto a bollard that was covered in sweat from having had one of the competitors pushed hard against it a short time earlier. He slipped and crashed hard on the pavement, cracking his head on the adamantium surface. He straight away wished he had not been so unkind to the blue Zyne a few minutes earlier as a second later the blue Zyne threw himself on top of Freddie and pinned him helplessly to the pavement.

'You're all mine now, you blood-head Earthling.' Instead of pummelling Freddie however, the blue Zyne paused. 'What are you staring at?'

Freddie didn't hear him. He had just noticed a tattoo in the middle of the blue Zyne's forehead. It was, he assumed, the face of one of his past victims.

It was his father.

32. From the Jaws of Victory

‘I thought he beat *you*?’

The blue Zyne pinned Freddie’s chest with two hands. Another strangled his neck while his fourth hand was clubbed into a fist and held over his right shoulder. A battered Tribal was tattooed between each bony pair of knuckles. That fist was about to pound Freddie’s face, but it froze at his question.

To understand what happened next however it is necessary to know how things had progressed in other parts of the cage.

The battle between Agrosios and the yellow Zyne had been a stalemate. They had been wrapped in each other’s bear hugs and the crowd was getting bored. Luckily, Agrosios had been in the same situation once before while wrestling a bear on the rocky slopes of the Parnonas Mountains in eastern Sparta. What he did then was roll until the bear got so dizzy it released its hold. It was worth a try so Agrosios started rolling. He headed straight for the Channel. Reached it and then rolled back. He did this a few times. It was something the crowd had never seen. They were torn between this spectacle, Freddie’s athletic escape from the blue Zyne and the dramatic struggle taking place on the top wires of the cage.

When Agrosios stopped rolling, the yellow Zyne was so dizzy he could no longer keep his grip on Agrosios, who jumped to his feet as steady as an oak tree. The yellow Zyne staggered to his, wobbling like a cheap drunk. Agrosios placed a finger on his chest and, with the smallest of flicks, sent him splashing into the Channel of Blood.

‘Spartaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!’ screamed Agrosios.

The crowd cheered furiously.

Thinking they appreciated his efforts, Agrosios raised his arms and shook his fists, but his showboating did not last long. He was there to fight Zynes and there was still one on his feet somewhere. Searching the arena, he saw less than a handful of contests. The Pit was filling with eliminated challengers. Another air ambulance was about to land and collect the yellow Zyne who was clinging to the side of the Channel, the bloody torrent lapping about him.

The two Amazons were now up against a pair of Desert Tribals. Koia had hers in a step over toe hold. She swiftly released this grip and dragged him to his feet and pushed him to the Channel in a full Nelson. Once on the edge she released the hold and threw him in. One more down! A short time later Aella's opponent suffered the same fate. Two down. Under the rules of the tournament Aella and Koia should have then fought each other. Instead they both looked fiercely around the arena.

The play of lights had already attracted the attention of Agrosios to the spot where the blue Zyne was sitting on top of Freddie. The Zyne's fist was drawn back and he could see the power in his massive biceps. One blow could just about knock Freddie's head off his shoulders. Luckily the fist was frozen in mid-air. Agrosios ran towards them. Tackling an already engaged combatant was not technically within the rules but he was a Spartan—and an angry one at that. He did not sweat over details. Just as the blue Zyne was about to release his punch, Agrosios flew at him. He was about to grab the blue Zyne's descending fist when he was struck from behind. The yellow Zyne, for reasons the judges were never able to properly explain, had been allowed to re-enter the arena. (This seemed outrageously against the rules but there really was only one rule: 'the Zynes must win'.)

The yellow Zyne took full advantage of catching Agrosios off-guard and smashed him into a bollard. It was a move the Zyne champions had been rehearsing in their pre-tournament training. Agrosios' chest hit the bollard with a bone-crunching crack and a

pain like being struck by lightning and straight away he knew that he had busted a couple of ribs. Clutching his chest in agony, he glared at his attacker.

The crowd booed.

The yellow Zyne stepped forward to finish off Agrosios.

The blue Zyne released his fist.

Freddie closed his eyes and looked forward to being unconscious.

He did not care anymore. The weight of the blue Zyne's bony knees pushing hard into his lower ribs had become so unbearable that he could not imagine anything worse. He did not even brace himself for the impact. Luckily as it turned out, he did not need to. The blue Zyne's fist was half way to Freddie's face when two feet, one on either side, kicked into the blue Zyne's ribcage and he lost balance. His fist scraped the side of Freddie's face and slammed with a crunch of broken knuckles and phalanges into the adamantium floor of the space ship. Grabbing his broken hand, he screamed loud enough to wake the extinct. Opening his eyes, Freddie saw Koia on one side of the blue Zyne and Aella on the other. Amazons do look alike in the way that all really fit people do but Freddie was struck by the similarity between the two of them and it came to him in a flash that Aella was Koia's mother.

The Amazons each grabbed an upper arm to drag the blue Zyne off Freddie and into the Channel. Two on one was a breach of the rules and Zyne guards with lasernators already poised at their shoulders ran into position. The blue Zyne struggled but his spirit had been broken by the damage done to his right hand. A splintered shard of his proximal phalange poked through the pinkish red flesh of his middle finger. Despite this the Amazons could not budge him. His legs were still wrapped around Freddie and he used them as an anchor point.

'Move Freddie!' It was the first time Aella had spoken to him. 'We must drag him to the Channel while he is still in shock from the pain.'

‘And before we’re lasernated,’ added Koia.

Freddie drew his knees up and wedged his feet into the floor of the spaceship and pushed hard.

‘That’s it,’ strained Aella. ‘Keep doing that.’

Looking and feeling like a squashed worm struggling under a large boot

Freddie pushed and pushed as the Amazons dragged and the blue Zyne roared in pain. They had almost reached the Channel when the Beta Zyne nodded the order to fire the lasernators. Aella was hit and almost fell but the calibration was not enough for an Amazonian warrior in full flight. She fell to the side of the blue Zyne, wrapped her arms around him and rolled him the last bit. Freddie rolled with them. There was a huge splash and the world turned red. Freddie tried to breathe and took in a mouthful of the bloody liquid. He choked and struggled to the surface where three faces bobbed nearby. One was the blue Zyne’s. He splashed the water with his good hand and cursed all Amazons. Though the continuation of his species depended on them, he would have happily killed them all. The other two faces belonged to Koia and Aella.

‘Just let yourself float,’ said Aella. ‘We’re all eliminated but you have done well. Just as I thought you would.’

Any conjecture about why Aella had so much confidence in Freddie was cut short by another huge splash of red.

All the time they had been struggling with the blue Zyne his yellow counterpart had been grappling Agrosios. Wrestling a Zyne in the Tournament of Blood is never easy but when you have busted ribs it is much worse. Luckily for Agrosios pain only made him angrier.

‘Spartaaaaaaa!’ he screamed. Then charging the yellow Zyne, he wrapped him in another bear hug and carried him, grimacing in agony to the edge of the bloody

Channel. Once there he encountered a problem. The yellow Zyne had just as strong a hold on him and he could not throw him in the Channel without sacrificing himself. The pain from his ribs was unbearable.

He had no choice. ‘Spartaaaaa!’ he screamed, leaping into the Channel and taking the yellow Zyne with him.

Still bobbing about in the waves caused by their entry, Freddie breathed a huge sigh that it was all over but then he remembered Lucy and looked up to the top of the cage.

A violent din was swirling around the cage and he could hardly hear his own thoughts but miraculously he heard Lucy. Much later he realised that it must have been telepathy rather than ear hearing. ‘We can’t hold on much longer,’ she cried.

Many in the crowd also heard her telepathic cry. Thrilled by the prospect of this bloody spectacle, they booed even louder.

Two air ambulances hovered in to collect the eliminated Zynes. The yellow Zyne was short of breath but hopped on the back of his air ambulance without too much difficulty. It took off the second he was on-board. The blue Zyne was moving more slowly.

As Freddie watched on the bushy, black brows of Agrosios suddenly appeared alongside him.

‘Can you throw me to that air ambulance over there?’ asked Freddie.

‘Spartaaaaa!’ shouted Agrosios.

Freddie changed his tack and demonstrated with his hands the idea of throwing him on to the air ambulance.

Agrosios’ face lit up with understanding. He locked his hands and Freddie hopped into them. ‘Now!’ cried Freddie.

‘Spartaaaaa...’ The pain from his busted ribs dug deep but he gave it everything he had in him.

Freddie was suddenly a missile. A second later, the blue Zyne who had just mounted the ambulance was skittled by Freddie and he splashed back into the channel. Next, Freddie pushed the startled Medic into the same place and leaped onto the driver's seat. The main controls were similar to the uniped he had ridden across the desert. He pushed the lever up hoping that was the direction it would take him. It did. The air ambulance flew skywards and Freddie was almost thrown off the back by the speed of the take-off. He managed to hold on but the trouble now was that he could not stop it and he looked like being diced on the top of the cage. His hand fumbled on the throttle and eased it back just in time. The crowd cheered and he gave them a wave. Quickly getting a feel for the controls, he maneuvered the ambulance to just below where Koia and Polydora clung, completely exhausted, hanging on by the very tips of their fingers and the mettle of their spirits. Freddie could tell however that they could not hold on much longer.

'Let go and drop on,' he cried. What he was doing was way outside the rules and he knew that he could be lasernated at any second but he banished these thoughts because there was nothing he could do about that. Lucy and Polydora let go at the same time, fell, and landed on the back of the stretcher. There was not room for both of them to lie down so Lucy came forward and threw her arms around Freddie. Polydora sat behind Lucy and held on to her. They were almost settled when a laser beam upset Freddie's concentration. The air ambulance tipped violently to one side.

'Watch what you're doing,' screamed Lucy.

Freddie leaned against the fall and regained the controls in time. He could see more lasernators getting into position. It was time to get out of there.

'Hold on!' Freddie banked the air ambulance and gunned it back to the channel; zigzagging to avoid the laser fire. It was a rough landing and they tumbled and splashed into the bloody liquid. The air ambulance continued on its way, skipping over the

surface before crashing into the blue Zyne who by now had received more injuries out of the arena than in it.

Freddie was in not much better shape himself. He was dazed and allowed himself to be washed helplessly along the channel to the now crowded Pit. The bruises below his ribs where the blue Zyne had dug his knees still throbbed but the excruciating pain was starting to ease. He did not realise until he reached the Pit that Lucy and Polydora had been clinging to him all the way. Once there, the flat-capped Englishmen helped Freddie and Lucy out of the channel. Aella and Koia did the same for Polydora and checked that she was okay. Never has someone so small been so indestructible. She was fine.

Koia then turned to check Lucy who nodded that she too was okay. Then she looked at Freddie. It was a new look from her but no less awkward.

Luckily Agrosios hauled himself out of the fake blood at that moment and sat between them.

Freddie slapped his back. 'You did well.'

'Spartaaaaa!'

'You deserved to win—but don't worry, it looks like everyone has been eliminated.'

'No,' said Lucy, nudging Freddie and pointing back to the cage. 'Not everyone!'

Freddie turned and looked in the same direction. At first, he could not see anyone. The gaudy lights continued to glide across the surface. Then his sight was arrested by a small movement. Someone was climbing onto one of the bollards. Once on top they balanced unsteadily and raised their arms towards the clouds that were gathering at that moment over the Central Pangean Mountains.

'Gruntenguile—'said Freddie, just before the lasernators knocked him out.

Part Five: An Ending of Sorts

33. The Ship City Brig

Freddie came to in the lowest cell of the Ship City Brig. It was as hot as a furnace and a slimy liquid, like molten Vegemite,³⁴ was dripping onto his face.

He did not want to open his eyes but he did not want to drown in slime either. It was easier thought than done however as the slime around his eyes had dried and pasted his eyelids together. When he finally did force them open, everything was blurred and for a moment the idea that he might once more open his eyes on Koia raced through his mind. When the outlines of the creature above him stopped shaking he realised that was not the case.

Freddie had never seen a Yiaaak before but he had no doubt that the creature dripping reproductive slime on him belonged to that unfortunate species. Two flabby cheeks, dimpled with fat, ran either side of a large orifice in the middle of what had to be its face. This orifice served the purpose of eyes, ears, nose, mouth, reproductive, and excretive organs. As Freddie realised this, it blinked again and dripped a fresh flow of reproductive slime over Freddie's face.

'Blazes,' he cried, rolling to his side. Ripping off his shirt, he shook and wiped off as much of the slime as he could.

Yiaaaks are not as socially graceful as most creatures but they are moderately intelligent and as capable of telepathy and translanguage as any of the so-called 'higher' species.

'Forgive me. I rather forgot my manners. It's been so long since we have had company. I forgot that some creatures don't enjoy being dripped on. Amongst Yiaaaks it's

³⁴ For those not familiar with the eating habits of Australians, this is a black paste not unlike axle grease in texture and taste. (Editor)

quite the compliment.’ It spoke in the voice of Jungle Jim, plucked straight from Freddie’s memory.

‘Well . . . thank you,’ said Freddie. ‘The sentiment is appreciated, if not the slime.’

‘You must have done something pretty bad to be put down here with us,’ said the Yiaaak. Stepping back, it raised the ring of tentacles around its shoulders to hide its face.

Freddie was relieved but at the same time slightly ashamed of himself for the feelings of revulsion the Yiaaak had inspired in him.

‘I’m sorry if I . . . overreacted . . .’ he stammered.

‘You didn’t overreact!’

Freddie wheeled around. Someone, or quite possibly something else, was in the cell with them.

‘Count Schnauzer!’

Sitting in the corner—presumably to get as far away from the Yiaaak as possible—sat Count Schnauzer; his knees pulled in tight to his chest just as they had been in Doylian Lair.

‘Count Schnauzer—what are you doing here?’

For a few moments the Count was silent. Then he burst into such a crazy cackle of laughter that both Freddie and the Yiaaak took a step backwards.

‘What am I doing here? That is good young Freddie! That is about the funniest damn thing I have ever heard.’

Freddie looked warily at Count Schnauzer. He would sooner have trusted the Yiaaak.

‘You don’t remember me do you?’

‘Of course I do,’ said Freddie. ‘We met back in the Doylian Lair but we were separated when the Amazons attacked.’

‘Yes . . . I remember that,’ said Count Schnauzer. Each word was as flat as a hammer-fall. ‘But we also met one time before that.’

Freddie continued to stare blankly at the Count. He was sure that Doylian Lair was the first time he had met him.

‘Perhaps this will help.’ The Count took a monocle from his breast pocket and held it just above a scar over his right eye. ‘I also had a beard at the time.’

Freddie looked down at the Count’s hand and saw the same cold sausages that he had shaken on the excursion to Arnhem Land the previous year.

‘Yes, I remember now,’ he said. ‘But you still haven’t answered my question.’

‘Oh yes . . . what am I doing here?’ said the Count. ‘Not much I am afraid. After you kicked me senseless and left me for dead back at Doylian Lair I was captured by the Amazons and held captive in one of their stinking, hot tents for a few weeks before they traded me to the Zynes. Since then I have been stuck in this miserable cell in the salubrious company of our dripping friend here.’

‘And where is this miserable cell?’ asked Freddie.

‘It is in the Ship City Brig, which is in the very lowest level of the Ship City,’ said the Count. ‘A place from which there is no escape.’

Freddie eyed the Count suspiciously. He seemed a devious fellow but, trapped as he was in the Ship City Brig, surely he had no choice now other than to speak truthfully about what he knew. ‘So, why are you here?’ asked Freddie.

The Count raised his eyes at Freddie’s directness. ‘Good question,’ he began. ‘I’d almost forgotten the main purpose of my being here amidst all the betrayal and incarceration.’ He stretched his legs and looked about the tiny cell as if freshly reminded of

his situation. 'There are many things I could say in answer to that question,' he said, 'but since time is so precious, I shall get straight to the most important point. I am here to give you this.' The Count raised his left middle finger and at first Freddie thought he was making a rude gesture. He soon realised, however, that he was, in fact, pointing to his left eye. Freddie looked at that eye but could see nothing interesting or odd about it. He glanced across to the right eye. Apart from being magnified to twice the size by the Count's monocle, it looked the same.

'This instruction was meant to be delivered to you at Doylian Lair,' said Count Schnauzer, 'but unfortunately, as so often happens in Pangea, we were rudely interrupted.'

Freddie was baffled and could only think that the Count had been locked-up with a Yiaaak for too long. The Count stared at Freddie and pointed more insistently to his left eye. Moving closer, Freddie knelt down directly in front of Count Schnauzer. Maybe the Count had a grain of sand in his eye that was bothering him. This seemed possible because when he looked closer the eye was covered in tiny scratches but as he continued to look something extraordinary happened. The eye flipped around in its socket like an egg in a pan to reveal what looked like a film screen in miniature. A countdown from ten flashed on the eye-screen and, after zero, the image of Professor Dupler suddenly appeared. The background was hard to see on such a small screen but it appeared to be dense jungle. After a quizzical look towards what Freddie assumed was the recorder and a final stoke of his beard the Professor began:

'If you are listening to this second instruction Freddie you have done very well. Congratulations on making it so far. I only wish that I could be there with you.'

'You are now, I imagine, in Pangea. A place I have dedicated much of my life to discovering and perhaps one day I too will be standing in that same wild and beautiful place. (The Professor paused and Freddie cast an ironic look around his dingy cell.) No doubt

(he continued) you are wondering why you are there. (The Professor paused once more but his eyes remained fixed.) I know it will be hard for you to hear this but I have not got all the answers. I do not even have all of the questions. That is *why you* are there. I know only that you are in a place of immense intrigue and deadly shenanigans that could have a devastating effect on our Earth and time. I believe however that you will find some people there who could do with your help. You are your father's son, Freddie, and from the moment I saw the look of . . . understanding . . . on your face as we stood in that cave on the Arnhem Escarpment I knew that you were the one most likely to solve this dark game we are all playing. (Pausing briefly, the Professor scratched at his glass eye.) I would now like to tell you exactly what it is you must do but the truth is that I know as much about Pangea as a Sentinelese tribesman knows about . . . aeroplanes.

‘But what I do know is this. When the time comes for someone to act, that someone will most likely be you. You have an instinct for this game Freddie. I’m not sure how you got it . . . although, I must say, I have my suspicions . . . but I do know you have it. This is the last contact I will have with you, Freddie, and if you ever see me again—do not trust me.

‘I knew I was giving a lot for this damn eye (the professor pointed to his glass eye) and this chance but I did not know I would lose . . .’ Professor Dupler’s mouth remained open but his image suddenly froze and disintegrated into static. Count Schnauzer’s eye revolved in its socket and Freddie was once more looking at the hazel eye of the Count.

‘That gives me such a headache,’ he said. He pressed his fingers gingerly to the side of his head and blinked.

‘How did you do that?’

‘Zyne technology; I agreed to become a messenger between Pangea and our time years ago when I was still excited by this whole business. I have been expecting them to

take the time-eye back and maybe they will. They don't mind keeping people . . .' Count Schnauzer looked over at the Yiaaak and added '. . . and creatures . . . waiting. Although I don't think there's much chance they still have my old eye.'

'Is that what the Professor has?' asked Freddie. 'A Zyne *time-eye*?'

The Count nodded. 'I told him it would take control of him eventually but he didn't listen. We're all the same. The power it gives is just too much . . .'

'Where did he get the eye?' Freddie asked.

'That, he would not say—I am afraid we're all playing a very close game.'

Freddie walked to the opposite corner of the cell. It was only four paces away. Spaceship brigs are notoriously small.

Frowning, he ran his fingers through his mop of hair, not knowing which point to focus on. 'But I thought Professor Dupler *was not a member* of the Doylians?' he said at last.

'He isn't; nor am I. The Doylians do not let just anyone into their society. Only when they are sure that you are interested in all of this for the *right reasons* will they talk to you. Professor Dupler was simply someone who was very close to finding out about them and the truth about Pangea.'

'What about you? When did *you* find out about the Doylians?'

'I have been more what you might call a private contractor. I was searching for Pangea, but in the end the Zynes came for me. I am something of an expert in . . . certain fields . . . that were of interest to the Zynes. They brought me here. I worked for them . . . and later became a time messenger.' The Count pointed to his eye. 'But, slowly, I became suspicious of them. This eye . . .' the Count once more raised his finger to his eye. '. . . does more than just relay messages. It takes over—cell by cell; thought by thought. Eventually, you live for the eye. I have been able to control mine, but others aren't so lucky.'

The Count's time-eye remained fixed on Freddie as he spoke.

‘So how did you get mixed up with Professor Dupler?’

‘I made some mistakes that I wanted to fix. The Doylians would not trust me because I had been working for the Zynes and Professor Dupler seemed like the only person I could turn to. Some of his work suggested he knew something. A recent paper he had published hinted at a critical moment in the Earth's pre-history more influential than others. So, I decided to find out how much he knew and joined him on his expedition to Arnhem Land last year. I discovered, however, that, although the Professor had somehow acquired an eye, that eye seemed to be more for the benefit of those who had given it to him. It allowed them to see without giving the Professor any insight into what was going on. Despite this he knew a lot about the possibility of a place like Pangea as a result of the evidence we observed in the cave, but he was still very much in the dark. He did know about some things however that were very useful to me.’ Once more the Count paused; his eyes shifting from Freddie to the floor and then back to Freddie. ‘Those things had to do with your father—’

‘Is he alive?’ Freddie's heart leaped from his mouth with the words.

‘That is something I would like to know just as much as you,’ said the Count. ‘If he is, I believe he could be very helpful in this deadly little game we are all playing.’

Freddie once more buried his disappointment. ‘So when did you meet up with the Professor to record his second message?’

‘After the expedition last year, I confided to the Professor that I knew a lot more than he could imagine about the discovery he had made.’ The Count looked once more to the floor. ‘Sometimes a man just needs to talk to another man about the things they've done. Anyway, after I told him what I knew, he convinced me that we had to help the Doylians and he was also convinced that you were somehow important in all of this. I tried to arrange a couple of GT Turbos for an expedition to Pangea but that proved harder than I had

anticipated. In the end, I could only find two and I needed one for myself. That was why the Professor pulled out at the last minute. He believed that Gruntenguile would be more use to you here than he would. I think he was right about that. Once I had arranged the GT Turbos, I returned here, to Pangea, to parley with the Doylians and prepare them for your arrival.'

'So the Professor wants me to help the Doylians. I get that. But why are you helping him? Why did you come back here, Count Schnauzer? Forgive me for saying it but you don't look like the "save the world" type.'

The Count pointed this time to the scar just beneath his right eye. 'Do you see this scar Freddie? I did that with my own knife. It was a tattoo—I suspect you may have seen others like it before. It was the quarter moon tattoo of the Searchers. It is a way of identifying others who are seeking to find this place. Some have good reasons, but I should never have come here.'

The Count stared at a point somewhere between himself and Freddie as he had back at the Doylian Lair. 'You see, Freddie . . . I am the main cause of the Dark Cloud. It is *my* dreadful handiwork, *my* machinery that has caused this catastrophe.' The Count glanced upwards at the adamantium ceiling. 'I used to repair watches before all this. I should have stuck to it!'

'If it's a machine that's causing the Dark Cloud then it can be shut down,' said Freddie. 'Right? So all we have to do is shut it down?'

The Count shook his head. 'It's a little more complicated than that.'

'What do you mean?'

'There are three lock rings. One works. Two are fake. Two of the rings went missing during a Tribals' uprising and were later stolen by a time bandit. The Doylians have one of those missing rings—'

'The ring on Haji's necklace!'

‘Precisely.’

‘And the Zynes still have the third ring?’

‘Presumably, yes. It is held by the Alpha Zyne but in the confusion of the rebellion they lost track of which was the real lock ring. There is no way to check or test it other than to see if it works.’

‘So—if I’m getting this right—there is a one in three chance that Haji has the real lock ring.’

The Count nodded.

‘What if it’s one of the two fake rings?’

‘Then a booby trap kills whoever is attempting to shut down the tower in a toxic explosion of steaming gases and lava.’

Freddie slumped to the floor!

‘So there is a two in three chance of being cooked alive,’ said the Yiaaak.

‘That is a real bummer.’

‘Blazes,’ said Freddie. ‘This just gets crazier and crazier. Someone’s got to tell me what to do. I can’t keep going like this. Where are the people I came here with? Where’s Lucy? Haji? Gruntenguile?’ He buried his head in his hands.

‘Do we look like we’re in charge around here?’ asked the Count.

‘And how did my father get involved in all this?’

The Count shrugged his shoulders.

There were too many questions and not enough answers and Freddie was suddenly struck by an overwhelming desire to escape. He cast his eyes around the cell. The floor, the ceiling and three sides were plated adamantium. The fourth side was adamantium bars. Freddie forced himself onto his feet and walked to that side of the cell. He clenched the bars as he had seen prisoners do in films. A grey corridor choked with eerie echoes ran in

both directions. Scrapes and creaks; a strangled howl; a sound like whistling; a faint dripping (possibly more Yiaaaks). Even the sounds could not escape that terrible place.

Then, as he continued to listen, another sound, more disturbing than the others became audible. This sound swelled and swelled until its hollow echo stamped out everything else, filling the grey corridors like a solid thing.

34. Dr Claudia Bufon

The *tramp-tramp-tramp* of jackboots grew louder and louder.

His eyes widening, Freddie looked to his new companions. The Yiaaak made a sound like squealing tyres and slid to a back corner on its tentacle legs; cringing there with its upper tentacles hiding its head. Count Schnauzer remained slumped in the other corner. Both of them looked so broken that Freddie knew he had to get out of there. He walked quickly around the cell holding his head. Something needed to be done. He didn't know what that something was but that was no excuse for not doing it. For months his life had been a runaway train hurtling towards a collapsed bridge. It was time to hit the brakes.

The stamp of the jackboots was deafening by now, reminding Freddie of the beating of the drums in the Amazonian village. Instinctively he knew they were coming for him. It was best, he thought, not to be pacing nervously; better to be lying calmly on the hard floor as if it were a feather mattress. He lay down and pretended to be asleep. That proved to be harder to do than he had first thought. The rhythmic slap of the cruel leather on the adamantium floor was made worse by the awful screeching coming from the Yiaaak.

Tramp-Tramp-Tramp-Tramp-Tramp-Tramp-Tramp-Tramp-Tramp-

Tramp-Tramp-Tramp-Tramp-Tramp...

This was followed by the wrenching sound of grinding metal, which Freddie correctly guessed was the bars rising.

. . . Tramp-Tramp-Tramp!

Just as Freddie thought the boots were about to march right over the top of him they came to an abrupt halt and a more dreadful silence followed.

‘Ouch!’ The hard toe of one of the boots kicked his rib cage. Much harder than necessary, he thought.

His eyes had not been closed for very long, but it took a few seconds for them to focus. He blinked before opening them fully; shielding what weak light there was with his hand. The first person he recognised was himself reflected in a black leather boot. That boot extended all the way to the knee of Dr Claudia Bufon. A haze surrounded her. She was smoking. The top two fingers of her right hand were pointed like a pistol and between them she held an ivory cigarette holder. The cigarette in the end was a freshly lit Lucky Strike. Raising the holder to her mouth, which from Freddie’s angle looked like a tulip in full bloom, she kissed a small quantity of smoke into her lungs. The same quantity minus some toxins was then expelled in a puff through her tight, tulip-red lips.

‘Congratulations! That was some performance. The most *intriiiiguing* Tournament of Blood I have ever seen.’

Intriguing was just the word that had been running through Freddie’s mind, although he had not been thinking about the tournament.

‘It sounds like you have seen a few,’ countered Freddie. He knew he could not trust Dr Bufon but at the same time he felt that he would always want to.

‘Enough,’ she replied. ‘My work takes me to some . . . interesting places, but . . . I am not always here at this time of year.’

‘What exactly is your work?’ asked Freddie.

‘*My business,*’ she said. ‘And part of my business is *your business.* I must know why you are here and why you are seeking an audience with the Alpha Zyne?’

‘Who says I want to see the Alpha Zyne?’ said Freddie.

‘Come, come . . . let’s not waste each other’s time, shall we? Why else would any Wanderer expose themselves to the dangers of the Tournament of Blood?’

Freddie had never been good at talking in questions and he could see he was no match for Dr Bufon. Besides, the only idea he had at that point that could remotely be considered a plan was to work his way into her trust. If he did not do that he might rot in that cell for the remainder of his days. He needed to do *something* and that meant getting out of the cell. Nothing could be done there.

‘The truth is I am not sure why Professor Dupler sent me on this expedition. The Professor does not even know himself. He is not as advanced with his research as you seem to be, Dr Bufon. Since arriving, I have been travelling with my . . . companions. *They* believe that something is happening to the north and that . . .’ Freddie paused, fearing for a moment that he was saying too much but not knowing how to say less.

‘They think the Zynes might be responsible,’ continued Freddie. ‘That is why they . . . *we* . . . wanted to speak to the Alpha Zyne.’ Freddie waited for a reply but none was forthcoming, so he continued. ‘We wanted the Alpha Zyne to give us permission to travel north to see for ourselves.’

Dr Bufon laughed. The sound jangled in the air like chains, then stopped as if the chains had suddenly been pulled tight.

‘Why would anything that is happening here, in this time, 250 million years before your time, be of any concern to you?’

‘That is something I’m not quite sure about. I think the answer has something to do with our primitive understanding of time—’

Dr Bufon pushed an open palm towards Freddie. ‘Really Freddie, you must learn not to believe everything you hear. Life can become so very . . . *confusing*.’

She had a point and Freddie really wished he could trust her.

‘But enough of this . . . chit chat. You *arrrrre* going to get your wish. It is *tiitime* for you to meet the Alpha Zyne. He’s also very interested in meeting *yooooou*.’ Dr Bufon stuck her pointy nailed finger into Freddie’s bare chest and glanced across at the wailing Yiaaak. ‘And, lucky for you, I brought a spare shirt.’

Dr Bufon draped a black prisoner’s shirt over Freddie’s bare shoulder, swivelled on the sole of her boot and tramped out of the cell before suddenly turning as if she had forgotten something. Peering around Freddie at Count Schnauzer, she said, ‘You are also required. The Beta Zyne wishes the pleasure of your company. It will be like old *tiimes*.’ Dr Bufon then gave a tiny nod of her pretty head and two of the guards came into the cell and lifted the Count to his feet. All this time the Yiaaak, still screeching, recoiled further into itself like it was its own burrow.

They marched out of the cell and the bars creaked and clunked shut behind them. Dr Bufon led them all at a brisk pace along a labyrinth of corridors. Freddie listened carefully for tell-tale sounds but they were drowned by the jarring tramp of jackboots. As they approached cells, adamantium barriers dropped to conceal the occupants. They made an eerie metallic sound as they slid and clunked heavily on the floor. The echoes of these hard noises bumped into each other up and down the passageway. All the while, Freddie could not help thinking that it was very likely his father was rotting in one of those cells.

At last they arrived at the very base of the crystal stem which formed the central hub of the Ship City. Inside this stem was a large elevator. Freddie guessed it could have carried fifty or more people. It was the only way to reach the Control Disk.

‘I hope you are not afraid of heights. The Control Disk is over a mile high.’ Dr Bufon smiled as she said this but did not bother to wait for Freddie’s answer. She held out her hand and a doorway opened before them. Freddie and the Count followed her inside. The jackbooted guards remained where they were. The doorway closed on them but they

remained visible, if only as distorted shapes, through the semi-transparent wall. Freddie had heard about elevators but this was the first time he had been in one. Dr Bufon held out her hand and Freddie suddenly felt like his backside was flying through his head.

35. The Beta Zyne

When they reached the top, Dr Bufon raised her hand to the door. It opened and Freddie squinted into the flood of hard light and the first thing he saw was . . .

‘Gruntenguile! What are you doing here?’

‘Waiting for the party to start, Little Boss. This is where the Tournament Reception is held.’

‘No speaking yet,’ interrupted Dr Bufon. ‘There will be time for that later.’

Freddie was too overawed to speak much anyway. The entire Control Disk was surrounded by a window which gave an uninterrupted 360-degree view. On one side the Central Pangean Mountains reared their craggy, snow-covered slopes, reflecting the morning sun like a mirror; on the other side, clouds swirled and choked the sky. The window was so clear that it looked like there was no window at all.

It was like a scene cut from a Buck Rogers comic. That was the only place Freddie had seen anything that looked like a computer.³⁵ Each was connected to massive screens spewing grey light over their operators and sometimes throwing out 3D images like attacking spirits.

The high level Zyne technoids sitting in front of these screens did so with their backs to the windows and the grand view outside. Their polished pants sat on body sensitive polymer seats that melded into their butt for maximum comfort. Freddie had thought that his arrival might cause a stir but no one looked up from their work or paid him the least attention.

³⁵ The first modern computers were being developed around the time Freddie left on this expedition to Pangea. It was not until the following year, however, that the first electronic programmable computer was developed. This computer, The Colossus Mark One, weighed 20 tons and was used by the British to break German codes. The degree of Doylian involvement in this breakthrough remains a mystery. (M.A. SINGH)

The upper Zynes were dressed in tight-fitting white tunics and pants and wore the same protective vests as the Zyne guards although Freddie assumed it was more symbolic or fashionable in their case than for the guards. They also wore the same hobnailed jackboots as the guards. The boots of the upper Zynes however were lined with the same body-sensitive polymer as their seats.

Only one Zyne took any notice of Freddie's arrival. Freddie had seen the Beta Zyne from a distance during the Tournament of Blood but was not prepared for how charming he seemed at close quarters. He expected that defeat may have cast a shadow over the Beta Zyne's face, but if anything it seemed more dazzlingly assured than before.

The Beta Zyne signaled for Count Schnauzer and Gruntenguile to be taken aside. Then he offered his pale hand to Freddie. 'Congratulations! You gave us a real "run for our money", to use one of your expressions.' Freddie shook his limp hand.

'*We* normally use that expression when *we* have only *just won* rather than when we have *just lost*.'

'I know the correct use of the expression, Freddie, and it suits the occasion. I forgot that you were knocked out before the official end of the tournament. Your team and your Tribals' teammate—'

'Gruntenguile!' interrupted the fellow of that name who was listening to their conversation a good ten feet away.

The Beta Zyne continued as if he had not heard; 'was . . . unfortunately . . . disqualified.'

'Pifflegrunt!' said Gruntenguile pretending to cough.

The Beta Zyne ignored him. 'The winner automatically became the previous competitor eliminated. That was, of course, the . . .'

He turned to a subordinate Zyne standing next to him.

‘The yellow Zyne, Sir’. The subordinate bowed as he spoke.

‘You can’t be serious. That’s not fair! The red Zyne should never have been allowed to swing in like he did at the start of the tournament and the yellow Zyne should never have been allowed to re-enter after he had been fairly eliminated. If it were not for that, Agrosios would have won for sure. Even *after* all that, the tournament was won by Gruntenguile—fair and square.’ Freddie could not hide his anger. He had never seen such cheating since his father had taught him how to play cards. As he spoke he searched the Beta Zyne’s face for signs that he might be joking but could not find any.

‘Well, who knows?’ asked the Beta Zyne as if sympathising with Freddie’s concerns. ‘I am no expert, but it seems very unsporting to question the referee’s decision after the event. And to be honest Freddie, they can ignore a little bending of the rules here and there, but they have to draw the line somewhere, and . . . *attacking the medics* . . . that went a little “beyond the pale” to use another of your expressions.’

‘Pifflegrunt,’ coughed Gruntenguile.

‘Lucy and Polydora were going to fall from the top of the cage. Is there a rule against saving someone’s life?’

‘Let’s not get too caught up in emotional details. There is really only one rule anyway, and that is that *we can’t lose*.’ By the time the Beta Zyne finished that sentence his face had hardened to an expression that closed the matter.

Looking at that face, a feeling of hopelessness wrapped around Freddie’s heart like a wet octopus—there was no beating the Zynes.

At the same time another feeling was also growing in him. It was the same as the one he had felt when standing before the crystal sword and outside the cave in Arnhem Land. It was a feeling like he had been there before. Maybe, psychologically, he just wanted something to be familiar.

He did not have much time to ponder this, however, because a loudspeaker interrupted his thoughts. It announced in a sharp voice, 'the Alpha Zyne'.

The Beta Zyne turned and faced the wall to his left. A door, unseen before, split in the middle and opened to reveal a dark space behind. Out of that darkness stepped the Alpha Zyne. There was no mistaking who he was because the symbol in the middle of his breast plate was the alpha symbol, α , from the Greek alphabet. Apart from that he was dressed the same as the other upper Zynes, except for the colour of his suit. It was adamantium silver. The upper Zynes, the Beta Zyne included, lowered their heads as he entered. He walked straight towards Freddie and stuck out his hand.

Freddie glanced back briefly at Gruntenguile and in a split second saw that he was just as surprised.

Freddie stared at the Alpha Zyne's hand as if it was the first he had seen with five fingers.

Confusion and elation washed over him.

The Alpha Zyne was his father. With hair!

36. The Alpha Zyne

The letter “D” formed between Freddie’s tongue and teeth but that was as far as it got. A slight shake of the Alpha Zyne’s head and a quick look in his eyes was enough to tell him that he was to show no sign of recognition. The same look was thrown over his shoulder to Gruntenguile.

His father’s hand hung in the air for a few seconds before Freddie was able to reach out and clasp it in his own trembling hand. It felt real. The skin was a little softer than he had known it and the bones slightly more prominent, but it was his father’s hand. The only thing that was different about his father was that he had hair.

Feelings, long buried, clambered unsteadily from their graves and fought zombie wars inside his head as he touched his father for the first time in seven years.

When Freddie’s father shook someone’s hand he always counted to two. That was long enough to be exposing oneself to their bacteria, he thought. Freddie however was holding on tightly and had gone past that to three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, and finally to ten. His father looked down at their hands as if worried they might need surgical separation.

‘It is a pleasure to meet you Mr O’Toole,’ he said, giving their hands one final shake. Suddenly realizing that everyone was looking at their clasped hands, Freddie let go.

‘You too . . . Sir.’ The letter “D” had once more been swallowed.

The Beta Zyne cast curious looks at them both. There was a tension between the two of them that he could not quite put his finger on.

Turning quickly to the Beta Zyne his father announced, ‘I will hold a private counsel with Mr O’Toole in my chamber.’

‘I would not advise that.’ There was a hint of suspicion in the Beta Zyne’s voice. Freddie guessed his father was walking a tight rope for him at that moment.

‘Advice declined!’ The Alpha Zyne held up his hand to the Beta Zyne and Freddie caught a flash of a tattoo on the palm. It was the alpha symbol. Zynes often settled issues of authority that way. There was no more compelling argument in Zyne society than an α tattoo on an upheld palm.

The Alpha Zyne then turned and walked back into the darkness of his chamber while Freddie stood rooted to the spot, his hand still reaching out.

‘You are meant to follow,’ said the Beta Zyne.

‘Blazes! Of course,’ said Freddie, feeling a bit rattled.

It took some effort to move his legs but he finally convinced them to follow his father into the Alpha Chamber and the door slid shut behind them.

Inside Freddie found himself standing before a man he knew as well as anyone, but did not know at all. He was not sure what he expected his father to do. Maybe embrace him. Even football players did that sometimes but there was no embrace. Instead he stood at arm’s length and looked him over.

‘You could do with a little more meat on those bones,’ he said at last. His Irish accent had returned.

‘Nutrition capsules don’t really stack on the weight,’ said Freddie.

‘And that hair never came good.’ His father ran his hand over the top of Freddie’s ginger mop and shook his head. Freddie’s scalp tingled at the long lost touch but it did not last long. His father withdrew his hand and checked his palm as if he was worried the orange colour might have rubbed off. Then he looked up and continued. ‘I imagine you have a few questions.’

‘A few questions?’ cried Freddie. ‘I’ve got seven years of questions!’

‘Let me anticipate some of them and start as close to the beginning as is possible.’ Freddie’s father had never been very emotional but Freddie was shocked at how calm he was after such a long absence. Freddie on the other hand could barely stand upright.

As his father spoke, Freddie tried to separate his memory of Colum O’Toole from the Alpha Zyne that stood before him.

‘Let’s start with the good news. You’re not human! You’re a Zyne; just like me; and a rather important one at that.’ His father paused for a moment and seemed disappointed at Freddie’s limp reaction. Then he continued. ‘mmm . . . You are a bit lacking in Zyne history so I should tell you that our ship (the Alpha Zyne gestured around him) crash-landed here several centuries ago—to use a human measure of time. I am the sixth generation born on what you call Earth and I hope the last to reside on this decaying ball of dirt. Our time draws near.’

‘Why leave? Why not stay here?’

‘That is spoken like an Earthling who has not been anywhere else. This planet was not even on our long-list. Life here is too fragile. This is a brittle clod of earth and water spinning way too close to a sun that, one day soon, will cook it to a crisp.’

‘But this planet is still alive and going well—okay, at least—250 million years from now. You know that. You’ve seen it for yourself.’

‘You don’t want to be up and moving every few hundred million years. Besides that, the atmosphere here ages Zynes, and all creatures, much more quickly than our intended destination.’ The Alpha Zyne cast a wan look around his chamber. Three walls, including the wall through which they had entered, were covered in screens that showed various parts of the Ship City. These screens changed every few seconds and the Alpha Zyne could telepathically conjure up whatever part of the city he chose. Freddie had of course seen nothing more advanced than the flickering vinyl screen at the Star Theatre. He looked for

projectors but could find none. One screen remained the same however and that was the one which showed the goings on in the main operating room of the Control Disk. On that screen Freddie could see more challengers gathering for the Tournament Reception. He was relieved to see that Haji and Lucy had arrived. A short distance from them stood the three Amazonian champions. They were choosing between different coloured hydration capsules, served by pale lower Zynes wearing yellow tunics.

Freddie was so distracted by the enormous number of screens that it was a while before he noticed the fourth wall of the alpha chamber. When he did he took a step backwards.

‘It’s a while since you last saw that, Freddie,’ said his father turning to the crystal sword which protruded from the fourth wall.

Freddie nodded as he gazed for a moment at the tip of that terrifying instrument. Then, shivering, he drew his eyes away.

There was nothing else in the room except a swivelling chair which sat in the very centre. He briefly wondered what his father must do with his time before a question that had been building inside him over almost seventeen years finally spilled from his lips. ‘Are you sure you’re really my father?’

A shadow crossed the Alpha Zyne’s face so quickly that Freddie could not tell what it meant. The Alpha Zyne replied simply, ‘yes,’ but showed no inclination to add to this.

‘What about my mother? Was she who you always said she was? Did Jane O’Toole really die in a car crash in Ireland?’

‘You probably should ask just one question at a time. It is a no and a yes so far.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean your mother was not who I said she was, but yes, Jane O’Toole did really die in a car crash in Ireland. Although I can’t even see why that’s relevant.’

A dark curtain lifted inside Freddie. He had spent his life grieving a mother that he had never had. ‘So Jane O’Toole was not my mother?’ He looked steadily at the Alpha Zyne’s impassive features. ‘If what you’re telling me is true, I am guessing now that there was a real Colum O’Toole.’

His father turned and walked a few paces away until he became a black silhouette standing in front of the screen which showed the crowd gathering for the tournament reception.³⁶ When he spoke it was to the screen and not to Freddie.

‘When I visited the time where you have lived most of your unfortunate life I needed to take on an identity. I was surprised by how caught up everyone was with having an identity and a name. Most of the higher civilisations don’t bother with such primitive notions. It is enough for a Zyne to know their rank. Anyway, this fellow, O’Toole, was a Wanderer here in Pangea. He was my size and build and looked remarkably like me although, unfortunately he was bald. It was for that reason that I shaved my head in your time. This O’Toole also had a respectable job which took him to remote places where no one knew who he was or what he was up to. Not only that, he was proving to be quite a nuisance here. Stirring up the Tribals and even competing in our Tournament of Blood. He almost defeated our blue Zyne. Had him out cold! If our guards had not blasted him with lasernators O’Toole may have dragged him to the Channel of Blood.’

‘How can you cheat like that?’ asked Freddie.

³⁶ It was a Zyne custom to hold any event that might involve social pleasantry as early in the day as possible. This allowed them to get it out of the way so they could get on with more important things. (M.A. SINGH)

‘It’s not cheating Freddie. You have not quite understood yet that the first rule of our society is that Zynes must win.’ The Alpha Zyne smiled and for a moment Freddie thought he was going to ruffle his hair but at the last minute he drew his hand back to his side. ‘Anyway, my point is that this human was perfect for the scheme I had hatched. All I had to do was terminate him—to be on the safe side—then, return to his time and assume his identity.’ Freddie’s father smiled like he’d just shown his son how to mend a puncture on his bike.

‘Terminate?’

‘Yes, you know; the euphemism for kill—’

‘You killed a man—to assume his identity?’

‘Yes, it worked a treat.’

‘But you can’t just kill people.’

‘Why not? It’s not like I didn’t have a *reason* and he wasn’t a Zyne. He was a human. Humans kill other species all the time *and most times eat them.*’ The Alpha Zyne shuddered. ‘Besides—I didn’t do it myself—I gave the job to the Amazons. They were unusually cooperative and I can only assume that O’Toole had fallen foul of them for some reason or other.’

Freddie stepped back in horror at what he was hearing but as much as he wanted to ask more questions about the murder of Colum O’Toole there was an even bigger question he needed to ask. ‘What about . . . my mother? I have got one, haven’t I?’

‘Why do you ask? I assume you know how Zynes . . . collaborate . . . with the Amazons to produce our offspring.’

‘So my mother was an Amazon?’ Freddie looked over the Alpha Zyne’s shoulder at the screen where he could see the Amazons attending the reception just outside

the Alpha Chamber. A quick thought darted about in his head but he could not catch it in time. Instead he asked, 'What was her name?'

Freddie's father turned around and smiled at his son's silly question. 'I certainly didn't want to know her that well, and what does it matter anyway? In Zyne society the only thing that matters is the father. The mother is simply a vessel. The sooner we can liberate ourselves from them altogether the better. You will understand that when you get more used to Zyne ways. Don't worry, we will dehumanise you soon enough.'

'I guess the next question is why?' asked Freddie. 'Why would you want to travel to the mid-twentieth century and leave me there?' As he was asking these questions Freddie eyes flitted to every corner of the room. There was no way out. Even if he could make it out of the Chamber, which seemed impossible, the Control Disk was heavily guarded and the screens showed how crowded and well secured the rest of the city was. The Tournament was over for another year and every Zyne had returned dutifully to their business.

'I don't know how much you have learned about our ways,' said the Alpha Zyne. 'Not much I imagine if you have been spending your time with Tribals and Wanderers. They are not our biggest fans. But let me assure you that you have a lot to be proud of in being a Zyne. Our society is highly developed and underpinned by what we call Socio-Logic. Whatever is logically best for our society as a whole is implemented without reference to any primitive factors such as emotions and one of our core Socio-Logic practices is controlled selection.'

'Of people?' asked Freddie.

'No, Freddie, of Zynes. There's a lot you have to learn but do concentrate. Anyway . . . this controlled selection happens in two phases. The first is in the selection of the Amazon for reproduction. The second is in the weeding out of any offspring who do not fall

within certain parameters. Size is one factor. Small babies are immediately eliminated. This is very important to us. The standard measure of weight in Zyne society is the minimum accepted weight for a new-born.'

'Are you saying that I was sent away because I was a runt?'

'No—that was just an example. There are other criteria as well. One of them—a very important one—is hair colour.'

The Alpha Zyne paused; waiting for a response but for a while Freddie was not capable of one. Had his father just said 'hair colour'? He replayed the sentence a few times in his head. Surely he had not heard correctly.

'I was banished by my own father for being a red-head?'

'You make it sound like a bad thing,' said his father. 'The gene for red hair has been linked to an increased tendency towards non-conformity and our society is not prepared to take that risk. The gene has been pretty much bred out but occasionally it comes back; as it did in your case. Mutations do occur. Blood-heads we call them. Anyway, the point is that blood-heads are not permitted in our society. Our laws are very strict about that. It is the job of the Amazon bearers to take care of the elimination but your bearer did not eliminate you. It was not until I arrived to collect you at three years of age, as is the custom, that I realised the problem. Then for reasons I can't explain I was . . . unable to eliminate you myself. For a while . . . the only time in my life . . . I did not know what to do. It was not long after that the pesky Wanderer, O'Toole, fought in the Tournament of Blood and started stirring up trouble. I saw an opportunity to, as you say, "kill two birds with the one stone". I had O'Toole eliminated and used his identity to take you forward to his time for safe keeping until we could come up with a cure.'

'You mean a cure for red hair?' asked Freddie.

‘Of course,’ continued his father. ‘We’re always coming up with new things. I thought our medoids could surely come up with a cure for red hair. The difficulty was however that the cure had to be effective at the level of DNA so it proved a little trickier than I had at first thought.’

Freddie stared wide-eyed at the Alpha Zyne.

‘Anyway, where was I?’ continued the Alpha Zyne. ‘Oh yes . . . I arranged a meeting with this O’Toole after the tournament and pretended to listen to all his blah-blah concerns about the environment and his sad old planet when, in reality, I was “casing him out”, as you Earthlings say. Once that was done, I visited the Amazons and hired them to dispose of O’Toole. Then I shaved your head, and brought you back to the Ship City.

I brought you here to this very chamber.’ Looking back towards Freddie he added, ‘it seems like yesterday.’ He turned again and took a few steps towards the crystal sword. ‘We stood here.’ They both stared at the tip of that terrifying instrument for a few moments. ‘I remember thinking at the time that if you could survive the sword then you deserved to live; that you deserved to be a Zyne. I realise now how ridiculous that thinking was. As I say . . . my thinking had become . . . quite primitive.’ His father turned back to Freddie and added, ‘This planet does that to you after a while.’ Then he turned back to the crystal sword. ‘I had never used the crystal sword before. It is more like a museum piece; a symbol of our first time travel breakthrough. But . . . I had no choice. It was the only way to get to O’Toole’s world without anyone knowing. You have to book the GT Turbos weeks in advance and every flight is recorded—the red tape is ridiculous! All time flights must also be cleared by the Beta Zyne and the Zyne Council and there was no way they would have given me clearance to take my mutated offspring to a future time. There is no Socio-Logic in that!’

His father looked briefly at Freddie to see how he was enjoying the story so far and mistook the look of shock on his face for spellbound interest. He turned back to the

screen. On that screen Freddie could see the Beta Zyne completing a speech and placing a bone wreath around the neck of the yellow Zyne who did not look one bit embarrassed.

‘I held you up. Like this. I lined up our hearts and ran through the sword. My last thought was that neither of us would survive but sometime later I awoke to a tapping on my head. I opened my eyes and it was you.’

‘Was it in the cave? In Timor?’

‘It was—’

‘Then why didn’t I come back to this portal?’ asked Freddie.

‘Good question. The answer is, however, simple. These old things are so dodgy you’re lucky if they work at all. There are only three of these portals left in this time. The one you see before you, the one in Amazonia, which I believe was your point of arrival, and a third which has fallen into the hands of pirate Tribals. In your modern times, there are several. You can use telekinesis to direct you to a particular portal but it doesn’t always work. The worst case I’ve seen was a Crossblood whose head ended up in Victorian London and the rest of him in Renaissance Machu Picchu.³⁷ It terrified the Incas so much they abandoned the city the next day . . .’ His father chuckled at his own story before pulling himself together and continuing. ‘Anyway, where was I?’

‘The cave in Timor,’ said Freddie.

‘After the cave, we trekked to the coast and eventually picked up a lift on a mission plane to Australia. Once there, I contacted Professor Dupler who had corresponded with O’Toole, but never met him. Before the meeting, I added to what I had already learned

³⁷ The ruins of Machu Picchu can still be found in modern day Peru. The city was part of the Inca Empire and was built around a crystal sword time portal in the fifteenth century. The headless body incident however freaked them out and the Incas abandoned the city overnight. It is not known what happened to the portal. (M.A. SINGH)

from O'Toole by reading all of his articles and his book, *The Coincidence of Mysticism*. Really, he should have called it, *The Nose That's Sitting on the Front of Your Face*. When I met Professor Dupler in Darwin he had no reason to believe I was anyone other than who I said I was. I gave him no cause to doubt anything I told him and he was too busy with his work to worry about my past life or any oddities in my behaviour as I pretended to be human—which was not always easy.'

'What about Gruntenguile?'

'Before I left your time I briefly returned and hired Gruntenguile. It was easy because he thought I really was Colum O'Toole and O'Toole is such a hero to rebellious Tribals like Gruntenguile. He thought it an honour to serve me.' The Alpha Zyne chuckled to himself at his powers of deception. 'You can't beat Tribals for loyalty and—give him his due—he has stuck to his contract and kept you alive.'

'So, Gruntenguile thought you really were Colum O'Toole, just like everyone else?'

'Yes, just like everyone else.'

Freddie ran his hands through his ginger mop and thought for a moment. 'So, you didn't have the heart to kill me because I had ginger hair and, I guess I should be eternally grateful for that, but I still can't see why you stayed. Why you didn't just leave me there and return straight away, to Pangea.'

His father stiffened and kept his eyes trained on the Beta Zyne on the screen before him for a few moments. 'In life, Freddie, we cannot always explain everything and besides, that is not really important anymore. The fact is I did stay; for seven long Earth years. I have to say I even enjoyed parts of it although I did find it difficult talking to Earthlings. They just keep repeating things, like "hello" and "how are you?" and saying your name every time they see you, like you might forget. It also got boring at times because no

one ever wanted to fight. It's mostly all talk and eat with Earthlings. Anyway, I stuck it out for as long as I could. I . . . I thought I owed you something because—outside a miraculous cure—you were never going to be a real Zyne. It seems outrageous when I look back on those times but, as I have said, my Socio-Logic was . . . being over-ridden.' The Alpha Zyne glanced over his shoulder at Freddie and added, 'Since that time I have returned to pure Socio-Logic. I would never do it again.'

'How did you explain being away seven years?'

'I didn't have to. I returned to the same time that I left—not a second later; not a second older. You would never have known who you really were if the Professor had not been so obsessed with finding out about all this—and he is not the only one snooping around our affairs. There are others; your companions, for example.' His father turned and for the first time held Freddie's gaze for a few moments. 'Don't worry, we know all about the *Doylians*.'

'What about Dr Bufon?' asked Freddie seeking to steer the conversation in a new direction.

'Now that's different. She is someone with whom, the Beta Zyne assures me, we can do business.'

'What sort of business?'

'That is not your concern.'

Freddie looked back to the screen in front of the Alpha Zyne. The yellow Zyne was making a speech and pointing out the red and blue Zynes. He could not have done it without them and so forth. Lucy and Haji listened with twisted faces. Gruntenguile coughed in the background.

'So what are you going to do with us?' asked Freddie.

The Alpha Zyne turned his back on the screen and faced Freddie. ‘I am going to give you what you want, Freddie. I am going to take you all to Laurasia and show you what you want to see. You want to see what’s causing the Dark Cloud? I’ll show you.’

‘How do you know that’s why we’re here?’

‘Because I know everything, Freddie.’

Freddie’s mind stretched back over his journey. There were any number of individuals that could have been spies and now that he knew the extent of Zyne technology he did not doubt what the Alpha Zyne was saying.

‘If you know that is what we want; why are you taking us?’ asked Freddie.

‘Why? Because there is nothing that any of you can do about it . . .’ He turned back to the screen before adding, ‘. . . and it will amuse me.’

37. The Zyne Party

As far as Zyne parties go, the reception was in full swing.

Beings bunched like bananas in the same groups in which they had arrived.

The first group Freddie noticed when he left the chamber, were the Amazons.

They stood in a tight huddle saying very little, and casting grievous looks at the upper Zynes.

They glanced at Freddie as he left the chamber but the expressions of Amazons are as inscrutable as cats. Freddie glanced briefly at Koia but could not hold her gaze.

He kept walking and the next group he saw were the two flat-capped Wanderers, deep in conversation with a high level Zyne. Standing alongside them was Agrosios, nursing busted ribs and looking as angry as ever.

The Zyne fighters stood closer to the centre, near the great bank of flashing computer screens. Standing with the Zyne champions was Dr Bufon. She had brought her own drinks to the reception and was swilling a bubbly beverage from a long glass. This glass was narrow at the bottom but ballooned out at the top. If, as Freddie assumed, it contained alcohol, it contained a lot.

On the opposite side of the room stood Gruntenguile and Lucy, whose mouth had dropped open in surprise when she saw Freddie emerge from the Alpha Chamber with the Alpha Zyne. It had locked shut just as quickly when she noticed that his first impulse had been to look towards the Amazons.

Haji stood some distance away. He had been trying to work his way closer to Count Schnauzer. He was talking to a blank-faced Zyne technoid while casting curious looks in the Count's direction. The Count did not return these glances. He stood to the side surrounded by guards, gazing hungry-eyed at the trays of nutrition capsules which were being offered to everyone but him.

Apart from this, scattered groups of higher ranked Zynes were either fighting or discussing fighting moves in small groups.

None of the all-Tribals teams had been invited.

‘You may mingle with your friends,’ said the Alpha Zyne leaning close to Freddie’s ear. ‘Say nothing about what I have told you. I will tell them myself soon enough.’

Before Freddie could take two steps, Dr Bufon, as she was so clever at doing, stepped from nowhere into his path.

‘You continue to *surpriiise* me Mr O’Toole. It may be that you have as much to tell me as I have to tell you.’ As she spoke, she ran her fingers once more through Freddie’s hair and removed the micro-recording device she had planted on his scalp before the tournament. Freddie tingled under her touch and searched for something that Buck Rogers might say but before anything came to mind, she was gone.

Noticing Freddie entering the room Haji abandoned his technoid and tried to intercept him but had been beaten by Dr Bufon. Now that she had gone, he grabbed Freddie’s arm and led him over to Lucy and Gruntenguile.

‘We’d almost given you up for dead. You never quite know how those lasernators are calibrated. They can kill you just as easily as tickle,’ said Haji.

Lucy was less concerned for his safety. ‘What were you doing in there with the Alpha Zyne? Is there something *you* haven’t told *us*?’

Freddie had not so much as nodded when the Alpha Zyne had told him not to say anything but he still felt duty-bound to do as he had said. The trouble was it was hard to dodge Lucy’s questions. Luckily, at that moment, his father raised the alpha tattoo on his palm and hushed the reception to silence. When he spoke his Irish accent was gone.

‘Zynes . . . and visitors . . . welcome to our reception for the Tournament of Blood victors.’ The Alpha Zyne waved his hand towards the Zyne champions.

Gruntenguile cast a derisive look in their direction and coughed. ‘Pifflegrunt!’

‘Now is a time, however, not to think in terms of winners and losers.’ The Alpha Zyne looked with steely eyes towards first Freddie’s group, then Agrosios, after saying the word ‘losers’. Now is a time to come together and what better way to do that than marvel at the greatest wonder of Zynedom on this . . . miserable planet. I know some of you are particularly interested in this, so I have decided to take you all on a special journey to the wastelands of what some Wanderers call Laurasia.’

Through all of this Lucy looked awkwardly at Freddie.

‘Why are you looking at me like that?’ he asked.

‘I don’t know. Maybe it’s because *you* have been accusing *me* of holding out on you about what is going on in this little game and now I find you are all chummy with the Alpha Zyne.’

‘I can’t say anything right now. You’ll just have to trust me.’ The words hung in the air, sounding like an echo of Lucy and Haji’s pleas to him over the past months.

‘So let’s go take a look shall we? Beta Zyne; set a course for the Probe Tower immediately.’

Dr Bufon choked on her drink and the Beta Zyne also looked like he did not think that was a great idea but the Alpha Zyne still had his palm raised. ‘Yes, your Alpha,’ he replied. The Beta Zyne relayed the instructions to a Gamma Zyne technoid sitting at the nearest computer console. He relayed some instructions to a group of Delta Zynes and the flight deck rippled for a few moments with further instructions and the pressing of buttons and the turning of knobs. There was a lot of leaning forward to check gauges, sharp orders

and brisk replies before,³⁸ a short time later; the Control Disk seemed to become a living thing. It shivered and gave a hydraulic groan and then a roar like a landslide swelled beneath them and filled the space inside the Control Disk until it quivered.

The next thing Freddie knew was that he felt like his head was being left behind as the Control Disk detached with a clunk from the crystal stem and rocketed across the Ship City, heading for the sheer, grey and white slopes of the Central Pangean Mountains.

³⁸ Zynes preferred telepathy but backed it up with verbal communication for double security on occasions such as this. (M.A. SINGH)

38. A Place Unknown * 1942 AD / 250Ma

‘Why is that happening?’

A small man with round glasses, and a moustache like a sick sewer rat, glared into a computer screen. The face that looked back at him belonged to a round faced, woman with pouting lips. Her face might have scored points with most men, but not with him.

‘We are in the middle of complex business negotiations and he decides to go on a joy ride to Laurasia? This is a very complicated deal spanning time and species. I cannot have this fellow suddenly deciding that he wants to be a tour guide.’

‘I don’t think it will be a lengthy delay. It will only be a matter of hours. The Alpha Zyne has got it into his head to show the Wanderers the invincibility of Zyne technology. Once he’s done that, we can get on with the deal. He has already released Schnauzer from the brig to be handed over at the next phase. As soon as the shipment comes through we will seek the Beta Zyne’s approval and the deal can go ahead. But, we will not get that approval until he has the shipment.’

The man lifted a military cap which sat on his desk. Underneath the cap was a severed finger with fresh blood dripping from the cut. On that finger was a ring with a crescent moon. He picked it up and held it before the bulging eyes of Dr Bufon.

‘As you can see Dr Bufon, we have just acquired one of the missing lock rings. It will be sent in our GT Turbo the moment we get the go-ahead from you. I trust that will be soon.’

‘It will be. I can assure you of that.’

‘Good, I do not do disappointment.’

The screen flicked off and the ring and the finger it circled were placed back under the cap.

39. The Control Disk

‘You realise you need an alpha clearance to operate the Timesmitter, Dr Bufon?’

Turning around Dr Bufon found herself looking straight into the subtle eyes of the Beta Zyne.

Smiling, she shook her head, releasing a lock of hair that had been trapped in a tie back. It fell across her face, dividing her left eye. ‘Extraordinary times sometimes require a little less red tape and a little more . . . *initiative*,’ she said. ‘The biggest deal in history is about to be made. It is this close.’ Dr Bufon held the tip of her finger very close to the tip of her thumb. ‘There are just a few loose ends and do you know what?’

The Beta Zyne’s silence told her that he was not entirely sure what.

‘It’s up to *ussss*. This is where the big deals really get done. This is where the rubber really hits the road.’ Dr Bufon pointed to herself and then to the Beta Zyne. ‘These deals are never clinched by the big wigs at the very top. They’re clinched by players like *ussss*; just a rung or two down the ladder. *We* are the ones that will make this happen. Not . . . my big-black-capped booby of a boss; not the Alpha Zyne; but *ussss*. And do you know why that is?’

The Beta Zyne activated the DNA sensitive lock on the door with the touch of a finger and waited for her to answer her own question.

‘Because we are prepared to get a little dirt under our nails.’

Zynes are not good with metaphors and the Beta Zyne looked bemusedly at his fingers.

‘I mean,’ continued Dr Bufon, ‘that we are prepared to do whatever it takes.’

‘Hmm,’ said the Beta Zyne looking down his perfect nose at Dr Bufon. He was conditioned to think of females as necessary vessels for the continuation of Zynedom but he was not entirely immune to the charms of Dr Bufon. ‘Why is it that I sense a proposal coming from you, Dr Bufon?’

‘It is because you are a smart Zyne.’ Dr Bufon stepped closer to the Beta Zyne. Close enough so that he could smell her musky perfume.

‘How does this sound?’ Dr Bufon glanced towards the door, checking that it was locked. ‘I am confident I can give you one of your precious missing lock rings but when I do, I need an Alpha Zyne who I can trust. Is that you?’

The Beta Zyne looked hard at Dr Bufon. He was sniffing the bait but not quite ready to bite. ‘But we both know, Dr Bufon, that the real Alpha Zyne is in the next room leading this . . . party bus,’ said the Beta Zyne, smiling at his use of metaphor.

‘What if I told you that I can prove that the Alpha Zyne has broken Zyne laws?’

‘What laws?’

‘Laws so important, that it would be impossible for him to continue as the Alpha Zyne.’

‘You can tell me what you want Dr Bufon but it won’t count for much unless you have proof.’

‘Would a recording of the Alpha Zyne’s little chat with the snooping blood-head, Freddie O’Toole be sufficient?’ Dr Bufon held up the tiny micro-recorder she had planted in Freddie’s hair. ‘Before the tournament, I didn’t just pop down for a chat. I placed this micro-recorder in O’Toole’s hair and it has revealed some very interesting information; the most interesting being that our blood-headed, Freddie O’Toole is the Alpha Zyne’s son. Given that the bearers are tested, that makes the Alpha Zyne a carrier of the illegal gene.’

The Beta Zyne stepped back, aghast. He had never in all his days heard of a blood-headed Zyne living past the culling age of three. When he recovered, he replied. ‘I think Dr Bufon, that if your recording confirms what you say, then we might be able to do some business.’

*

In the main room of the Control Disk, Haji and Lucy gazed out the window as they flew up the jagged and frosted side of the Central Pangean Mountains. Freddie stood a few paces away from them. The mountains were the most spectacular thing he had ever seen and he gazed on them in a kind of rapture but he was not standing apart just to admire the scenery. He was hoping to avoid further questioning and at the same time coming to terms with the news that he was a different species.

One thought dominated his thinking. If he was a Zyne, why didn’t he feel like one?

‘We’re in the tropic zone,’ Freddie heard Haji lecturing Lucy. ‘That keeps the temperature up a little. The land we are flying over will one day become North America. The Central Pangean Mountains will, in time, split over two continents to become the Appalachians in North America and the Atlas Mountains in northern Africa.’

Haji’s theory of floating continents reminded Freddie of how he,³⁹ and Lucy too for that matter, had deceived him on so many occasions. Now, that seemed to have turned around completely and he was the one deceiving them. But what choice did he have? How could he tell them that the Alpha Zyne was his father? He hardly believed it himself. How

³⁹ What Freddie did not know was that at that very moment, in his time, palaeomagnetic data was being collected by planes over the Atlantic as they hunted for German submarines. This data would later be used to support the theory of Continental Drift. (Editor)

also could he sabotage what his father had called the greatest wonder of Zynedom when he was a Zyne himself? A mutant, blood-headed Zyne; but a Zyne no less.

His father had risked everything to save him. He had spent seven years living in a primitive civilisation to ensure that Freddie survived. At the same time, however, his father did not feel a second's remorse at the thought of destroying that entire civilization and planet.

‘A penny for your thoughts, Little Boss . . . grrrnt.’

Freddie jumped and, looking down, saw Gruntenguile standing beside him.

‘What do *you* think I'm thinking?’ asked Freddie.

‘Grrrnt . . . The Alpha Zyne being your father, and my Big Boss, comes as a shock to us both,’ said Gruntenguile. ‘I had never met the real Colum O’Toole but he was a great hero to the rebel Tribals.’

‘Should I tell the others?’ asked Freddie.

Gruntenguile looked across at Lucy's frowning face. ‘Maybe not just yet,’ he said.

*

For the final thousand feet of the ascent all the passengers in the Control Disk could see was a shroud of grey cloud. It was a relief when they finally burst through the top of the cloud and an awesome vista opened up ahead of them. Had Freddie travelled after the war he may have noticed some resemblance between the giant cloud that filled the horizon and those that mushroomed over Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the final days of World War Two. For a while no one said anything. Freddie had thought he had almost had his fill of breathtaking sights but nothing could have prepared him for the show of raw power rising before them.

‘Can we stop that?’ asked Lucy at last.

The question hung in the air until she turned her eyes on Count Schnauzer who had been allowed to move forward to the viewing deck.

‘It is much worse than it looked the last time I was here,’ said the Count. ‘The biggest explosion from our time was the eruption of Mt. Tambora on the island of Sumbawa in the Dutch East Indies in 1815. That was estimated at about 800 megatons of TNT. If this blows, it’s impossible to say how big the explosion will be . . . maybe 1,000 teratons of TNT.’

No one knew what a teraton was, but they all got the general idea.

‘Would that . . . blow up the planet?’ asked Freddie.

‘No,’ said the Count. ‘If it happens sooner rather than later, it might just save the planet. It would—I hope—provide an outpouring of lava, large enough to cap the plume beneath. If it is allowed to continue as it is now, it will either suffocate the planet or—one dark day—it will explode so violently the very Earth may be torn apart.’

The further they went, the worse things got. Smoke blackened the air and sulphurous gases fizzed on the side of the Control Disk.

‘How far can we travel into this toxic cloud?’ asked Freddie.

‘Far enough.’ Count Schnauzer’s voice at his shoulder sounded like the end of an echo. He was not the sole architect of the terrible scenes of devastation they were flying over but he was one of them.

Below them a dead sea, scummed over like a diseased eye, reflected the lights of the Control Disk.

‘The Zechstein Sea,’ said Haji. It lay like a ghostly corpse across most of what in Freddie’s time would become Europe. A masterpiece of death.

Once they had crossed the Zechstein Sea, they came to the great rift valley of bubbling water and methane gas which, at that time, divided most of northern Asia from the

continent of Europe. One day the two would collide to produce the Ural Mountains. On the other side the smoke was so thick the Control Disk could go no further. They slowed and hovered over a desolate plateau looking for a landing spot; the humans staring in awe at the brutal and broken surface. Alternating frost and fire had fractured the rocks into a shimmering plain of shards dissected by lava flows, which looked to Freddie like the exposed veins of the Earth. From a distance the surface also seemed to be sprinkled with salt but as they drew closer he realised that it was the skeletal remains of animals torn apart and scattered by the fierce winds.

Freddie turned to Count Schnauzer. A cold sweat had broken across his brow.

‘When we put the thermal rod down we knew there was some chance of a mantle plume but we didn’t expect . . . this.’

Freddie had never thought much of Count Schnauzer but he reached out at that moment and placed his hand on his shoulder. ‘Blazes,’ he said, ‘what part of the modern world is this?’

‘Siberia.’

40. The Siberian Traps

A short time later they landed on a shrapnelled ledge overlooking a maze of lava flows broken here and there by melting islands of fractured rock. Sulphurous gases oozed from hell-holes and encrusted the tortured rocks like leprosy. The air shimmered with heat and disorder.

Freddie, like most boys in those days, had a mental image of what Hell might be like if he should ever have the misfortune to end up there. This was it.

Delta Zynes, seemingly blind to the hellish scene exploding and steaming outside the window of the Control Disk, handed out face-masks as protection against the mephitic vapours. Like airline staff they demonstrated their use to the non-Zynes. Next, they handed out silver suits to protect them from the extreme heat.

Once all the masks were properly fitted, an eye-shaped door slid open on the side of the Control Disk and the Alpha Zyne led the way down the ramp with an air of casual invincibility, like he was going out to bat.

The others followed more cautiously. Sparks and chunks of molten lava flew through the ashen air like fireflies. A constant low rumbling punctuated here and there with more violent eruptions filled the air and the earth under their feet rattled like a Moth biplane.

Only the Alpha Zyne seemed unperturbed. He walked with the same old assurance that Freddie remembered so well from his younger years. As he walked the smoke seemed to clear in front of him and a viewing platform emerged. It was little more than an encrusted scaffold of adamantium pipes. The Alpha Zyne mounted the platform and stood with his back to the sundry group that had followed him. Freddie looked to where he was gazing across the maze of lava flows. At first he could not see anything due to the thick flurry of gases but a violent burst of wind suddenly cleared the air a little. Shrouded in a pall of

hissing vapours, Freddie could just make out a metal tower. It rose about a hundred feet in the air and was topped by what seemed from that distance to be turrets or the upturned teeth of a skull.⁴⁰ From the base of the tower, ran a pipe similar to those in the Ship City. It was about twenty feet in diameter and ran in a southerly direction before disappearing into the broken terrain.

Freddie worked his way across to where Lucy and Haji were standing either side of Count Schnauzer. 'Blazes! What do we do now?'

Count Schnauzer turned to Freddie and whispered in a quivering voice, 'There is a panel on the front of the Probe Tower with the eye symbol of the Zynes set into it. In the pupil of the eye is a crescent shaped notch. The ring locks into that notch and a quarter turn to the right locks down the Probe Tower forever. There is no reversing the lock down. Once it is locked it cannot be reopened. Locking the tower is meant to be the final act of Zynes on Earth.'

'The only problem is,' said Haji, 'if we wait for the Zynes to lock this thing down there will be no life left on Earth.'

Freddie looked at Haji. His hand rested on the spot where his shirt bulged slightly over the ring.

'Don't you fools see?' hissed Count Schnauzer, sweat sliding down his trembling face. 'It is hopeless. That is why he has brought us here. He is mocking us! It is as if he knows we have one of the false rings.'

'Shut up Schnauzer,' said Haji, glaring fiercely. 'We have no time for doubts. The Doylians have strived for years for a chance like this. Yes, our ring may be—most

⁴⁰ The top of this tower may also have been surrounded by various scientific instruments which simply gave the tower a medieval appearance. (M.A. SINGH)

probably is—one of the two false rings. Maybe there isn't a real lock ring at all but *we* are here next to the Probe Tower and for the fate of the world and all eternity and the love of God, we must at least try.'

Freddie had never admired Haji so much as at that moment. He felt inspired by his fighting spirit.

Then, Haji turned to Freddie and grabbed his hand. Before Freddie realised what he was doing Haji slipped the ring on Freddie's middle finger.

'What are you doing?' asked Freddie.

'You are the one who is going to lock it down. I can't get across there with my bad back.' Haji stretched and grimaced to stress his point.

'No way! Why is it always me that has to save the world? Answer me that. Why is it always me?'

Freddie was struggling to keep his voice down and the Zyne champions cast suspicious looks in his direction. He clasped his hands behind his back to conceal the ring.

'*Seriously; why me?*'

Lucy stepped in close to Freddie. Curling her arm around his back and squeezing his arm she said, 'Because *you can*, Freddie! *You can!*'

All this time the Alpha Zyne gazed as if in a trance at the Probe Tower. To him it was more than just an extraordinary piece of engineering. It was the means of reunifying his species. Deep in the next galaxy the other space ships in the Zyne Armada had already landed and had possibly given them up for dead. Inter-galactic space travel is never easy, even for the most advanced civilisations.

Freddie felt Lucy's hand on his arm and the ring on his finger. He looked out across the maze of lava flows and jagged rocks. He looked down at his battered shoes which

by now were little more than two paper thin rubber soles strapped to his feet by rags of canvas. Then he turned back to Lucy. ‘What about the lasernators?’

Gruntenguile grunted and tapped the side of his head. ‘Leave that to me. I still have a few tricks up my sleeve.’

‘What if the Zyne champions come after me?’

Haji winked at Agrosios and said, ‘Leave that to me.’

At the same time the Alpha Zyne turned and faced the group. Freddie had just made up his mind about what he was going to do but the sight of his father’s face shook him to the core. How could he betray his own father? His own species? If only he felt like a Zyne it would have been a lot easier.

His father spoke in a booming voice to be heard over the tumultuous din.

‘Behind me you see the Probe Tower—’

The Beta Zyne stepped forward. ‘Do they really need all the details? That they are even here is surely enough.’

The Alpha Zyne raised his palm. A hot gust of wind blew across the plain and feathered their faces with black dust.

‘You should have more faith in your species Beta Zyne. This tower will not be stopped until we have drained every joule of energy we need to get our ship back in space and on our way.’

Lucy pushed her mint-scented lips in even closer to Freddie’s ear. ‘Go now,’ she urged.

Freddie took a half step forward but then froze when he saw that his father was looking directly at him.

‘Don’t do it Freddie. Do not betray your own kind at the urging of an Earthling girl. Remember—above everything in this universe *you are a Zyne.*’

Lucy's hand tightened on Freddie's arm like a vice.

The words hung in the air and spun in Freddie's head for what seemed like a long time before someone else spoke.

'That is not true!'

Every head turned in the direction of the voice to see who had dared speak.

It was the Amazon, Aella.

'*You* may have long forgotten, Alpha Zyne, but I am Freddie's bearer.'

Lucy was still holding Freddie's arm and squeezing it tighter with each new revelation.

The thoughts which cascaded through Freddie's mind at that moment were too confused and overwhelming to be described. He had already guessed that Polydora and Koia were Aella's daughters. If what he was hearing was true that made them his sisters.

'Well, good for you,' said the Alpha Zyne. 'But so what if you are.' He shared a derisive laugh with the Zynes gathered about him. The very existence of bearers was a source of embarrassment to most Zynes.

'So I know that you are *not* the boy's father and that he is *not* a Zyne. He is a *Crossblood*. Not your usual kind, but an Amazonian Crossblood.'

'Don't be ridiculous the only Crossbloods are the result of Zynes . . . spreading the glory of Zynedom.'

The other Zynes laughed at this well-used Zyne joke but the Alpha Zyne did not chuckle as heartily at his own joke as he had in the past.

Aella calmly looked up at the Alpha Zyne until he was forced to ask the question that he wanted so much to ignore.

‘If what you say is true—which Wanderer do you claim is the father?’ Freddie noticed a tightening of the Alpha Zyne’s voice and a half memory stirred in him of the last time he had seen him so agitated.

‘That, I will not say.’

‘No!’ cried Freddie. ‘Say for my sake.’

Aella looked towards Freddie and their eyes met. Aella’s eyes still shone fiercely. There is not much an Amazon can do about that, but they were not as forbidding as Freddie had imagined them before. At that moment he knew she *was* his mother.

‘For your sake Freddie, I will say. Your father is the Wanderer with the strange voice. The one *you* ...’ Aella turned to face the Alpha Zyne. ‘... ordered killed. His name is Colin O’Toole.’

‘Are you sure you don’t mean Colum?’ asked Freddie.

‘Hmm . . . I think you’re right. It is Colum.’

No one apart from Freddie heard this correction as their attention was now fixed on the Alpha Zyne. His face seemed to be breaking up before their eyes. ‘Don’t you mean he *was* Colum O’Toole?’

‘I mean what I say, Zyne.’ Aella turned to Freddie. ‘Your father lives still with the lost Wanderers in Babel.’

In a flash as sudden and sure as a lightning strike Freddie saw everything exactly as it was. He did not feel like a Zyne because he was not a Zyne. He was a Crossblood . . . of sorts . . . and . . . Freddie stopped and reined his thoughts in, recalling the Professor’s final instruction to him. ‘When the time comes for someone to act that someone will probably be you.’ This was surely that time. Freddie pulled his hat down as tight as it would go. Then, turning, he picked out the Probe Tower through the sulphurous gases fuming up from the lava. In less than a second he decided on a path and took off. The first lava flow

was the widest and Freddie needed some height to get across. He ran up the viewing platform and bounded like a cat over the top rail. The lava flow hissed and fizzed beneath him but he paid it no mind. He bounded across the narrow precipices of jagged rock, lacerating his now almost non-existent shoes, his eyes fixed on the path he had chosen and trusting his instincts to keep him out of the flows of lava.

He had no idea of the scene he had left behind.

As he raced towards the tower Agrosios seized a crutch from under the Red Zyne's arm. The Red Zyne collapsed. Agrosios then stepped forward and shook the crutch in front of the yellow and blue Zyne. His ribs were tightly wrapped but he was still hurting from his recent injury. Chewing back the pain, he made the wrenched look on his face appear like anger rather than agony. Meanwhile Gruntenguile used a telepathic trick he had learned during the last Tribals' Revolt to immobilise the Lasernators. Without them the Zynes were helpless. They stood watching Freddie like statues.

Freddie saw none of this as he bounded across the fiery terrain towards the tower. Loose rocks rolled and slipped under him. Still he kept his feet. He had almost made it when he landed on a brittle ledge that gave way under his feet. He fell forward and slid along the length of his forearm grazing it a dimpled red. There was no time to feel pain. He picked himself up and looked dimly at the blood oozing from his arm as if it belonged to someone else. There was not far to go but the loss of momentum was not good. He retraced his steps and ran again, remembering to see with his feet. He leaped and made it across the final lava flow and clambered up a rocky slope to the tower. Up close it was glowing red from the tremendous heat of the lava pumping inside. His eyes raced over the surface of the tower but could not find a panel anywhere. Alarmed by this he glanced back at Count Schnauzer. Why had he trusted him? His heart was beating its way out of his chest. It took everything within him and a deep breath to not completely surrender to despair. His thinking had gone haywire

and he had to calm down. He looked back at the tower and ran his eyes slowly over the surface once more and this time he saw something.

‘Blazes! he cried. It was the Zyne eye, almost hidden by a yellow-green scum. Then, looking closer, he saw the crescent shaped notch, held his clenched fist above it, and inserted the ring. His heart almost stopped beating he felt such a rush of relief. Then, for some reason that Freddie could never properly explain, he glanced back at the Alpha Zyne; the being who had once been his father. The father he had been searching for in his heart for the past seven years. For the first time in Freddie’s memory his face seemed to be marred with an emotion. It was a twisted look of sadness and despair and at the same time he was gently shaking his head. This could have meant that he did not want Freddie to save the Earth because he did not care one fig about the entire planet but somehow Freddie knew that was not his reason. He had the wrong ring and was about to be scorched in acidic steam and die an agonizing death in the most awful place the Earth had ever known. He pulled the ring out of the crescent notch and sat down on the jagged rock at the base of the tower. He pulled the ring from his finger and threw it into the molten lava at his feet.

Haji collapsed to his knees and clutched his head. ‘It’s gone forever,’ he said.

Lucy stared in bewilderment.

The Beta Zyne stepped onto the platform and placed a hand on the Alpha Zyne’s shoulder. Freddie saw him laughing like the devil across the burning landscape. The face of the Alpha Zyne however was as calm as buried rock and Freddie realised for the first time the enormity of his own self-absorption. How could he have been so focused on himself and his own needs all those years ago that he was unable to see that the man who was caring for him as a father was not even one of his own species? This thought was followed by an awful feeling that somehow he was to blame for everything. Somehow; it was he, Freddie

O'Toole, who was responsible for the extinction of the Earth. Freddie wrapped his head in his hands and tears for the end of the world flowed down his cheeks.

The crowd perched on the ledge above the lava field saw Freddie's defeat and gazed at him with various emotions. The Zynes were triumphant. The normally ice-cool Dr Bufon could not disguise her delight. The ring that sat under her boss's cap had suddenly gone up considerably in value. Maybe, she thought, she could afford to play a little harder.

The non-Zynes were downcast. The game for them seemed to be over. The only non-Zyne not giving way to despair was Gruntenguile.

Brain sucking is a skill, as far as I know, that very few of even the most advanced creatures have mastered. It had taken Gruntenguile years of practice to develop this skill. In its most advanced form, it involves sucking all of the irrelevant thoughts from a being's mind until the only thought remaining is the one which they seek or need. It is very handy, especially if you have lost something. Brain sucking was what Gruntenguile was doing with Freddie at that very moment. No one suspected anything because Gruntenguile looked no different when he was performing this procedure.

The first thing Freddie noticed was that he suddenly did not know what he was doing there. He looked across at the beings staring back at him and had no idea who they were. And so it went as memory after memory was temporarily razed from his mind. As these memories flew away he was better able to recall what was left and these mostly involved the Alpha Zyne in the time when he was Freddie's father.

He saw himself picking up the bright-coloured Easter egg wrappings after his father had eaten all the chocolate eggs.

He saw himself unwrapping a bottle of Blarney whiskey and a cigar, almost as big as himself, for his fifth birthday.

Then he saw his father's fury at having lost something and suspecting that Freddie was responsible. Was it a ring? The memories kept paring back like an onion until Freddie saw the thing his father was looking for and yes he had taken it but he dared not tell him. He dared not because it was somewhere that he could not get it back. He had swallowed it. He had swallowed the lock ring and he knew that it was still inside him. As soon as Freddie realised this, Gruntenguile immediately reloaded his other memories.

Freddie sprang to his feet and faced the gloating Zynes. As they laughed at his pitiful plight he recalled the words of Swami Sittami. 'Something I show you may prove useful.' Then, without thinking, he placed his hand on his stomach and blanking his mind pushed his hand through the taught flesh of his stomach wall. The skin parted like soft fruit and Freddie pushed his hand further through the slimy stomach sac until his fingers were feeling their way around the inside lining. At first they found nothing but sticky dissolving capsules but this did not worry Freddie. He knew it was there and he found it. His fingers touched something hard and round and then felt the crescent edge of a crystal. Freddie pinched the ring tightly in his fingers and pulled it from his stomach. The flesh slid back in place and the psychic surgery was completed. Freddie held the ring in the air but he was too far away for any of the onlookers to see clearly what he had in his hand. The Alpha Zyne, however, knew exactly what it must be and he collapsed to his knees.

Freddie placed the bloodied ring he had pulled from his gut on his middle finger and once more turned to the tower. He drove his fist into the Zyne eye and the crescent moon locked in. He twisted his fist a quarter turn and the eye turned with it as easy as that.

Then . . . nothing happened. Seconds that seemed like ages ticked by and Freddie wondered whether the ring he had just used was a fake. Then the unthinkable raced through his mind. What if he had destroyed the real ring? As his heart sank at this thought an awful grinding sound erupted from somewhere deep within the Earth. Freddie looked back at

the others. They were all turning to run for the Control Disk, except for Haji, who was already half way up the ramp.

The grinding sound rapidly became a thunderous roar. There was no time left to lose. Freddie sprang forward and ran for the Control Disk. About him the streams of lava were rising. The gases seemed suddenly thicker and were leaking into his mask. He felt sick and dizzy at the same time. The smoke was so thick by the time he made it back to the viewing platform he could not see where he was going. Racing across the platform something caught his foot. He stumbled and fell.

‘What are you doing?’ he cried. The Alpha Zyne was still slumped on his knees on the platform.

‘Where have I to go? You have just destroyed everything.’

‘You still have where you are,’ said Freddie. ‘That’s something.’

The Alpha Zyne looked up at Freddie and smiled. ‘I didn’t stay for you. I stayed to find the ring. I didn’t want to come back without it. It’s important that you know that. I wouldn’t want you thinking that I was . . . human.’

‘Don’t worry,’ said Freddie. ‘I wouldn’t think that. Now let’s get on board.’

Freddie would never have moved the Alpha Zyne if Gruntenguile and Agrosios had not seen him trip on the platform and run back to help him. They each grabbed an arm of the Alpha Zyne and despite his resistance they dragged him like a corpse back to the Control Disk, making it inside just before the hatch slammed shut.

In the same instant the vessel took off, the Probe Tower blew.

41. Cataclysm

It was disappointing having just saved the Alpha Zyne to have Dr Bufon shoot him dead a few moments after they dragged him back on board.

Dr Bufon slid her Walther P38 pistol back into its holster as casually as if she was returning a lipstick to its holder. ‘The job of the Alpha Zyne is to get his fellow Zynes to their destination planet as quickly as possible. This Alpha Zyne has failed. I am sure the new Alpha Zyne will do better.’ She turned and smiled at the Beta Zyne—the new Alpha Zyne.

Freddie did not know how to feel. The Alpha Zyne in so many ways had been the worst possible father but he had still been his father and at the end of the day, he had taken enormous risks to keep him alive. He knelt on the ground cradling the old Alpha Zyne’s head in his lap. It was probably a good thing he was not able to utter any last words but there were still things that Freddie would have liked to say to him.

It was the first time he had seen his father when he had not been in a hurry. For once he looked peaceful, like he was dozing in the backyard.

Through the rear window the Siberian Traps could be seen exploding in a mushrooming cloud of gas and thousands of cubic miles of exploding lava and rock.

It was the most awesome sight ever seen on Earth and under normal circumstances Freddie would not have been able to drag his eyes away from it. Instead all Freddie could see at that moment were the blurred spaces between things.

Tears streamed down his face, dripping onto the stiffening corpse of his once father. His cheeks were streaked with the salty tracks of them when he finally looked up at Dr Bufon. He had always found her to be an attractive woman but she did not appear so any more. She did not look at him. She was lighting a cigarette.

A subordinate Zyne walked over to the new Alpha Zyne with what looked like a stamp pad. Instead of ink however it was saturated with dyed acid. The new Alpha Zyne raised his hand as if to make a pledge and the subordinate punched the stamp onto his open palm. The acid fizzed and the brow of the new Alpha Zyne furrowed with pain. When the stamp was removed the alpha symbol could be seen tattooed to his palm and the other Zynes bowed their heads.

Some lower Zynes shuffled in and removed the α breast plate from the old Alpha Zyne's body before dragging him, without ceremony, from Freddie's lap. His squeaky slide across the floor was lubricated by his blood. The last Freddie saw of him was the top of his head disappearing through a side door.

About the ship the Zynes moved calmly as if everything was as it should be. Technoids went about their task of flying the vessel. The pale, yellow subordinates picked things up and put things down. Everything was as if nothing of note had happened.

Only the reception guests reacted to the assassination—quietly splitting into two groups according to their allegiances.

The Zyne Champions and Dr Bufon crowded behind the new Alpha Zyne.

The Amazons and Gruntenguile gathered around Freddie and the other Wanderers, most of whom were still staring at the door through which the former Alpha Zyne had just been dragged. Unknown to any of them he had already been placed in an ejection chamber and had become a part of the massive maelstrom of debris that was being blasted across the northern hemisphere.

'Well that's quite a day's work, Freddie!' The new Alpha Zyne was putting on the α breast plate and mopping some specks of blood with a tissue he had pulled from his pocket. Unlike Freddie's former father, the new Alpha Zyne did not seem in a hurry. He was well aware that he had taken over the reins in fairly ticklish circumstances. It would take a

deft combination of diplomacy and bloodshed to sort things out from here. He raised his alpha hand and ordered; ‘Wanderers and Amazons . . . and *you* (pointing to Gruntenguile) . . . to the Alpha Chamber now.’

The new Alpha Zyne swept past the Zyne champions and the door of the Alpha chamber slid open. Dr Bufon followed him inside.

Freddie struggled to his feet and for the first time felt the graze on his forearm which was still weeping blood. Lucy noticed it also and untied the bandana from her hair and used it to dress the wound. Then she unwound her hair ties and used them to secure the bandage. For the first time since he had known her Lucy’s hair fell to her shoulders and though the world was exploding outside Freddie could not help staring at the change.

‘We’d better follow,’ said Lucy.

‘Yes,’ said Freddie, shaking his head and looking about him to regain his bearings.

He entered the Alpha Chamber closely followed by the remainder of the humans and Gruntenguile. The Amazons kept an eye on the Zyne champions and entered last of all. Freddie had avoided looking at them since entering the vessel. Thinking of Aella as his mother and Koia and Polydora as his sisters—half or full he was not sure—was too much. He had enough to occupy his mind. Instead he focused his attention solely on the new Alpha Zyne and Dr Bufon and wondered what they had in store for them.

Like his former father in their meeting before the reception the new Alpha Zyne stood with his back to them. The screen he stared at showed the cataclysmic blast that still barked at the heels of the escaping Control Disk. His species had been cruelly marooned on Earth for centuries. The Probe Tower had been their only means of escape, and now that hope was no more. Freddie could feel no anger towards the new Alpha Zyne. He was acting

as he had been Socio-Logically trained to act—in the best interests of his species. Dr Bufon, however, was another matter.

That woman turned to Freddie and spoke. ‘Well Freddie, you are a bad boy. Do you know what you’ve done?’

Lucy stepped forward to Freddie’s side. ‘Saved the Earth from extinction is what he has done, Dr Bufon.’

Dr Bufon reached over her shoulder and withdrew her lasernator from its sheath and twisted its calibration knob. ‘This is now set at obliterate and if I hear from you again it will be for the last time. Now—I’ll ask my question again; do you really know what you have done?’

‘I have destroyed the Probe Tower and if I hadn’t it would have destroyed life on Earth. As it is it will take millions of years for the planet to recover anyway.’

‘Well, hoorah for you.’ Dr Bufon walked to the side of the new Alpha Zyne and briefly looked at the screen. She did not look at the devastation; she saw only the reflection of Freddie and the others who had foiled her plans. ‘Do you know what I do, Freddie?’

‘Aren’t you an anthropologist?’

‘Pooh no! I work for a living, Freddie. I do deals. Do you think I would come all this way to study some smelly culture? For what? To write a book that nobody understands; so I can teach a course to a handful of pathetic . . . *cardigan-wearing* . . . *students*? No Freddie! I was here for the deal of the ages. I’ll tell you about it because it doesn’t matter now and I need to kill some time while I decide whether any of you might be useful in the future.’

Freddie watched silently as Dr Bufon slithered, like a snake that had learned to walk, to the opposite side of the chamber. The screens there showed Zynes in other parts of

the Control Disk going about their business. Freddie could tell, however, that she took no interest in them. Her eyes never left his reflection.

‘Do you know what makes the world go round, Freddie?’

Freddie shrugged his shoulders.

‘Deals!’

‘I’m afraid I must pull you up on that one,’ interrupted the new Alpha Zyne. ‘It actually goes round because it formed in the accretion disk of a cloud of hydrogen that collapsed down from mutual gravity and needed to conserve its angular momentum—’

‘*It is a metaphor,*’ said Dr Bufon, glaring at the new Alpha Zyne. Turning back to Freddie she continued. ‘The explosion you have just witnessed was not just a volcanic eruption. A large part of it was concentrated geo-thermal energy. It means little to you Freddie but those from more modern times may know something of its potential.’ Dr Bufon was now looking at Haji.

‘What do you mean *more modern* times?’ Freddie followed Dr Bufon’s eyes and found himself also looking at Haji.

‘There is *one thing* I have not told you yet,’ said Haji. ‘I am not from the nineteen forties. I am not even from the twentieth century. I am from many years later. . .’

Haji turned to Dr Bufon and continued. ‘Some of the top scientists are aware of its power and its destructive potential but it is still not widely known. Nuclear energy is still considered the most potent source of energy by most; especially those in the military. My guess is you were planning to buy geo-thermal technology for your client?’

Dr Bufon smiled and nodded her assent.

‘And your client if I am not mistaken is Herr Hitler and the Axis Powers.’

‘Hoorah! Someone is starting to get it. Yes!’

‘So if Herr Hitler gets the geo-thermal technology what do the Zynes get?’

‘The third lock ring. Like so many precious things it has just fallen into my boss’s tight hands. He has been collecting Pangean artefacts for years ever since he got his hands on one of their bio-freeze bags. More recently, however, he got really lucky. First he found a GT Turbo, then he got his hands on a Zyne Timesmitter. It allowed him to communicate directly with the Zynes and to Time Messengers.’

‘Like Professor Dupler?’ interrupted Freddie, looking towards Count Schnauzer.

‘You are a little slow, Freddie, but you are getting there at last. The Professor however was not interested in working with my boss and I guess that is one of the reasons why he teamed up with your repulsive friend over there.’ Doctor Bufon pointed her smoke-trailing cigarette hand at Count Schnauzer. ‘Just lately they have been a thorn in the side of my employers who have been working very hard towards a deal with the Zynes.’

‘Ever since finding out about the Doylians and their quest for the lock rings that were lost in modern times my employer has been playing this little game and at last he found one of the rings. He had to invade Russia to do it; but he did it! He knew that the Doylians had already discovered one of the rings and had been playing about in Pangea for years. There was of course only a one in three chance that either ring was the right one but they were still priceless. Despite having a Timesmitter my employer still needed to have a tough negotiator on the ground. That’s why I was brought into this little game.’

‘My first jobs were to track down the ring the Doylians already had, and to look for any Crossbloods that might be of help in doing that. We suspected that there was one Crossblood in particular whose sense for this sort of business may have been useful to us. That is why I was checking out Professor Dupler. His most recent papers suggested that he might know someone or indeed, *be someone*. I soon learned on that visit that he was not interested in dealing with any third parties. I was interested also in finding out about O’Toole

and I concluded that he was most likely a Wanderer and also, most likely, dead. I further concluded that you, Freddie, were also of no use to us and I therefore decided to put an end to your meddling mission. But it seems you just can't get good help these days.'

Dr Bufon waved her arms over her head; the cobras climbing her biceps twisting to life with the movement.

'After my trip to Arnhem Land I decided it was time to start negotiating. The Zynes wanted the lock rings and by that time my employer was confident that he was about to lay his hands on one. My client wanted Schnauzer and the geo-thermal technology that Schnauzer had helped the Zynes develop. What could be simpler? I was getting close to wrapping everything up when, suddenly, things started to get sloppy and . . .' She turned once more to Freddie. 'Let me tell you Freddie; when you are pulling off these sorts of deals you can't afford things to get *sloppy*. You need things *tight*.' Her voice was stretching and taking on something of the shriek of an angry bird. She moved around the room as she spoke dragging a curling trail of smoke from the end of her cigarette. Her voice had risen to a crescendo as she finished the sentence and turned to face Freddie. A larger shock of her silken hair than usual fell across her face.

'But now everyone knows that the ring we have is one of the two fakes. It is worth absolutely nothing . . . but . . . but . . . but . . . (Doctor Bufon's hair was looking more dishevelled with each strained word she spoke.) let me tell you all something for real and that is that the rubber is still on the road and this deal is *not dead* by a long shot and it won't be dead until *I say it is*.'

'But surely,' said Freddie, 'this little game is finished. You have nothing now.' He did not mean anything nasty by this remark. He simply felt it was time for Doctor Bufon to face the reality of her situation.

‘This game is finished? *I have nothing?* You, Freddie O’Toole, tell me I *have nothing!* What have you got? Better still; let me show you.’ She made her way to the screen showing the devastation still raging behind them. She poked its surface and it became a touch screen computer. Doctor Bufon then speared a few icons with her nails and a box popped down from the ceiling. She reached into it and pulled out Freddie’s backpack—the same one that he had left behind 250 million years later in Timor. ‘Yes Freddie, we have been all over you like the hair on a Tribals’ back ever since you started out on this idiotic quest. If it had not been for that disgusting manservant, you would have been eliminated from this game a long time ago. And let’s see what you have? What you have brought along on this expedition about which you knew *nothing.*’ Doctor Bufon turned the backpack upside down. At first whatever was inside was stuck and she had to give it a good shake before Freddie’s spare clothes and the chocolate bar still in the bio-freeze bag fell from the open end of the pack. Dr Bufon reached down and picked it up. ‘I have the backing of the Axis Powers *and* the Zynes and their immense technology at *my* fingertips. And that’s not all! I listened in on every conversation you had from the start of the tournament through to your heart-warming chat with your dear old “thought-he-was-your-dad” via this micro-recorder. I planted it on your scalp before the tournament. My hand is still crawling. Honestly, I could have put a concert microphone in your hair it was so easy. You may recall me removing it from your head at the start of the reception.’

Doctor Bufon took the chocolate bar from the bio-freeze bag and held it in front of Freddie’s eyes. All Freddie could think of was how much he wanted to eat that chocolate.

‘I have all this power and technology at my disposal,’ continued Dr Bufon, swirling her pistol hand around the Alpha Chamber, ‘and you . . . have . . . a chocolate bar.’ Dr Bufon then turned to the new Alpha Zyne. ‘I think I have almost made up my mind what

to do with these . . . liabilities . . . but first, let's have some chocolate. She ripped the wrapper from the chocolate with the speed of a striking cobra and broke the bar in half; almost. She handed the slightly smaller half to the new Alpha Zyne. Turning to Freddie she said, 'I bet you have thought about this chocolate many times over the past few months as you have been eating your disgusting snake stew or half-starving on a nutrition capsule every few weeks.'

She was absolutely right. Freddie's mouth was watering and he was almost fainting from the distress of having to watch someone else eat his chocolate.

The new Alpha Zyne perked up at the sight of the chocolate and his lips slid open to reveal his perfect teeth. Zynes eat real food the same way they eat nutrition capsules. Straight down the hatch. The new Alpha Zyne threw the chocolate in his mouth and his higher body temperature melted it almost instantly. Doctor Bufon, however, made more of a show of enjoying her chocolate directly in front of Freddie. When she finished she turned back to the Alpha Zyne and I imagine was going to ask him how his chocolate tasted when, to her surprise, he collapsed in front of her. About the same time a dreadful queasy feeling crept over Dr Bufon and a few seconds later she too collapsed.

42. The Last

‘Well—that was lucky . . . grrmnt,’ said Gruntenguile

Then Freddie remembered the poison dart he had removed from his backpack before entering the cave in Timor.

‘Blazes! The chocolate must have been pierced by one of the head-hunter’s poison darts,’ said Freddie.

Lucy knelt down and felt for a pulse on Dr Bufon. ‘She’s alive! The drug on the tip of the dart was most likely an anaesthetic. They rarely use poison because . . . well . . . it’s a bit silly if you intend to eat the flesh afterwards. We’d better tie them up before they come round.’ Glancing around the chamber however she could see nothing which might be used to achieve what she had just suggested.

‘With what?’ asked Haji, who had just completed a similar search.

‘How about this?’ Freddie unlaced the straps from his backpack and began wrapping them around the feet of the new Alpha Zyne.

‘You really aren’t as stupid as you . . . I mean . . . what a great idea,’ said Lucy.

There was a time Freddie would have gloried more in Lucy’s praise but at that moment his thoughts were running in too many other directions. His once father’s body was flying through the cataclysmic dust swirling outside the Control Disk. Doctor Bufon and the Alpha Zyne were lying drugged at his feet. He was surrounded by aliens and humans who, if anything, were even stranger; and Lucy was standing so close to him that his body tickled with her electricity. All this, 250 million years before the time he had lived most of his life.

As these thoughts raced through his mind, the hopelessness of their situation also slowly dawned on Freddie. They were trapped inside the Alpha Chamber as the Control

Disk hurtled irrevocably back to the Ship City where a vast population of aliens—with bad attitudes at the best of times—were going to be extremely annoyed with them.

‘Well, what now?’ asked Freddie. ‘Anyone got any bright ideas?’

The silence which followed his question suggested that no one had any. His companions cast glances around the Alpha Chamber in search of some means of escape but none appeared. All of his companions, that is; but one.

Instead, Gruntenguile stared awkwardly at Freddie.

‘Why are you looking at me so weirdly,’ asked Freddie.

In reply Gruntenguile nodded his head at something just over Freddie’s right shoulder.

Ignoring this Freddie once more looked around the Alpha Chamber for a means of escape he may have overlooked earlier despite the fact that even if they escaped the Alpha Chamber they still had nowhere to go.

Meanwhile, Gruntenguile continued to look at Freddie while nodding over his right shoulder. Soon, Lucy noticed what Gruntenguile was doing and she too stared at Freddie. Unable to ignore them any longer, Freddie followed Gruntenguile’s line of sight over his right shoulder and found himself looking directly at the tip of the crystal sword.

‘What the . . . blazing blazes . . .’ said Freddie. ‘You’re not thinking what I think you’re thinking?’

‘That depends on what you think I’m thinking, Little Boss.’

Freddie turned from Gruntenguile to Lucy.

‘It’s the only way,’ she said.

‘But, you said yourself, it’s incredibly dangerous—’

‘For us—yes—but not for you! You have already used the sword successfully. Travellers . . . *most* travellers . . . who use the sword successfully the first time survive repeat journeys.’

‘*Most?*’ asked Freddie.

‘Most, including you, Little Boss—but you’d better hurry.’

The new Alpha Zyne was showing signs of stirring. Soon he would wake and sound the alarm.

‘But why is it always me?’ asked Freddie.

‘I already told you why,’ said Lucy. ‘*Because you can.*’

Freddie gave the tiniest of nods to Lucy, before walking as in a trance to where the Amazons stood just in front of the Alpha Chamber door. Aella had not been fond of Zyne males but there had been something about Freddie’s father that had stirred her heart. She could see the same things in Freddie and maybe also some of herself.

Freddie took out his pocket watch and held it in front of her. ‘Have you seen this before?’ he asked.

She stared at it for some moments before taking it from Freddie’s hand and running her fingers over the engravings on the back.

‘Is it my real father’s?’

‘Yes it is,’ she replied. Then, stepping forward, she threw her arms around Freddie. He flinched. Aella normally hugged men to squeeze them into asphyxiation or at least submission but that was not how she hugged Freddie. When she let go his sisters did the same. First, Polydora sprang onto Freddie, like a monkey and the feelings he had previously had for her washed away in an instant.

Next, and somewhat awkwardly for Freddie, Koia stepped forward and hugged him.

‘Are you both my . . . full sisters?’ asked Freddie.

Koia nodded and smiled. ‘I am also your twin. Why do you think I was being so friendly?’

Freddie’s mouth hung open for a moment. ‘You realise that there are ways to kiss and . . . there are ways to kiss . . .’

Koia shrugged.

‘So, what was going to happen *tonight*—that time back in the tent?’

‘Mother was going to tell you about your father and who you were. We thought it was best to get your strength back before you heard about all that.’

‘How did you even know?’

‘Your guardian’s time-eye—’

The new Alpha Zyne groaned and rolled to his side.

‘There is not much time, Little Boss.’

‘There never is,’ said Freddie, ‘but what little there is I will use.’

Turning to Agrosios, Freddie belted his huge chest in a manner that would have upset anyone else, and shook his strong hand. ‘You are a great fighter and we could not have done this without you.’

‘Spartaaaaa!’ said Agrosios.

‘We plan on teaching the lad a little more English, when we get the chance,’ said Terry or possibly Bertie.

Either way Freddie shook both of their hands.

‘Make sure you return home or the chances are—none of this will ever happen.’

‘Don’t worry about that Guv we can’t afford the pay out if we stay,’ said the other.

Next, Freddie stood before Haji and they too shook hands.

‘I’m sorry I wasn’t more help to you in the clinches . . . bad back and all—’

‘It all worked out okay in the end.’ Then, holding the ring up to Haji he said, ‘If you don’t mind I might keep this one. I’ve had it so long it feels like a part of me and I can’t see how it’s any use to anyone else.’

‘It’s yours,’ said Haji. ‘No one would argue with that.’

Next, Freddie stood before Gruntenguile, who looked more dishevelled than Freddie had ever seen him. His beard had been singed more than once through their adventures and now looked much worse than a badger’s backside. ‘I always thought you were the worst manservant in the world. Now it turns out that you are the best manservant in two worlds.’

‘I do my best,’ smiled Gruntenguile. ‘Within the terms of my work contract . . . grrrnt.’

Doctor Bufon groaned and Gruntenguile urged Freddie to hurry.

‘I’m almost done.’ Turning to Lucy he suddenly noticed Count Schnauzer standing in front of the screen showing the explosion that was still billowing behind them.

Freddie walked over and placed his hand on the Count’s shoulder. ‘I guess you can return to watch repairs now. You can start with this one if you like.’

Freddie held out his father’s watch and dropped it in the Count’s hands.

‘I’ll see what I can do,’ he said. Then he smiled for the first time in Freddie’s memory, and gave Freddie’s hand a vigorous shake.

‘Thank you Freddie. If we meet again—and I believe we will—this watch will be ticking over like the day it was made.’

Finally, Freddie made his way to Lucy whose hair by now had completely unravelled.

‘So what’s the plan when I get back,’ he asked.

‘No one said anything about a plan,’ said Lucy. ‘All we can do is make sure that one of us escapes. How and if you return to save us, is entirely up to you.’

‘I’m sorry about the spaceship thing. I really couldn’t see properly.’

‘What?’

‘My reference to your hair being like a spaceship—I’m sorry.’

Lucy touched the L-shaped scar below Freddie’s eye. ‘Wherever you find yourself, ask some questions.’

Freddie winked and tapped the brim of his battered hat. Then he turned and faced the crystal sword for the third time in his life.

‘Would you like me to push you, Little Boss?’ asked Gruntenguile.

‘No,’ said Freddie. ‘I’ve got this.’

Then he stopped thinking and ran forward. The sharp tip and all eternity slid through his chest and heart and, for now, he was gone.