

TRAVELS IN ELYSIUM

BY WILLIAM AZUSKI

AN ANCIENT AND MODERN MYSTERY INTERTWINED

*'Then chalk it up to experience, Mr Pedrosa. Trust no one. Believe no one.
Question everything. Remember, there is nothing here you can take at face value...
No — not even yourself.'*

When young Nicholas Pedrosa lands the job of a lifetime as an archaeologist's apprentice on a Greek Aegean island, the horizon is blue, his dreams limitless; he's escaped a life of slow death in the grey English provinces.

Yet landing on the scarred volcanic island of Santorini, his expectations are abruptly dashed as he blunders into a funeral procession — that of his own predecessor.

Thus begins a chain of events that seems purposely designed to undermine his confidence in people's motives and conduct, in the meaning of truth, even in the nature of reality itself. Nothing is quite what it appears to be on this island that famously boasts more churches than houses, sheer drops from thousand-foot cliffs, bubbling lava vents, sporadic earth tremors, and an everyday reality so intertwined with myth and folklore it is often impossible to pull the threads apart. Neither the job he applied for, nor its relentless demands upon him. Neither his boss, the autocratic yet strangely mesmerising Marcus James Huxley, nor the ancient Minoan city that is being raised on the island's southern peninsula.



Buried under a 100-foot blanket of volcanic ash, the ancient city has been preserved like a fly in amber, yielding frescoes so exquisite it's been said that an ancient people once created here an image of heaven on earth. But then, on one fateful day some 3,500 years ago, this luminous civilisation was extinguished in an instant that still seems to resonate through time, the erupting volcano tearing the island apart with the force of a 100,000 Hiroshimas.

Yet digging down through the ash that has preserved streets, houses and temples virtually intact, they find a city that is eerily deserted. Where are the entombed bodies, victims of a panic escape, people turned to stone by the falling ash? Everything has been neatly put away, amphorae, cooking utensils, grains and spices. Of the living or the dead, there is not a single trace, neither a fallen body nor even an animal bone.

As Huxley pursues his forensic investigation over the peninsula, reconstructing events in the hours and days before the ancient island met its doom, the psychological pressure he exerts upon his young apprentice tightens relentlessly, notch by notch. Pressures his dead predecessor knew only too well. What does Huxley want from his new apprentice and why? Can this broken ruin of an island really be the remains of Plato's Atlantis, as Huxley now secretly plans to proclaim to the world — or is that, too, just another elaborate deception? What great secret is the archaeologist hiding, as the dig advances over the peninsula with an almost reckless haste?

Over his head, out of his depth, Nicholas Pedrosa suddenly finds himself in the middle of two great mysteries, one ancient, the other numbered in days. Yet as he discovers through experiences that are at times shocking and at times sublime, it is in Plato's mind, and in his metaphysical genius, that the ultimate answer to the mystery resides.



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