

COPYRIGHT AND DISCLAIMER

© 2015 David Brookes

Reptile Books

This edition published in 2015 by Reptile Books.

2 1

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form or by any means – graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping or information storage and retrieval systems – without the prior permission in writing of the author.

The stories and characters in this book are fictional only and any resemblance to any person, living or dead, or situation is coincidental.

For information about the author please see the back page.

ALSO AVAILABLE BY DAVID BROOKES

The Gas Giant Sequence (shorts):

Krill

Split

Tranquil Sea (coming soon)

Tulpa (coming soon)

The Professor Arnustace series (shorts):

An Account of a Curious Encounter

Short story collections:

Love is an Eye That Doesn't See

Novels in e-format:

The Gun of Our Maker

Novels in paperback:

Half Discovered Wings

CONTENTS

1. [Title](#)
2. [Part One](#): Visitor
3. [Part Two](#): Remains
4. [Part Three](#): Invitation
5. [Part Four](#): Vyomanaut
6. [Part Five](#): Tragedy
7. [Part Six](#): Ipsun Isle
8. [Part Seven](#): Secret
9. [Part Eight](#): Revelations
10. [Part Nine](#): Frozen Room
11. [Part Ten](#): Escape
12. [Part Eleven](#): *Cobra Coil*
13. [Part Twelve](#): Unexplainable
13. [About the Author](#)

ICED TEA FOR PROFESSOR ARNUSTACE

BEING A QUESTIONABLE ACCOUNT OF UNCONFIRMED STRANGENESS

– JANUARY, YEAR OF OUR LORD 1917.

~

DAVID BROOKES

PART ONE:
IN WHICH THE PROFESSOR WELCOMES AN ADMIRABLE VISITOR; AND THERE IS NEWS OF A
GRAND MYSTERY

A YOUNG LADY IN A RAINCOAT arrived to see the Warden at the Whitby Asylum for the Insane. The weather that day was awful, as evidenced by the tremendous mess the young lady made in the lobby. An orderly slipped in the puddles whilst escorting her to the Warden's office, who greeted her coolly.

'Hello, Miss,' he said, peering over the rim of his spectacles. 'Was I expecting you?'

'I rather hope you were,' she replied primly. 'My name is Doctor Annabeth Ross.'

'Ah yes. The veterinarian.'

'Doctor of Biology, as it happens.'

'Bless me, women with doctorates ... They'll be allowing *horses* into colleges next. Follow me, then, follow me.'

The Warden was not a peculiar man, at least for one who spent his days locked between the dank stone walls of a psychiatric hospital. It was not the best example of such in England, either, but Anna was not there for an assessment. The Warden was stooped, aged from experience rather than years and, in many senses, a bigot.

'I read your recent paper on madness in negroes,' Anna said to him as they walked the lengths of long, stone corridors. 'I fancied it rather a lot of nonsense.'

'You don't pull your punches, do you, Miss Ross?'

'Not where ignorance is concerned.'

He snorted. 'You'll get along just dandily with *him* then. I don't go past this gate – it riles up the inmates. You can progress by yourself from here. You'll find him in the cell at the end of the hall, to the left.'

'Most gracious of you.'

The Warden waited by the iron gate as Anna peered down the long corridor, still dripping rainwater. It was gloomy down there, a dead end with no windows other than what filtered in through the locked cells on either side. It was the first time the Doctor had been in an asylum, and her heart fluttered in her chest as she took her first steps towards the last cell.

Her heeled shoes echoed sharply on the stone floor. As she walked she was surprised to see that the first few cells had no inmates. They were bare of everything but beds, perfectly unoccupied. And not just the first few – all of them! Except for the last cell on the left...

She stopped at the end of the corridor and looked through the iron bars. Her eyes widened. It could hardly be called a prison cell! The floor was carpeted, and the large bed had four posts and cotton curtains. There was a collection of reading lamps, side tables and well-stuffed armchairs. Paintings hung on the wall in elegant varnished frames. There was a small sink, cupboard and a stove, on which a kettle was boiling.

'Good gracious!' she gasped, utterly stunned.

A long-limbed man sat in one of the armchairs looked up at his visitor. He had sharp blue eyes and a rather magnificent blond moustache. He was extremely well-dressed for an asylum inmate. For a second he seemed

rather stupefied, but the moment he recognised his guest he stood up and reached through the bars to shake her hand, smiling widely.

‘Doctor Ross! It’s a great pleasure to see you again!’

The young lady returned the smile, and shook his hand heartily. ‘Hello, Professor! Please tell me, surely this isn’t where you *live*?’

‘Why, of course,’ he replied. Professor Arnustace was taller than Anna remembered, but just as dynamic in his expressions and gestures. ‘I have everything I need here. A bed, a writing desk, a bookshelf...’

The kettle on the stove began to whistle.

‘And tea...! Would you care for some? I just had a new box of Ceylon leaves shipped from India. I rather thing we’re balling things up over there, don’t you? Shame, that.’

‘Quite...’

Anna watched in a state of bewilderment as the Professor made a pot of loose tea and let it brew for awhile on a narrow lacquered table. He took two cups and saucers from a cupboard, all elbows for a moment, then gestured towards one of his chairs.

‘Please, do sit!’

Anna looked at the cell bars. ‘I would, only...?’

‘Oh!’ As though having forgotten something quite rudimentary, the Professor reached over to the cell door and pushed it open.

‘It’s unlocked!’

‘How else would I leave?’ he replied, perplexed. ‘Come, take a seat here ... I’m eager to hear your news. I was most intrigued by your letter.’

‘Forget my news!’ Anna spluttered. ‘Professor, do you *live* in this asylum? In an unlocked cell?’

‘Yes. It’s most convenient when it comes to my many psychiatric treatments, and I gather the constabulary is relieved to know that I’m under observation. I fear they think I would get into all sorts of trouble. But it’s a sort of voluntary section, you know. They’re quite happy to have me here, and even took out the you-know-what and used the plumbing for a sink instead. Not to mention...’ He leaned in close, conspiratorially. ‘...It’s free!’

‘I should think you miss the outdoors,’ said Anna.

‘I have my window.’

‘The Warden said that he doesn’t come down this way, for fear of upsetting the inmates?’

‘I suspect he meant only me. We don’t get on, I must say. Biscuit?’

Once the tea had been poured and Anna had relaxed in her armchair opposite the Professor’s, she felt much more comfortable talking about her news.

‘Your note was quite the mysterious thing,’ said the Professor, smoothing one side of his moustache as his eyes twinkled. ‘I had thought that once we parted ways here in Whitby I would never hear from you again.’

‘So did I,’ she replied honestly. ‘After we both conducted our investigation into those strange events I was perfectly ready to go back home to Oxford and sleep for a month, but last week I got a call on the telephone from your Chief of Police, whom we met on the beach that day. He has discovered something.’

The Professor stirred his tea with a silver spoon. ‘Yes, a strange animal corpse.’

‘You already know about it?’

‘As you saw for yourself, the door to this cell is unlocked. I fetch a newspaper every morning from the shop down the road. Today there was an article – let me fetch it for you ... Here it is, the Whitby Gazette, Tuesday edition. “Police hide mysterious animal remains.” They’re calling it a cover up. Based on this ridiculous artist’s impression I suspected it was one of our deep sea monsters.’

The Doctor seemed perturbed by his choice of words. ‘The creatures we encountered last year were gargantuan in size, Professor, but that does not qualify them as monsters. Whatever they were, we gathered they all flew up out of the ocean and left. However, there have remained reports of strange glowing lights off the cliffs. And now this – a dead one, found in a field half a mile from the cliff.’

‘How big is the specimen? Did you get a good look at it? I’m afraid our initial encounter with the creatures is all rather a blur to me. Being underwater in that diving bell, and the shock of it all and whatnot.’

‘Actually, I haven’t seen the specimen yet. The owner of the land it was found on refuses to admit anyone except the Chief of Police. He says that it will remain so, “*unless Professor Arnustace is present, by Jove!*”’

The Professor was delighted at her impersonation, and slapped his thigh. ‘Lord Dunridge, I’m quite sure!’

‘Precisely, Professor.’

‘That mad old goat! Well, I’m not surprised. Come on then, I suppose we’d better go and pay him a visit. There’s hardly much point in the Chief having dragged you all the way up here just to go home again. Let’s get you that examination.’

The Professor had already tied the laces on his polished shoes and mounted his top hat upon his head. Anna asked, ‘I’m sorry, right now? But what about...?’

‘You’re concerned with the cell again? My dear Doctor, I could never be a prisoner unless I wanted to be. We are both free as birds, so let us fly!’

~

PART TWO:

IN WHICH SOME PECULIAR REMAINS ARE EXAMINED WITH MUCH PERTURBATION

‘I FORGOT TO ASK, Professor, but how is Verne?’ enquired Annabeth, as she and Professor Arnustace dashed from the Asylum stoop to a waiting automobile.

‘Oh, he’s well, he’s well,’ replied the Professor curtly. The automobile rocked as they jumped inside to avoid the rain. Anna shook excess water from the umbrella before drawing it inside and closing the car door. The Professor crossed his spindly arms and looked out the window. ‘Well, actually we aren’t speaking at the moment.’

‘Oh? I don’t mean to pry...’

‘...But you shall anyway? Very well. There was a disagreement.’

‘Why, you seemed rather tight when last we met.’

‘No longer,’ said the Professor, his leather gloves he held creaking as he squeezed them in one fist.

Anna pouted. ‘I know a particularly good dentist in Oxford, Professor.’

‘Hmm?’

‘Should you wish to see teeth pulled by an expert. I’m only a layperson.’

‘I simply don’t wish to talk about it. Let us turn the topic to you, shall we?’

‘I am well,’ said Anna, giving up. ‘As it happens, I am currently studying Zoology at Oxford.’

‘Ah, excellent!’ said the Professor, brightening instantly. ‘I have a degree in Zoology myself. As well as Cryptozoology.’

‘So I recall you telling me, Professor. I was half expecting you to say you’d earned a sixth or seventh qualification in these past few weeks.’

‘I considered it, but that would only be for the post nominals, you know. At this stage I merely conduct my own private research and worry not about the qualifications. All rather pointless anyway once self employed.’

Anna eyed him, wondering whether he was oblivious or devious. It had to be one or the other. ‘Well, in any case, I am undertaking a second degree. It is the University that has asked me to identify this strange carcass. I am to write a paper on it that will form part of my thesis.’

‘Which is?’

‘Newly discovered fauna.’

‘Come, the whole title please.’

Anna raised an eyebrow. ‘*A disquisition on newly discovered flora and fauna, their origins and place in the global ecosystem.*’

The Professor watched the scenery go by outside the window. ‘Change “disquisition” for “treatise”. No-one likes a smarty-pants.’

By the time they arrived at the private estate of Lord Dunridge, the rainclouds had receded across the sky and the sun blazed in all its glory, drying out much of the fertile grounds. Anna left her umbrella in the automobile and unbuttoned her greatcoat, allowing her skirt and buttoned-down blouse to breathe.

The Chief of Police met them at the side entrance of the estate with two officers. ‘Doctor Ross. Professor Arnustace – I wasn’t sure the Miss would persuade you to come.’

The Professor raised his top hat in greeting. ‘And why not? There is a mystery to solve.’

‘Not much of a mystery, Professor. Just a dead squid, from what my officer tells me. He got close enough for a glimpse before that mad Lord started blasting off his shotgun. I’m going to have words with him about that.’

The Professor and the Doctor looked at one another calmly. Anyone in the Chief’s position would have noticed the unspoken communication that took place between them, more than merely a look. It was a conversation, lasting only seconds, that crackled in the empty space between their eyes.

‘You ... don’t think it’s a squid?’ asked the Chief.

‘Well, good sir,’ replied the Professor absently as he put on his gloves, ‘that’s what we’re here to find out.’

~

‘A DEPLORABLE STATE,’ boomed Lord Dunridge, striding across the field to meet them, ‘but give me a year, and it shall be back to its former glory!’

He was talking – or rather shouting – about the manor house that the Professor and the Doctor could see behind him. At a distance the ancient building seemed to be in fine condition, but neither felt that now was the time to discuss the matter.

Professor Arnustace shook hands heartily with the Lord, who was a Byronic figure over six feet tall, barrel-chested, with red cheeks protruding proudly above his fine beard. Anna thought that he seemed a rather wild man, disguised in the red General’s uniform of a British soldier and surrounded by the trappings of wealth. But his eyes were extraordinarily bright, even though they were a very deep brown, and he moved with such confidence and strength that he gave the impression of being a caged tiger desperate to stretch its legs. He bared his teeth when he spoke, exposing pronounced canines.

‘Professor, Professor!’ he roared, a few strands of oiled hair falling loose as he pumped his old friend’s hand. ‘So good to see you again! You’re looking as scrawny as ever, what?’

‘Each to their own, sir,’ the Professor warned, but his smile belied his fondness of the Lord. Anna thought they must have known one another a long time, but still had a lot to learn about one another.

‘I must apologise for the state of the land,’ said Lord Dunridge, looking about them. ‘Quite overgrown ... I only returned two weeks ago, after a year’s absence, and I found that the housekeeper has been rather slack in most regards. Sacked him immediately, of course, but in the meantime things are getting dusty. Staff weren’t trained to be autonomous, you see.’

‘Quite,’ said the Professor. ‘How was Darjeeling?’

‘A significant bore!’ bellowed the Lord. ‘Shuffled the whole government all the way up to those hill stations from Bombay for the summer and did bugger all, I don’t mind telling you. Those in Darjeeling just sat around with punkah-wallahs wafting them all day like blaggards, sucking down tea. Do it every year. No wonder nothing gets done there; I’ve a good mind to tell King George to give up if he’s going to allow that kind of behaviour. Meanwhile the locals never *stop* working, although they give a good impression of getting nothing done. Very cunning, that lot, by Jove!’

‘It never does to underestimate folk.’

‘Not just underestimate, Professor. At first I was all for the interference, thinking we were doing some good, just like every blighter else. But lately I’m starting to think we’re just confusing them with our ways, when they were doing perfectly well by themselves.’

‘Still: the tea.’

‘I’ll have someone prepare something special for the afternoon,’ Lord Dunridge promised.

Anna had been patient during the exchange, but now she spoke up. ‘Actually, Lord Dunridge, I don’t have the luxury of staying long. I have a return ticket to Oxford booked, you see.’

The Lord turned to her and blinked, as though seeing her for the first time. ‘Oh! Of course, of course ... Well, I’d best introduce you to the sea monster then, yes? What, that dithering Chief not with you?’

‘We explained that our investigation should be free of interference initially,’ Anna told him with a smile. ‘He’ll follow shortly.’

Dunridge nodded, looking as though he was about to pay her a compliment but thought better of it.

He led them across an overgrown lawn to a path, then followed this down a long slope through beautiful gardens high with semi-wild hellebores and hyacinths, as well as tall foxgloves and drapes of honeysuckle along discreet trellises. There were many species that Anna couldn’t identify, which thrilled her.

A forest path led them beside a burbling river, then back into more cultivated gardens towards a large lake, almost perfectly still in the absence of wind. It was like a mirror surrounded by bracken and dicksonias, its shores thick with whistling reeds.

In the green space beyond, where the manor house was visible now from the side instead of the front, they came to a confluence of hedgerows which sheltered a rose garden. A deep furrow cut through the wild lawn in front of it, which was clearly not part of the design. It culminated in a tarpaulin which had been nailed down with long pegs.

‘Here we are,’ said Dunridge, standing by the tarpaulin. ‘About the uncanniest thing I’ve ever seen, but then only last week I watched elephants performing a tug-o-war in Udaipur Palace, so what do I know about possibilities?’

The Professor had brought with him a black doctor’s bag, which he now put on the grass and unclasped. He took out some white elastic gloves and handed a pair to Anna. ‘Wear these.’

‘Are these rubber?’

‘Non-vulcanized naturally-occurring latex. Doctors in America have been using them for a while – over here, too – although my design is a significant improvement. Best to be protected, considering we don’t know this thing’s true origin.’

‘As you wish.’

Suitably gloved in squeaky powdered gloves, the Professor pulled back the tarpaulin.

~

‘GOOD LORD.’

‘Far more peculiar up close, isn’t it?’

‘Rather. I should like to take photographs for my paper. A sketch will have to do.’

‘Allow me to examine it thoroughly first, so as to avoid disturbing you. Look at these pseudopods!’

‘Most odd. And like you observed during our first encounter with them: rudimentary sensory apparatus, almost like a face ... Some ocular clouding. Gelatinous dermis...’

‘We should cut it open once you’ve made your sketches, Doctor.’

‘I’d like to do that myself. These limbs, though. Clearly not designed for walking on land, far too spindly—

‘Insects manage rather well.’

‘A matter of size versus body mass, Professor. These legs can’t support this mass. Perhaps as feelers for use under water, but as we’ve seen, not biologically designed for water, but capable of adapting to the environment...’

‘I had made the assumption that the pressures of the deep sea were comparable to those beyond the planet’s stratosphere, however one can’t be sure. Until we succeed in space travel, of course.’

‘Don’t be absurd, Professor.’

‘See here: blunt force trauma to the snout, if we can call it a snout ... Hard impact.’

‘From the landing?’

‘Think, Doctor: we know that’s not possible.’

‘What...? Oh, the furrow – a shallow landing. Then the impact must have been whilst travelling upwards. From the ocean.’

‘Exactly. Flying straight up out of the water, there was a hard impact and, dying or dead, the thing fell back to Earth at a gentle gradient and landed here.’

‘Poor creature.’

‘Well, let’s not personify the thing with feelings, Doctor. Hardly more than a squid, albeit the strangest I’ve ever seen. These must have been the photo-luminescent cells we saw, just below these flanges here.’

‘Biophosphorescence, like many deep-sea cephalopods. But if not designed for oceans, then its evolutionary purpose must be...’

‘Perhaps, Doctor. Now, let’s see what it’s like on the inside...’

~

IN ALL, THEY HAD forty minutes with the animal carcass before the Chief of Police introduced himself. Lord Dunridge seemed irate merely to be in his presence, but the Professor calmed him.

‘This is a most extraordinary find, sir,’ he told the Lord. ‘One of a kind, to date. You may well make a great deal of money selling it to a private buyer through auction, provided you can preserve it satisfactorily.’

Lord Dunridge scratched his head. ‘Really? You don’t say. I must admit the coffers are far lower than is traditional in my line, what with personal endeavours overseas ... If I remember, you know a fellow at the National History Museum in London, don’t you?’

‘Good idea,’ said the Professor, snapping off his latex gloves. ‘The paperwork shall have to say “giant squid” or something along those lines, at least until they’ve done with their own experimentation and are ready to put it on display. A noble choice. I shall make a phone call this week.’

‘Jolly good of you, Professor. Would you fancy that pot of tea, now?’

Anna was already prepared to leave. The Professor glanced at her, rubbed the powder from his hand, then said, ‘I shall have to pay you a visit some time soon, old friend. This mystery requires my immediate attention.’

‘Of course, of course,’ said Lord Dunridge. ‘Be seeing you. And if you fancy a jaunt to Darjeeling, sir, you need only ask!’

~

'I FEAR HE FELT rather left out,' said Anna, as they made the long walk back to the automobile. 'We did get a little carried away, didn't we? Hardly stopped talking to breathe.'

'A most incredible discovery. If I had the means to safely store it, I would have absconded with the specimen myself.'

'I have to admit to being rather perplexed, Professor,' said Anna. She stopped on the garden path, in view of the lake and the manor house, and looked up into the sky. 'Follow my gaze, sir. What do you see?'

The Professor narrowed his eyes. 'Mostly clear sky. Cumulonimbus. The usual entoptic phenomena.'

'In other words, nothing.'

'Nothing, dear Annabeth. Why do you ask?'

'Our specimen flew out of the depths of the ocean and up into the sky, where it hit something with enough force to kill itself. What could it have hit?'

'I agree, it is most perplexing.'

'Perhaps,' said Anna slowly, shielding her eyes, 'rather than going back to your dingy asylum cell, you'd like to adjourn to my hotel with me, where we can discuss the matter over iced tea?'

'I expect I should return home to think on matters...'

Sensing his hesitation, Anna smiled and reached out her hand. 'It is particularly good iced tea, Professor Arnustace.'

'Alright,' he said eventually, after a most confusing pause. 'But I must make a brief stop on the way.'

~

PART THREE:

IN WHICH AN ENIGMA IS EXAMINED; AND A FLOATING INVITATION IS RECEIVED

THEY MADE THE PRESCRIBED STOP, some eight miles out of their way at the edge of town. The driver of their borrowed Ford Model T sedan was less than pleased, having been assured of a simple return journey between Annabeth's hotel in the city centre and the coastal estate. His sparkling new machine was much begrimed by the time they finally returned to the Bay Royal Hotel. Professor Arnustace said that the detour had been quite necessary, even though he only disappeared into a building for one short minute and emerge holding another black bag.

As the Ford driver tutted and retired to the hotel's garage to clean and refuel his prized vehicle, Anna and the Professor went up to the balcony restaurant and ordered brunch and iced tea.

'A surprising change in weather,' commented the Professor, looking up into the sky. 'Only this morning it was raining cats and dogs, and now I could imagine it being summer.'

'Lucky indeed,' Anna replied. She greeted the waiter, who unloaded their meal from his trolley and disappeared without a word. 'Now, what think you of our creature? Are we seriously entertaining the notion that it is a visitor to our planet?'

'Based on what we have seen, not quite. Three months ago, we both saw a giant version of such a creature, surrounded by many smaller kin, soar up from the ocean near West Cliff and continue above the clouds. That would support the notion that they are extra-terrestrials, if one has the imagination for it. But consider: we did not *see* them beyond the clouds.'

'You are suggesting they are atmospheric extremophiles of some sort,' Anna said. 'They live above the clouds as flying beasts?'

'Possibly,' said the Professor, taking up his two black doctor's bags and unclasping one. He removed from it a ball of newspaper. Unravelling it, a small piece of semi-translucent jelly was revealed. 'A sample from our specimen, since the Chief was so against our *al fresco* biopsy earlier.'

'I never saw you take it!'

He waved his hand. 'Simple misdirection, dear Anna, don't think poorly of yourself. And behold, my most trusted pathologist...'

The Professor opened his second bag, which he'd retrieved during their devour. Anna was surprised to see a small cat put its head and paws out of the bag and look around, flicking one ear.

'Verne!' she cried, delighted. 'How are you?'

The kitten meowed. With a serious expression, the Professor put his brunch plate on the floor beside the table, and put the cat on the table where his plate had been. Then he went about removing various pieces of apparatus from his bag. Anna cooed and tickled under the cat's chin.

'He's grown!' she exclaimed.

'Of course. No doubt you've aged yourself the last three months.'

Anna stroked Verne's head and back, being careful not to touch the small scars and metal pins that were tangible beneath the fur. Verne purred and sniffed at her plate.

'No,' she said kindly, and Verne obeyed.

The Professor was screwing several bits of metal together to form a circular cap about the size of half a potato. Several small lightbulbs made of singed glass stuck out at regular intervals, along with dangling wires that were maintained here and there by bits of tape and glue. The wires led to a modified cigar case, itself lined with dozens of tiny bulbs.

'Here we are, Verne,' said the Professor, and placed the headset on the cat's head. He made room for the cat's large, erect ears and tightened some screws. Then he switched on the box.

'TELE-LUMINOUS COMMS. DEVICE: ON', spelled the bulbs on the box, lighting up in specific sequences. The words blinked off, then were replaced by: 'BATTERY LOW.'

'Doesn't the headset hurt him?' asked Anna, pouting at Verne.

The Professor knew he needn't answer. Verne himself spoke to her, via the device:

NO HURT

Anna was fascinated by the communications device. She had met Verne before, but the encounter was only brief. The Professor had seemed dead set on keeping him a secret. But once the jig was up, he'd been happy to explain how the device worked: transmitting Verne's simple thought-waves into the electronic device, which translated the words into flawed English and displayed them using the bulbs.

'I'm glad to hear it, Verne,' Anna replied. 'How are you today?'

GUD THNX. U?

'I'm very well, thank you Verne. The Professor was telling me that you two had a falling out.'

FIX.

'I'm sorry?'

WONTD 2 FIX.

The Professor sighed and rubbed his lined forehead. 'Verne won't stop scratching the furniture. I planned to have him spayed.'

'You didn't!'

'It's perfectly humane.'

'Verne is an intelligent creature!' Anna replied, appalled. 'How could you mutilate him that way?'

'One could consider the conduction nodes implanted in his head "mutilation", but you seem to consider it worthwhile for the greater good,' said the Professor, checking the calibrations on the tele-comms box.

'Neutering him serves much the same purpose. I would have it done myself if I didn't think there were going to be some interesting developments in genetic modification on the horizon.'

'Pfft, you would *not*!' Anna crowed, picking up the little tabby cat and grinning at him. 'Verne, don't you listen to the nasty man!'

OK LADEE. FUD PLZ?

'In a moment, Verne,' said the Professor. 'I have something special for you first. Will you perform us a small favour?'

NO FIX?

‘No, Verne, I’ve given up on the idea. But if you continue to scratch my armchair then I’ll have to consider feeding you nothing but dry kibble for a week as a punishment. Do we have an accord?’

HATE KIBBL.

‘I know you do. Now...’

The Professor unwrapped the newspaper in front of Verne, who immediately began to sniff the strange biological sample within.

‘Tell me, Verne: fish or bird?’

Anna looked at the Professor, surprised. She hadn’t considered that the unusual creature could be anything but a fish, or at least a fish-like being. Professor Arnustace was without a doubt eccentric and frustrating, but she was convinced of his genius. She decided not to question him too often in future.

Verne sniffed at the gelatinous sample. He batted it with his paw a few times, just to be safe, then put out a tentative tongue to lick it. Eventually he gave his diagnosis.

BIRD.

‘Are you sure, Verne?’

YES. BIRD. HNGRY NOW, FUD PLZ?

The Professor stroked his little feline friend and told him, ‘Well done,’ then put him on the floor besides his uneaten brunch, then unfastened the cables. Verne attacked the slices of ham with gusto.

Professor Arnustace wrapped up his sample and smiled at Anna. ‘We have our verdict. I suspected as much: did you notice the bones?’

‘There was a small tear along the underside, presumably from the impact,’ she replied. ‘I saw thin bones in there, but they looked like fish bones.’

‘The way they refracted the sunlight showed me that they were hollow. Unlike a fish’s bones, those of birds have the same advantage to allow flight.’

‘But then, how could they survive the pressures of the deep ocean?’

‘I suspect that they couldn’t, hence their sudden departure. Not for long, anyway. The elasticity and durability of their outer flesh would seem to provide sufficient protection against outward pressure for quite some time. An octopus the size of a football, for example, could easily squeeze itself through a hole no bigger than a golf ball, if it desired. I could probably bounce one like a tangerine from here to London without damaging its central nervous system or sensory apparatus.’

Anna considered the details for a moment. ‘The dead specimen weighed as much as one would expect a large fish too – maybe a little less – even with hollow bones. And it had no obvious way of propelling itself through the air, which would be much thinner above the cloud layer ... so however could these things fly?’

The Professor’s blue eyes twinkled as he sipped his iced tea. ‘That, my dear Annabeth, is why I intend to see this riddle through to the end. And yet, I have a strange feeling that we are only at the beginning of a greater mystery.’

~

‘WHAT MAKES YOU SAY THAT, PROFESSOR?’ asked Anna.

He merely put down his perspiring glass and put on his gloves again. ‘Look behind you, madam.’

Anna did just that, turning in her seat. At first she saw nothing except the scenery at the rear of the hotel: a garden and hedgerows, and beyond those, fields. The angle of the cliff obscured the ocean, but she could smell salt in the air.

‘I don’t see—’ she began, then stopped. An object was descending from the sky. It was about twice the size of a pumpkin and roughly the same colour. ‘Good Lord! Is it a balloon?’

But the Professor was already out of his seat. On his great bandy legs, he strode towards the edge of the balcony and leaned over it like a scarecrow, his arms stretched out to their fullest. The object drifted down into his open hands, and he grasped it and pulled it in.

Anna joined him at the edge of the balcony. The object was a large balloon with a flimsy skeleton, like a little zeppelin. A wicker basket covered with a plastic sheet was attached to the bottom of the balloon, which had almost completely deflated.

‘Remarkable,’ said the Professor, staring at it in awe. ‘A miniature dirigible ... semi-rigid copper frame, looks like ... And this sheet is some kind of Parkesine plastic, yet malleable at ambient temperatures! Outstanding!’

Anna moved to pull back the sheet to see what was in the basket, but jerked her hand away when the sheet moved of its own accord. A furry animal thrust its pointed snout into the open air and sniffed the two humans.

‘Oh! Gracious me...’

‘Most curious,’ agreed the Professor, wisely pulling back his hand.

‘A weasel, do you suppose?’

‘In Indian grey mongoose, as a matter of fact. Male, based on the size. Look, Verne, we have a friend for you!’

Verne scampered over, but was very wary of the mongoose. The larger animal hissed and retreated momentarily into the basket, then leapt fully out and arched its back slightly. Every strand of its coarse fur had minute tawny stripes. It leaned back on its haunches and stood tall, its long tail straight out behind it, and bared its pinprick teeth at the cat.

‘Best give him some space, Verne,’ the Professor advised. ‘He doesn’t appear as cultured as you are.’

Verne wisely accepted the Professor’s wisdom and scampered back to his plate, but he kept his eyes on the ropey creature as he feasted.

‘What on Earth is he doing out here, floating around in a dirigible?’ Anna asked, amazed as she watched the mongoose preen itself rapidly, then glance at the two humans. ‘He’s a little aeronaut!’

‘I don’t wager it’s a coincidence,’ replied the Professor darkly, as he glanced at the clear sky. ‘Where do you suppose he dropped from? There’s hardly any wind.’

‘Professor – the basket.’

Anna was slowly putting her hand into the basket, wary of the nearby mongoose. It looked like it could give a nasty bite if it chose to, and she didn’t like the hard blackness of its small eyes. She quickly extracted an envelope from the basket and sat back away from the animal to examine it.

‘Professor...’

She showed him the envelope. It was addressed “*To Ms. Annabeth Ross and Prof. Z. Arnustace.*”

Anna said, ‘*Miz?*’

The Professor gaped. ‘May I?’

Anna passed him the envelope, stifling her irritation at the unflattering honorific. 'Please do. How could anyone possibly know we'd be here, together, right at this moment?'

'I would hope the answers lie within,' said the Professor, clearly perturbed.

He tore open the envelope.

~

PART FOUR:

IN WHICH THE PROF AND THE DOC MEET A VYOMANAUT

THE LETTER READ:

~

Dear Ms. Ross and Prof. Arnustace,

*You are most cordially invited to supper and polite conversation this evening,
Friday the 5th January. I assure you that the topic of discussion will be of significant
interest to you both.*

I look forward to meeting you at the entrance to the Dunridge Estate at 18:30.

Yours sincerely,

Sir N. Chatterjee (M.Eng)

P.S. If you would be so kind, please RSVP and show the mongoose this blue seal.

[] *We gratefully accept your invitation.*

[] *We wish to remain ignorant of your revelations.*

~

WHEN THE PROFESSOR had finished reading out loud, Annabeth could barely constrain her astonishment. ‘The audacity of this man! Talk about the illusion of choice. He appears to be a master of manipulation, as well as engineering.’

‘Hardly a master, nor is it an illusion of choice,’ replied the Professor thoughtfully. ‘I wonder whether our Sir Chatterjee, whoever he may be, thinks more highly of himself than perhaps he should. Or perhaps his attempts are humour are simply too different to ours.’

‘Well, I vote we ignore the man.’

‘Madam, where is your curiosity?’

‘Safely in this hotel, where I hope to accompany it,’ she scoffed. ‘Whoever this man is, he’s not even close to the calibre of gentleman I would wish to have dinner with.’

The Professor’s eyes shone as he smoothed his moustache. He was clearly deep in thought, but appeared to be enjoying the minor dilemma. ‘Well, I intend to accept the invitation. His mention of the Dunridge Estate makes me believe there must be some connection to our wildlife conundrum. I intend to test that hypothesis.’

‘Test away,’ said Anna, getting to her feet and dusting her petticoat. ‘I’m sure Verne would have something to say about curiosity.’

‘Actually, I bred a strong curiosity into Verne’s bloodline many generations ago. That is why he is so invaluable to me.’

‘Verne is the result of selective breeding?’

‘I would be happy to discuss the details of evolution by artificial selection with you some other time, Doctor,’ he replied, also standing. ‘But for now I shall follow our stranger’s instructions.’

He took a pencil from his breast pocket and ticked the first RSVP box on the letter. He then turned it around and displayed the bright blue stamp that covered much of the page to the mongoose, who now sat patiently in the basket. The round seal was printed in blue ink and had a sun motif incorporating what appeared to be a multi-headed cobra.

Upon seeing the bright symbol, the mongoose immediately pulled a small lever on a metal contraption within the basket. The lever released a small food pellet, which the mongoose immediately devoured, and it also activated a metal gas cylinder which hissed its contents into the deflated balloon. The balloon began to swell, and within moments it was buoyant enough to float upward into the air.

‘Most remarkable,’ murmured the Professor, still holding the envelope as the dirigible rose above their heads and began to shrink against the blue sky.

‘Most *unnecessary*,’ Anna corrected. ‘Why didn’t he forget the mongoose and just ask *us* to push a button instead?’

‘I haven’t the foggiest. But look—!’

The dirigible must have reached a height of several hundred feet, because it was barely a speck now. But before it could vanish, too small to see, a dark shape manifested. It was almost like a black doorway opening up on the sky. The speck was obscured by the rectangular apparition. Then the ‘doorway’ slid closed, and the dirigible was gone.

Anna gaped. ‘Professor...?’

Professor Arnustace clapped his hands together, overjoyed. ‘My dear, I admit to being thoroughly confounded! How very exciting!’

~

IT WAS PAST LUNCHTIME and there were several hours to go before they were due to travel for their mysterious *rendezvous*. Annabeth was gracious enough to allow the Professor access to her hotel suite in order to review his notes and discuss his ideas with Verne (only a little put out that he considered a cat equal conversation to herself). They took turns to bathe and redress in private, and then rejoined one another in the hotel’s restaurant for high tea to put their heads together.

‘We should have some sort of plan of action, don’t you think?’ said Anna. ‘This stranger could well be of the criminal sort.’

‘What makes you say that?’ asked the Professor, carefully removing lint from his top hat with a pair of tweezers.

‘It all seems rather bonkers to me, not to mention clandestine. I’m sure you’ve made the same observations as I.’

‘For the sake of discussion, would you care to outline those observations?’

‘Of course. Firstly, the letter was addressed to both of us and delivered to the hotel. We had only two hours earlier decided that the hotel was to be our destination. This strongly suggests that we are being closely observed.’

‘It is feasible that Sir Chatterjee did not expect me to be at the hotel with you, and assumed you would simply contact me upon receipt of a letter addressed to us both. You told me that you have been at this hotel for several days.’

‘Considering that he failed to call me “Doctor” instead of “Miz”, I suspect he is rather more inclined to talk to a man such as yourself than a feeble-minded woman.’

The Professor nodded without saying a word.

‘Secondly,’ said Anna, ‘his pompous attitude and self-assurance have me inclined to believe that he is not a character with whom I would wish to spend a great deal of time. I accept that this does not necessarily make him a criminal.’

‘Go on.’

‘Thirdly, based on his name, choice of pet and the seal on the letter, Sir Chatterjee is of Indian origin. Although the Empire would like to have us believe that we are on good terms with our South Asian cousins, I happen to know that there is a great deal of unrest all across the Indian continent. That there may well soon be a violent political struggle with the goal of separation from the Empire.’

‘I too have heard such things,’ said the Professor. ‘Shall I presume that you fear Sir Chatterjee is on the side of the Nationalists, if that is what we are to call them?’

‘My understanding is that strong personas such as Tilak and Gandhi have been most persuasive. Even though they have shown great support for us during the war so far, the Indians are still calling for self-rule.’

‘I concede. There is a threat, but I am reluctant to make assumptions until we meet the man.’

Anna nodded. ‘Of course. Fourth and last, the man may well not be sound of mind. He appears to have some connection to the strange sea-creatures—’

‘Or air-creatures.’

‘—that we have discovered; he possesses little by way of social niceties; and sent his invitation to us in a tiny Zeppelin piloted by a mongoose. Are we really to assume he is perfectly *compos mentis*?’

Not for the first time that afternoon, the Professor peered out of the window into the blue sky. ‘I think it would be safest not to make any assumptions at all at this point.’

~

JUST BEFORE SIX O’CLOCK, as the night began to draw in, they called the hotel’s driver and once again piled into the Ford Model T and went on their way to Lord Dunridge’s coastal estate. They arrived early and stood patiently by the road, huddled in their coats. It was a silent period, as they each contemplated what might be to come. Verne had been left in the hands of the hotel staff, with a hefty deposit and expenses, which was all the best: it was bitterly cold.

Promptly at six thirty, according to the Professor’s waistcoat timepiece, a great gust of wind almost blew their hats from their heads. A powerful electric light dropped upon them from above, and so too dangled what appeared to be a rope ladder. Looking up into the blinding beam of light, neither the Doctor nor the Professor could make out what hovered above them like a giant bumblebee. There was a tremendous amount of noise, requiring them to shout to one another.

‘What do you think, Doctor?’ called the Professor. ‘Shall we?’

But Anna was frozen to the spot. She looked up into the spotlight as though reliving some unbelievable horror, her hair sprung loose from its bob and lashing about her face and neck.

The Professor persisted. 'If we desire answers, I see little alternative!'

Anna said tentatively, 'I don't wish to be separated...'

'Nor I. Come.'

They both clung to either side of the rope ladder. The Professor had his bag looped around his forearm, and Anna kept her legs together to avoid her skirts from billowing in the incredible downward gust of wind that battered them. Her lips were pressed tightly together and her eyes were wide and pale. The light flooded the country road, bleaching their clothes and skin white, so that they rose up into the air like ghostly apparitions in the night.

~

THE DIRIGIBLE had a crew of at least five, one of whom helped them aboard once the rope ladder had been retracted. The visitors stepped shakily into the belly of the small airship, which was a long gloomy space the shape of a ship's hold. Glinting metal ribs curved down the walls and joined beneath a long metal walkway.

'Are you quite alright?' asked the Professor, touching Anna's arm. 'You seemed distressed.'

Anna pulled her coat tightly around her. 'It's so *cold*.'

Then her eyes became as round as coins at the sound of her own voice. It was squeaky and high-pitched. The Professor's voice was the same.

'Extraordinary,' he squeaked, looking around. 'We appear to be breathing helium.'

'Isn't that dangerous?' squeaked Anna, looking alarmed.

'I should fear embolisms.'

'Good Lord!'

One of the airship's crew gave them two hard boiled sweets. 'Here – suck these.'

His voice was perfectly normal. He had a French accent, and was well-clothed in a woollen coat and hat.

'Humbugs?' said the Professor.

'Suck, don't chew. My name is Ornaud.'

Ornaud led them down the long catwalk. Their footsteps had a flat echo to them as they followed through the dimly lit space, sucking their sweets. The ceiling bulged down, so that the Professor was obliged to remove his top hat. Soon they arrived at a ladder leading upwards, and they followed the bearded Ornaud up into a wide, well-lit space.

A metal walkway made the floor flat, even though the inner bulkheads of the airship curved below them. There were several elevated platforms, one which supported a great deal of machinery manned by a woman in a chair, and another that provided access to a giant cylindrical tank not unlike the one from the mongoose's tiny basket. Above was a multitude of criss-crossing girders and cables, each glinting in the glare of bright halogen lamps. Straight ahead was a command centre, from which their host greeted them in a deep, plummy voice.

'Welcome, my friends! I am Sir Nagendra Chatterjee, and this is my humble airship, the *Garuda*. I am most gratified to see that you accepted my invitation.'

Sir Chatterjee was somewhat shorter than the Professor, who was a resounding six feet tall even without his hat and shoes. His black hair was oiled into a perfect side parting, and his moustache was similarly flawless. An orange fingerprint adorned the centre of his smooth forehead. He gave a courteous bow with his hands together like a praying man.

'Namaste,' said the Professor, returning his gesture. 'Ah – I hear that our voices return to normal.'

Anna gave an experimental cough.

‘The *F.R.I.I. Garuda* flies using helium, rather than hydrogen. It is far safer, but my particular method involves breathing the gas, which affects our vocal chords. The sucking sweets you were given will give you temporary solace from that embarrassment. I will see to it that you have a supply – one sweet helps for approximately one hour, depending on one’s constitution.’

‘Thank you. This is a most wonderful airship,’ the Professor replied. ‘Is the helium not rather dangerous to breathe for an extended period?’

Sir Chatterjee bowed again. ‘This is a unique gaseous formula of my own design. It is quite safe to breathe, although it must be kept cold to remain so. I hope that the temperature is not too uncomfortable.’

It was true that their breath hung in the air like clouds, but both Doctor Ross and Professor Arnustace had come wearing their winter coats and gloves, and Anna was prepared with a scarf.

‘We shall survive,’ said Anna.

‘I am happy to hear it, Miz Ross.’

‘It’s Doctor, actually.’

Sir Chatterjee turned away from her, smiling. ‘Professor Arnustace, would you and your friend wish to join me for a hot meal in just twenty minutes’ time? I have cabins prepared for you, where you may deposit your things. It will only be a short journey.’

‘Where are we going?’ asked Anna, stepping closer to the Professor so that it would be harder for Sir Chatterjee to avoid her gaze.

‘To my island in the sky, madam. The Free Republic of Ipsun Isle!’

~

PART FIVE:

IN WHICH THE PERSONAL TRAGEDY OF A SKY-CAPTAIN IS UNVEILED

AFTER DEPOSITING THEIR POSSESSIONS in a one of the two cabins assigned to them, they followed Ornaud back through the bowels of the airship to a quaint dining area.

‘I say, doesn’t this airship remind you of a train?’ asked Anna as they walked.

The Professor had noticed much the same thing: wooden panelled walls, sliding doors to the berths and other rooms, and the general luxurious elegance one would expect on the finest of British or European steam trains. There was also the underlying sensation of movement beneath the feet, and gentle rocking of fixtures such as lamps, which all served to enhance the sensation.

‘I quite agree,’ said the Professor. ‘It seems that Sir Chatterjee and his crew are accustomed to travelling in style.’

‘But did you notice how we never saw the airship approach? And the unusual downgust of air as we climbed the ladder? I don’t think this thing is powered entirely by helium.’

‘Agreed. I suspect that the strange shape we saw ‘absorb’ the little dirigible was actually a door opening in the bottom of this very airship. Somehow, the airship was made invisible to those viewing it from below – only the door, when it slid open, was visible to us.’ ‘Technology unlike anything I’ve ever seen...’ Anna murmured, as they were seated at a large dining table complete with cloth, crockery, cutlery and elegant wine glasses. There were also several narrow containers that held unusual items Anna didn’t recognise.

The Professor was only slightly better travelled. ‘Chopsticks, madam. There must be some crewmen from the Orient here.’

‘But I only saw five men in total.’

‘Perhaps Sir Chatterjee regularly picks up guests,’ the Professor ventured.

Anna didn’t speculate. She rubbed her hands together against the ever-present cold. ‘Doesn’t it feel strange to be seated for dinner whilst wearing a coat and gloves?’

The Professor seemed distracted, however, as though these minor curiosities were barely worth wasting his mental energies on. He looked acutely around the dining room for a moment until Sir Chatterjee made an appearance a few minutes later.

‘My friends, thank you again for joining me. I have a most sumptuous meal prepared, the finest you will ever taste.’

‘Thank you,’ said the Professor. ‘And may I complement you again on the ingenious design and efficiency of this dirigible.’

‘That is most gratifying to hear, sir,’ replied Sir Chatterjee, wobbling his head on his neck in a curious sign of satisfaction. ‘This aerostat has a semi-rigid structure and is made buoyant by a gaseous cocktail mainly comprised of helium, as we previously discussed. The balloon above us maintains our elevation. We are together in the gondola, attached to the inner structure of the envelope, below the balloon. The gondola houses

the control centre you saw earlier as well as crew quarters and cargo storage. Two separate engine nacelles on either side of the gondola are where the propellers are mounted, which steer the craft.'

'Fascinating!' exclaimed the Professor. 'Wouldn't you agree, Doctor Ross?'

'Quite,' she said in a clipped manner. 'Sir Chatterjee, may I ask you to elucidate on your earlier answer? You said that we were heading towards an island – and island in the sky.'

'That is correct, madam,' replied Sir Chatterjee, smiling. 'The *Garuda* is just one of many aerostats, each of a varying design. I have chosen to – ah, but our first course arrives! A simple *smorgasbord* from my home state of Bengal.'

The table was filled to overflowing with selections of samosas, spiced onions, chickpeas, pakoras, popadoms, and a selection of chillies, chutneys and kasaundies. The Professor relished the challenge to his delicate palate, but Anna seemed not to be hungry.

'Is everything to your satisfaction, madam?' asked Sir Chatterjee, appearing genuinely concerned. 'If you prefer, I also have simple breads and soups, which are none too spicy...?'

'I fear I don't have an appetite,' said Anna. 'And I await an answer to my question. How did you hide your dirigibles from view above Whitby? What are you doing here in England with these airships?'

Sir Chatterjee sat back in his chair and smoothed over his short, neat hair with one hand. He seemed to find the direct questioning, and Anna's hard stare, to be very uncomfortable. He said, 'To answer your first question, the *Garuda* is equipped with a magnificent technology of my own design. It has a complex series of external mirrors on pulleys and joints which capture sunlight from above and reflect it below. To a casual observer, at a distance, there is nothing above except for sky and clouds. The reality is they are seeing only a reflection, which is bent around the circumference of the aerostat. An imperfect system, but when used properly it can obscure our approach and then keep us hidden from view. Usually however we rely upon the cover of night and cloud.'

'I would like to see these mechanisms, once the sunlight returns,' said the Professor. 'It sounds most ingenious.'

'Thank you, good sir.'

'Ingenious is not the word I would use,' said Anna flatly. 'I believe suspicious and intimidating is more accurate.'

Sir Chatterjee nodded slowly. 'To answer madam's second question, my purpose here requires a longer explanation. I would bid you to eat as I speak, but even if you do not then the food will not be wasted. What my crew doesn't finish off will be a feast for my birds: the *Garuda* has a small aviary – a passion of mine.

'As I have told you, my name is Nagendra Chatterjee. I was born in a village called Gowda not far from Rajpur, near the city of Calcutta. My father was a herdsman, as is typical in my village, and my mother was a seamstress from a city called Ajmer in Rajasthan, whose own mother was sold as a servant and taken to Gowda and later escaped. As such, my mother was very protective of me, for child kidnap and slavery is not uncommon in my country. My father was less protective, and saw my mother's restrictions as another way to curb my freedom. Against her wishes, he bid me to travel to Calcutta and be my own man. This I did. It transpired that I was adept at subjects such as mathematics and structural engineering, and was quickly recruited by an Indian private company which was making great advancements in certain fields, including automobiles and air travel.

'It had always been my dream to fly, like a bird, although my mother said that it was mankind's lot to stick closely to the ground, like a snake. I worked hard on revolutionary designs for aerostats such as the one in which

you now travel. Years later, after the Great War broke out, I learned that the private company for which I worked had been secretly purchased by the British Army, and they were building with my creations a Royal Air Force. I could not bear to learn that my aerostats were to be used for death and destruction on a global scale. I endeavoured to flee, taking only my wits and accumulated savings.

‘In the three years since, the war has escalated and airships are used as tools of devastation.’

‘I know it well,’ said Anna. ‘Why did you not simply go back to your village?’

‘Because Gowda was completely destroyed soon after I left,’ explained Sir Chatterjee. ‘We thought that we were far enough away from Europe to escape the war, but a fire may have more than one source of fuel. Nationalists, fearing that the British would bring war to India, sought to expel them through violence. Many rural villages were wiped off the map as the nationalists cut a swathe across the country.’

The Professor sighed deeply. They had all ceased eating by this juncture. ‘I am truly sorry to hear it, Sir Chatterjee.’

Sir Chatterjee nodded. ‘I fear that this Great War will go on far longer than anyone anticipates, and even afterwards, what then? Mankind was not meant to be embroiled in conflict. We have far greater purposes with which to turn our talents.’

‘And what is your purpose?’ asked Anna coldly.

‘To help those who need it, madam, before it is too late. My secret nation on Ipsun Isle is filled with those who share my vision or benefited from it. We seek solace from the madness of empires and kingdoms. We have our own economy and sustainable resources. Within two more years, I anticipate that we will be fully self-sufficient. As a peaceful nation, hidden from the warmongers of the world.’

‘I fear that such nations may find it difficult to retain their freedom,’ said the Professor. ‘But it is a noble endeavour nonetheless. But I am puzzled by your mention of a ‘nation’ and an ‘island’. How is it that you remain hidden?’

Here Sir Chatterjee smiled widely and peeked at his timepiece. ‘I have talked too long, but it brings us to a convenience juncture. Please, come with me.’

They dabbed their mouths with napkins and stood to follow the expressionless man to the edge of the dining room. At the rear was a set of double doors, which Sir Chatterjee threw open with more than a hint of showmanship. They adjoined a wide, open-air balcony at the back of the airship’s gondola. The Professor and the Doctor gasped as they stepped out into the high wind and surveyed their surroundings.

Far below them stretched Great Britain, a patchwork of green, brown and grey spreading out against the white boundary of the ocean. Waves crashed against the shoreline, too distant to hear over the sounds of the gondola’s nearby propellers. Above them was the great swollen belly of the airship, ridged by its internal skeleton. Its rubberised skin fluttered between the trapped gases on one side and the fierce winds on the other. A complicated system of silvery cables and small panels formed a busy second skin across the budge of the balloon.

‘Astonishing!’ yelled the Professor over the wind, holding his hat onto his head. ‘And this must be the mirrored system that disguises you from the good people below?’

‘Indeed!’ cried Sir Chatterjee. ‘Most remarkable, is it not? You may notice that we take a spiralling route up into the air from where we departed at Whitby. The engine nacelles are capable of swivelling to face downward, enabling rapid vertical lift-off, but they are only effective upwards of three hundred feet. Beyond that we must

rotate them to face upward, then rely on the lift of the gas envelope to elevate us further. Other rotors steer us on the horizontal plane, and some forward thrust is necessary, and so we describe a spiral. Better yet: behold...!’

When Sir Chatterjee pulled a lever, an enormous mechanism began to move beneath their feet. Several tensile cables hove a large, wide mirror into view in front of them. It was angled to give them a reflected view beneath the gondola and show what the airship was heading towards, not where it had been.

Reflected in the glass was a fleet of airships. Each enormous vessel was strung to its neighbour with a network of cables and catwalks. Some of the gondolas were far wider than any of the balloons, and suspended by two or more ships. There were so many separate parts that it would be easy to mistake the fleet for a single enormous object made up of myriad platforms, walkways and balloons.

The Professor leaned forward into the wind to peer more closely at the enormous mirror that provided this forward view. ‘It’s spectacular, sir! A most incredible aeronautical achievement – it truly is a floating city! More than that, far more...!’

But when he turned to see Anna’s opinion, he found her as pale as a sheet of writing paper and her eyes rolling backward in their sockets. She lost consciousness completely, requiring the Professor to catch her before she tipped out of the airship and went tumbling through the miles of empty air below them. It was all he could do to hold her tight and say her name over and over: ‘Doctor Ross! Doctor Ross! Doctor Ross...!’

~

PART SIX:

IN WHICH WE SOAR TO THE AIR-CITIES OF IPSUN ISLE

‘THE EXCITEMENT must have gone to her head,’ said Sir Chatterjee with concern, as the two men pulled Annabeth away from the open hatchway.

‘I fear so,’ said the Professor, although he wasn’t quite being honest. He had seen something in the Doctor’s eyes that he couldn’t easily interpret, and wanted to relocate her to her cabin before trying to speak with her about it.

With the help of Ornaud he got her there. Sir Chatterjee apologised and said that he must see to the docking of the *Garuda* with the fleet. Ornaud gave the Professor some smelling salts and further humbugs to suck, as the effects of theirs would soon expire.

Alone again with Anna, the Professor abandoned the salts in favour of a natural awakening. This happened a few minutes later, and the Professor was waiting with a small glass bottle of water, which had been supplied.

‘Fear not, Doctor Ross. You’re safe on your berth.’

‘Professor...’ She gulped down some water, then smoothed down her hair. ‘I suppose I fainted? How shameful...’

‘Not at all, Doctor. When you’re ready, we can talk about how you developed your fear and hatred of airships.’

She looked at him sharply, and that was all that he needed to know that he had made the correct deduction. ‘How did you know?’

‘Your disinterest when we encountered the miniature dirigible, and your fear when the *Garuda* dropped its rope ladder, far deeper than any normal apprehension in such a scenario. Your chilly response to Sir Chatterjee’s story, and of course your shock just a moment ago at seeing so many airships in one place, severe enough to cause you to faint.’

Anna accepted the hard boiled sweet that the Professor offered to her. ‘Chilly, was I?’

‘Positively.’

‘You are correct that there is a story, Professor,’ Anna replied quietly. ‘But would you do me the courtesy of letting me choose my own time in which to tell it?’

‘Of course. I’m afraid that now you have a greater challenge ahead of you. We have arrived at the floating island.’

~

THEY WERE SHOWN THE WAY to the forward hatches, where Sir Chatterjee was waiting for them. He smiled as the doors opened, allowing cool moonlight to pour in around them, along with the many jostling sounds of enterprise: clanging, hammering, the whine and twang of cables, roaring engines and propellers, and the distant shouts of hundreds of people.

For a moment, the Professor forgot that he was in the air. There was only a faint breeze, and the ‘ground’ of the bustling urban vista in front of him seemed solid and continuous. He saw wide public spaces that boasted

trees and flowers, and many tall gondolas that were as high as any building in Whitby, each glittering with hundreds of windows. Above were the voluminous ‘clouds’ of the many balloons, tied to this metropolis by thousands, if not millions of glinting steel cables, many of which were decorated with flags or utilized as telephone wires or even laundry lines.

‘It’s just like a city...’ murmured Anna, forgetting her earlier trauma. She did not feel suspended in the air like a basket from a hot air balloon, but safely ensconced in the Earthly security of a large township.

Sir Chatterjee gestured at the hundreds of short and tall ‘buildings’ all around them, and the countless citizens going about their evening. ‘Not just one city, madam, but many, each representing many nations. With the *Garuda* now docked, Ipsun Isle is comprised of precisely 421 aerostats, the largest of which is the *Gräfin von Falkenrath*, which is 682 metres long with a volume of 474,000 cubic metres. Each vessel is the permanent home to anywhere between 20 and 130 men, women and children. At last count, my floating island has 4,388 citizens, and more born every year. Please, come with me.’

Crewmen were lashing the *Garuda* to the airborne pier. When the Professor looked back he saw still more men on pulley-platforms cleaning the ship’s many mirrors.

They travelled a shaky few metres along a metal walkway, cut with many holes to make it as light as possible without sacrificing its strength. They could see the ocean far below them through the holes – a dizzying experience – but once they left the pier to the ‘street’ they felt as secure as if on *terra firma*.

With so many giant structures all around them, some moving gently as they were buffeted by the wind, the Professor thought that much of the ‘city’ must be in shadow; and yet, the whole street was as bright as any meadow in England.

‘I feel as though I’m walking through Oxford!’ said Anna, amazed. ‘Only nowhere near as old. However did you come to own this?’

‘A fair question,’ said Sir Chatterjee. ‘The truth is that I do not own Ipsun Isle. I am its creator and its master, but the island belongs to the people. Oxford, I’m certain, is over a thousand years old, but most of the vessels you see around you have yet to have their fifth birthday. Some two hundred were commissioned by myself and Ipsun’s wealthiest citizens; others were salvaged, others stolen, such as the fleet of six I commandeered for my escape from Calcutta three years ago.’

‘For a metropolis only three years in the making, you have achieved something quite monumental,’ commented the Professor reservedly. ‘It would be quite unbelievable, were I not seeing it with my own eyes.’

A sudden shrill noise came from a case that Ornaud was carrying. He set down the case, opened it, and produced a telephone receiver, which he passed to Sir Chatterjee.

‘He can’t be speaking with anybody,’ Anna said quietly to the Professor. ‘That phone has no wire!’

‘Wires aren’t necessarily essential,’ he replied. ‘I designed a similar device for communicating underwater, remember?’

Grinning uncharacteristically, Sir Chatterjee passed back the receiver and clapped his hands. ‘Most honoured guests, I would love to speak more of our island’s remarkable history, but a most urgent matter has come up. I ask you to please hurry with me, and I shall tell you why I have asked you here.’

What choice had they but to follow?

THE GROUND ON WHICH THEY WALKED was made up of metal panelling and criss-crossing catwalks, wooden boards, bamboo rafts and rope-bridges. It was designed with fluidity in mind, as the metropolis was made of its composite parts each moving on separate air currents, and so sections of floor slid over and under one another with the graceful movements of the tide.

At first this vaguely tilting, shifting landscape confused the visitors' legs. By the time Sir Chatterjee and his retinue escorted them to a giant multi-storied gondola they found that they were becoming accustomed, much like earning their "sea legs" during a long ocean cruise.

The "building" they found themselves in was a gondola of indeterminate size, but on all accounts vast: the Professor estimated twelve storeys high and at least three hundred feet long. It was of the finest construction, and even gave them a perfect view of the nearby section of Ipsun Isle by way of an electrical elevator, the shaft of which had glass walls. Annabeth pressed her nose and hands against the glass, straining to see the even a portion of the incredible size and sophistication of the metropolis.

'You aren't afraid of heights, Doctor?' asked the Professor experimentally.

'Not in the least,' came the reply.

The elevator car released them into a long corridor, which in turn led them to a large semi-circular room not unlike a ship's bridge.

'Welcome to the control cabin of the *Chowringhee Tiger*,' announced Sir Chatterjee. 'This is the very ship in which I escaped Calcutta, thereafter pursued as a traitor to both the Indian and British nations. She survived many bullet holes, sir and madam, now healed, and is my proud flagship. It is from this magnificent titan that I monitor many of my missions – one of the most important of which calls us here now.'

'And what mission is that?' asked the Professor.

'It is related to your "extremophiles", my friends. Come, please look.'

Sir Chatterjee beckoned them over to a large table made of lightweight metal. There he unscrolled a large sheet of paper, on which were biological sketches of a very familiar outline.

'That is our creature,' said Anna softly. 'Where did you get these drawings?'

'I have a man aboard, an anthropologist as it happens, who has a keen interest in biology and a steady hand with a pencil. His name is Cho, an Oriental, and a very respectable man. The drawing is of a creature I know you are familiar with. We refer to them on Ipsun Isle as *Chatepterus Expatia*, or the "white wings".'

'I prefer to call 'em the sky squids,' muttered Ormaud with a grin, who operated machinery next to the table. 'Squidlings!'

'*Chatepterus expatia* – you've given them a taxonomical group,' said the Professor. 'Of the Phylum *Mollusca*, I presume?'

'No, good sir. Of the Phylum *Cordata*. I was very close to placing these animals in the order *Pterosauria*, but couldn't bring myself to overlook the obvious absence of hind limbs.'

'*Pterosauria*!' gasped Anna. 'Surely you can't link these animals closer to prehistoric flying reptiles than you can to ancestral cephalopods like the squid?'

'I can and I have, madam,' sniffed Sir Chatterjee. 'These extremophiles are certainly not mulluscs, as their pseudopods are vestigial skin flaps rather than true tentacles; they have boned limbs, not to mention lungs. Beyond that, the soft carapace that gives the creatures their squidlike appearance is actually conjoined wings – featherless, I might add. One only has to look at the skeleton.'

‘You have a whole skeleton?’ asked the Professor excitedly.

Sir Chatterjee blinked. ‘Of course. I have hunted these animals since I discovered them, but the closest I have come was sadly to kill one accidentally, when it was caught in the propellers of my craft. Although grievously wounded, its skeleton remained intact. Much of the flesh was lost over the ocean. We boiled the bones and sealed them in resin *in situ*. I shall show you the specimen soon, but for now avail yourselves of the sketches. You will notice these two curved bones, which are actually elongated fingers, much like the bones of a pterosaur’s wings, or those of a bird or bat. They are fused at the wrists here, where we could assume the creature has its nose, and double back in this outer curve, forming the front of the “face”.’

‘Remarkable.’

‘Just so. However being clearly not reptile, mollusc, bird nor fish, I had to create a new Order. The Order *Chatepterus*, which has only one Genus, *Expatius*. I wonder if I will one day populate it with more than one species, but so far I have not been able to gain a close study of any one specimen – in fact, I am envious of the two of you, who examined the remains of that poor dead animal just today.’

‘It bludgeoned itself against the bottom of your invisible airship,’ Anna spat. ‘The remains will be taken to a museum for study.’

‘Ah,’ said Sir Chatterjee, raising a dark eyebrow. ‘Which museum?’

‘Paris,’ said the Professor quickly. ‘There is an expert in cephalopods there. However, he would evidently be as perplexed as we were on the matter, as the relations to cephalopods seems far distant.’

Just then, another siren sounded, drawing their attention to the bridge. Out the gloriously large front windows they could see little but the flutter of greyish clouds against the glass. They were neither above nor below the clouds, but within them. For some reason the “Sky Captain” was maintaining this altitude, despite the minimal visibility.

‘Contact, Commander!’ said Ornaud, who was peering down a vertical copper pipe in much the same way as a scientist examines a microscope. ‘Bearing a few degrees East ... A single form, as large as the last one – maybe bigger! Shall I prep the plane?’

‘Immediately,’ said Sir Chatterjee, suddenly a vision of seriousness. This was only slightly undermined when a small, furry creature dashed across the floor and spiralled up his rigid body, settling on his shoulder. It was a mongoose – presumably the same one as from before.

‘Your pet, then?’ asked the Professor, reaching out to tickle the mongoose’s chin. He pulled back sharply when the animal produced a hideous snarl, exposing dozens of tiny white teeth.

‘This is Retahvi, a fellow vyomanaut,’ Sir Chatterjee told them warmly. ‘But I shall have to introduce you all later – science calls.’

‘You intend to fly?’

‘The *Chowringhee Tiger* carries a small biplane equipped with state of the art photographic equipment. I will capture the white wing’s image and develop it here for study. I have a great scientific interest in these creatures, which has brought me here, over your country. If you wish, you may listen via the two-way radio. I regret that the biplane is not large enough for passengers.’

Anna surged forward so that the Indian was staring her in the eyes. ‘You’ve already killed two of these rare creatures because of your “studies”. Don’t you think it’s time you let them exist and be on your way?’

Sir Chatterjee had put his pet mongoose, Retahvi, down on the table and was now shrugging on a thick aviator's jacket. 'Madam, I *do not* think that. For, you see, I believe that they are being hunted to extinction. I would like to found out by whom, and why.'

The man placed his goggles over his eyes, and the transformation from visionary engineer to pilot was complete.

~

PART SEVEN:

IN WHICH A CHASE IS MADE; AND ANNABETH'S SECRET IS DISCLOSED

AS PROMISED, the chase of the “white wing” was transmitted by radio, and was almost as exciting as being there in person. Sir Chatterjee’s amazing wireless two-way radio delivered every rumble and whine of his motorised aeroplane, every gust of wind as he swooped, and the crackled sound of his excited voice as he gave chase:

‘...And disengaging from the gondola now ... Disengaged. I am in the air. Ornaud, a bearing please? ... Good, adjusting ... Heading into the cloud.

‘Visibility is poor, as expected. Temperature must be 45 Fahrenheit or lower. Proceeding ... Moisture on the windshield, but not too bad ... I see it ahead! I see it!’

There was a buzz on the bridge. The Professor noticed that Ornaud in particular was excited by the news. Evidently they did not encounter the extremophiles very often. He and Annabeth perched against the desk, rubbing their hands together and sucking their sweets, listening.

‘I am matching its bearing. I am in pursuit. It is a larger specimen than before, perhaps three metres from front to back. There is a faint bioluminescent glow! Amazing, beautiful ... I can see its light reflected off the clouds. It is like chasing a fairy through mist...’

‘I shall try to encourage it to leave the cloud cover. Preparing the photographic apparatus. Accelerating – I am closing the distance. The animal is bigger than I thought, perhaps four metres. The pattern of its bioluminescent flashing is changing: no longer a steady ripple of lilac and blue, but more frantic flashing. The ends of the tendrils are glowing a faint blue-green. Utterly remarkable!’

‘I am within five metres, banking to the left of it ... Attempting to push it right, out of the cloud cover.’

Anna clutched the Professor’s gloved hand. She was staring at the radio transceiver. ‘He’s going to kill it, Professor.’

‘I don’t believe that is his intention, Doctor.’

‘He’s going to kill it. This might be the last one alive.’

Sir Chatterjee’s voice continued to come from the radio: *‘I am moving closer, but the animal remains on course. Either it doesn’t see me or it does not view me as a threat. Perhaps the white wings don’t hear as we do – the plane is very loud, obviously – or maybe this one is injured or defective in some way ... Pushing harder, attempting to coax it...’*

A fierce crash suddenly boomed from the radio, making Anna jump. Ornaud and the other staff stood and stared at the receiver, eyes wide, waiting for the next words:

‘A collision! It attacked me! Repeat, the white wing attacked the plane! It shot off into the cloud, above the cloud ... I can’t ascend further. Damage to the right wing struts, the prop is failing ... Going to try to turn around, try to—’

There the transmission ended.

THEY WAITED FOR A LONG TIME. The radio produced only silence and broken moments of white noise. The static was the only audio backdrop to the frozen scene on the bridge of the *Chowringhee Tiger*.

Five minutes passed.

The Professor looked at Anna, but she seemed preoccupied, her eyes unfocused, gloved hands gripping the edges of the table that she leant upon. Just as the Professor was about to remove his hat and speak, she turned. She was examining the drawings again.

‘Could it really have attack capabilities?’ asked the Professor in an uncharacteristic whisper. ‘They seemed rather docile when we first saw them in the ocean.’

‘Perhaps because they sensed we meant them no harm, Professor,’ she replied quietly. Every word on the silent bridge seemed twice as loud. ‘Do you really think that this animal felt the same about Nagendra in his biplane?’

The Professor looked out the forward window, into the misty whorls of cloud. ‘Hard to say what these strange beings feel, or think, at all...’

‘They are living creatures. They will protect themselves, violently if necessary. If we encroach into their territory there’s no telling what they will do. As you say, we don’t know what they’re capable of.’

The Professor stood tall and spoke. ‘Ornaud, sir. Is there no way we can learn of your leader’s fate?’

‘He is not our leader, *monsieur* – and no. Not until we launch another craft for a search. But there is only one aeroplane on Ipsun Isle, so it will be a slow search by balloon.’

As it happened, a search was not necessary. Sir Chatterjee returned minutes later.

He was battered and hid his frayed nerves well.

‘Ornaud. I am afraid the biplane will need repairs.’

‘Sir. And the camera?’

‘The camera was knocked loose. It is already sinking into the North Sea. The whole venture – a failure!’

He threw his leather gloves onto the floor, then stood staring at them as he steamed.

After the hustle of post-mission preparations filled the bridge, Sir Chatterjee finally approached his guests.

‘A most disappointing evening. Please forgive my outburst.’

‘I trust the innocent thing got away unscathed?’ asked Anna coldly.

‘I shall escort you to the *Cobra Coil*, the aerostat where you will have your berths. I shall have supper and any bedtime beverage prepared for you that you wish. Please come.’

The Professor had already known that Doctor Ross could not abide being ignored. She was fiercely protective of the capabilities of her gender, and would defend their potential to the death, he was sure. But for some reason she swallowed her pride and indignation, and silently allowed herself to be led down in the elevator and back into the streets of the floating island.

They left the *Chowringhee Tiger*’s enormous gondola and stepped across the ringing metal walkways of the central square. One again the Professor was struck by how much like a real city the place was, with people leaning out of upper-storey windows to smoke cigarettes, children running around the potted trees on the green, and the occasional man-pulled wagon rattling down the street.

They walked in silence for a short while. The “vyomanaut” was brooding – for that was how Sir Chatterjee referred to himself, using what the Professor had taken to be his native word for “aviator”. In fact it meant “astronaut”: a pilot of the outer atmosphere.

Eventually the Indian looked up and realised that he had been amiss as tour guide of his marvellous island. ‘We now walk through our resident China Town, though you wouldn’t know it. Our Oriental investors are few and far between, but I have located many talented pilots from China and the Japanese archipelago. Down the street there you would soon come across the “Quarry”, as some of our people call it. At least four of the aerostats there are named after precious stones or minerals, so the nickname for that *cul de sac* stuck.’

‘Have you residents from many countries besides India?’ asked the Professor, knocked sideways by the wonders all around him.

‘Only a small percentage of our people are from India – approximately one hundred, so less than five percent. We have a great number of Europeans, with about a third comprising of French and another third of Germans, with most of the rest being Italian or from some of the smaller Eastern European countries. I was stunned by how many very wealthy people there are on the Carpathian mountain range, for example. Many Lords and Barons were quick to invest in what they saw as a new nation. Everybody dreams of a land where they can make their own rules.’

‘But they *don’t* make the rules, do they?’ asked Anna. ‘You do.’

‘On the contrary. We have a democratic system. Each district, which is in essence a microcosmic country – birds of a feather flock together, you know – has an elected leader. Those leaders and I form the laws of Ipsun Isle.’

‘Which are?’

‘Very few would surprise you. They are laws founded on ethical grounds, or are in place to protect the identity and secrecy of the island, which is of utmost importance.’

‘And yet, you revealed yourself so readily to us,’ pointed out the Professor as they were led towards another “square”, in the centre of which was a large pump that acted as a freshwater fountain. People were collecting water in cups and bottles, and chatting idly as they drank or washed from buckets.

Sir Chatterjee turned sharply to lead them up an adjoining lane, but not before the Professor saw what appeared to be a large factory, independent of any airship, which belched black smoke and spurted red and white flames from its towers.

The Professor frowned as he saw several men outside the factory with their faces covered in black dust. Some appeared to be helping others. The injured were shaking, barely able to stand, and one staggered aside to vomit into a gutter. Others wandered nearby, clutching their heads.

‘Sir Chatterjee, may I enquire about the factory we just passed?’

‘Factory? Oh, maybe that was the foundry. We produce our own simple tools – cutlery, and such.’

‘There appeared to be some wounded, disoriented men outside,’ the Professor pressed, his blue eyes narrowing.

‘Ah, he pub! Our people work hard and play hard, Professor Arnustace. Some of the men play a little too hard, if you ask me, but then I come from a country where many areas are alcohol free. Bengal is not such a place, but alcohol is often seen as unclean, and I expect the attitude has rubbed off on me. Still, I allow my people many freedoms – as you will see, Ms Ross; I am not a dictator.’

Doctor Ross said nothing. Nor did the Professor as they were led down a narrow street lined with refuse dumpsters. They emerged into a *cul de sac* where a small, nimble-looking aerostat was moored: the *F.R.I.I. Cobra Coil*.

‘Do you not have any place to stay that is *not* an airship?’ asked Anna, although her expression suggested that she already knew the answer.

‘I’m afraid not. This is a flying island, after all. The *Cobra Coil* is one of our oldest ships, one of the six that I brought with me from India. It is a fine aerostat and I hope it will be a most comfortable home, for as long as you choose to stay here.’

The Professor said, ‘We have not yet discussed the true reason we were brought here, nor how long you would wish us to stay.’

‘For as long as it takes. You are here to help save the white wings, Professor Arnustace. They need our help, and the two of you are foremost in your fields, not to mention more experienced with *Chatepterus expatia* than any other human being save myself. Please comfort yourselves this evening, and rest well. Tomorrow morning I will have Ornaud give you a tour of the island. After lunch, we shall talk the business of saving a species.’

~

A DOORMAN led them into the gondola of the *Cobra Coil*, which had two storeys. The lower deck was the business part of the aircraft; the upper storey had the habitable rooms, and they were asked to confine themselves to this upper storey. Engineers worked daily in the lower decks, as their modified engines provided some electric power to the airships even when they were not being used for flight. In this way, each vessel was self sufficient in terms of power. The doorman told them that this was a requirement in case the island might have to someday break up, and be reassembled at another time and place.

‘Do your masters think that likely?’ asked the Professor. ‘That the island might have to someday disassemble and separate?’

‘We are a new nation, my friend. The world powers do not take kindly to new nations popping up here and there. Here are your berths.’

The rooms were comfortable. Their bags had already been brought over from the *Chowringhee Tiger* and left for them. Anna was silent as they had a modest supper of bread and butter. The Professor had a smooth nightcap and was about to bid Anna goodnight and retire to his room when he noticed that her hands were trembling in her lap. She was staring down at the table as though looking through it, to the ocean that was no doubt several miles below them.

‘My dear Doctor Ross, what is the matter? Perhaps a nightcap for you also?’

‘I rarely drink, Professor,’ she replied quietly. ‘I find it affects my faculties.’

‘That is the delight of alcohol.’

Annabeth was silent.

The Professor stood from his chair and moved around the table to sit beside her. He clasped her hands in his and said, ‘My therapists tell me that talking about things is helpful. From a psychological standpoint.’

‘You have therapists?’

‘Yes. One for each brain.’

Anna stared at him blankly.

He said, ‘That’s not important now. Why don’t you tell me about what happened to you when you were a child?’

‘How did you know?’ she asked, restraining a laugh that was half sob.

‘Isn’t it usually the case?’ he replied with a gentle smile. ‘Do tell. I’m all ears.’

The Doctor took a deep breath and expelled it through her pursed lips. 'Ten years ago, when I was sixteen, I was living with my parents in Farnborough, which is about forty miles southwest of London.'

'I know it.'

'My father was an Army general. My family lived on the Army base with him, where he worked on Britain's first airship project. I was there when they designed and tested our first dirigible, the *Nulli Secundus*.'

'"Second to none",' the Professor translated.

Anna nodded. 'It was a lot different to these airships. I still remember the measurements: 120 feet long, 26 feet wide ... The balloon was pill-shaped, with its little basket hanging beneath the scaffolding and wires. It looked so strange and new, like a vision from the future. It was striped with silk banners, because they were lighter than other materials, so it glistened in the sun when they pulled it out of the workshed. My mother and I stood watching as they hauled this enormous hovering pill out by its cables and into the field.

'It was to be piloted by a Colonel, who worked with my father with the Royal Engineers. There was room for other crewmen too, and they all wanted to be on the maiden flight. It was magnificent. The propellers began to turn, the last of the envelope was filled with hydrogen, they tested the rudders and the leather turnbelts ... My mother and I were so excited.'

She paused. The Professor waited for her to continue, holding her hands gently.

'They aborted the first flight because of an engine failure. The dirigible landed safely, and they worked on the problem. Meanwhile my father adjusted the propellers, because they were producing too much drag. They replaced them on the spot with smaller ones that would be able to turn faster and give better lift and steering. But he failed to compensate for the weight difference of the aluminium, and the engineers working on the engines were too eager to get the ship back into the air. So they tried again.

'The semi-rigid frame broke its back mid-flight. My father was on the ground, with us. The Colonel did his best to steer the ship clear, but it fell too quickly. The envelope cut against the propellers, spilling the gas. Luckily there was no explosion, just tonnes of sagging balloon bearing down on the field. Back then the balloons were made of goldbeater's skin – have you heard of it?'

'A membrane from a calf's intestine. Very thin, very durable.'

'Tonnes of it drifted down towards my parents and I. The shadow covered us first. Flattened, it must have been sixty feet wide. The silk bands that supported the scaffolding and gondola slipped away and fluttered down. The scaffolding crushed at least one person. The emptying envelope came down towards us. It seemed to move so slowly, like a giant leaf sinking in water, but it was an illusion of its size. We couldn't run fast enough. It landed on top of my parents and I. It was unbearably heavy; I would never have thought it was so heavy! The three of us scrambled under our little bubbles of air, pressed against the grass, trying to find the way out. Total darkness, gasping for breath, the weight of it ... It was horrifying. Finally I found the edge and dragged myself out. It had taken many minutes. Then I don't know what happened. I believe I fell unconscious.'

The Professor leaned back in his chair. He didn't know what to say. Finally he stood and walked away from the table, surprising Anna. He spent five minutes brewing a herbal tea, and returned with a cup of camomile for each of them.

Then he said, sincerely, 'Doctor Ross, that sounds like a terrible ordeal. I am sorry.'

‘Thank you, Professor ... Later, I woke up inside the Army’s medical building. It seemed that most of the emergency efforts surrounded the people who had been in the gondola, which was crushed, and the people who had been hit by the scaffolding. My parents and I went unnoticed for a long time. My mother and father were both found beneath the deflated envelope, suffocated.’

‘Doctor Ross ... Annabeth...’

She turned to him sharply. ‘So you see why I have little trust of engineers. They are in such a hurry to advance their science, to get their marvellous crafts in the air, that they lose sight of everything else around them. I fear for our safety on this little floating island, Professor Arnustace. And I don’t trust Nagendra Chatterjee one bit.’

‘No,’ replied the Professor, sipping his tea, ‘neither do I. And tomorrow I intend to do something about it.’

Anna burst out laughing. The Professor laughed too, in a high-pitched helium voice. They had forgotten to take their next humbugs.

~

PART EIGHT:

IN WHICH MORE IS REVEALED THAN WAS INTENDED

EARLY THE NEXT MORNING, Professor Arnustace watched the sun rise over Ipsun Isle. Warm light spilled between the jostling balloons of almost innumerable aircraft, and through the open window he heard the bump and squeak of their enormous envelopes as they touched.

He thought of Annabeth's story. He wondered whether he should tell her about his own family, his chequered past, and the many strange events that had created today's Professor Arnustace. He considered telling her everything, but realised that it was an illogical decision. He was reacting emotionally to her tragic tale. And the more she knew about him, the less she would want to know him.

The streets and walkways filled with morning sunshine. The Professor ached to see more of the amazing floating island. Luckily this morning was his chance: he had already been given the hour's notice of Ornaud's visit to give them a tour.

There was a gentle knock at the door. The Professor put down his teacup, turned towards his empty room and said, 'Come in.'

It was Anna, ready to take their tour together.

'Good morning, Doctor Ross,' he said.

'Good morning, Professor.'

It was as though nothing had been said the night before. They were once again acquaintances.

The Professor put on his gloves and hat – he already had on his coat, against the biting cold – and they walked through the *Cobra Coil*. It was an impressive vessel: nimble and fine-turned for speed and manoeuvrability, although it lost something in stability, according to the doorman that chatted to them as they waited for Ornaud.

The Frenchman arrived ten minutes later than agreed, and he apologised. 'My wife has a cold, and I had to see my son to school.'

'There is a school here?' asked Anna, as they set off walking across the square.

'*Oui*. Several. There are five schools, each specializing in teaching in a different language. There is some integration, but not much. We work on this. This is why it is more an island of cities, than one giant city, no?'

'It's rather impressive,' admitted the Professor.

'We have all the usual social services one would expect. There is a fire service and two hospitals, with some smaller medical centres here and there.'

'No police?' asked Anna.

The Frenchman eyed him sideways. 'We operate more on social justice.'

'That sounds potentially rather violent.'

'Not at all. We all simply behave on ethical grounds, as each would expect of their neighbour. We have had a few small incidents, but nothing major. There is no serious crime on Ipsun Isle. Not one beating, not one

murder or rape. The people here have been carefully selected for their ability to uphold the principles of the island.'

Anna scoffed. 'You mean, you only pick the kind of people you want to have here? The rich and privileged, who you're sure will sympathise with your agenda instead of causing trouble?'

'We have to fund our survival. Besides, would *you* do it any differently?'

They came to a wide street between some tall gondolas, each four or five storeys high. Their two balloons cast a black shadow over the alley. At the far end was a jetty, of sorts, which jutted out over the edge of the island. The wind was incredibly strong there, and the Professor noticed Anna going slightly pale. He reached out to touch her elbow, and was surprised when she grasped his hand in hers whilst staring out over the miles of empty air below.

The Professor didn't recognise the coastline he saw. 'Ornaud, where are we?'

'You can't tell? We're somewhere near the border of Belgium and the Netherlands. The city you see there is Bruges. We are not too far from home, Professor, but I expect that Nagendra is pursuing the white wing as far as he dares, considering the cloud cover.'

Mindful of Anna, the Professor said, 'Let's take our tour inland, shall we?'

'But Professor, I planned to take you on an aerial tour.'

'Doctor Ross?'

'I shall manage,' she replied quietly.

'*Tres bien!* Then let us board the *F.R.I.I Claxon*.' Ornaud talked as he walked. 'She is neither fast nor fancy, but she is sturdy and has large windows. Here we are.'

They boarded a relatively small aerostat, which had a sky-blue envelope and dull wooden gondola. It was decidedly unimpressive compared to the monster vessels they had walked by earlier. And it was clear that this was no-one's home, but a craft regularly used by the likes of Ornaud for jaunts.

'It's from the *Claxon* that I launched our little balloon, with Retahvi and your invitation in, yesterday,' said Ornaud, grinning. 'Nagendra is training him to do all sorts of things. I'm sure it was only a test for some other plan – Nagendra always seemed to have three or four plans in motion at any one time, in that clever brain of his. But whatever he wants to train a mongoose to be a pilot for, I have no idea!'

Aboard the craft, Ornaud performed many checks and pre-liftoff rituals, aided by a crew of just three men. They made sure everything was in order, and then the mooring ropes were cast down to helpers below, and up drifted the *Claxon*.

'She can only go a little way above the island,' Ornaud explained. 'When you take into account the distance from the ground below, she is too small to go any higher. We will be able to clear the tallest of the other aerostats, though, and look down on the cities.'

Anna gripped the polished wooden control panel in front of them. Her lips had gone pale. But what could the Professor do, besides stay beside her?

The little ship was more nimble than Ornaud had let on, and they were soon taking a circular route around the circumference of the great floating island.

'Visibility is poor, but we have to keep the island in the clouds,' he explained. 'Only a few ships, like the *Claxon* and the *Garuda*, have the mirror technology that hides them from below. The city relies on cloud, and so we are always moving. But if you look down there, you will see one of our cloud factories.'

‘Cloud factories?’

But it was clear simply by looking what the “cloud factories” were. They had floated low to the street level, and could see some of the structures below that held the island together. They also saw what looked like small upside down factories, clinging to the bottom of the island like limpets. They were spewing white mists, which helped to disguise the floating island in artificial “clouds”.

‘Ingenious,’ said the Professor. ‘But how is it done?’

‘Simple water vapour and aerosols. The cold temperature of the island helps them to condense. It’s a rather simple process once you know how. Nagendra figured it out.’

‘He must be something of a genius, then,’ suggested Anna coldly.

‘Oh, he is. The longer you stay, the more you’ll realise. He’s the smartest man I’ve ever met. It’s intimidating. Now, I’m pulling over the Oriental district – Chinese New Year, that place is beautiful with lanterns, although we don’t let them light them up – and just here is Little Italy, where I live.’

‘But aren’t you French?’

‘Actually, I’m French-Canadian. But that’s not important. Little Italy is where the best restaurants are, so that’s where I live.’

They soared over the bustling districts. Life was going on like normal for the residents of the island, although it felt peculiar to know that way, way below, in Brussels, people were doing exactly the same thing, simply at a different altitude.

The Professor was grimly silent. Anna noticed and tried to penetrate his thoughts. What did a man like that *think*? How did his brain work? And hadn’t he said something last night about having *more than one brain*? Impossible, of course, but perhaps it was some insight into his curious form of insanity. Some days it seemed to Anna that he was entirely insane, but today...?

‘You have other dirigibles in the air,’ the Professor said quietly, pointing. Some small craft were indeed rising from the forest of jostling balloons, like baby jellyfish swimming away from their larger parents. ‘They’re fitted with some equipment, I see. Hoses and such.’

‘They’re just going about some daily chores that we have to do. It would be wonderful to be perfectly self sufficient, but occasionally we have to borrow from the land or the ocean.’

‘It appears that they’re equipped to siphon water from the ocean,’ pressed the Professor.

Ornaud was quiet for a moment, apparently concentrating on his steering equipment. Then he said, ‘We gather seawater to convert into drinking water. We have evaporation vats that remove the salt and other impurities.’

‘I see.’

They drifted gracefully over other sections of the island: small areas set aside for agriculture, a minor park (‘Real in every way, just miles off the ground. We get all the sun and water we need up here.’), and a small warehouse district where the island’s many engineers worked. They even saw the evaporation vats, which were wide shallow pools with transparent layers of cloth stretched over them. The sun evaporated the water, leaving the salt in the vat; the water condensed on the cloth and rolled down into collection tanks for sterilization and drinking.

‘That cloth is natural silk,’ explained Ornaud. ‘We have a supplier in China.’

‘That must be rather expensive,’ said Anna.

‘We don’t buy silk. We buy the moths that produce the silkworms.’

‘*Bombyx mori*,’ said the Professor. ‘You breed them here?’

‘That’s right.’

‘The water vats look full to overflowing,’ observed Anna. The Professor shared a look with her to say *I’d noticed too*, and they waited to see whether Ornaud had a response. He did not.

~

‘WE ARE LEARNING far more than I would have imagined about this place,’ said the Professor, once they were alone in the elevator up to the *Chowringhee Tiger*’s bridge. Ornaud had dropped them off. ‘I wonder if our man Ornaud feels embarrassed at how much he told us, without words?’

Anna rubbed her hands together. ‘I am astonished that he wasn’t better prepared. Surely Sir Chatterjee must have warned him against spouting off? I’m wondering if they’re so free with details because we’re actually prisoners, and just don’t know it yet.’

‘Do not fear. My concern right now is that we have more information than we know what to do with, and it only raises questions, not answers. If the vats were full, why were they siphoning more seawater? I didn’t see any large storage tankers around, did you? It must be dangerous for their secrecy to send aerostats down to the surface like that, within sight of the coast.’

‘What other use could they have for it?’

‘Perhaps they aren’t looking just for water, but something in the water.’

‘We need more information before we can come to any conclusion.’

‘I agree,’ said the Professor. ‘That this secret island seems to fly all over the globe, as far as China and back, on a semi-regular basis, is a cause of alarm to me.’

‘And did you observe the narrow, egg-shaped structures at the edge of the farm?’ asked Anna.

‘He said they were grain silos, but there is clearly no need for so many if they are just for grain. The farms are necessarily small.’

‘I trust you have never been to a military base, as I have,’ said Annabeth in a low voice. ‘They looked suspiciously like missile silos.’

‘Goodness. Are you certain?’

‘As certain as I can be without looking inside one.’

‘I feel that we ought to find some free time for our own explanation, don’t you?’

~

THE PROFESSOR found some of that free time two hours later.

They were taken to the bridge of the *Chowringhee Tiger* to meet again with Nagendra Chatterjee, where they had lunch. It was a quiet affair: polite conversation mixed with probing questions about Ipsun Isle, many of which were met with vague answers. The atmosphere cooled as the discussion went on, and before dessert the Indian dabbed his lips with a napkin, apologised, and left.

‘Are you comfortable finding your way back to the *Cobra Coil* by yourself?’ asked the Professor of Anna, quickly donning his hat.

‘I should think so ... Why? What are you going to do?’

‘Take a look around, my dear. Don’t let me stop you.’

‘I’ll come with you,’ she said firmly.

‘Better not,’ he replied. ‘One person captured is only half as bad. Who knows what kind of “social justice” will be bestowed upon someone caught snooping around?’

She eventually conceded, and the Professor took a metal staircase down into the belly of the *Chowringhee Tiger*.

He had formed several hypotheses about Sir Chatterjee, his Ipsun Isle, and the activity they had seen there. The problem with a hypothesis is that it takes additional information to prove or disprove it. The Professor was keen to gather that additional information.

The catwalk in the bowels of the gondola was a hollow, lonely place, hemmed in on one side by the metal hull of the gondola, and on the other a “wall” of machinery, pipes and levers, blocked off by a railing. There was much more noise down there: even though the airship wasn’t going anywhere, its engines still ticked over. Gauges twitched and glinted amongst the tubing. There was the occasional spurt of hot steam somewhere in the thicket of piping and tanks.

There were twelve storeys to the gondola: an incredible achievement of engineering. The Professor and the Doctor had dined on the tenth floor, and the Professor was now on the ninth. He found a second elevator, this a traditional paternoster. It was a loop of platforms that never stopped rotating. One had to jump on and off quickly, as it would wait for no-one. In a single spidery motion, the Professor stooped into the side that was descending and held onto his hat, fearing it would get snatched away by the belts.

A diagram on the platform showed that the lowest seven storeys were related to engineering and gas storage. Peculiarly, the gondola itself was shown to actually only have four storeys; the rest seemed to be a separate structure that the gondola was nested into. But if the rest of this equipment was unrelated to the colossal *Chowringhee Tiger*, then what was it for?

He found out once he passed below the sixth floor. Suddenly the architecture was totally different: clearly not part of the original gondola. This part of the “building” had been constructed separately, probably around the time that the island’s base plates had been put together into the amorphous infrastructure it had now.

But one of the labels on the floor diagram interested him the most. It was a symbol of a tiny squid. The bottom floor – which was marked as “Basement-8”.

When the Professor stepped out of the elevator he realised that he was actually *below* the bottom of the plates that made up the island floor. Like the cloud factories, he was “underground”, even though he could see the sky through gaps in the floor and walls, as well as the ocean far below. It gave him a curiously dizzy feeling to step over those gaps. ‘Vertigo,’ he murmured to himself, and gulped something about the size of a pomegranate.

More pipes and jets of steam, more gauges and dials. But if this was an engineering section, where were the engineers?

He walked down a metal catwalk beneath criss-crossing girders and beams. This part of the floor was exposed to the open air; even though the gaps were too small to fall through, it was deliriously nerve-wracking to feel the wind on his face. The Professor neared a doorway. The door had a white stencil drawing of a squid on it.

He opened the door.

The most astonishing sight greeted him. In the centre of a very large room was a cradle of steel rods and cloth suspended from the ceiling, easily twenty feet across. It was made of several loops of cloth, supported by steel cables.

But it was the object suspended in the cradle that astounded the Professor. It was a “white wing”: one of the squid-like extremophiles. It was several times larger than the creature he and Doctor Ross had examined the day before: not counting the long appendages, it was over ten feet long. And it was alive.

Its many tendrils and spindly limbs hung below it in a graceful arc, like the neck of a swan, and trailed in curlicues on the floor. There were dozens of small wires and electrodes embedded in the animal’s skin. A larger cable, coloured yellow and black, was entwined amongst the others and rose up into a hole in the ceiling. Photoluminescent flanges glowered and flickered around these penetrative needles, but the animal seemed otherwise paralysed. Its lightshow gave it the impression of a mind racing frantically inside a frozen body.

‘As I suspected...’ whispered the Professor, his eyes wide. What he saw was both horrific and beautiful.

The circumference of the room was lined with control panels, workstations and reams of charts and maps. *This* was where all the engineers were: monitoring various spasming needles on dials and adjusting valves in this secret vault.

The Professor could barely take his eyes off the magnificent suspended animal. He was reminded so powerfully of that day, not too long ago, when he was in the North Sea and saw the remarkable extremophiles up close. He was reliving the wonder and awe that he experienced then, one of the rare few occasions that had defined his adult life.

Reluctantly he slipped away, back to the paternoster, to take the news to Annabeth. He thought that she would be equally astounded – and just as curious about the lies told to them by Sir Nagendra Chatterjee.

~

PART NINE:

IN WHICH WE ENTER THE FROZEN ROOM

‘AND IT WAS *ALIVE?*’ asked Anna.

‘Absolutely alive,’ the Professor replied.

‘Hooked up to wires and cables and things?’

‘Most definitely hooked up. And hanging from the ceiling like a weird potted plant.’

‘And the purpose of these wires and cables?’

The Professor smoothed his moustache with a finger and thumb. ‘Why else do we connect machinery with wires?’

‘To power them?’ asked Anna, trying to peer into the misty realm of insight that existed behind the Professor’s blue eyes. ‘They’re using the white wing as a ... battery?’

‘That is my current hypothesis. It had been troubling me since we arrived. Some of these aerostats are far larger than any I’m aware of in our current Air Force, or in any other country for that matter. Many of them make the *Graf Zeppelin* look like a child’s party balloon. Their gondolas are grossly oversized in many cases, but I believe I have a partial explanation for that.’

Anna nodded. ‘The true gondolas are only the top part of the “buildings” – the lower floors are separate structures. The two pieces fasten together in some way.’

The Professor was pleasantly surprised. ‘However did you deduce that?’

‘I noticed that many of the larger gondolas seem to have a missing storey about two thirds up. There are no windows, or in some cases dummy windows, on those floors. Then I realised that there were always steel ridges just below these sections, which I suspected were seams and clasps. How did *you* deduce it?’

‘I saw a diagram in a paternoster in the *Chowringhee Tiger*, on my way down to the lower basements.’

‘To go back to your earlier point, you suspect that the white wing is somehow providing power to parts of the island, like a living battery?’ she asked.

‘I believe so,’ replied the Professor, nodding slowly. ‘Ipsun Isle, with its four hundred plus airships, must have well over one hundred million cubic metres of gas keeping it afloat. Even assuming that Nagendra’s undisclosed gaseous mixture is lighter than helium and therefore more effective, there should still not be enough lift to levitate all the extra walkways, plates, panels and additional docking structures, like those we have seen. That must double or even triple the weight normally carried by the aerostats.’

‘Perhaps some highly modern engine that provides added vertical thrust? It would explain why the engines are always running, even on the empty ships.’

‘That could be the answer. But it doesn’t explain on what those engines run, for Nagenda certainly isn’t flying to the nearest hardware shop to pick up new batteries every weekend.’

‘But how can one animal generate that kind of power? And how is it harnessed, and converted?’ asked Anna.

‘There’s a simple way to find out what our friend Sir Chatterjee is really up to,’ said the Professor, his fingers tapping his knee anxiously as he peered out the window.

‘And what is that?’

‘Ask him!’

~

AFTER A FINAL CUP OF EARL GREY to soothe their nerves and discuss their options, Professor Arnustace was ready to confront Sir Chatterjee. But as he posited his theories and considered all the angles, Annabeth slowly sank into her own memories. Being trapped under the heavy envelope of the doomed *Nulli Secundus*. Blinded, suffocated. It was hard to separate those memories from how she imagined her parents must have felt. The two of them, mother and father, each entombed in a little pocket of dwindling oxygen, unable to even reach out and hold each other’s hands...

Just as the Professor rinsed out the teacups in the small sink and popped another humbug in his mouth, Anna slumped in her chair.

‘Doctor Ross? What’s the matter?’

‘I suddenly feel rather tired.’

He must have heard it in her voice. Not just tiredness, but fatigue; she was back under the weight of that deflated balloon, the pressure of her memories and anxieties bearing down on her. In the single second she caught his eye, she saw only calculating coolness, a miraculous mind trying to determine the appropriate social response.

‘It’s okay. I shall be fine once I’ve rested a while,’ she told him, shielding her eyes with one hand. ‘Perhaps it was the bergamot...’

‘I brought the tea from the asylum, it’s the same blend we had when you arrived yesterday morning. Still, this would be a stressful situation to most people. I suppose you’re doing well.’

As he left, reaching around the door with his gangly arm to pull it closed behind him, she wondered what on Earth she was doing here with this profoundly odd man she hardly knew.

She would have dearly liked to question Sir Chatterjee herself. And she would give anything to see that live specimen of what he called *Chatepterus Expatia*. What were they doing to the poor creature? What was the true purpose of this infernal island?

But Anna hadn’t been lying when she said she wanted to rest. Her body felt weak, and her arms trembled as she got up from the chair and moved to the bed.

A lie down would help. She was afraid that if she slept, she would dream, so she fought it as long as she could. Every time she closed her eyes she saw fleets of aerostats droning over the cities of England, distorted by the rising heat of burning buildings...

~

SHE AWOKE SOME TIME LATER. The sun was lower in the sky, although on the elevated island “dusk” came earlier. She had fallen asleep, and had the sensation that she’d been dreaming, although couldn’t remember what. Her clothes were clammy with sweat, despite the permanent cold.

Ispun Isle even had a town hall with a clock “tower” – an anachronistic bowsprit on one of the larger gondolas. It told her that it was four o’clock in the afternoon, so she’d been resting for a few hours. Anna felt better for it, albeit a touch groggy.

She was alone in the cabin, as she probably would have expected. The Professor was not the type of man to linger whilst a woman slept when he had his own cabin next door. But when she knocked on his door there was no reply. Rubbing her arms and with her breath in clouds before her, she shouldered open the door. The Professor was not home.

He hadn't yet returned.

Anna had no way of reaching him. She could try to find him, but where could he be? In any one of the 420 aerostats of the island, or the many spaces in between. An almost impossible task.

She felt the surge of anxiety rise within her again. But she didn't want to feel this way anymore. Why should she? She made herself another cup of the Professor's Earl Grey blend. It was comforting to know that he had picked out the leaves himself, using his own judgement, sprinkling with his own fingers.

Once the cup was drained, she decided that she wouldn't wait any longer. She pulled her coat more tightly around her waist and left.

~

HER FIRST STOP was the *Chowringhee Tiger*. That was where Sir Chatterjee seemed to spend most of his time, and probably the first place the Professor would have gone. She crossed the busy street and got into the elevator, which took her up to the appropriate floor. On the bridge there were crewmen, but no Chatterjee.

'Do you know where he might be?' she asked, after one of them confirmed he wasn't aboard.

'He could be at the vats, or overseeing the prison, or board the *Garuda* if he's having some downtime.'

'There's a *prison*?' asked Anna, her voice rising an octave. 'What happened to "no serious crime on Ipsun Isle"?''

The crewman shrugged and quickly turned away. He realised he'd said too much.

When Anna got into the elevator again she started to press buttons: perhaps the Professor had taken the chance to explore some more. And she wanted to see this live extremophile, perhaps the first live capture of one in history.

But although she turned the handle to the relevant floor and pulled the switch, the elevator wouldn't budge. It was only when she turned the handle to "G", for the ground floor, that it finally moved. Someone on the bridge must have somehow disabled the other floors, stopping her from snooping!

With no other choice, she emerged back onto the street. She was immediately approached by a black-faced man who lurched well into her personal space, making her yelp and draw back in alarm. He leaned towards her suddenly and grabbed her arm, but she pulled free. His eyes were rolling back in his head. His mouth gaped. Anna realised that he wasn't attacking her; he was not well, confused, covered in soot.

'Do you ... Do you need help?' she asked, taken aback, but the man had already staggered into an alleyway. Wasn't he one of the "drunken" workers they'd seen yesterday, outside the curious factory? That man was more than drunk. But there was little Anna could do for him anyway, and she had other matters to attend to.

Unsure of where else to try, she headed for the *Garuda*, the orange-and-brown dirigible on which Sir Chatterjee had brought them to Ipsun Isle. Based on what the crewman had just told her, it was his personal airship. Perhaps he had taken the Professor there to discuss their important business in private.

She found it moored by the "jetty" where they'd arrived, only two streets away from the *Cobra Coil*. Even though it was one of the island's smaller vessels, it was still a massive object. Its bulging sides blotted out the sun as she craned her neck to see the symbol of a blue sun and multi-headed cobra. Its shadow was long and

wide, encompassing her in shiversome air. A powerful urge to run away from it filled her stomach, but she ignored the warning. Her sense of dread incorporated a fear for the Professor's safety, too.

She mounted the plank and walked up to the main doorway in its wooden gondola. Surprisingly the door was not locked – or should that be unsurprising, in a “nation with no crime”? – and it opened with only a turn of a wheel. Anna stepped into its bitterly cold exterior.

‘Hello?’ she called into the hollow, steely place beneath the envelope. Metal girders hemmed her in on all sides, allowing only the narrow walkway that Ornaud had led them down barely twenty-two hours earlier. There was no-one there.

She was about to explore when she saw a small moving shape at the end of the catwalk. There were few lights inside this cold, inhospitable cavity filled with walkways and beams. Everything glinted from only faint beams of natural light that filtered in from high above. She felt as though she was inside the attic of a house made of metal. So what was this little creature far ahead of her, slightly over a foot tall?

At first she thought it was Verne. It certainly had an air of intelligence about it. When she recalled that Verne had been left behind at the Bay Royal Hotel, she realised that this must be that nasty mongoose, what had Chatterjee called it? Retahvi?

Something about that thing gave her the creeps, but it was as good a lead as any. If the rodent was around, then Sir Nagendra Chatterjee couldn't be far away.

Anna followed when it scampered around a corner. She was always eight feet behind, moving as quickly as she could despite her cold-stiffened limbs. The mongoose dipped and ducked under pipes and panels, disappearing for moments before reappearing somewhere else.

At one point she almost caught it, reaching out with her gloved hands for the sinuous, furry body, but was too slow. She almost got the feeling that it was playing a game with her, leading her on a merry chase, but by the time she arrived at the room she didn't care.

The room was protected by a metal door, which had a small round porthole that was covered with frost on the inside. Anna could see nothing but murky shapes through its white crystals, but she thought she heard a man's voice.

She leaned against the heavy door and pushed. The mongoose had disappeared into a hole in the wall. As the hinges creaked and the door cracked open, she heard the music of a thousand tinkling ice crystals falling to the floor. The inside of the room was literally frozen, and hissing currents of cold air rushed out through the crack to replace by the warmer air outside.

Finally the door opened. The floor of the small, circular room was covered with ice, so that Anna hesitated before stepping inside. Her eyes grew wider as she took in the sight laid out before her.

A tall glass tank. Its square sides were joined by stainless steel corners and large rivets. The top of the tank bristled with all manner of tubing, pipes and rubber-insulated cables, including a heavy yellow-and-black striped one that seemed to have copper filaments melted into the glass of the tank. One of the copper panels was engraved with a beautifully elegant *T*.

The glass itself was heavily coated in rime, which sprinkled away under Annabeth's glove as she wiped it. Through the glass, floating in the bluish liquid within, was a sleeping girl.

‘May I help you with something, Ms Ross?’

Anna turned, tripping over a thick insulated cable and falling against the slippery surface of the tank.

Standing in front of her was Sir Chatterjee.

~

PART TEN:

IN WHICH THE PROFESSOR AND THE DOCTOR MAKE AN ESCAPE

HE SEEMED TO HAVE TEARS IN HIS EYES. The shock of suddenly seeing the man had blurred Annabeth's vision, which she swiftly cleared with her cold sleeve. Yes, Sir Chatterjee was silently crying.

Retahvi the mongoose spiralled up his legs and settled around his neck like a fur collar, its tiny black eyes glinting above a wrinkled, snarling snout.

'Sir Chatterjee,' Anna said breathlessly. 'I was just—'

'Looking for me? It appears that you weren't the only one.'

Anna pulled herself upright. 'You have spoken with Professor Arnustace?'

'In a manner of speaking.' Sir Chatterjee stepped back out of the doorway and reached to the side to grab something. He pulled the Professor into view. The Professor's hands were tied together at the wrists with tightly wound silk.

'Hello, Doctor Ross.'

'Professor!'

Sir Chatterjee yanked the Professor inside the room, then closed the heavy door. The three of them were alone in the frozen room – Three, plus the girl in the icy tank.

'Who is she?' asked Annabeth. 'Why is she here?'

'She is quite alive,' replied Sir Chatterjee softly. 'And none of your concern. She is here because she is soon to die. I wish to prevent that. All of this here is to prevent that.'

The Professor pulled back his shoulders. 'Sir, surely you know that it is impossible to successfully revive a frozen human being. Her very cells would disintegrate, and—'

'I'm well aware of the science, Professor. You are indeed most knowledgeable in many fields, but not, I am certain, in the field of advanced cryogenics, a field I myself created.'

'Nonsense,' said the Professor.

'You see before you the proof. A human being preserved by the cold, using unique methods known only to me and a select few others. Safely, causing no harm other than the desperate loneliness felt by those who wish to be with her alive and well. Her body is filled by a most deadly poison, for which I seek a cure.'

'Which poison?' asked the Professor immediately. It was as though he wasn't actually tied up by this strange man, eager to do anything to help.

'*Hydrophis belcheri*,' replied Sir Chatterjee.

'A sea snake?' asked the Professor.

Anna said, 'The faint-banded sea snake. It's extremely venomous, and lives in parts of the Indian Ocean.'

'Not,' said Sir Chatterjee, raising a finger, 'near India itself. It was no accident. Her father did this, to punish her. Punishment for daring to love a man below her caste. The venom of the snake kills within thirty minutes. I slowed her heart and froze her within twenty-nine. But you were never meant to see this. This is *my* airship. This is *my* room.'

‘We have no interest in this room,’ said the Professor reasonably. ‘We came to you because of the white wings.’

‘And if that had been all you learned of during your time here, then I would have no need to imprison you. Indefinitely.’

‘I have no intention of being imprisoned,’ replied the Professor. ‘Release us immediately.’

Sir Chatterjee stepped towards Anna, another strip of twisted silk in his hands. ‘Under no circumstances, my friends.’

‘As you wish,’ said the Professor calmly. ‘Verne?’

Anna wasn’t sure exactly what happened next. All knew was that something small and gingery leapt out of the Professor’s pocket as though fired from a gun, and collided with the mongoose draped around Sir Chatterjee’s neck. There was a furious cacophony of spitting and hissing, and the mongoose dropped to the floor and shot off across the room, disappearing into another hole in the wall.

Meanwhile, the ginger creature seemed little more than a tornado of claws and teeth. A hundred tiny paws lacerated Sir Chatterjee’s neck and face, causing him to shriek in a most unmanly fashion. He grabbed at the feral animal – it was Verne! – and made to haul it across the room.

If Doctor Ross had been familiar with cricket, she would have recognised the Indian man’s perfect over-arm bowl. Little did either of them know that Professor Arnustace was also rather talented at the old sport, and caught Verne gently in two hands *en route* to knocking Sir Chatterjee off his feet.

‘Come on, Doctor Ross!’ shouted the Professor, who delivered a swift kick to Sir Chatterjee’s face as he lay on the ground.

Anna was still trying to process what she’d seen. The Professor transferred Verne to his left hand and grabbed her arm with his right. ‘Let’s take our leave, Doctor!’

They ran.

~

THEY RAN, LEAVING the frozen room behind. The sound of yelling and a slammed door told them that Sir Chatterjee was in hot pursuit.

The metal catwalks rang and clattered as they took off along the length of the *Garuda*’s gondola. Within a minute they were at the main door, and the Professor passed the small cat to Anna before tackling the heavy wheel that opened it – a difficult task, with his wrists bound.

Anna kissed Verne’s scarred little head. ‘Well done, Verne!’

Verne mewed in return. She couldn’t be sure without his tele-luminous communication device, but she imagined he was saying, ‘You’re welcome.’

The Professor had the door open. Sir Chatterjee ran around the corner just as they fled through it and ran across the plank, back to the *aera firma* of the island’s docks.

‘The *Cobra Coil* is just two streets that way!’ called Anna breathlessly.

‘What? And?’

She looked at him, a wild grin manifesting on her young face. ‘How else does one leave a floating island?’

She ran ahead, leaving the stunned Professor behind for a moment. He grabbed his hat to stop it falling off as he ran after her. ‘Surely you jest...!?’

It was clear, however, that they had little choice other than to commandeer one of Ipson Isle's aerostats. A plummet, even into the ocean, would be terminal. But surely Annabeth, of all people, knew that an airship crash from even a fraction of the height would be equally deadly?

Their escape was forestalled at the last hurdle. Just as they ran down the street that led to the *Cobra Coil*, they came nose-to-nose with two dozen black-faced men – more victims of the strange circumstances at the factories. But there was no time to try to understand their situation, or their ailment; the two of them pushed through the crowd. The slightly delirious men appeared to be waiting for another airship to open its doors so they could board.

'Where are they all going?' asked Annabeth, as the Professor hurried her towards the gangplank into the *Cobra Coil*. 'Professor, they're being taken somewhere!'

'One mystery at a time, my dear! Quickly!'

But they were too late. At the end of the gangplank, blocking the way to the *Cobra Coil*'s gondola, was Ornaud. He was armed.

'Hands in the air, *monsieur, madame*,' he requested calmly, aiming his rifle at the Professor's chest. '*Le petit chat*, too.'

Verne meowed. Annabeth gently put him into the pocket of her coat, then raised her hands.

The Professor said, 'There's no need for violence, *monsieur*.'

Ornaud spat over the side of the gangplank. His spittle travelled several miles through the air before, presumably, landing in the ocean.

'Thank you, Ornaud.' Sir Chatterjee was pushing his way through the milling crowd of sooty-faced workers. He smiled widely, bobbling his head, when he saw that his trusted second-in-command had his prisoners at gunpoint.

'Commander,' replied Ornaud tersely, not taking his eyes off the two prisoners.

'He caught up with us and he's not even out of breath!' murmured Anna in surprise. 'What is he, some kind of machine?'

Sir Chatterjee smiled, taking the rifle from Ornaud and pointing it at Anna.

She said, 'Nagendra, please let us leave! We came here on good terms, at your invitation!'

'And I had hoped you would help us with our white wing problem,' he replied. 'Sadly you snooped into one room too many. That secret – that one secret – I will take with me to the grave. The risks are too great.'

'What risks? Tell us, and perhaps we can help!' pleaded Anna.

'Do not waste your breath, Doctor Ross,' said the Professor. 'He is quite mad.'

'An oversimplification, to justify your feelings towards me. But no man readily accepts the radical, unless he has been through his own personal Hell and knows there is little other choice. I went through my Hell. So did Ornaud, here. What would *your* Hell look like, Professor Arnustace?'

The Professor said nothing.

Anna determined to herself that, whatever happened, she would not scream.

They both jerked when an ear-splitting claxon sounded across the docks. It was the same harsh siren that they'd heard the day before, prior to the aerial pursuit of the white wing.

'Go!' said Sir Chatterjee to Ornaud. 'Make the preparations!'

'Are you sure, Commander?'

‘Do it!’

Ornaud ran, presumably for the *Chowringhee Tiger*. Sir Chatterjee gave a long sigh, and smoothed his oiled hair back into place before checking that his rifle was primed. It was.

‘I’m getting rather tired of executing uncooperative scientists,’ he said, looking down the sights.

Before he could fire, someone shoved Anna and the Professor out of the way. Two someones, in fact. It was the sooty-faced workers, moving with clumsy, shaking steps up the gangplank. One of them was shouting:

‘You! You’re him! *You* did this to us!’

The man talked with a heavy slur, and could barely lift his arm to jab his finger towards Sir Chatterjee, who was so startled that he’d lowered the rifle. More of the dreamy-eyed, leaning workers were finally taking notice, and pushed past Anna to cluster around Sir Chatterjee at the foot of the gangplank.

Sir Chatterjee didn’t waste any time. He raised his rifle and fired, hitting one man between the eyes. The man toppled over the edge of the dock, slamming his shoulder against the plank, and went spinning down towards the distant reaches below. Before Sir Chatterjee could reload the rifle it was knocked from his hands, and it too was sent plummeting towards the ocean.

The claxon became louder. Then the loudspeakers crackled to life: ‘The Commander. The Commander to the *Chowringhee Tiger*, please.’

It was Ornaud’s voice.

‘It sounds as though you have a choice,’ said the Professor, lifting his chin. ‘Stay, or chase your *Chatepterus expatia*. I’d wager you feel much more strongly about one than the other.’

Anna could see that Sir Chatterjee was torn. He’d lost his weapon and was now outnumbered, although the disoriented workers, whatever their ailment, would be no challenge as individuals. Chatterjee turned first to the Professor, snarling, then whirled to look pensively towards the *Chowringhee Tiger*.

‘Blast you!’ he hissed finally, and fought his way through the amassing workers towards the main square, where Ornaud and the *Chowringhee Tiger* were waiting.

Anna didn’t waste any time. She pulled the Professor’s sleeve and hurried up the gangplank and into the *Cobra Coil*.

~

PART ELEVEN:

IN WHICH THE *COBRA COIL* DOES ITS GALLANT BEST, IN PURSUIT OF FREEDOM

WITH THE DOOR CLOSED behind them, a new quiet filled their ears. They felt the coolness of the helium-filled space, and the faint susurrations of the vessel's gas balance being restored by automated systems. But the obnoxious sound of the claxon was not obliterated, and they had an airship to fly.

'Come on!' urged Anna, already running down the walkway towards the control cabin.

The *Cobra Coil* had a modest bridge befitting the diminutive craft. Anna rushed to the array of levers and dials, appraising each one with her eyes.

'You have an inkling as to how to pilot this thing?' asked the Professor, his raised eyebrow evidence of his present surprise.

'My father often showed me some of his secrets. I played with replicas of simple aerostat control cars since I was a little girl. This one would be to rotate the prop nacelles ... Twist the key...'

The airship thrummed into life. With a steadily increasing whine, the propellers began to spin. The *Cobra Coil* began to vibrate at a frequency almost too high to detect, but Anna felt it in her teeth and fingertips. Most of the brass levers, which were arranged in a neat row to the right side of the cockpit, were labelled. The airship was already straining at its mooring cables like a whale caught in giant sea fronds. Anna flipped an emergency switch to detach the cables, and they sprang away like broken guitar strings. Another lever operated buoyancy, which she increased. Another boosted the propellers to enhance their forward propulsion.

'Doing rather well, Doctor Ross,' said the Professor appreciatively, seeing the neighbouring gondolas drop outside.

'Thank you, Professor.'

In half a minute they were higher than the tallest of the other aerostats: more than enough to slow one of the props and angle the rudder in order to turn. This they did, and soon they were powering through the cloud cover.

'The gyroscope seems to be functioning fine,' commented Anna. She cut the Professor's silken handcuffs with craft knife found in a tool kit. 'As soon as we can get our bearing, we'll know what our heading is for home.'

'Well done!' cheered the Professor. 'But we're not out of the woods yet: look!'

They had now cleared the edge of Ipsun Isle's "plate" and were descending. Anna saw the object detaching from the underside of the floating island: a small biplane.

'I thought Nagendra said his plane was damaged!' she gasped.

'He said a lot of things,' the Professor pointed out. He prepared to push the lever for more speed. 'That plane only needs to nip our envelope with one of its propellers, and we're done for!'

The biplane soared towards them like a metal hawk glinting in the sunlight.

~

ANNA SWUNG THE AIRSHIP AROUND at as sharp an angle as she could manage. The *Cobra Coil* was small, but it was swift and manoeuvrable, making the turn in seconds.

‘What are you going to do?’ shouted the Professor over the noise of the straining engines.

‘That plane is only a threat for as long as we’re in the air!’

‘Oh...’ he replied, sensing with a sinking feeling what she planned to do.

‘Hang onto your hat!’ Anna cried, and pulled both levers that controlled the buoyancy. Immediately there was a sharp hiss of air as several valves were released, and helium gushed out of the envelopes at ten cubic feet per second. The airship lurched, then leaned a little towards its nose, swinging down to present an aerial view of the English southeast coast. Most of the objects on the bridge were nailed down, but that didn’t stop papers, pencils and a teacup from flying across the room. Anna hung on to the levers; the Professor pitched towards the wheel and hung on desperately with both hands.

They were in a tilting nose dive. The biplane soared past them so closely that they could see the pilot in his hat and goggles tugged hard on his yoke. It would take him a few seconds to gain enough distance and then swoop around for another attack.

‘Flooding the ballonets!’ cried Anna as she pulled several heavy switches. These inflated four large balloons within the helium envelope, compressing the helium. Anna and the Professor practically rose into the air with the suddenly increasing descent. Verne floated up out of Anna’s pocket, meowing, and she caught the little cat and reassured him with a gentle kiss.

Their plummet through the air generated a deep howling noise. They could also hear the envelope rippling against the airship’s semi-rigid skeleton. They swooped in a spiralling descent, at one moment pointed towards the rugged English coastline, at others the cold waves of the North Sea.

The biplane had turned around. It headed right for them, and this time there was no avoiding it. The droning aircraft clipped the envelope with an almighty crash, ripping open the balloon. But the already semi-depressurised envelope saved them; there was not enough pressure to tear the wound wider, which would have turned them into dead weight with no lift at all. Meanwhile, the biplane’s propeller had struck a rib in the skeleton. Anna saw the plane soar back up into the clouds, stuttering and trailing black smoke and flickers of orange flame. Perhaps it would make it safely back to the hidden Ipsun Isle, or perhaps not. But its job was done.

‘We’re going to crash, Doctor!’ shouted the Professor over the screaming wind.

‘Not yet!’ was Anna’s brave reply. ‘The ballonets...!’

She thrust herself against gravity for the ballonet switches, but the airship’s pitch and speed were too strong. It was like reaching through high winds to grab something, when the wind was almost powerful enough to lift her off her feet. She strained, pushed ... the Professor leaned against her, lending her his weight ... and her fingers gripped the switches and yanked them down. Gas tanks rapidly reinflated the interior ballonets. There was little noticeable effect because the envelope was torn, but the increase in helium pressure was enough. Now slowed, however minutely, Anna could reach the helium valves to stop them releasing even more of the precious lifting gas.

‘The wheel!’ she shouted. ‘Steer us true, Professor!’

The Professor did as he was told, pulling hard on the wheel to keep the rudders steady. The whole cabin was shaking violently. They were over land, he presumed somewhere in the vicinity of Ipswich on the East coast.

Another powerful jolt that tore through the airship. The spigots on the ballonet lines had burst from being inflated too quickly; now the ballonets, too, were leaking air.

‘I sincerely hope there is enough lift to allow us a shallow descent!’ called the Professor, hanging onto the wheel grimly. ‘Otherwise this will be a very quick landing!’

‘There’s ballast,’ said Anna, checking a gauge. ‘Just hold on...’

The airship plummeted. Soon they were soaring past the tops of cedar and oak trees that delineated the boundaries of fields and meadows. Country roads rippled below them like brown ribbons.

‘We need to drop that ballast, Doctor Ross!’

‘Just hold on...’

‘Any second now would be spot on!’

Anna pulled the levers for the ballast tanks. Usually these were released one at a time as needed, but Anna released them all at once, dumping hundreds of gallons of water from tanks built into the bottom of the envelope’s skeleton. The water fell in spreading arcs, the gleaming droplets turning into rain that spattered the countryside. The weight of the airship dropped; the nose rose a few extra metres, and when the gondola struck the muddy fields of Suffolk county it was to the splash of water.

Neither the Professor nor the Doctor remembered much about the crash itself. There was bone-shaking grinding on all sides, their eyes vibrating in their sockets so that nothing of what they saw was imprinted in the brain; the Professor was thrown backward against the levers, breaking his tibia and severely bruising his whole left side. Anna was cast forward out of the shattered gondola, and was unconscious thereafter.

~

ANNABETH AWOKE IN TOTAL DARKNESS, gasping for breath.

A great weight crushed her from above. She was lying in an inch of thick mud with a later of surface water on top. She was completely blind, and her whole body was wracked with pain, especially the left side of her stomach.

She realised immediately where she was. She was beneath the deflated envelope of the *Cobra Coil*. Anna had survived the crash, but her lungs were burning.

On her hands and knees in the mud, she frantically pushed upward with her spine to relieve the surprising pressure of the rubbery envelope. There was no way to know which route would be the quickest way to freedom, but she sensed a downward pressure to her left, where perhaps some wreckage was lying on the envelope. She crawled to the right.

Anna gasped in air, but there was little more oxygen to be had. In those seconds or minutes of unconsciousness, she had used up all that fate had allotted to her. Within her own little dome, however she moved, she was breathless until she escaped.

Scrambling, too terrified even to cry, Anna raced ahead. As long as there was no other blockage, she would eventually come out from beneath this crushing blanket. As long as she didn’t suffocate. As long as she moved fast enough...

It almost seemed to get easier. Her scrambled brain thought she must be getting near the edge. Just a few more feet to freedom, to fresh air...! Then, though the scrape of the envelope on her back and the squelch of mud under her hands, she thought she heard a noise. A voice.

Was it the Professor? Was he trapped, too?

But she was only seconds away from salvation, and equally only seconds away from death...

She crawled towards his voice. There was no air with which to scream to him. She just kept crawling, hoping that her oxygen-starved brain hadn't created the voice as a final hallucination before Heaven took her.

Anna's bubble widened suddenly. It had joined with that of the Professor. They bumped skulls painfully, but ignored the throbbing; she pulled on his forearm and together they struggled, wriggled, slithered off in the direction that Anna had been going.

Just as her vision began to go grey and the burning pain in her chest became too much to bear, they burst free of the envelope, out into searing white light and blissful fresh air.

They lay for a while, on their backs in the wet earth and grass, staring up at the stretches of cumulonimbus clouds that strove slowly across the sky. They knew that somewhere, within that cloud, was the floating island and its master.

~

PART TWELVE:

IN WHICH THE PROFESSOR EXPOUNDS ON THE UNEXPLAINABLE

ANNABETH HAD ONLY INTENDED to spend two weeks at the most in Whitby, in order to investigate the extremophile corpse found at the Dunridge Estate for her paper. She considered it vaguely ironic that the trajectory that had killed the extremophile and cut a furrow across the privates lands of Lord Dunridge was so similar to that the *Cobra Coil* had made. Both had plunged from the invisible wonder of Ipsun Isle, only Annabeth and the Profesor had fared slightly better. They had survived.

Aside from the trauma of what had happened, Anna suffered no major injuries. The Professor had a broken leg. Both were covered in cuts and bruises so prominent that neither could sit down for long in any position, or stand for that matter. Anna certainly got funny looks when she walked down the long road to the Whitby Asylum for the Insane, three weeks after the crash.

After the usual perfunctory verbal sparring with the Warden, who was becoming quite used to Anna's visits by now, the Doctor was finally allowed into the Professor's empty wing. He must have heard her footfall echoing on the stone, because he was boiling a kettle for tea by the time she was outside his cell.

He smiled at her from near the stove, where he supported himself on his crutches. He dangled two teabags from his good hand, which only had one broken finger instead of three. 'My own blend.'

'That would be perfect, Professor.'

Anna went, smiling, to the Professor's armchair. Verne was curled up in it. The cat had emerged from the wreckage miraculously unscathed, although the Professor put that down more to his superior genes than luck. Anna picked up Verne and sat down, then let the cat curl up on her lap to sleep.

This was Anna's third visit since the Professor was released from hospital back into the "care" of the Asylum. They had talked very little about the events that had transpired since receiving Nagendra Chatterjee's invitation at the Bay Royal Hotel. Just as they settled down to tea – the Professor leaning his crutches against the wall before lowering himself carefully into his leather chair – he abruptly began to expound on his theories.

'I have had some time to think about things, and have come to some conclusions,' he announced.

Anna sipped her tea. Finally her patience was paying off! 'Oh?'

With a little difficulty, he passed her a hardcover book. It was *The Atomic Compendium: Accumulated Knowledge on the Elements of the Periodic Table* by Cearbhall Rousseau. The title was replicated on the cover in French, but there was no English translation on the inside.

'I don't read French,' Anna said, already accustomed to the Professor's absent-mindedness.

The Professor continued, as if without hearing her: 'There were several unique characteristics of Chatterjee's floating island that we noticed. Extremophiles. The sickness about the factories. Ocean water, which Ornaud told us was being collected. The mysterious girl. Advanced cryogenics, cryonics in particular. And the existence of Ipsun Isle itself.'

'I have thought about this myself, Professor, but could only make educated guesses. I gather you have a theory?'

‘Naturally,’ said Professor Arnustace. ‘Firstly, I confess to being perplexed by the black dust on the faces of the factory workers. They seemed to be suffering some illness, the symptoms of which I observed to include weakness, nausea and vomiting, dizziness, confusion, slurred speech, and lack of limb co-ordination.’

‘I had a close encounter with another such man. He displayed signs of nystagmus - uncontrollable eye movement.’

‘That happens to fit perfectly. I would have assumed that these were all signs of poisoning – lithium poisoning, to be specific. Lithium is sometimes used as a psychiatric medicine here at the asylum, and can personally attest to its effectiveness. But overdoses or prolonged use can be highly toxic. Lithium would also account for those striking red and silver flames that the factory towers produced. But lithium is silver, and the black soot-like substance on the faces of those workers threw me off track.’

Anna lifted the book. ‘You looked it up?’

‘Lithium turns grey, then black, upon oxidation.’

‘There we have it,’ she said.

‘Indeed. But where did they get lithium in the first place, and why? We saw them harvesting sea water. Lithium can be evaporated out of brine quite simply. I believe that was the purpose of all that water on the island, not for reasons of hydration or “cloud factories”. Ample access to a lot of seawater may have been one of the deciding factors in constructing a flying island in the first place. India has a long coastline, of course, but proportionately speaking there is poor access compared to the open ocean.’

‘And the purpose for all this lithium?’ asked Anna.

‘There are experiments being conducted in Germany, as well as here in England, that suggest lithium would make a perfect conducting material. It is an alkaline metal, after all. If Chatterjee had succeeded in harnessing the potential of lithium, then it may explain how he can generate so much power from such little input. I also believe it may have something to do with the complex electronic equipment we saw supporting the life of that poor poisoned girl.’

Anna leaned forward, clasping her hot cup of tea in both hands. She was still grateful to be somewhere warm, after two days of freezing on that island. She spoke in a hushed voice, delighted to finally be able to gossip about the mysterious girl. ‘Wasn’t she *beautiful*? Who do you think she is?’

‘I have no idea. She seemed quite clearly of Indian origin, and must have been of a high caste, based on Chatterjee’s story.’

‘Maybe a rani!’

‘Conjecture is moot. But the reason Ipsun Isle is so cold is due to Chatterjee’s choice of a helium compound, and I have come to believe that it serves an important secondary objective.’

‘Preserving the girl in the tank.’

‘Exactly. Cryonics is a new field of science. There has been little progress when it comes to anything close to resembling what Chatterjee is attempting. Despite whatever miraculous medium the girl is suspended in, the freezing cold atmosphere around the tank must also be required. It would explain the use of lithium, which is a terrific conductor that could suck the heat out of that room.’

‘And what about the extremophiles?’ asked Anna. ‘Why is he so focused on capturing them?’

‘I doubt that he has altruistic reasons in mind. The live specimen that I saw aboard the *Chowringhee Tiger* was being experimented on, not examined. I am fairly certain that the extremophile and the frozen room were

literally connected in some way. It may be that Chatterjee knows something about these extraordinary animals that we do not. Something that will help him with his poisoned girl problem.'

'He said he thought the extremophiles were being hunted to extinction – by someone other than him.'

'Hmmn. Who knows if we shall ever discover the truth about that mystery?' The Professor breathed deeply and smiled at the swirling surface of his Earl Grey tea. 'I think that about covers it. Primarily I am ... most pleased to see that no permanent harm has come to you, Doctor Ross.'

She smiled. 'Thank you, Professor. But I fear that if the extremophiles have some positive impact on Sir Chatterjee's problem, then he will never stop hunting them. Not to mention our insult to him by escaping, and the theft of his airship. I think you may have made a nemesis, Professor.'

'Oh golly. Another one.'

'You already have a nemesis?'

'There are many enemies of reason and truth. I fight them wherever I find them,' the Professor replied, taking another sip of tea. 'And I have no fear when it comes to Nagendra Chatterjee. A time will come when we shall encounter one another again, I'm sure of it. Until then we can only wait and ponder.'

~

The End

~

~

PROFESSOR ARNUSTACE

WILL RETURN

~

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Brookes is a writer and editor currently living in the UK, from where he runs his editing firm [The St. Paul's Literary Service](#).

He has stories published in many magazines including Electric Spec, Pantechicon, Bewildering Stories, Whispering Spirits, Morpheus Tales, The Cynic and Aphelion.

His fiction has appeared in printed anthologies, most recently 'Skull & Crossbones' from Bedazzled Inc.

His first novel, 'Half Discovered Wings', was published internationally by Libros International in 2009.

Read more about his work at his website, mrbrookesabroad.wordpress.com, or [send an e-mail](#) to sign up for updates and offers.

If you liked **ICED TEA FOR PROFESSOR ARNUSTACE** and would like to see more stories in the series, get in touch!