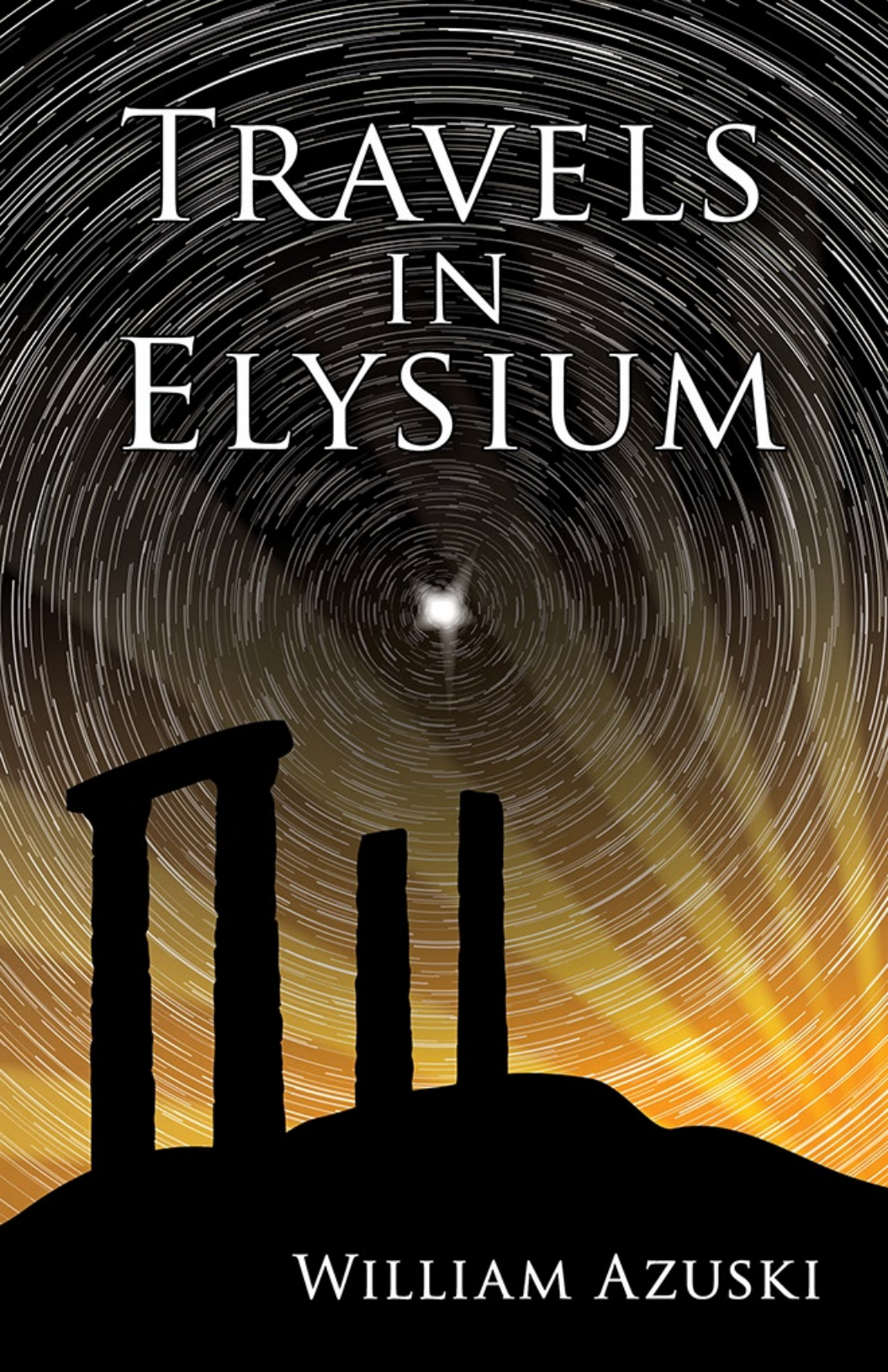
Travels
in
Elysium
William Azuski

About Travels in Elysium

'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.'

It was the chance of a lifetime. A dream job in the southern Aegean. Apprentice to the great archaeologist Marcus Huxley, lifting a golden civilisation from the dead… Yet trading rural England for the scarred volcanic island of Santorini, 22-year old Nicholas Pedrosa is about to blunder into an ancient mystery that will threaten his liberty, his life, even his most fundamental concepts of reality.

An island that blew apart with the force of 100,000 atomic bombs… A civilisation prised out of the ash, its exquisite frescoes bearing a haunting resemblance to Plato's lost island paradise, Atlantis… An archaeologist on a collision course with a brutal police state… A death that may have been murder… And a string of inexplicable events entwining past and present with bewildering intensity… Can this ancient conundrum be understood before it engulfs them all?

'This extraordinary novel, part murder mystery, part metaphysical thriller, kept me guessing until the very last page. The intellectual duel between the troubled hero and his ruthless mentor is mesmerising. William Azuski's treatment of the Atlantis legend is completely original and I have rarely read a novel with such a strong sense of place. The bizarre landscapes of Santorini and the daily lives of its people, both ancient and modern, are vividly evoked. Anyone who enjoys the work of Umberto Eco, Orhan Pamuk or Carlos Ruiz Zafón should try this book.'

— Geraldine Harris, author, Egyptologist, and a member of the Faculty of Oriental Studies at the University of Oxford.

About the author

William Azuski was born in the United Kingdom, and is of British and Yugoslav descent. Travelling widely through the Mediterranean since childhood, his frequent sojourns in Greece included several months on Santorini in the 1970s, an experience that provided firsthand experience for this exceptional novel's local setting. Writing as William Miles Johnson, Azuski is also author of the critically-acclaimed *The Rose-Tinted Menagerie*, an Observer Book of the Year (nonfiction), and *Making a Killing*, an end of the world satire, both titles recently republished by Iridescent.

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iridescent publishing

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E·ly·si·um n. **1.** in Greek mythology, the home of the blessed after death. Also called Elysian Fields
2. any ideally delightful or blissful place or condition

‘Beyond the Pillars of Hercules, there lay an island among islands,
whose people had the means to cross one to the other…’
— Plato, Timaeus

1.

Shall I whisper its fate through the raging clouds, this mountain island with a heart of fire?

Then listen well, Stranger, for memories like us who travel dreams are but time-straying ghosts who neither know nor care that they are dead.

Summer was in the making. Catching the west wind we roamed the high bluff, lay upon the pillows of the tufted grass, infinity flooding our eyes. If ever we knew and feared this day would come, surely it could never be on a day like this, a lark's song painting the blue above our heads. People returning from the saffron fields with sunburnt faces. Drifting asleep in their gardens to the hum of the bees and the chimes of the water. A few hours in which dreams bring on the coolness of the star sown night.

I felt the tremor through the soles of my feet, so tentative at first I confused it with my own pulse. It grew stronger. I glanced across at you, wondering what kind of love could electrify the heart like that, whispering across the skin, crackling through the mind like a summer storm that will drench us in some almighty collision of fire and rain.

Then before we knew it, the ground was buckling under our feet, fissures cracking the earth, their monstrous jaws devouring anything in sight, a farmhouse, a meadow, trees torn from the soil like weeds.

Through a blizzard of petals, I caught the nose-stripping stench of sulphur, as if some malevolent daemon were now stalking the Earth. My eyes darted to the mountain heights to find liquid fire spilling between the rocks, torching the sacred trees. Then to the wide coastal plain, where among the orchards and fields of spice the waterways were bursting open; farmhouses, temples, carts, horses, boats with tattered sails, swept away on the flood wave. Villages we once knew, as puny as a child's plaything.

There was no time to think. No time to run. It was as much as we could do to stay on our feet. At the island's brink, the high cliffs were crumbling, streets, schools, workshops, temples, a thousand summers, lost to the blink of an eye.

Families still fast asleep in their beds, husbands, wives, children, lovers just like us, hushed by the sweet lullaby of the mountain's ancient sleep.

Amid a cloud of dust and rubble, they free-fall through the bloodstained dusk, eyes jarring open to find all those life-defining things that once inspired love or indifference, sublime, ridiculous, a mattress-flying child, the statue of a god, pots and pans, a tumbling donkey, a squealing pig, a flock of hens startled by their own flight.

There were numb white bodies in the water, with wide staring eyes and fronds of seaweed hair. Looming shadows through the deep cast by a sky on fire

★

I awoke with a start, still blinking back silhouettes, trying to remember who or where I was, the hypnotic clatter of the rails in my ears, the train carving its way towards Dover through the sleet, the ferry pitching across the puke-green Channel, the rippling walls of the station waiting room suddenly remembering they're made of solid stone. That's right. I remember now. February the 29th. Day two on my four-day travel plan. Brig, a bustling little town under the Simplon, its high pass lost to the snow. Waiting for my next connection heading south. My guidebook to Greece lying on the chequered floor, where it must have slipped from my sleeping fingers. Still open at the same page, that fire-breathing island in the Aegean sea: Thera, Santorini, Celeste, and whatever other names it has gone by in its tempestuous acquaintance with time.

★

Out onto the platform for a shot of frozen air, lugging my cases behind me, ticket between my teeth.

Almost time.

I glanced down at my watch as the train came thundering in on its own blizzard of snow and electric sparks. It might even have been a trick of the light, I suppose, snow falling against the sunset of a cracked sky, that lent that moment its peculiar magnification.

Time seems to quiver, then billow, a fraction of a second somehow orphaned from its own past. My father's old silver Omega, a present for my 21st; it even crosses my mind that I must have forgotten to wind it.

The second hand seems to falter, then hesitate over the XII before taking its plunge over the luminous radium dial. I blink, put it down to the eerie light, the stress, the sleepless nights that have landed me here.

No, I was dead on my feet, that's all, and with another sixteen hundred miles still to go.

The train comes sweeping in on a draught of fractured light, snow and seething sparks. Carriage doors swing open, people in woollen hats, overcoats and scarves descend onto the platform, leaning forward against the cold.

Doors slam. The guard's whistle blows. The carriage jolts forward. I slip into the nearest seat, the window still all steamed up from the passengers who were sitting here before. Slide my cases between the wooden benches where they meet back-to-back, casting an eye over the open carriage, and the handful of people going on to the next stations along the line. Absently, I wind my watch, lift it to my ear, just to check it's still ticking as it should.

Moments like this, bursting with repressed chaos, that yet seem no more consequential than any other in the hours, days and weeks that have led you here.

As innocuous, perhaps, as the moment your eye caught the advertisement in *The Times* of London and you applied for the job, just on the off-chance, knowing you weren't really qualified. As routine as the call that summoned you to the interview in Cambridge, butterflies in your stomach, the dryness on your tongue sometimes making you trip over your own words, your palms all sweaty even in the cold.

As fake innocent even, as that lucky morning when the postman arrived with a registered letter all the way from Greece, the brusque scrawl less an invitation than a summons but still, it's the chance of a lifetime isn't it, a job half your college classmates would have gladly died for.

Apprentice to the archaeologist M. J. Huxley, no less, his excavations in the southern Aegean already raising a lost city, 3,500 years old, from Thera's volcanic ash.

Thera, Santorini, the southernmost of the Cyclades. An island of thousand-foot cliffs, bubbling fumaroles and black volcanic sands.

I admit, that's about as much as I knew, but it was enough for me.

From one moment to the next, everything had changed. The gravestone sky no longer had the power to entomb me. In my mind's

eye, I could already see it, already feel it, summer, the curve of a blue horizon, the scattering of islands.

Moments engineered by scheming minds, by chance or serendipity, by some force greater than ourselves, who can tell?

Maybe there are even people out there who can predict them in the making, I don't know, catching the telltale movement at the corner of their eye or something, the tingle down their spine. Not me, that's for sure, making my oblivious way south, just trying to keep to the impossible timetable set by my new employers, just trying to stay awake in case I miss the next connection.

Never guessing for a moment that someone might be interested enough to record my progress, maybe that scruffy student with the goatee under the toothpowder advertisement in the Paris metro; that busker in the Gare de Lyon with the broken guitar string; that impeccably dressed valet boarding the first class carriage in Dijon with his master's cases.

No. If moments of any description entered my muddled head through the blur of the landscape or the clackety-clack of the rails, they were of the past, snatches of time just lived, that's all. Ghosts of moments, that now seemed to be struggling to keep up, flickering through me as we hurtled into the darkness of a tunnel, or emerged into bright snow-swollen light.

My final days at home, minutes, seconds, melting away with the fury of a candle left in a draught.

Eighteen hours to go and I'm racing the clock, wondering how the hell I'll ever get everything organised in time. Tossing stuff into trunks and cases, then hurling pieces out at random when the lids won't shut; cycling down to the high street for the traveller's cheques, quitting my stupid dead-end job, and I don't know, a million other things.

The great day dawns, the sun struggling through spitting clouds.

Mum's fussing over the porridge, the poached eggs, the toast, the coffee percolating on the stove. I know what she's doing; keeping busy, so she won't have to think about me leaving home; worse, leaving the country, who knows, maybe for good.

Sleepy faced, jet black hair tumbling into her eyes, Sofi gives me a playful push just at the thought of it. 'Little Brother' off to Greece; the great big brilliant adventure waiting for me at the front door. She's always been like that, ever since we were kids, visualising things abstract to the rest of us.

Have you got your passport? Have you got the tickets? Have you got the itinerary they sent you? You don't want to miss a connection, not if you can help it.

She throws me a serious look, lowers her voice so Mum won't hear: *Don't forget, Nico. It is a military junta, whatever they say in the holiday brochures. It's a police state. Just look after yourself won't you.*

There's not enough time.

There are too many things left unsaid.

Don't forget to write!

Mum's at the rain-splashed window, smiling, waving, trying not to cry till we turn the corner. Sofi at her elbow, eyes on fire, waving madly now as the taxicab sets off down the driveway.

Try to visit!

Maybe in the summer!

And the next thing I know, I'm wading through the crowds at King's Cross. *I'll never make it in time,* I'm thinking. Never. *They haven't given me enough time to change trains, change stations.*

I should have been paying more attention, that's what I'm saying, even then on the journey down, long before I ever set eyes on Marcus James Huxley.

I shouldn't have needed instruction for something as basic as this, even if I was still wet behind the ears, even if my teachers were as ignorant as I. I mean the warning was there from the start, wasn't it, long before he thrust it into my reeling senses with a vehemence that almost blew me off my feet. *Take nothing at face value. Read between the lines. Trust neither what your eyes tell you, nor the words people speak. Expect the unexpected.*

The train thunders over frost-encrusted fields in the ice-light moon, spins a vortex of snow as it crosses a viaduct built in the sky, utters a piercing shriek as it plunges into a mountain tunnel.

The carriage windows throw our reflections back in our faces and, just for an instant, just for a heartbeat, you have to wonder — *who is that, is that really me?* Nicholas Pedrosa, 22 years old, bags packed, leaving home.

Snow flakes hit us in a sudden blizzard, the line snaking the contours of the granite mountain walls, the snow valley and the river catching moonlight a breathtaking leap below.

We seem to be descending now, and on a long improbable corkscrew through the mountain itself.

Then just when you're thinking the tunnel will never end, out we break into the southern Alps, the air limpid, the sky a mass of crystal splintered stars.

Domodossola, all change! People hurry along the platform, all wrapped up against the cold, blowing steam. People like me, who have no idea what's awaiting them around the next corner, much less the next horizon. *All change!*

2.

When finally I set eyes on her, I assumed I was still in the wrong place, some graveyard for ships. The *Pegasus*, read the name on the prow, each letter with its trickling stain of rust. A Piraeus tramp steamer if ever there was one, her glory days beyond all recollection of the living.

Propellers frothing the putrid water, she was already getting up steam, deckhands loosening the algae-slick hawsers. There was no telling when she would be back. I ran.

A battered old Land Rover was being winched onto the aft deck in a rope sling. A few late passengers were still scurrying up the gangway, the escaping street hawkers barging past them with their trays of sesame rings and *loukoumi,* that gummy sweet the rest of us know as Turkish Delight. In a cacophony of yells, bleating, and jangling of bells, a flock of goats was being chased up the ramp and into the hold. The Captain glared down at us from the bridge. Any moment now, his patience would buckle and he would lift the gangway whoever ended up in the drink.

Dragging my stuff behind me I dashed after the goats, and had hardly stepped on deck when there was a shrill whistle from the bridge, and the funnel began panting and billowing steam.

Still winching in the hawsers, we moved across the fetid harbour, the factories on the other side belching black smoke. Past the listing and abandoned ships tied up among the graveyard quays, out past the harbour walls and then, all of a sudden, when I looked again, the whole world had turned blue.

The blue of the winter Aegean. Sea, sky, reflecting one another into infinity.

If only they could see me now, I thought, my friends, my former work mates in that dead-end job of mine. My life was just beginning.

Every so often I'd cast an eye over my fellow passengers, just to pass the time. Farmers and fishermen in Sunday-best suits two sizes too small; trouser cuffs over their ankles, spit-and-polish shoes that probably pinched the toes. A young soldier with his rifle between his knees. A gaggle of students on some class expedition to the islands. A plump man in a straw boater at the railings, round tortoiseshell glasses

lending him the appearance of a pompous owl. Folded in his hands an Athens newspaper, its headline proclaiming new finds at the Theran dig. *Archaeologists Unearth Mystery Hieroglyphs.* I squinted hard. *Temple inscriptions in the extinct script Cretan Hieroglyphic, probably more than 5,000 years old. Would they ever be deciphered?*

Just how long that reptilian stare had been boring into the back of my head I had no idea, but I was aware of it now.

I shifted sideways on the bench, stealing a glance over my shoulder. So it wasn't my imagination after all. He *had* been staring at me the whole time, and continued to do so even now, sour, unflinching eyes in a speckled parchment face.

A gaunt man in a white suit and Panama hat, striking an imperious pose on the First Class deck, 80 years old if he was a day. Sitting in the wind shadow of the ship's funnel, a bronze-headed walking cane clasped tightly between bony fists and knees.

After resisting that mouldy gaze for another ten minutes or so, I gave up, retreating to the other side of the ship.

Nearing the Cyclades, we ran into a sudden gale. Demented gusts and spitting rain struck us broadside from the east and went shrieking through the wires on the upper deck. Through the doorway to the bridge, I saw the look of consternation flicker over the helmsman's face as he fought the wheel to keep us on course, the Captain at his shoulder, scanning the bruise-black horizon that seemed on the verge of swallowing us whole.

The ship pitched and rolled, the sheer force of the waves juddering through its iron hull. In the dining room, bottles, glasses and plates skated back and forth across the tables, then crashed to the floor. Passengers stumbled about as if drunk, barging into one another, collapsing into chairs. Peasant women from the islands lay supine on the floor, moaning, their olive complexions now wan and ghostly.

Others took their seasickness to the lavatories, leaving the floors and basins awash, the sight and stench so contagious there was no escaping it, stem to stern. Craving air I stumbled out onto the deck, gripping the railings with white-knuckled fists, retching over the side, knees buckling as the *Pegasus* seesawed through the waves.

A rocky island appeared off the port bow, silhouetted against the raging silver sea. Listing in the wind, the ship limped along in its cliff-bound shadow, at times so treacherously close I was certain we would be dashed against the rocks.

Smoke belching from the funnel, engines shuddering, we plunged into a maelstrom of white water, spray cascading over the decks. I saw the helmsman spin the wheel hard to port, and just as it occurred to me that he had doomed us all, we went steaming between the splintered rocks into an implausibly narrow channel.

To my untrained eye it seemed as if we had barely escaped with our lives, but at least we had reached calmer waters, a sheltered bay ringed by parched, rounded hillsides. Strung along a narrow pebble beach, a few poor fishermen's houses, bright yellow nets hanging in the sun. Above, a little village of white cubic houses nestled on the ridge of a pointed mountain.

With a clanking of chain we dropped anchor, engines hushing. Despite the enduring silence from the bridge, what with the bulk of the crew now in their bunks, it seemed safe to assume we were seeking refuge from the worst of the storm.

Through the deck railings separating First Class from steerage, I heard a man's brusque, impatient shout.

'Boy! Boy!'

The voice rose in volume.

'You, boy!' he was yelling, as though summoning some Athens shoeshine, or the servant he normally kept below stairs.

My eyes flickered towards him in irritation — only to discover that those sunken-cheeks and thin bloodless lips were actually scowling at me.

I should have known. The ancient creature in the white suit and panama hat, now striking the railings with his skull-headed cane.

I remarked it even then. His posture. Almost Napoleonic in a gaunt, moth-eaten kind of way, nose tilted several degrees above the horizon.

'On which godforsaken island are we now?' More demand than question, as though I should be any better acquainted with the Captain's charts than he. 'We are already twelve hours behind schedule, *twelve hours!*'

'One of the Cyclades, I suppose. Maybe Naxos. Maybe Paros. Maybe —'

'These Greeks!' he cried in exasperation, and now I could definitely hear the French lilt to his voice. 'It is as if their incompetence were deliberate rather than congenital.'

'You can hardly blame them for the weather.'

'The weather!' he sneered. 'There was a time, young man, when no

challenge was insurmountable to the warriors and visionaries of this land, philosophers who would hurl imponderable questions beyond the stars; golden heroes who would challenge even the King of Death himself. Why? Because the challenge exists and they had the soul to seek it, the resolve to demand it.' Casting a jaundiced eye over the shuffling deck hands on the lower deck, he added: 'Now, apparently, the insurmountable challenge is walking upright.'

'But we almost sank! We almost drowned!'

'If so, that would be testament to the captain's incompetence, hardly the severity of the storm. I have been through far worse in any sea you care to name.'

'At this rate,' he fumed, leaning heavily on his cane, 'we shall be days behind schedule, not hours. Are you not even vaguely curious as to the Captain's intentions?'

'Of course. I have people waiting for me on Santorini, but —'

'Then kindly spare me the trouble of negotiating those treacherous, brine-slick stairways. Go below deck and interrogate the Purser.'

Swearing, I did just that, finding the man one deck down at the reception, eating *loukoumi* and smoking cigarettes, his uniform powdered with ash and sugar dust. 'When will we get underway again, do you know? Yes, but what's our estimated time of arrival? Is it still far?'

Questions to which our Purser replied with accomplished indifference, eyebrows arching up, mouth arching down, right hand swivelling round, fingers splaying out to reveal an open palm. From what I had already learnt in evening class, this was a common expression among the Greeks, and roughly translated meant 'Who knows? Who cares? Fate alone will decide.'

Munching and smoking, his eyes drifted bleakly to the porthole at his side, and a distant patch of angry sky; conversation over.

When I reported back to the Frenchman in First Class, I expected him to rant and rave, but he merely scowled, demanding to know where I was going, who was waiting for me, and what conceivable benefit a youth could bring to something so ancient, so sacred. I made my escape.

When at last the storm blew itself out, we got underway again, pounding through the swell it had left in its wake.

I went down to my cabin, crawled onto the bunk, tried to sleep, couldn't.

Even now I could hardly believe my luck. It kept turning round and round in my head, the impression I must have made on Professor Huxley's agent at the interview, and what she had seen in me that I couldn't quite see in myself. Apart from my mediocre Greek and a four week stint at archaeological field camp on the Peloponnese when I was 19; apart from my half-completed classics course at college, what else was there?

That made me worry even more. What if there had been some kind of mistake? What if I wasn't up to the job? Maybe the obnoxious Frenchman had a point.

As interviews go, mine had been a rough ride, almost as rough as the weather out there, dashing the porthole in wind and spray.

Professor Huxley's agent turned out to be a Russian of indeterminate age, with ice blond hair, ice blue eyes and an almost translucent complexion. Aside from the flowery silk scarf bringing a splash of colour to her neck, Svetlana Bé, as she purported to be called, was dressed in black from head to foot.

Cold, yet as elegant as a fresh snow drift. You could almost imagine the ice crystals forming in the prisms of her eyes, feel the touch of the lips that would numb your skin. Fear for the cheek bones that might shatter in the event of a smile.

Nothing to do with idle vanity, this kind of elegance, but something far more purposeful. You could feel the static charge from her sheer silk stockings as she crossed her legs. See thin air make way for relentless confidence as she incised her way across the street in her stiletto heels.

As per her written instructions, we met at the old Garden House Hotel in Cambridge, overlooking the river, an incongruous setting given the barrage of questions she was about to unleash. Genteel Cambridge wives sitting down to their afternoon teas and cream cakes, all hushed voices, salmon-pink curtains, tablecloths and doilies. Beyond the French windows, a boat would sometimes glide silently through the mist, a solitary figure punting from the stern.

Svetlana Bé opened a black foolscap notebook, propping it up against the table edge so as to conceal its contents. The waitress appeared with our order. Hers, Himalayan Darjeeling with a slice of lemon. Mine, plain old tea with milk. A plate of fresh scones with strawberry jam and clotted cream was placed between us, and I could

see it in her eyes, just daring me to take one.

I was aware of permed heads inclining towards us, all the better to eavesdrop on the muffled yet strangely dashing words that passed between us. I, in my mother-pressed shirt and interview tie, trying to impress or at least look the part. Grasping, fumbling for the slippery, unsettling questions being hurled at me.

Questions on my ties to England. Questions about my relationship to my family, friends and teachers. Questions on my emotional attachments, or lack thereof. At times they seemed as darkly suggestive as black chocolate. At others, as subtle as a cricket bat.

Ambition, honour, duty, love, which is more important to you? Your sexual awakening, Nicholas Pedrosa, characterise it for me. Describe your first erotic encounter; in the woods, behind the bicycle sheds, in class itself, perhaps, under the teacher's very eye, fumbling under the desk? You pleasure yourself, of course, all boys do — how many times a day?

I have to admit, it wasn't what I'd been expecting, and at first I must have looked like a stunned deer or something, caught in the headlights.

I know: that must have been the intention all along. I glanced apprehensively at the tables across the aisle, thinking how thrilled to bits the genteel ladies would be in their *'well I never!'* kind of way.

For a moment, ticking off the reaction boxes on her list and scribbling her observations, Svetlana Bé seemed satisfied, then pounced.

'How is it that a young man like you has no friends to speak of? I would consider that strange. Would you not consider that strange?'

'No, I wouldn't, not at all!' I protested, a fraction of a second off the beat. 'I only came home from college in summer —'

'Ah, yes, Aberdeen!' she said, scanning her notes. 'Such a long way from home. But why? Why a college closer to the Arctic Circle than your own home? Your dinky little village in the Cotswolds, Moreton-in-the-Marsh.'

'Because of the course,' I said, holding my breath. 'The syllabus.'

'You were not homesick?'

'No.'

'Not once? Of course, I forget. You have no attachments. No love. No friends. No passion.' If not for the midwinter frost that gripped them, the words might even have sounded sarcastic.

'Twenty-four and still living with his mother and sister.'

'Twenty-two,' I corrected her. Things were going badly.

'Where is your father? Did he desert you, you, your mother, your sister? Is that it? Is that why you ran home from college? Is that why you tore up your education, threw away your own future?'

I wondered if she could hear the pounding in my chest. 'Yes.'

The second I saw the look thrown back at me across the table, I knew she knew she'd finally caught me in a lie.

'Professor Huxley demands the loyalty of his apprentices,' she went on, the ice crystals dancing sardonically in her eye. 'Boy that you are, doubtless you would expect to run home on leave every other week, back to mama, homesick, frightened, disrupting the work plan, inconveniencing everybody in sight.'

Still stumbling over the boot camp metaphor, I just managed to protest, 'No, I can go and not look back. I can.'

The pencil line eyebrows arched sceptically.

'Then what is it that attracts you most to this job that you have applied for, Nicholas Pedrosa?' A question tinged with accusation, and probably the hardest one of all to answer. In the end, thinking the job already lost, I just blurted out the first thing that came into my head.

'To know the ancient island and what it might have been.'

A hesitation. A skipped beat. The first and only one. A scrutinising look across the table, the biologist sizing up a curious bug.

'I think you cannot imagine what Greece is like,' she said in parting. 'Its identity smudged between the fog of mythology and logic as lucid as a winter sky… But look, look who I am talking to… a child.'

She took my CV and references without comment, stuffing them carelessly into her bag.

In the gathering dusk I returned home, gloomy and demoralised. Crumpling into bed that night, the encounter wouldn't leave me alone, questions, answers, bouncing around my head. What I should have said, and hadn't. The words I should have spoken, but couldn't find. There would never be a chance like this again, I knew that. Never.

The days oozed by, congealing into weeks, and I heard nothing more. I returned to my dead-end job on the high street. Junior Sales trainee at Randoor & Heaven, Estate Agents of Distinction. Mr Percival Heaven, the roly-poly Principal, his pinstripe suit so habitual he might even have slept in it for all we knew, folds of flesh sagging over his shirt collar.

If I put my mind to it, kept my nose to the grindstone, I might even make Assistant Sales Negotiator by the time I was 35. Only another 13 years to go.

'We have Rolls-Royces drawing up outside,' spluttered Mr Heaven, indignant that I had let hair, and not fat, grow over my collar. My first warning.

Second warning, late for work, an hour docked from my pay.

Third warning, unprofessionalism, blabbing to some prospective buyer that the cellar of his dream house floods in stormy weather. A bawling out from Heaven. Half a day docked from my pay.

First snows. Drifting on the hills. Christmas at home, as difficult as ever, never mind the presents under the tree, the children's carols at the door, the lights in the snow. Habit, I suppose, setting that place for him at the head of table, his favourite glass for his favourite wine. You even catch yourself looking for careless footprints in the snow. Down to the Bell Inn with the younger office staff, drinking far more than I should, who cares. It's fucking amazing to think that, of all the people you have come to know since leaving college, you have absolutely nothing in common with any of them. Nothing at all.

Monday morning. First thaw, muddy sludge along the lanes, the countryside bleak and misty.

About to bike off to work, I almost collided with the postman at the front door. A registered letter, postmark Athens. Well that's it, I thought, with a wince. This is your formal rejection. Some other lucky applicant's already heading south to the job of a lifetime.

Anxious about being late for work again, and resenting myself for it, I tore open the envelope, almost ripping its contents in the process.

When finally the swimming words began to make sense, I could hardly believe my own eyes; I had to read the letter again and again just to make it sink in. Secreted in the bulky envelope, not the booby prize brochure on the dig I had been expecting, but tickets, itineraries, everything. Boat train to Calais, then on to Paris, Dijon, Milano, Brindisi.

Within the space of that infinitesimal moment, everything had changed. Everything. Life was no longer the poison we are required to drink until it kills us. I would say goodbye to the yellowing walls that absorbed our childhood memories like blotting paper, weeping their mildewed ghosts.

Now wherever I looked, 360 degrees around my own life, I saw only one thing: horizon.

I admit, I drew some perverse pleasure in announcing my departure, effective immediately, to Heaven himself.

'Don't imagine for a second you'll be getting your last pay packet,' he blustered, the absurd originality of the moment spinning him like a top. No one had ever done anything like this before, not in all his born days. 'After all we've taught you. After all the time we've invested in you.'

'Yes. I'm leaving for Greece. I'm leaving for the islands. This time tomorrow I'll already be in Dover.'

Impressed they were not. Despite the odd envious glance from the other trainees, the smug consensus was that I had obviously taken leave of my senses. Abandoning one's career like that, without so much as a day to weigh the consequences; running off to an island you've never set foot on before, to a job you know next to nothing about, to people you've never even set eyes on before.

You'll come unstuck, my lad, you just see if you don't!

They had a point, I know, but I didn't care.

I couldn't believe my luck. I was free.

3.

Thirty-six hours behind schedule, its crescent moon outline appeared on the southern horizon. Thera. Santorini.

I hurried back to the cabin and its cubicle-like washroom, thinking, you have to make yourself look at least vaguely presentable to your new employer. Except, peering into the dimly-lit mirror, I could hardly find myself, the silver so thin it was in danger of losing its reflection altogether. I splashed water onto my face, ran fingers through my hair but still ended up looking like someone who had been sleeping rough for a week.

By the time I'd dragged my belongings to the reception area we were already reaching the northern, pincer-like tip of the island. I rushed up to the top deck to take in the sights.

At first, it was the light, not the island, that snatched my breath away. Its intensity. Its clarity. Its improbability. I squinted, shielding my eyes. It glanced off the water, off the white bridge where the helmsman stood, off the windows of the saloon in which I and my fellow deck passengers had now become silhouettes against a streaming silver sea.

And then there was the island itself, looming up at us like some eighth wonder of the world.

Long ago, it would have dominated the southern Aegean, a mountain volcano piercing the sky, its peak all snow and ice even in spring. But then, some 3,500 years ago, it went off like a Roman candle, raining fire, blowing apart, the sea flooding into its molten heart. And this was all that was left of it: a crescent shaped crater rim formed by towering, rust-red cliffs. Soon, they were dwarfing the ship.

Off the starboard bow, the Burnt Islands came into view, charred islets of solidified lava like great heaps of coal, strange obsidian sculptures and the occasional plume of drowsy, sulphurous smoke. Beyond, Thirassia, a smaller remnant of the ancient volcanic cone, a curving lava wall rising defiantly out of the sea.

With two blasts of the klaxon we hailed the inhabitants of Oia, a shabby little village of white cubic houses, domes and bell towers strung across the cliff top.

Coming from rural England, it was hard to imagine people living

like this anywhere, on the brink of a thousand-foot precipice, on the lips of a volcano not dead, just sleeping.

Maybe that explained the dark superstitions that were said to infest the village streets, and why there were more churches on the island than houses. Tempting fate like that, it might have been the sensible thing to do.

Then I realised. Those grey rock caves, that appeared to honeycomb the higher reaches of the cliff face at Oia — they weren't caves at all, but the shells of ruined houses. Victims of rock slides, tremors and earthquakes that would strike inevitably sooner or later, a day, a year, a century from now.

Something was different about the sea here within the caldera. Off the Burnt Islands, it was almost as if its deeper luminosity carried an electric charge, making it hiss against the hull.

Soon we were approaching Phíra, its barrel-vaulted houses and domed churches rising over the crater wall, windows catching the winter sun.

Even here, at the main town, there was no harbour as such, just a small cement quay at the foot of the cliffs, where fishermen laid out their nets to dry. Carved out of the rust red lava, a steep pathway serpentined its way up the rock face. Squinting up, I could see, as if in miniature, a mule train being driven down to the wharf, loaded with passengers, luggage, even packing crates.

The ship edged closer until the death-defying houses were almost overhead. Then, with a clanking roar off the crater wall, we dropped anchor, probably using every link of chain to reach the seabed.

A flotilla of boats put out from the jetty. Of the smallest vessels, several looked in danger of capsizing altogether under the weight or sheer dimensions of their cargo.

I caught sight of the Frenchman whacking his way impatiently through the crowd, his luggage being towed behind him by his very own flunkey. As his head turned, I caught his profile, and the memory splashed into my head like a reluctant drip from a tap — wait, wasn't that the valet I had seen on the platform at Dijon, stowing aboard his master's suitcases, tall, self-assured, despite his apparent bondage? There was no time to dwell on it.

From the cargo hatch, crewmen were tossing suitcases, boxes and sacks onto the boats flocking below, a mess of flapping sprit rig sails, frothing propellers, colliding oars, yells and curses.

Then it was every man for himself, passengers from the flotilla leaping aboard ship with an energy and determination that defied age, weight or infirmity, passengers from the *Pegasus* shoving their way towards the boats. And somewhere in the stumbling mass, me, jumping onto the nearest caïque and almost ending up in the drink, a huge calloused hand just catching me by the wrist.

As my trunk and cases were tossed carelessly onto another boat, I wondered if I would ever see them again.

And all of a sudden, after a week on the road, there I was. Climbing out onto the dock, hands and feet meeting island for the very first time.

My eyes swept up and down the length of it, searching faces. Fishermen mending their nets, the mesh between their toes, the hemp twine between their teeth. The muleteers, fiddling with reins and saddles. The new arrivals thronging the quayside, jabbering at family, friends, lovers, whoever had braved the cliff face steps to greet them.

I suppose I had been expecting some kind of welcome as well. If not Professor Huxley himself, then at least some messenger holding up a sign with my name on it. There was no one.

Against my better judgement I joined the mule train, about to make its precipitous ascent up the serpentines. While my luggage was strapped onto the pack animal next in line, I hoisted myself up onto the crude wooden saddle. Then amid a volley of yells and lashes against hide, we were off.

For the next thousand steps up the cliff face, we clung to our lurching beasts of burden as if our lives depended on it.

At every other hairpin on the path I'd find myself teetering over the abyss, staring into thin air. When hooves lost grip, skating over the slick volcanic stones, it seemed that luck, nothing more, had saved us. Cries of dismay up and down the mule train provided little in the way of comfort.

At the summit, we entered a little square formed by an intersection of paths, and suddenly it was mob chaos again, mules snorting, bags, boxes and trunks dragged left and right, men yelling, women shrieking.

Hoping my employer might have remembered me, I scanned the faces in the crowd. In vain. As the agitated swarm abruptly dispersed, I found myself standing there alone in the middle of the pebble-dashed street, my trunk and cases in a heap beside me.

My attention was drawn to a wiry little man standing in the arched

doorway of a *kafeneion* across the way, staring at me with quizzical bird-like eyes.

'Tea? Coffee?' he demanded impishly, rattling the loose change in his pocket, moustache twitching expectantly.

I stared at the heap of luggage at my feet. I could store it all inside, I thought. The little man would be sure to let me. Then scout about town for my new employer or, failing that, at least my lodgings, probably at some house without a number in some street without a name.

I wandered inside, the little man scurrying after me. It was grubby, deserted, and about as warm as a fridge. I studied the chalkboard menu on the wall, if that's the right word for a something that basically consisted of muddy Greek coffee, mountain tea, *gazoza* lemonade, and use of the *tavli* boards.

Feeling obliged to order something as I stacked my stuff in a corner, I settled on a glass of raki, some local firewater that would at least kill off any germs lurking on the grease-stained glass.

I moved towards the windows, where the afternoon light was streaming in. My heart seemed to swell over an unseen wave. Beyond the flimsy glass there was blue ethereal sky and a thousand foot drop to the caldera, that's all. I stepped back, not quite used to walking on thin air.

★

I found myself in a warren of little streets, scarcely wide enough for two mules with laden panniers to pass. They rose and fell in slopes and steps, sometimes running through archways or tunnels formed by streets and houses above.

Shrines, chapels, churches. They were everywhere you looked. Like this one, perched on a narrow ledge of rock, seemingly levitating over the precipice, the folly already apparent in the jagged crack running through its dome.

When next I looked back, it was from the heights of the town and I could see it rising across the hollow in the crater wall like an amphitheatre — barrel-vaulted roofs, domes, bell towers, cubic houses. All gaining silhouette now against the sunken crater far below, and a sea turning molten bronze in the late sun.

Just as the last of the houses gave way to barren fields, something in the distance caught my eye. A procession or something, making its way over the gashed volcanic cliffs. Twenty people, maybe more, the

pathway lending them the sinuous motion of a snake.

By the time I caught up, the serpent's tail was already entering a walled field, curling under a white stucco arch.

Impulsively, I stepped through, and just as abruptly found myself wishing I hadn't.

A burial. I had blundered right into the middle of it. Silhouettes dressed in mourning, suddenly gaining flushed tearful faces. Tombs and headstones, some bearing sepia pictures of the dead. A tiny barrel-vaulted chapel, illuminated from within by a blaze of candles. The elderly *Papás*, with his flowing silver beard, chimney-pot hat and billowing skirts. And from afar, what had once resembled the serpent's angular head: six strong men, locals by the look of them, their stout shoulders bearing the crude pine coffin.

I swallowed hard. The wine coloured light, suffusing everything now, had found another angle, and with it, the profile of the face in the lidless casket.

The body, whoever it had once belonged to, wasn't Greek. Not with that straw blond hair, those finely chiselled features. A young man, hardly older than I.

Shielded by the cemetery wall, I studied the mourners one by one, thinking, *who are they?* Standing out from the rest, a young woman, far too elegant for this rough and ready place, foreign too, judging from the fair complexion and the flaxen, bun-coiled hair.

A woman in grief, yet not one whose disposition would have her keening over the grave, much less tearing her hair out by the roots. At a guess, family of the deceased, probably the young man's sister, maybe his wife. And angry, that much obvious enough from the smouldering look that swept towards me, stopping short only as it found its true mark among the mourners filing in behind her.

A shadow, eternal, passed over the dead man's face as the coffin lid was nailed shut.

A hurried ceremony got underway over the freshly dug grave, the priest delivering his singsong incantation as the coffin was lowered jerkily into the ground, a sprinkling of holy water drumming over the wood like reluctant rain.

No sooner had he recited the blessing than the bereaved woman broke away, angrily shaking off the hands that sought to comfort her. Seconds later she was marching for the gate, the sunset no match for her blazing eyes.

I heard English being spoken, and several colliding voices trying to soothe or reason.

She spun around, incensed. 'No, *no!* It is unforgivable! Who put the silver drachma in his mouth? *Who?* Who gave you the right? I should have taken his body home with me, I should never have agreed to leave him here with you godless people, *never*!'

'It is ancient custom, that's all. Benja loved the island, and everything about it, you know that.'

'The island! The island killed him! *You* killed him!'

And with that, the young woman fled along the path, choking back anger and finding tears, choking back tears and finding an anger too scalding to touch.

Call it premonition, but at that moment I knew it with utter certainty. The target of her wrath, I mean. He was the imposing, no, the almost imperious figure now blocking the gate, each calloused hand the size of a bear's paw. If youth should take a guess at age, somewhere in his early fifties. The broad shoulders telling everyone that here was a man who wouldn't flinch from swinging a pickaxe with his own hand should the mood take him. A shock of dark unkempt hair, dashed with silver at the temples. A face that has known too much dust and sun, too many sleepless nights. *Marcus James Huxley.*

A man for whom even the solemnity of an occasion like this warrants no particular deference to custom, at least to judge from the dusty boots and the donkey jacket. He stepped heavily out of the gate, casting a grim look at the receding figure who had just hurled that shocking accusation at him.

At his shoulder, other faces, unmistakeable, even if I had never set eyes on them before. My future colleagues. Archaeologists and other members of the team, handpicked by the great man himself.

I flinched as Huxley's eyes caught mine in their relentless gravitational field. For a few excruciating seconds, I don't know why, I found myself struggling to hold on to my own sense of self, as though my identity were slipping away from me.

Luckily, I was saved by the priest, who chose that moment to appear at the gates, breaking his stare. What with the grim disapproval of one and the sardonic grimace of the other, the animosity between the two almost made the air crackle.

The object of Huxley's scorn hesitated, turned.

'It is unusual to see you at any religious service, *Professor.* Even

those laying the dead to rest.'

'Is that what you have achieved with your Christian ritual, *Papás*?' replied Huxley with casual contempt.

'You still have the disease of youth, Huxley, thinking you will live forever. But remember this, even you will one day meet God or the Devil through the same hole in the ground.'

A moment later I felt his penetrating eyes on me again, and had to use all my will just to meet them.

The sardonic look was still there, and for a moment I had to wonder who, exactly, it was aimed at — the Papás, me, or the whole world.

He thrust out his hand at me, no doubt recognising my face from the mug shot stapled to my job application.

'Mr Pedrosa, I presume.' The words so dry, a careless breeze might have blown them away.

A flinch of a smile, one that did nothing to dispel that air of resentful impatience about him, as if every moment here was a moment squandered on irrelevance.

His hand took mine in a powerful yet curiously sensitive grip, the mark, perhaps, of a man whose arrogance knew no bounds, yet who was accustomed to handling artefacts as delicate as eggshell.

As for idle pleasantries, there were none. The word 'welcome' passed his lips just once and with that, I was introduced to the others one by one.

Anna Trevisi, a long way from Piacenza, the charcoal scarf tied under her chin accentuating the winter paleness of her face. Henna red hair, filaments of copper where it struck grey. Emerald eyes like tropical sea anticipating the rain. Here to bury a friend, not quite ready to cry, even I could tell that; the tears held back by something, something in turmoil, something in conflict, but what?

Nestor Louganis, Huxley's right-hand man and site foreman, so tall he has to stoop as he passes under the cemetery archway. Nestled at his side, his fiancée Maria, an island beauty if ever there was one. High cheekbones, wide almond eyes, and a smile that on better days might have rivalled the dawning sun. But not today. Not with that swollen redness about them. She had been crying long and hard.

'Sam,' muttered Anna, with a vexed glance over her shoulder.

Samuel Gascon. Last known abode some attic apartment in the Paris student quarter, Saint-Michel. Half a dozen years older than me, if that. Typical Latin looks, at least if you could forget even for

an instant those eyes, inherited from God knows where, a shocking blue that drew the stares, just as they drew mine now; how could they not? There was a brooding, even resentful, air about him, and he wasn't hiding it either, a bored *who cares?* curl to his lips as he slouched against the cemetery wall, rolling a cigarette.

A pudgy hand thrust its way between the milling bodies. Dr Adrian Hunt, thinning hair, waddling gait, and that pink English skin that the sun refuses to bronze even in summer. He stood there like a plump, startled bird, peering out through round tortoiseshell glasses, probably still wondering at the back of his mind why he had deserted the gothic spires of Oxford for this godforsaken place. Then it struck me, as we shook hands. This man I had seen before, on the upper deck of the *Pegasus*, his newspaper announcing those stunning hieroglyphic finds at the dig. There was a fidgety apprehension about him that somehow even this outlandish moment couldn't quite explain.

Catching a movement along the pathway I realised we were being watched by two policemen, one as round as a barrel, the other as tall and thin as a beanpole.

The moment had me in its grip. I had to say something.

'Who is it?' I asked Huxley. 'Who has died?'

His hesitation barely measured a skipped heartbeat.

'Your predecessor, Mr Pedrosa. Benjamin Randal. He has lost his life. I trust you will be more careful with yours.'

4.

Just for a second I felt myself falling, the words like brine slick rocks, my feet plunging into the foaming waters between them. Someone shot out a hand to steady me, and I heard a disembodied voice say, 'Are you all right?'

Straightening up, I mumbled my excuses, about the journey, the storm, the sleepless nights. Come to think of it, I hadn't eaten so much as a slice of bread in twelve hours.

As I looked up, I found eyes the colour of blue glass fixed on me, I don't know why, almost as if they were tapping my discomfort for their own pleasure. With a sneer, the young man stubbed out his cigarette on the cemetery wall.

'Tomorrow morning bright and early, Mr Pedrosa,' Huxley declared in parting. 'I trust you will not disappoint us on your first day.'

He turned, setting off along the path at a brisk stride.

With a stab of apprehension just at the thought at that freshly dug grave in there, I called after him: 'Do I have lodgings here? In the town, I mean?'

'A fifteen minute walk at best,' he replied sharply, pointing along the crater rim, tinged lava-red now in the dusk. 'Beyond the church with the blue dome, ask at the taverna and you'll find your accommodation.'

And with a curt nod he moved on, the others in his wake. In the gathering darkness I was left standing at the cemetery gates, the candles casting their eerie glow over the sepia faces of the dead.

Retracing my steps, the feeble lamps of the town were hardly distinguishable from the stars above.

Down below, the caldera lay in trembling moonlight, the jagged, boulder-strewn shores of the Burnt Islands engulfed in silver.

Passing the church with the blue dome, there was still no sign of Huxley's mythical taverna. The clip-clopping of hooves welled up along the narrow street, and then they appeared, barely more than shadows under the lamps. One of the muleteers, about to stable his animal for the night. Stopping him, I asked the way. About as talkative as his mule, he offered a gruff toss of the head up the street. Just as he was about to move on, I remembered my luggage at the *kafeneion* and

asked if he would collect it for me. Ten drachmas, barked the stubbled face, and though it seemed a little steep, the deal was done.

I was beginning to think I'd already passed it without realising, when I came across a blue door and a glowing window filled with dusty bottles of wine. I peered inside. A few small tables, an iron stove in a corner. Then a lopsided doorway opening onto a cramped kitchen, where an elderly woman was tending her pots and pans. Hardly what anyone would have imagined as a taverna, that's for sure. To all intents and purposes, it was just a private household that had added a couple of extra tables to its living room. Just as I swung open the door, I felt a tug from the other side and a stocky man with grey-flecked hair almost barged into me. A startled expression crossed his face, momentarily chasing away the anxiousness that had set up home in his eyes.

He must have been three times my age, but still addressed me formally as 'sir'. 'We have been expecting you, *Kyrios*,' he wheezed, producing a huge iron key from his jacket pocket. A few yards up the pathway we came to a barrel-vaulted house with a small courtyard and a bare-limbed fig tree.

Oil lamp in one hand, key in the other, my landlord struggled with the lock until the door finally creaked open.

Inside, it was spartan but clean, smelling of fresh whitewash.

A half-flight of narrow stairs led to the bedroom, illuminated by the dim glow of an electric bulb. Small but functional, with a wardrobe, a chest of drawers, and a twanging, coil-spring bed.

Over the blue table in the kitchen hung a candle lamp and I wasted no time in lighting it, the sputtering wick sending our silhouettes leaping over the walls.

Like eyes preoccupied with other things, the room's twin windows stared out across the dizzying moonlit sea. From now on, I would be living here, perched on the lip of the crater, with nothing between me and the abyss but a wall made of sun brick, stucco and whitewash.

No sooner had my landlord taken his leave than I heard the echo of hooves along the pathway, signalling the arrival of my luggage.

For all his apparent surliness, the muleteer insisted on carrying in my trunk and cases on his own shoulders.

Down on the painted cement floor, I set about unpacking the essentials, but found trouble staring me in the face the moment I opened my first suitcase.

Someone had pried open the locks; their sticky fingers rifling

through everything inside — shirts, pullovers, underwear, books, even my diary and correspondence with Huxley's agent, Svetlana Bé. Nothing seemed to be missing, but that left me more puzzled than relieved.

Angry, upset, I charged back into town with every intention of confronting the wiry little man in the *kafeneion*. Maybe it was just the exhaustion catching up with me but by the time I had reached the first flight of steps into town, I was already regretting my impulsiveness. *What proof do you have?* I thought. *None!*

Suddenly, I heard quarrelsome voices in the air, faint but insistent, welling up on the tail end of the gusts, then subsiding. Out of curiosity I allowed them to draw me in, along a labyrinth of narrow, dimly-lit streets.

Turning a corner, a wash of yellow light appeared and I found myself standing outside a kind of wine cellar or *kanava*, its steep flight of steps disappearing through an arched doorway. The angry voices were unmistakeable now, even as the thick stone walls continued to muffle them.

On impulse, I ventured inside; my second blunder within as many hours. On unfamiliar ground, I found myself staring up at the vaulted ceiling and the huge oak and pinewood barrels lining the walls.

The air was so thick it was almost viscous, sour from spilled wine, acrid with the smoke of cheap tobacco. But there was something else. A tension so electric it seemed to crackle between the walls.

Through the billowing smoke a dozen or so men materialised, some standing, others occupying the rickety blue tables and chairs scattered about the stone-flagged floor. My eyes were drawn at once to the ringleaders, confronting each other at close quarters at the tiled wooden bar, each trying to shout the other down.

I tried to take in what I was seeing: two sides of island opinion, cleaved down the middle, and both more than a little worse for wear after a night's drinking.

I counted myself lucky that our Greek teacher had brought such tales of island life into the classroom, telling us about the function of the village *kafeneion* or of a place like this, an exclusively male preserve where opinions not so much met in debate as in battle.

And now I was seeing it firsthand, wine and raki overflowing, tempers flaring, argument teetering precariously between dispute and brawl.

Remember, the greatest threat is not loss of life or limb, but loss of face, my teacher was saying, her amused, ironic voice far too distant for comfort.

The two protagonists were easy enough to tell apart.

In the left corner, a gangling individual with a dense thatch of black hair and a Cretan-style moustache. And in the right, a thickset man in a crumpled suit, with a forehead overhang that appeared to half bury his eyes. Belly as swollen as a wineskin. Thin strands of hair slicked over his scalp to hide the bald facts from his own mind.

Around them, their enemies and supporters yelled, laughed, jeered, spat, thumped the tables. Sometimes, from one table or another, I thought I even caught appeals to reason but, if so, these were drowned as summarily as a litter of Greek kittens.

As far as I could tell, most were farmers, fishers, labourers, muleteers. The expressions etched onto their faces seemed to magnify in depth for a moment, leaping out at me, as if reflecting all the characters that the world had ever sought to create. Some smoked, others fingered their worry beads, clicking them loudly over their knuckles.

Lurid obscenities, only a quarter of which I could understand at all, were bouncing off the walls and echoing off the vaulted ceiling. Insults aimed at fate or absent enemies, curses contrived to pack a punch into their own emphatic opinions.

Confused by the bluster and noise, thrown by the unfamiliar dialect, I was struggling to understand what the argument was even about. By the time I had finally cottoned on, it was already too late. Their rage, I realised, was directed at *me* — or at least, the archaeological dig that had just hired me.

Half the eyes in the cellar were already glaring through the smoke at me, obviously sizing up the stranger in their midst.

Given half the chance you wouldn't have seen me for dust, but turning tail wasn't any option anymore. I'd never live it down.

From the greying figure behind the bar, I ordered red wine from the barrel. He was about to confuse me with varieties and vintages, for which the island is famous, but then evidently thought better of it, filling a glass from the nearest tap instead.

I caught the nonchalant gleam in his eye and I took some comfort from it. It meant he was accustomed to playing the referee, just as tradition demanded. Not that he was above taking the odd kick himself to keep the ball in play.

'Hey, Manoli,' he shouted at the beanpole Cretan, tossing his head towards me, 'look what the storm's blown in. The Professor's brand new boy.'

Reeling through a barrelful of emotions, Manolis leered through the smoke at me. Then with bared teeth, he shot out a splayed hand at the invisible Huxley, a silent yet eloquent curse of the worst possible kind. It was enough to break the tension like a downpour after a thunderclap. A jeering chorus rang off the cellar's walls.

The man in the rumpled grey suit raised his arms in mock supplication, as if appealing to reason lost among madmen.

'How can you say that?' he shouted above the din. 'Aren't your sons on the payroll there, digging down through the ash? Doesn't he pay them a decent wage? And you, Kostas, hiding back there, aren't the foreigners buying everything off your shelves, even at prices that would bring a blush to the cheeks of Lucifer himself?'

Roars of laughter, cries of protest.

'You all need him,' the stocky man went on. 'Your sons. Your daughters. He puts food on your tables, pays your bills, sends your children to school. Pah! You fools. You don't deserve such luck.'

That was too much for Manolis, and the words seemed to have sobered him, if only marginally.

'You!' he yelled, stabbing at several men at the tables with a gangling arm. 'Tell him! Tell the foreigner here what he's in for… If he lives that long!' The arm swung round to me, and I flinched.

'What's the use?' said one, with a disdainful shrug. 'Telling a boy something only a man can understand?'

More jeers, this time at my expense.

'Come on,' yelled the beanpole, 'you Nikos, and you Spyros and you too, Panos. Speak up!'

One elderly man with sad eyes and grey stubble cheeks got to his feet, the blue wooden chair scraping over the stones behind him.

'I shall tell my story,' he began.

As he spoke, a hush fell over the cellar and it occurred to me that this was somehow as ancient as mythology itself.

'It was first light. I was riding my mule to the fields, smoking a cigarette along the way, thinking about my son in Athens. You all know where my land is, just bordering the great holes they are digging to reach the towns of the ancient ones that lie beneath us. But then just as the sun was about to show its face, I saw them through the twilight, as

clearly as I see you now. Wraiths. Ghosts. Flocking out of the ground! Humans and animals alike, blossoming trees, rivers, escaping the shadows. As they touched the light, there was a sound like sighing, a great lament, and they were gone. After living in the earth so long, perhaps the daylight was too much for them to bear.'

A strained silence descended upon the cellar, and within it, the fear was palpable. There were whispers of curse, the dreaded word hissed between the tables on the raki damp smoke. Hailstorms destroying the first seedlings. A mad squall out of a clear blue sky, capsizing a boat, almost sending its hapless skipper to the bottom to sleep with the fishes. A child, lost in the fourth month. And now the Professor's boy, stone dead.

'They must be driven off the island before it's too late!' yelled Manolis, the words grinding between his teeth, the spent raki glass slamming onto the bar.

'You fools, just think what it will mean for our island!' parried the rumpled grey suit. 'This Professor Huxley is an educated man. When the city of the ancients is finally free of the clinging dirt, people will come from far and wide just to see it, walking the streets, scattering their dollars and deutschmarks wherever they pass. We shall be rich beyond imagining. You'll not have to grub about in the fields from dawn to dusk just to feed your families. Every home will have electricity and running water. We shall not repair our houses, but build brand new ones, two, three, four storeys tall!'

Another ear-splitting clash of words, every man shouting for all he was worth.

Just then, Huxley's foreman, Nestor Louganis, came clattering down the steps.

Greek he may have been, but to these islanders he was scarcely less foreign than I.

'*Ela*, drink up,' he said, gravel and treacle voice barely audible in the uproar.

He slammed a few drachmas onto the bar and began nudging me towards the steps.

Whether I was being rescued for my own sake or to prevent me hearing things I wasn't deemed ready for, who could say.

'You shouldn't have to go through that on your first night,' frustration edging his voice as we climbed up into the chill night air.

'I like to know what I'm letting myself in for,' I replied, putting a

brave face on things. 'The sooner the better.'

'Well, if it hadn't been for Benja's funeral today, of course we would have seen you settled in. It's hit us badly. His wife Jenna more than anyone.'

'How did he die?'

He uttered a torn sigh, running fingers through his close-cropped hair. Caught by the faint light of a street lamp, his face suddenly seemed creased by anxiety — or was it doubt?

'Just a stupid accident.'

'Island opinion seems divided,' I remarked, with unintended irony. 'It appears Professor Huxley is either going to make people fabulously rich or unleash the Devil.'

When that elicited only a disparaging click of the tongue, I added: 'So what do the local authorities have to say about it all?'

I caught his piercing glance and for a moment we stood facing each other in the street, the wind sighing forlornly between the houses, clattering the tin reflectors of the lamps.

'Those *were* the local authorities,' he replied, with just enough measure in his voice to let the bombshell hit me with its full force. 'The man in the grey suit promising them paradise — he's our mayor, Giannis Papadaikis. And Manolis the Cretan — who'd like nothing better than to throw us all off the island or into jail — well, he might be a hobby fisherman who prefers to believe that curse, not stupidity, almost sent him to a watery grave, but he's also our chief of police.'

I suppose it was that revelation that shocked me most of all. Suddenly, I remembered where I had seen that scrawny, sunken-cheeked man before; standing on the path with his barrel-round deputy, spying on the funeral of the boy I had come to replace.

What the hell was I doing here?

Back at my lodgings, I undressed, threw my clothes onto the floor and myself into bed. I was just about to fall asleep, some liquid dream already filling my eyes, when I burst awake, coughing, my eyes streaming.

'*Who put the silver drachma in his mouth? Who gave you the right?*' her distraught voice a receding echo over the grave. But it was ancient custom, wasn't it, just as one of Huxley's crew had insisted, reaching out to comfort her. The coin to pay the Ferryman. To make the crossing. A rite of passage, if you like — even if that was to the life hereafter.

5.

I tossed and turned, swept along in a jarring torrent of dreams. Trains heading south, my fleapit pension in Athens, the *Pegasus* pitching through the waves like a child's toy, my predecessor's dead face catching the sunset.

When the alarm clock began jangling its head off at the crack of dawn, I needed several seconds just to remember where I was.

For some time I just lay there, taking in the view from the window, the dawn light bleeding into a midnight blue sky, extinguishing stars one by one. It was a sense of tranquillity short-lived. Yesterday's events quickly began pounding through my head again, hurling questions, demanding answers. I jumped out of bed, washed, shaved, and hurried into town. It was day one in my brand new job.

By the time I arrived, the daily ritual in the town square was already in full swing, the vehicles lined up outside the post office looking like some ragtag military convoy. A couple of battered Land Rovers, and an American army jeep with the white star still painted onto the hood; then an olive green Berna truck, followed by an incongruous sky blue Morris Minor that had clearly seen better days. And, at the tail end of the column, a decrepit old bus, another War relic by the look of it, used to ferry the site labourers back and forth.

Watching them climb aboard, my encounter in the wine cellar barged its way into my head. Seconds later, I realised why. I had been catching something from them unconsciously. Rumblings of discontent. Furtive glances in Professor Huxley's direction, doubtful or suspicious. Angry mutters exchanged as they stowed their tools and lunch boxes.

'I trust you are settling in, Mr Pedrosa.'

Startled to find him standing there next to me, I blurted, 'Yes, Professor… Only…'

'Only *what*?' still glaring at the unfolding drama of the convoy.

'Only I found the locks forced on my luggage. Whoever it was, they went through everything — clothes, books, papers, even our correspondence.'

Eyes interrogating mine, he added abruptly: 'And? To your knowledge, is anything missing?'

'No, nothing.'

'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.'

I was left gaping at his back as he strode impatiently towards the lead Land Rover — the white one of course.

The excavations lay at the farthest corner of the island, at the southern tip of its lunar crescent, Cape Akrotiri.

Grating into gear we set off, Huxley at the wheel, Nestor Louganis up front with him today, while his own vehicle was on the blocks with a cracked sump. With Sam generously sharing the next row with his own gear, that left the narrow stone-hard bench seat right at the back just for me.

Between church and school, we passed one of those garish new hoardings going up over the whole country, a rifle-toting soldier with fixed bayonet, silhouetted against a Phoenix rising from the ashes on wings of flame. Commemorating the military coup and the radiant new dawn of the Colonels, they were probably meant to be inspirational, but just ended up somewhere between kitsch and creepy.

On the outskirts of town, the tarred surface abruptly turned to dust.

'Is it always like this, every day?' I said, trying to hold on as we hit some bone-jarring rut or pothole.

'Yes, Nicky. Every day twice a day,' came the murmur from the row in front. 'What about you?' The sexual innuendo was one thing; the hostility, just baffling.

Apparently taking it upon himself to prime the new boy, Nestor called out from the front: 'Sometimes we take the caïque when the winds are favourable. But that can make for a wet and miserable crossing in winter. If the wind's gusting from the south or the east, it can get rough, too, even treacherous rounding the cape.'

But the dust track had its own pitfalls, sometimes disintegrating altogether, washed out by the rains, blocked by rock fall or landslide.

'After a storm like that,' explained Nestor, 'the one that's just hit us, you can bank on it.'

And he was right. A hundred yards on our convoy ground to a halt, the track blocked by several dislodged boulders. Not on the clock until

they were through the gates, the hired hands struggled to drag them aside, using winches, levers, even the truck-mounted pulley.

Huxley sat motionless behind the wheel, staring bleakly through the windshield and becoming more irritable by the second.

'There has to be an easier way!' I caught the look reflected in the rearview mirror. That scornful defiance that crept into his eyes and tugged at his mouth, as if something out there, hidden by the sky, hidden by the rocks, were deliberately and maliciously meddling in his plans.

'I hope you are paying attention, Mr Pedrosa,' he said in that menacing voice of his, like a thunderclap sky that might blow up a great storm or just come to nothing. 'The obstacles that are thrown in our path, the obstacles that keep us from achieving what we must.'

Finally, there it was, sweeping out before us as the track took its demented hairpin turns along the mountainside.

Cape Akrotiri. Not much more than a razor cliff landmark for seafarers, a lava stone lighthouse marking its treacherous tip. Desiccated fields of charcoal soil flecked with white pumice. Crumbling dry stone walls, some almost buried by black sand drifts. A few farmer's *kalivia,* used to spend a grape harvest night, store spring hay or stable a goat or a mule.

From its northern point, what was left of the ancient crater wall went sloping back towards a rock-littered shore. There, just as the red ochre cliffs began to rise and the waters deepened, Nestor and his crew had constructed a cement dock so that freighters or fishing boats might supply the camp.

At our backs, the austere, unforgiving face of the Prophet Elias, the gashed, shrunken skeleton of a mountain that once must have towered over the Aegean in snow-capped splendour.

As we began our descent, I could even make out the excavations themselves, more striking, more brutal than anything I had imagined; like open cast mines biting into sheer cliffs, like trenches crisscrossing a battlefield.

We passed through the camp gates, thrown together with scrap metal and baling wire, and just before the track took a brief final plunge towards the excavations, parked on a small plateau of compacted ash.

I tried to take it all in. The odd holes in the ground like mine shafts. The army green tents where the visiting students and their teachers were encamped. The huts and sheds where tools were stored and arte-

facts sorted and catalogued. The laboratory and darkroom. The site office at the gates.

Muttering darkly, the labourers began moving into camp, several spitting surreptitiously into the dust as they hurried past the man who, they imagined, was so recklessly tempting fate. At their side, Nestor was doing his taciturn best to lift their spirits, promising mid-morning beer, bottles frosted from the dry ice machine in the mess.

The men collected their tools from the lock-ups, then headed down the slope towards a deep cleft. Burrowing into the ash as if cut with a knife, it went dipping down towards the sea, ultimately widening into the excavation zone, an area so immense it looked more like an industrial quarry than an archaeological dig.

Along the pumice-littered track the men filed in like miners, some wearing tin hats, others carrying pickaxes and shovels, the stones crunching under their feet like bones in an ancient graveyard.

At the perimeter of the site, where the volcanic ash rose like the sides of a great bowl, I gained my first awestruck impression of just how much tephra had to be shifted to reach the civilisation entombed below. Thousands, no, hundreds of thousands of tons of the stuff.

At the cliffs towards the end of the peninsula, a pair of rumbling bulldozers were driving waves of ash and pumice into the sea. On the east side, mechanical excavators were scooping up ash and lava rubble and depositing it onto a droning conveyor belt, the rollers squeaking loudly in complaint.

Despite the chill breeze off the sea, the March sun was just warm enough to remember its coming rendezvous with spring. Above our heads, the sky glowed, and I remember thinking, it is almost too blue to believe.

Here and there, Huxley's archaeologists were fussing over exposed walls and foundations with tools no more sophisticated than a garden trowel, a dustpan and brush, a garden soil sieve, a hoe.

At times, the work looked impossibly pernickety, and a stark enough contrast to the bulldozers droning away on the cliff.

Gingerly, I approached the fringes of the dig, an area marked by white demarcation lines and exposed trenches.

Sam, already up to his waist, was sifting through earth flecked with ceramic dust and coloured fragments. To my untrained eye, it seemed little more than building rubble and I was finding it impossible to

visualise the ancient civilisation that was supposed to lie buried under our feet.

Huxley's other foot soldiers occupied trenches deeper into the quarry. I caught sight of Anna, hardly recognisable now in khaki fatigues, a dusty scarf tied under her chin. Head-bobbing around her, a gaggle of over-eager students, fumbling with the bulky field camera and its cumbersome wooden tripod.

Hut door slamming behind him, Huxley came marching towards us.

Just when I thought this is it, your job's about to begin, Sam uttered a piercing whistle between his teeth. Huxley veered towards his trench with a glower, not appreciating the crudity of the summons one bit.

There was a coldness, a bitterness between them like dead ash.

Against the light flushing skywards over the mountain, Sam held up a fragment of pottery, the neck and handle of a small terracotta jug, still bearing streaks of blue pigment. With an agility surprising for a man of his age and build, Huxley vaulted into the trench beside him, taking the artefact in his fingers.

One cursory glance and he pronounced judgment. 'A Roman ceramic dump.'

Sam uttered an angry sigh. 'I know that. But look at the fine work on the stem. There could be other finds here, valuable in their own right.'

'Why are you wasting your time with this? More to the point, why are you wasting mine? Dig! Dig deeper! Get the machines over here. Get the tephra shifted.'

'The trouble with you is, you can never admit you're fucking wrong!' raged Sam, proving that even dead ash can sporadically burst into flame.

Barging between us, he threw me a look of such inexplicable hatred that I almost felt the physical force of it buckling the air.

I stared into the trench that had caused such bitter dispute between them, trying to take in the idea that the artefacts of one age were about to be crushed in order to reach those of a far older civilisation lying farther below.

Anger still smouldering in his eyes, Huxley said: 'How will you ever accomplish your duties here, Mr Pedrosa, if you are too intimidated or just too downright timid to pose the questions for which you

have no answer? How will you attain knowledge?' Intolerant of even the faintest hesitation, he added: 'Well? Do you have a question that is burning for an answer?'

'The Romans were here?' I was puzzled because even my limited knowledge separated these civilisations, Minoan and Roman, by two millennia or more.

'The Romans were everywhere,' he replied brusquely. 'Some might even say they are still with us today.'

While that sardonic aside went flying over my head, he added: 'Think of the strata as ages, as periods in time.'

'The picks and shovels will always hit the youngest civilisation first.'

'Yes.' The impatience still edging his voice. 'First the early Byzantine chapel or peasant's hut, their crumbling walls buried by dust storms. Then the Roman remains, an insignificant outpost that one day must have looked up into the sky to find it snowing ash. A minor eruption, but enough to bury what few buildings they had erected here — hence the broken mosaics of poor quality, the cheap ceramics…'

'Then the Minoans are deeper still.'

'Under this blanket of ash a hundred feet deep. Why else would we need all these machines to shift it? Well, you will see for yourself, soon enough. The streets, houses and temples we have already exhumed.' He cast a brooding look over the tortured landscape, over the bare rock mountain. 'At the scene of a great cataclysm, Mr Pedrosa — that is where you now find yourself. One that shook the ancient world to its core, brought about night in broad daylight, hurled flaming debris into the sky, rained fire over the Aegean. The day the island exploded with the force of a hundred thousand atomic bombs.'

'But why aren't we preserving these Roman things?'

'Because they are worthless and because we have no time,' he snapped. 'We could live another five hundred years, dig day and night and still would have exhumed only a fraction of the Minoan treasures that lie buried beneath us. So, do you think I have time to waste on this Roman gimcrack?'

I heard a plodding step behind me. It was Adrian Hunt, owl-eyed spectacles smudged with sweat, a fine film of ash catching his own careless fingerprint. 'That is an unbelievably close-minded view, Huxley. And I do not believe you should berate Sam for wanting to protect these artefacts as we dig.'

'Have you met "Hadrian"?' demanded Huxley, in a tone that escaped mockery by the skin of its teeth. I had to wonder if the tension was always like this, or whether it was just the fallout from my predecessor's death. 'Captivated by all things Roman. Wet nursed on Roman studies. And on his infrequent days off, where will you find him? Beachcombing? Walking the mountain? Sailing a boat? No. He's digging for Roman trinkets, saving them from the dump or the bulldozer, things that even the Romans saw fit to throw away before us.'

Hadrian — at least I now had an explanation for his pun-making nickname. He blinked peevishly, but then gave as good as he got, probably secure in the knowledge that, whatever their differences, he was still Huxley's second-in-command. In charge of site mapping, or stratigraphy, he was about to unfurl a huge chart, the better to harangue Huxley for his alleged vandalism, but Huxley would have none of it.

'How can you possibly know what these finds might reveal about the outpost they established here?' squealed Hadrian indignantly. 'It is reckless, unforgivably reckless!'

Huxley grunted and said: 'I cannot wait to be proven wrong, Hadrian.'

6.

I followed him into the long wooden hut, penumbral light seeping in from the narrow windows under the eaves.

Regimented columns of metal shelving disappeared into the shadows, seemingly running the length of the building, floor to ceiling.

Midpoint, enough space had been made for two trestle tables, positioned end to end and covered with green draughtsman's paper.

It was only as he flicked on the bank of lights suspended above that they emerged from the gloom. Potsherds. Fragments. Littering the tabletop from one end to the other, remnants of amphorae, vases, jugs, mixing bowls, sculptures, friezes, frescoes, and God knows what else.

Here and there they formed clusters, and elsewhere, scattered away from one another, forms of relationship and division presumably of significance to the hand that had arranged them. Huxley's.

Judging from the cardboard storage boxes stacked five high on every shelf, there must have been thousands upon thousands of them, of infinite, mind-boggling, shape and size.

'Do you know what you are looking at?'

'Potsherds?'

'Potsherds!' he retorted, as though I had said something very stupid. 'No. No. You would do better to think of them as jigsaw pieces. Parts of an immense puzzle bearing a picture we cannot yet see.'

He snatched a clay fragment from the table.

'This one, for example, offering us nothing more tangible than a glimpse of blue sky.'

He reached forward, seizing a fragment as brittle as eggshell. On it, in colours barely faded by the years, a river scene, reeds and rushes, a water bird flying low.

A moment's hesitation, and he thought better of it, plucking from the table what looked like a beach pebble, smooth, moulded, its surface bearing a line of faded script. 'Or perhaps this one here, the remains of a stone tablet that lay in water long before the great cataclysm. And freshwater, not sea, flowing, not still.'

'What does it say?'

He grunted, as though I had exposed some flaw or weakness in his abilities.

'Now you begin to appreciate the magnitude of the problem,' he replied, in a clipped voice. 'It is written in Linear A, a dead language we may never decipher.'

'But you don't really expect to find the missing pieces to all these things?' I said dumbly, casting an eye over to the door where two giant ceramic pithoi, like twin Humpty Dumpties, had obviously been put back together again after all.

'That is not the nature of the puzzle. Rather, it is the hidden picture that emerges from all the fragments. Who were these people? What did they believe? Where were they going? What was the island like before the firestorm engulfed it? Can we form a picture of its landscape and farmland, its towns and cities, gain an understanding of its economy, its philosophy, its technological achievements?'

'You can tell all that just from these fragments?'

'We begin. By a process of forensic analysis, logical deduction. The picture will emerge because we seek it, demand it. It cannot hide forever.'

★

Left to my own devices again, I began exploring the excavation site, taking care where I put my feet because of all the trenches, ditches and holes.

The more I saw, the more I began to understand the morbid superstitions of the locals. In places, weird shapes had been carved out of the lava by wind and water. Here and there, the gashed volcanic walls were encrusted with obsidian, or bore extravagant red lava or brimstone-yellow seams.

When a solitary and bloody-minded cloud chose that moment to eclipse the sun, the effect was uncanny, plunging us into a kind of ghostly twilight.

In their trenches or among the scorched walls, the crew continued to dig and sift, faces like death masks against the grey volcanic ash.

Stupid, I know, but in that air pocket of a moment I suddenly found myself entering the cemetery gates again, staring into the pitch pine coffin and the face of my predecessor, his numb skin and straw blond hair catching the sunset. *Just ancient custom*, comes the voice between the tombs.

Yet the more I twisted it now, the odder that assertion became.

Benjamin Randal. The English lad with the pretty young wife. It can hardly have been *his* tradition, can it? To have been interred on this far-flung Cycladic island, in a Greek Orthodox boneyard with a pagan silver drachma on his tongue?

For once, I was glad I hadn't skived off every mythology lecture at college. At least I knew the basics.

Still in the cloud's sombre shadow, it wasn't even hard to picture him trudging through the grey dust Underworld that the ancients believed lay beneath our feet. Imagination getting the better of me, I saw him reach the bog marshlands formed by the Styx and Acheron, rivers that divided the living world from the dead. Caught the dark reflection in his eyes from the black water, a cowled figure punting his flat-bottomed boat through the mist and the whispering reeds. The Ferryman. Charon, son of Darkness and Night.

Reaching the far shore, he'd enter the Kingdom of Hades, there to join the legions of the dead. Shadow beings, so the legend went, strengthless doppelgangers that death-trespassing heroes like Orpheus and Odysseus had to revive with draughts of blood, mead or wine, just to give them voice to speak.

Yes, just as that bilious old Frenchman with the wrinkled lips and parchment skin had so trenchantly pointed out in his rant against the ship's indolent crew, these golden heroes would defy even King Death in person.

On some reckless mission inspired by love, fate or a vengeful god, they would pothole through labyrinthine caves, or follow the Styx or Acheron upstream from where they empty into the world.

Battling fearsome monsters and demons along the way, some even ventured as far as the Elysian Fields, with their rounded hills, streams and asphodel meadows. Others, the Isles of the Blest, just visible from Elysium's towering sea cliffs; an archipelago in the farthest reaches of the sunset, where celestial music was said to enchant the sky, and whose ever-shifting shores would so sublimely foil the souls of the undeserving, those who were never meant to be there.

Anyway, that was the mythology, not that it offered any insights into the silver drachma on Benjamin Randal's tongue, let alone the livid accusation bereaved Jenna had hurled across the tombs. About the island killing him. About Huxley killing him. Maybe it was just emotion, the world falling in on her.

Not a moment too soon, the sun returned in a blaze of glory, chasing the cloud shadow over the peninsula like the blade of a scythe.

Returning from a bad-humoured visit to the site office, Huxley was now dashing past me, telling me not to dawdle, I was with him.

We crossed the excavation site, our feet raising little blizzards of dust. Past the mess tent. Past the laboratory and darkroom. Past the student encampment with the neat rows of army tents, the water cisterns, washrooms and latrines.

'The eastern sector,' Huxley announced, with a perfunctory toss of the head towards an array of elaborate trenches, half exposed walls and dunes of ash, where students from the British, French and Italian Schools were working under the supervision of their teachers; experienced archaeologists in their own right. It was a beehive, and I caught at least five languages being spoken as the various contingents worked the trenches, mapped, plotted and recorded finds within the sector zones assigned to them.

Scattered among the excavation pits were bleak, ruined shells of houses, exposed walls the colour of pallid sandstone, victims of the snowing ash, the invincible might of the lava flows or the sheer weight of the tephra. A fractured staircase, now ending in thin air. The remains of an arched doorway. A cracked amphora. He nodded a formal good morning to the archaeologist in charge of the zone we were crossing, this time a professor from Patras University, Galatea somebody, her jet-black hair so infested with ash it looked as if shock or hardship had robbed her of her youth.

The trail led us over a sand dune bluff, from whose wind-ribbed summit we could see the farthest point of the peninsula and the Aegean on three sides. What with the midnight blue sky, the Burnt Islands in the caldera, and the distant town of Phíra dusting the mighty volcanic cliffs like a fresh snowfall, the view was incredible.

He turned in an arc, his arm sweeping over the western skyline. 'Our sector. The west.'

'They're separate? Why?'

'We meet. Once a week, twice a week, when circumstances dictate. You're neither too young nor immature, Mr Pedrosa, to be ignorant of the professional rivalries that plague our oh-so principled profession. Luckily, within the zones assigned to them, they have their own petty turf wars to keep them occupied.'

In the distance stood a cluster of exhumed buildings of the same

bleak colour, rising over what might once have been the peak of a hill. Houses devoured by the earth. Lying abandoned in the guts of the earth for three and a half millennia. It was as if they still possessed the death hue of the Underworld itself.

A few yards on we came across Nestor Louganis, a bunch of nails between his teeth, a tool belt slung around his hips, fixing the wooden scaffolding around a three-storey house designated '16'.

'Is it secure?' Huxley called. Leaning out from the highest platform, where he was lashing the joints together with rope for good measure, Nestor offered a taciturn if emphatic nod of assent.

As it climbed the hill, the dust track turned into an ancient street of carved geometric stone. 'The Sacred Way,' he announced, pointing out the temple at its crest. 'At least,' he added in a taut voice, 'that is the name we have bestowed upon it, as much as that can ever mean in a city without a name, on an island without a name.'

Here the preservation of the houses was of a different order of magnitude altogether, as though the falling ash might have ended up cocooning rather than crushing them. When I noted as much to my boss, he grunted and said, 'Yes, somehow or other this section of the city was spared the worst of the burning ash; so too the pyroclastic blast, an inferno of superheated gasses that swept down the walls of the volcano as the island blew apart, incinerating everything in its path.'

We entered a wide thoroughfare lined with houses, some three storeys high, the ceiling columns and flights of stairs still intact. Sometimes, the roofs gave way to sky terraces, linking this house or that. As the street narrowed, we passed under balconies left and right, and then the shop-fronts began, what had once been a bakery by the look of it, hardly different from the one in town, then some kind of ceramic workshop.

Here and there, scattered about the perimeter, he pointed to what looked like broken stone columns, some almost 10 feet in diameter.

'A ruined temple,' I said, hazarding a guess.

'Petrified tree stumps,' he replied, in that abrupt way of his, 'living things, turned to stone by hot falling ash.' Molecule by molecule, the searing ash had even captured the tree rings and the intricate pattern of the bark.

Trees? I thought, trying hard to visualise them in an ash desert like this, and wondering how tall they must have been to have a girth like that. 'What kind of trees?'

'That awaits analysis. We have sent cell structure samples to Kew.'

Without warning he veered down a narrow side street and darted through a stone-braced doorway.

Just as my eyes were becoming accustomed to the gloom, he threw aside one of the panels boarding up the house to protect it from the elements. The light came streaming in and I just stood there, blinking, disbelieving.

I was standing inside a house that hadn't been touched for the better part of three and a half thousand years. And yet everything was exactly as they had left it on that fateful day, when the world these people knew and trusted blew apart. Who knows, perhaps a day just like this, dreaming of spring.

No mistaking the purpose of this room. Amphorae of olive oil and wine, jars of grain and spice. Pots and pans, in earthenware and bronze, lined up neatly along a wall. Barley grains, in a clay crock. A well-worn marble-topped table with blue and rose veins, the criss-cross knife scores still visible. A hearth with fire-blackened cooking pots. Everything neatly in its place.

I was aware of his flecked eyes upon me again, that penetrating look that seemed to be measuring reactions, reading thoughts.

Abruptly, he turned on his heel and entered an adjoining room. The instant he wrenched the panels aside, I could feel the breath being snatched away from me, the realisation hitting me in a riot of ancient colour.

The frescoes. He may have been guilty of exaggeration in other things, but not these, bold, vibrant, the spice pigments as fresh as the day they had touched moist plaster. Swallows soaring over summer fields. On the high meadow, beautiful young women with wide soulful eyes, gathering saffron. People in the windows of the town houses, talking, gazing out to sea, here in profile, here staring right back at you with limpid eyes lined with kohl.

I was left biting my lips, struck suddenly by the uncanny sensation that we were separated from the inhabitants of this house not by millennia but by moments.

Across the street, the frescoes turned blue with sea, earning the town house a name instead of a number: *Thalassa*. Young naked fishermen on the dock, a brace of sea bream in their hands. A fishing boat with a single canvas sail and trailing oars.

In several rooms conservationists were at work, stabilising the wall

paintings from timber scaffolds. Among them, Sam; apparently restoration was his specialty, and he only worked the trenches at all because Huxley insisted upon it as a matter of diehard principle.

'Step forward, examine the workmanship at close quarters,' commanded Huxley.

Sun-dappled water, iridescent fish among the sea grass meadows, a solitary octopus with intelligent eyes, a school of dolphins leaping by.

'Note the subtlety with which the artist captures his subject,' he went on. 'The playful compassion in the dolphin's eye. The prisms of light over the seabed. Here and there, you can even make out the brush strokes. Do you know what that means? Once we have had time to analyse and compare, we shall even be able to differentiate between individual artists. We may never be able to give them a face or a name and yet somehow we will begin to know them. A mind will emerge from the pigment.'

Detecting our presence from ceiling height where he stood atop a scaffold bridge, Sam shot us an angry scowl, then studiously ignored us. Several students were assisting him, handing him brushes and palettes or mixing pigments; girls, boys, seventeen or eighteen years old, and I couldn't help remarking how unusually attractive they were, at least, when seen in the same place and the same time like that.

The images and colours were still tumbling through my head as we emerged into the sharp winter light. A honey bee in a blossom, children winnowing wheat. The sky-piercing mountain, and the deep green forest. Among the trees, between the waterfalls, an antelope. Peering through the dense foliage, a panther with gleaming eyes.

Back amid the ruins, in the shadow of the broken mountain, the contrast, the implications, couldn't have been starker: these ancient moments, captured in pigment. They were less an insight into changing history than changing reality, the appearance of it; even the meaning of it.

'Is that what they tell you?' demanded Huxley with a curious glance.

'Yes.'

'Then there is something else you might wish to contemplate. All of these representations are found within the same quarter of the city, many along the same street. What does that tell you about the values of our lost civilisation?'

The images ran through my head like the pigments they were made of, but I wasn't getting anywhere until finally he answered himself.

'The fisher boys and the priestess. The saffron gatherers and the philosopher. They tell us that each was held in similar regard, similar esteem. Each made this the world it was, the colour it was.'

Whoever said they depict a vision of heaven on earth was right, I reflected, as we resumed our expedition. That's exactly what they depict. That's exactly what they project.

A time-still moment of heaven before the holocaust.

7.

No sooner had we stepped out into the sunshine again than he began firing questions at me, master to student.

'Tell me what you see,' he commanded, narrowing his eyes at the street, quite as if the image it presented were blurred, not by time, but merely by distance. 'And concentrate only on what your senses tell you. I am not in the least bit interested in what you think I want to hear.'

I turned my attention to the sunlit street. An exhumed water fountain with the face of a beatific god. Temple columns, catching the light. Ancient doors. Ancient windows.

'Remember,' he added severely, 'our powers of deduction rely as much on clues we cannot see as those we can.'

I was at a loss. How the hell was I supposed to form a judgement on something I couldn't even see?

The longer he waited without an answer, the more intimidating his presence became.

'It was technologically accomplished,' I said, taking the jump at last, 'at least for its time.'

D- for effort, judging from the acerbic grunt it elicited.

'And on what do you base that judgement exactly? Merely on the things I have already shown you?'

'No, because of the plumbing,' I said, pointing out the ceramic pipes entering the houses with fresh running water, and the wastewater drains leaving them, the channels running concealed under the streets.

'Why twin pipes?' he snapped.

'One for cold, one for hot?' I blurted, stupid, I know, but it was the only answer I could think of. And it just happened to be right. There were even pipes for winter heating, the water probably tapped from volcanic hot springs nearby.

In some houses, even the windows were still intact, or at least sections of them, bronze frames of small squares or triangles, each holding a pane of hand-blown glass, mica, even seashell.

And then I saw it. The clue that was invisible. The revelation hit me so strongly I almost felt winded by it.

'There are no people,' I said, remembering the kitchen with everything neatly in its place.

Judging from the ironic pat on the shoulder that elicited, my marks had just taken a belated leap for the better.

'That is the mystery in which we find ourselves. Every house is the same. Deserted. Where are the bodies? What happened to the people who once lived here?'

When finally he saw fit to explain, I understood at once. At Pompeii, archaeologists had discovered scores of bodies entombed under the ash, their lava-petrified faces contorted in horror or astonishment. As Vesuvius blew its top, virtually without warning, the inhabitants of the city abandoned their houses in panic, leaving half-eaten meals on tables and pots and pans still bubbling over fires. As they ran for their lives, the sluggish and infirm collapsed in the streets, overcome by the poisonous fumes. Others, their escape routes blocked by lava flows and earthquake fissures, had been embalmed or devoured alive.

Here, it was a different story altogether, the streets and houses bearing no evidence of panic or escape at all.

'And what do you deduce from that?'

I hesitated, reluctant to state the obvious, but then took the plunge anyway. 'They must have been forewarned.'

'By what?'

'The volcano.' Taking in the shattered remains of the crater wall and that immense caldera, 8 miles long, 4 miles wide, I was still struggling to visualise it, towering over the people with its forested slopes and snowy peak, awesome, ominous, beautiful. 'The eruption was slow gathering momentum. Weeks, maybe months. At first, who knows, maybe it was only sending out smoke signals, a column of ash. Then earth tremors, ash falls, lava flows…' I paused, wide-eyed at the realisation. 'They evacuated the island en masse as a precaution. That's why everything's so neatly put away. They expected to return!'

I was feeling quite pleased with myself when he said, almost scathingly: 'Methodical and orderly, is that what you're saying? No need to run for their lives. No reason for blind panic. That's why, under the ash, every street and every house is the same. Pristine. Immaculate. Deserted.'

'It's plausible, isn't it?'

He grunted noncommittally. 'Like all speculative theories, that awaits the proof of confirmation.'

On the rubble strewn slopes beyond, we passed a graveyard of broken machinery; conveyor belts, rusting tractors with crooked wheels, excavator buckets, tangled coils of barbed wire. There we ran into Nestor again, this time supervising the cutting of another deep exploratory shaft into the tephra with his so-called 'trench moles', a band of labourers and off-island engineers apparently handpicked for their dependability and experience.

A man of many talents, Nestor Louganis. Maybe that's why Huxley placed such faith in him. No midday retsina under the olive trees for this Arcadian Greek. Methodical, industrious to a fault, chasing time before time chased him. So mechanically-minded he could fashion almost any tool demanded of him, be that out of cannibalised parts, wood, iron, tin or rope, it just didn't matter. As long as there was something practical about it, he could turn his hand to almost anything, and seemed just at home adjusting the monorail field camera, as he was poring over blueprints or operating one of the backhoes.

According to locker room talk, for fifteen years he'd sailed the seven seas, working his way up through the merchant ranks from galley boy to first mate — some explanation, perhaps, for that curious habit of his of addressing Huxley not by name but by his rank — *Kapitán*.

As for his motives for dropping anchor here, the same garrulous mouths were divided. Seduction of the island, said one, Huxley's vision, said another, no, the intoxicating sight of Maria, winked a third, her legendary beauty enough to send man or boy weak at the knees.

Retracing our steps into camp we crossed the dunes. On the wind-ribbed summit he paused, gazing out across his lost city, less in pride this time than in calculation.

'*This* will be the island's legacy, like it or not.'

An allusion to local opposition mounting against him, no doubt. A moment later, I had to wonder.

'Streets, houses, frescoes. You might say those are only the most obvious manifestations of what we disinter from the ash. In a deeper sense, what we are unearthing are secrets of ancient thought and mind. Knowledge that might one day change the course of human history.'

I took that to be ego talking, hardly an exceptional trait among archaeology's brightest lights, even to my limited knowledge. 'What about the locals. Can you count on them?'

'The locals!' He snorted derisively. 'Of what consequence are they in the great scheme of things? Mere drops in the ocean of time. The

ancient city exists with or without them, and I am raising it from the dead.'

The harshness of the insult seemed to boom-echo off the quarry walls. Seconds later, labourers were throwing down their shovels and pickaxes, and bolting away, all panic yells and flailing arms. They stampeded past us, Nestor giving chase, baying at them to stop.

Exasperation his second nature, Huxley threw up his arms. *'What now?'*

His foreman came striding up the dune, making short work of it on his long, powerful legs. 'I tried, Kapítán,' he said between gasps, 'I tried to reason with them.'

Huxley clicked his tongue in disgust. 'What is it this time? A gladiator? A charioteer? You would think that, after all the trouble and expense I have gone to, they might at least have the decency to see Minoan rather than Roman ghosts.'

The answer, when it came, was almost apologetic. 'Not this time, Kapítán. They say they saw Benja, over there at the trenches.'

They always called him that. My predecessor. Benjamin Randal. The boy I had come to replace.

8.

'Look at them,' sneered Huxley. 'One fool thinks he's seen a ghost and by the time they've bolted out here, all of them have.'

The labourers were huddled around the mess tent, swigging raki from the bottle and muttering furiously among themselves, eyes still bulging from the shock of whatever they thought they had seen.

Less quick to pass judgement, Nestor said: 'You forget Kapítán; some of these lads have never set foot off the island, not once in thirty years or more. The old ways are still in their blood.'

Huxley grunted disparagingly. 'There is not a man amongst them without a talisman around his neck or a clove of garlic in his pocket. Do you see them dangling there, Mr Pedrosa, amulets fashioned by their mothers, wives or sisters, each containing some kind of magic concoction to ward off evil spirits or the evil eye — human hair, perhaps, an eyelash, a fingernail, the crushed bone of some dead kinsman.'

But I was noticing something else about them; the fierce exchanges, the sudden bursts of bravado that came to nothing, the dangerous pride every bit as stubborn as Huxley's own.

Having received the assent of his comrades, the brawniest of the labourers got to his feet and took several wary paces towards us. He beckoned Nestor to his side with a glance and a stiff jerk of the head.

Some hard bargaining was obviously about to ensue, and Huxley shooed me off to record events, adding curtly that that was what he was paying me to do.

Our labourer was covered in dust from head to foot, the grey ash accentuating his eyebrows and eyelashes.

Like most of the farmers or fishermen who had been persuaded to join the dig, he was a man of few words. 'There are ghosts, no one can deny it. Every day we see them. The old ones, and now a man just buried. A man we worked with every day. A friend. Now made *vrykolakas*. The Devil is about. We cannot go on.'

When I heard those words, spoken with such finality, I expected every last man of them to march for the gates.

Nestor, however, knew better and began talking in slow, measured tones. At first, nothing would budge them. Not beer, not wine, not

bonuses, and certainly not appeals to reason.

Our trench digger tossed his head defiantly and clicked his tongue as the Greeks often do to voice their most emphatic 'no'.

Then finally it was out in the open. What they really wanted.

Probably already knowing how Huxley would react, Nestor winced loudly, exasperated hands streaking back through his hair. But there was nothing for it. We retraced our steps back to the dune, upon whose summit the imperious Huxley still stood, waiting impatiently for news.

'What's a *vrykolakas*?' I asked, wondering about the noun they'd used to describe Benja's apparition. 'I don't know the word. Is it a ghost?'

'Kind of,' Nestor replied grimly. 'The island's famous for them — maybe just because the volcanic soil is so slow to rot the flesh once the body is buried. They're vampires, poltergeists, the undead. Anyway, different from the rest; maybe less because they have a taste for young blood than for all the trouble they cause whenever they appear. Sucking the goats dry of milk. Draining the wine barrels. Assaulting innocent people in the fields. Tossing people out of bed in the middle of the night. Demanding sex even though they're dead. They never accept their fate. They rebel even against death itself.'

'Well?' demanded Huxley abrasively, as we reached the crest. 'What is it this time?'

I really had to admire how unflinching Nestor was in facing the music. 'They're demanding the dead be laid to rest, Kapítán. Benja. The ancient ones. They're demanding a blessing by the Papás. An exorcism.'

News broken, I could see Huxley grinding his teeth in fury, and half expected him to sack the strikers there and then.

'Kapítán, no one is denying the lads have worked themselves into a frenzy, but take heed, they believe what they say; it is not a means to trick you. Do nothing and it will get worse. A *vrykolakas* becomes more powerful if it is left to its own devices, that's what the tradition says. The men know that; they won't need reminding.'

Panting, mopping the sweat away from his eyes, Hadrian came lumbering over from the trenches.

'I hope you will not acquiesce to this nonsense, Huxley,' he said in a shrill, indignant voice. 'Have I seen a ghost? No! Have you, Nestor? Well, have you? No, I thought as much. This is the slippery slope, Huxley, mark my words. Once you let it into camp, we will never be rid of it, never.'

The glance Huxley threw back at him said it all. *Do you think you have to remind me of that, Hadrian?*

'We need a decision, Kapítán. Before the men walk.'

Huxley sighed irritably, apparently trying to weigh up which option was worse, days of labour lost to strike, or the ignominy of being rescued by a man whose religion he so despised.

At last he said through gritted teeth: 'Well, one calls in an exterminator for an infestation; why not a Papás for a poltergeist? Since he supposedly laid Benja to rest less than twenty-four hours ago, perhaps it's still covered by the guarantee.'

His tone was as corrosive as battery acid, but Hadrian still clicked his tongue loudly in disgust, apparently at the way Huxley was prepared to sacrifice logic like that, on the altar of expediency.

The decision, however, had been made and Huxley was already stalking towards the fragments hut in a foul temper, another shouting match with Sam ensuing along the way.

With nothing else to do, I resumed my exploration, and presently found myself wandering down to the cement dock, where a boat was moored. The *Persephone*.

I recognised it immediately. A white caïque with sprit rig and burgundy sails, it had been among the flotilla of boats ferrying us off the *Pegasus* after our storm-tossed voyage from Piraeus.

I knew the skipper by sight as well, now padding about deck in torn work clothes — some blunt-faced, tousle-haired 18-year old from Akrotiri, who had been shouldering one corner of Benja's coffin as the procession wound its way into the cemetery.

Shifting crates on deck, he offered a brash grin as I passed, even if there was something ambivalent about it.

Rounding the great boulder beyond the quay, I ran into the last person I wanted to see. Sam — from the sullen look twisting his face, still fuming after his latest run-in with Huxley, hands thrust deep into his pockets, feet booting beach shingle.

Too late to back away, I swore under my breath.

'What do *you* want?' It was almost a snarl.

'Nothing.' *What the hell had I ever done to him?*

'So he showed you the ancient city.'

'*Uh-huh*. Some of it. He said the rest would come in good time.'

'Of course. His time. His terms.'

He threw me another glance, and I saw then what the lovesick

student girls in camp were always mooning about, eyes as blue as the sea.

Maybe they had the benefit of distance. Up close, they seemed as real, as personal as glass.

He moved to the shelter of the rocks, a sun trap cheating the chill breeze. Out of his pocket he fished a tobacco pouch and rolled a cigarette. Every so often, he'd cast a narrow-eyed look over to the *Persephone*, where the boy was still stacking fish crates. The smoke smelled strange, and at first I assumed it was just that acrid Greek tobacco that everyone smoked straight from the sun-drying fields. But soon his pupils had grown as big as saucers, so that was that.

'Maybe he doesn't understand your point of view,' I ventured.

'He does not *want* to understand!' spitting out the words with some loose tobacco and weed. I caught the Parisian accent, boiling over his perfect English for once, like milk left on the stove too long. 'It is always what *he* wants.'

Even to me, it seemed a strangely childish thing to say.

That there was more to the tension between Sam and Huxley than quarrels over Roman ceramics was obvious. It was apparent in the body language, in the looks that clashed at fifty paces.

'Can you imagine?' he was saying. 'All the secrets of the Roman occupation that might still be buried here, a subject we're totally ignorant of. Trashed. Bulldozed.'

'Why is he doing it?'

He drew heavily on whatever sticky weed he was smoking. 'Don't you get it? Nothing can be allowed to get in his way. All he cares about is what lies a hundred feet down. We're just trashing everything along the way because Huxley needs to get there before he's thrown off the island for good.'

'Get where?'

He clicked his tongue. 'Atlantis, of course.'

The laugh dried on my tongue. 'Atlantis was in the Atlantic.'

'Was it?'

'Wasn't it?'

'You are very sure about something you know nothing about.'

'So you're saying Professor Huxley believes he's discovered Atlantis?'

Sam offered a lazy shrug, a knowing smirk on his lips.

I found myself staring into his blue pools of eyes as the implica-

tions swept over me. Trying to read the truth from them. Those eyes, I thought. It would be wrong to call them cold. There is something missing in them, but what?

For a second or two, I was tempted to doubt everything he said. But then Huxley's boast rang through my head, about his excavations changing the world, about him raising this miracle from the dead.

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