

# caposcripti

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*Now the whole earth had one language and few words. And as men migrated from the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. And they said to one another, 'Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly.' And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. Then they said, 'Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.' And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the sons of men had built. And the LORD said, 'Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; and nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down, and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another's speech.' So the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city.' Therefore its name was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth; and from there the LORD scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth."*

*(Genesis 11:1-9)*

**CHAPTER 1**

You walk down the dark street. It is summer. The breeze is cool on your bare legs and the night silent but for the susurrations of leaves. Pools of sepia-toned light fall from the lampposts, and the dark driveways yawn to left and right as you pass. Your heels strike the ground like drumbeats. You wish they weren't so loud.

Maybe it's the temperature; just that side of warm. A spasm twists you momentarily; someone crosses your grave. The night is dead silent – but is that a footfall behind you? You turn your head, just enough for a sidelong glance. Nothing. You shrug and walk on. The houses are barred, their windows dark. All the little diplomats tucked up in their beds, or someone else's, maybe.

You're heading for the school, further along: a gap in the fence and beyond it the sanctuary of the trees. You finger the wrap in your pocket, a tiny hard ball of cling film. Suddenly your mouth is awash with saliva. You quicken your pace. A bird starts up and you wonder what it's got to sing about at this hour of the night. Since when did anything in this crazy fucked up 24-7 town make sense? You walk on.

The gap in the chain link fence is all but invisible – the streetlights spaced much wider here – but you know just where to look for it. You crouch down and in a second you've gone, vanished into the dark beyond. The grass muffles your steps. As you walk across the playing field your eyes adjust to the darkness and you can just make out the shadow of a line of trees. The moon bursts out from behind the clouds and suddenly everything is silver, brittle. Why does it feel like someone's watching you, eyes probing like fingers down your spine? Dead quiet but for the distant whisper of traffic, the faint whine of a siren. You quicken your step, making for the trees. You seem to walk within a bright circle of light, carrying the darkness along with you; above you a universe of pinpricks swings into focus. You reach the trees and instantly the stars, the whole sky, vanish as the canopy encloses you.

You head for the centre tree, the biggest one, and find a dry spot at the base of the trunk where the dew hasn't penetrated. You take the works out of your pocket and lay them on the ground as ceremonially as a Shaman, holding the rock between your lips whilst you arrange the pipe and the lighter. Your hands are trembling a little, and you bite your lip in frustration as your clumsy fingers fumble at the cling film. You have to do everything by feel; it's so dark under this bloody tree.

Finally, it seems, you find an end and carefully unwind the cling from the rock. The pipe is ready. You raise the stem to your lips and you can already feel what it will be like: your lungs know the taste of the smoke and you flick the wheel of the lighter and suck it right down, and again, and again. You feel a massive rush of blood to your head. Everything tingles. You lie back and close your eyes and let it take you away.

Suddenly you feel the weight of a body on you. Cloth clad knees pin your wrists, and a hand at your throat, hard fingers. It might be happening to somebody else – as though in the distance, you can hear breathing; your eyes open. Dark bulk of a man against the black trees, face covered. Long seconds pass.

He fumbles in his pocket, looking for something, and a part of you is screaming silently, but you feel heavy as lead. You hear a faint snick, a half remembered sound, and see the glint of something bright in his gloved hand. It swings down to join its mate at your throat and you feel the cold prick of metal stabbing and then, you could swear it, the flood of liquid entering your veins. And still the dark hollows that should be eyes stare at you with no hint of emotion; deep breaths measure out the seconds. And for some reason you focus on that alone as everything else slips away...

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **The Photographer**

A heavy and unruly creature, he habitually dresses in black or grey: for many reasons, but not least because he is living celluloid. He's probably fooling himself - at root he is a pragmatist, a state symbolised by his footwear: his boots are solid with good thick soles.

His apartment is a rat's maze of frenzied overblown house-plants, and concealed cameras. From the monstrous cine-camera in his hall cupboard (activated by the doorbell, it has contained the same reel of film for a long time - company is rare) to a cunningly devised cigarette lighter, which snaps wide shots bond-style. He is a man of few words, and two obsessions, one of which is to make pictures speak for him.

The other? Don't be impatient please; all will be revealed in good time.

Despite his retiring nature he has achieved some notoriety in the world of photography. Infrequent exhibitions and a total lack of interviews contribute to this. And no it is not clockwork that makes him tick, as one critic suggested.

Love Interest? Cold comfort.

### **The Caposcripti**

The year is 1851 - the year of the Great Exhibition, optimism and palaces of glass (and not the late 20th century, an era of deforestation and sexual insecurity).

The Amazon is full of magic. Travel is difficult. Jungles impassable. Rivers form the main arteries for trade, but most are so sclerotic that traffic is limited to canoes and the occasional raft,

all that can survive the rapids and endless deltas of the Amazon basin. Alcoholism, the Clap and the common cold have not yet decimated the indigenous population and the ancient arts and languages are not yet ancient - for the people that live them the legends are real and spirits, rather than morals, censor their actions. They are not yet children - it will take them a few years longer to become that.

The Caposcripti are a semi-nomadic people, their wanderings determined by the floods that submerge large tracts of the jungle for several months of the year, when the rivers break their banks. They live in small, temporary settlements, each loose scattering of families taking up a few hundred square feet of jungle. When the rains come they will frequently abandon a whole village, returning to it the following year when the Amazon has deposited a rich layer of mud on the dry shores. They range over a fairly large area - always choosing land avoided by more settled tribes.

Keeness of hand and a rich oral tradition have bequeathed to them the gentle arts of head shrinking, and the ability to brew the equally lethal concoctions curare and alcohol. There are substances in the jungle which give them visions, and on attaining adulthood they take these daily, so as not to become confused by the lie of this reality.

Their language is infinitely complex: they tattoo it on their bodies so they don't forget it, starting on their feet for common phrases in youth and scripting sacred truths and personal histories on their faces, on the lids of their eyes, and on the lobes of their ears. As the intellect begins to develop the head is shaved, and various areas of the skull marked with the traits and characteristics that arrive through maturity. Typically an elder of the tribe will be completely bald, hair replaced by an intricate tangle of points and lines. There is a paste made from tree bark, which prevents regrowth.

They exist on a diet of fish and what they can hunt in the jungle - almost anything big enough to eat and not actively poisonous is fair game to their blowpipes and poisoned darts, their almost

invisible traps. Although sometimes the crops falter, and the staple manioc fails to yield its large and nourishing roots hunger is not a problem in the jungle. There are more than enough fruits and nuts to sustain the few people that inhabit the region. And yet there is much to fear, good reason to ask the protection of the spirits against accidents, floods, storms, against poisons, fevers and the attacks of animals. Those lost this way are the ones that are forgotten – their heads missing from the massed ranks that bear witness to the history of the Caposcripti, and provide the only constant record of their existence in the unsettled and ever changing jungle, ringing with the echoes of wandering spirits looking for another shell to animate. For all those who have ever been are not gone, but merely imperceptible to the living.

Suicide is less an escape from this existence than a passport to the next, and in fact an honourable way to remove the burden of one's existence from one's family. To avoid the fate of not existing, of never having been, those who are too old or tired or sick to continue take poison, mixed for them by the Speaker, who sends them on their journey to the next world. Their heads are preserved in the ritual manner, life reduced to an ideogram tattooed on their shrunken scalp.

After death, the body is mummified in a seated position, and suspended from the branches of trees high up to be disposed of by the elements – the cleansing depredations of birds and tree dwelling carnivores, the sudden, fierce squalls of the late afternoon.

The heads are prepared by quite another, and secret method, which preserves the sacred scrawl in perpetuity. They are hidden deep underground in concealed caves reminiscent of the photographer's cupboards and drawers - all the paraphernalia of a chronicle rests with them, the wisdom of the future and the potential of the past.

## **The Explorer**

Once he was a big man: his shoulders were as wide as two axe handles, and young ladies sighed over his dance cards. Now the years of travelling, bad food, and loneliness have given him a wizened, jaundiced look. Dirt ground into deep creases, clothes badly stained, candid, fanatical eyes piercing from beneath untrimmed brows. He has two passions: travelling and chronicling - nothing hidden here, all is transcribed into small dog-eared notebooks which set forth, detail, narrate, enumerate moment by moment the minutiae of life.

In his youth he had been a literary man: possessed of a large vocabulary, and the full complement of the fashionable philosophies. The years have conflated these into an all-embracing pseudo humanism - ennobling the savage and placing learning on a pedestal for all to admire. Reduced though he is in possessions, he has nevertheless held onto several books: the essays of Montaigne; the Confessions of Rousseau; a volume of Keats; a pocket bible. The rest of his belongings fill a number of solid trunks in the family home - sent back to London from all corners of the globe, and held in storage against his eventual return.

He is still uncertain of what has brought him to these remote and savage lands to chronicle their inhabitants. There is disillusionment with optimism - the childlike wonder in the machine, in technology, that has gripped his fellows with fever. - Some disgrace, a lapse in his fortunes. Anger at the profusion of inaccurate descriptions already in existence and daily multiplying. And there is wonder in the thought of describing what had never been seen; of challenging the certainty of those who believed that because they held the secrets of machines, they were infallible. For whichever of these motives you prefer, he has for the latter part of his life taken to chronicling lands distant and mysterious; arcane tongues and barbarous practices in a self imposed exile from civilised society.

His should have been the guardianship of many secrets: instead all are bequeathed to vellum and paper, mixing his piss with berries when ink runs dry, making a canvas of his skin, his body.



This last is probably what saved his life - and his death - from extinction.

### CHAPTER 3

The Photographer is out looking to score with his callipers and camera's. All around he feels the pulse of the city; in the grumble of traffic, the constant almost-contact with other pedestrians on the pavement. He is edgy, taut. Controlled precision and a certain detachment are evident in his posture. He has chosen that uncertain hour between daylight and dusk when the puddles in the gutter start to reflect darkness and the stark outlines of cornices, aeriels, fire escapes. Today, however, the Photographer is not particularly interested in puddles - although once upon a time he took pictures of them: as well as street scenes, barrow markets, smiling children, obscure buildings.

Back then the urban landscape had inspired him with its complexity - awed him with the continual juxtaposition of the unexpected. He would go to Liverpool street station to attune himself to the city's rhythms - wheels within wheels, natives interacting with one another like cogs turning, clockwork and unvarying measures; contrapuntal movement. Nine to five-ers in from the suburbs every day; the swarms of black suits fleeing the city at five fifteen; soaring buildings, park sized atriums, giant tropical plants belying their sterility and dwarfing the scurrying workers below; skyscrapers suspended from great steel arches, glistening pyramids of glass, all invited the Photographer's lens, demanded interpretation.

But now in the gathering dusk he ignores these and other possibilities: he is conducting a dialogue of one, with himself and his camera, the method and the goal, the Cartesian dichotomy. He believes in dualism.

"In the beginning was the word: and the word was with God. Who can we believe? The priests and the philosophers, these lovers of wisdom? Should have been a camera there. Black and white. Never lies.

"Seven planets, God and the Devil, and man travelling a known path one way or the other. Someone is up there with their CCTV, filming inside the mind, no lies. Camera never lies."

The Photographer doesn't own a television: he had a black and white one once, but the dull eye watching him from across the room unnerved him. God and his eye piercing his very soul, pinning him insect-like under the solar microscope, caught in the panopticon. No escape. Sometimes he thinks he is Lucifer – he too carries his hell inside him.

And so he is outside as the dusk falls, while the sun is too engaged in its struggle with the moon to keep an eye on him. Eyes scan the faces of passer-by for the one whose head fits his specifications: he has it down to a fine art now. The callipers a prop, part of the mythos. These days the only genre that interests him is portraiture, and he has no time for clouds, solar eclipses, or the bottom of the ocean. Motion photography he flirted with briefly, in his youth, but lately he's been after the freeze frame, the moment of truth.

Camera and callipers; callipers and camera. The others on the pavement give him a wide berth: his gaze is discomfiting - measuring them from head to foot as they near him. He has chosen a busy time and the roads are at capacity. The city's dwellers are displaying a refinement of evolution: the ability to condense population past the point where another species would choose to selectively cull their own kind. Evolution has a part to play in this narrative: the Photographer has more respect for it than for the scurrying pedestrians in his path. Still they serve their purpose.

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Morning. The Explorer wakes on what feels like the seven millionth day of his journey. The jungle is beginning to swallow him whole, he feels his spirit evaporating day by day. His voice feels rusty

from misuse – he has taken to talking to himself as he walks, to combat the loneliness, and to convince himself that he is still alive, and not wandering, a figment, in some self-imagined country.

Location is not important, but he might be in Ecuador, or Peru. If he had an idea where he was. If borders had any meaning in terms of the Jungle. He has heard rumours of a secret tribe somewhere in the vicinity, followed them up in the settlements up river, garnered what information he can from rum-sodden natives gone to seed in tiny river outposts. But for some reason they have never been classified – mere rumours of their existence culled from the records of successive waves of colonisers. Exploration in the area has been minimal. Attracted by the gold and rare minerals; the guano and oil and ancient treasure troves to be found in the more accessible areas of mountain and coast, the Spanish, and the British, and all of the other greedy or well-meaning colonisers have so far ignored it.

In another few years the anthropologists, those missionaries of civilisation, will arrive, taming the natives with ideas of property and sin, cheap gifts and alcohol – replacing traditional medicine with iodine, and quinine, the meeting huts with concrete schools. For now the Amazon is guarding its secrets well.

He cheats the jungle of his blood by making words of it, the dark fluid clotting on the pages of his notebooks. He feels himself shrinking, but into his descendants, onward to fame. The vegetable life around him is oppressive – the jungle alive with sounds all muted by the foliage, an audioscape that changes with each step, throwing back now the sounds of running water, now the high and melodious whistles of birds, now the harsh calls of parrots, the whirring and clicking of grasshoppers, the rustling of breezes and of his passage. Each step is a struggle and every step feels wrong. The lack of direct sunlight makes direction almost impossible to determine, and time a meaningless abstraction. For the first time in many months he feels lost. For the first time in as many years he feels fear, for somewhere on the edges of his vision he can sense eyes, a suspicion that has been plaguing him for some time. He thinks he is finally losing it. That and the years

of travel, the instinct for survival that has saved him in uncounted situations, make him wary.

His clothes, boots, food, books are rotting in the humidity: the pages gradually turning a virulent green - the ink correspondingly purple. They are rotting, but they addict him - he has learnt to appreciate the smell of musty paper, and still he is writing, recording, reciting his existence. Because the jungle never changes (although it continues to astonish him) he has begun to delve deeper beneath reality. The life around him seems to him to be too sentient to be merely the sum of several different types of monkey, innumerable birds fish plants and insects, and strange iridescent lizards. He is gradually developing an equation, out there on the perimeter: a series of truths hard-gained and dear paid for. These he proves on his body, scribbling arcane figures in the crooks of his arms, and on the palms of his hands. These he reproduces in his report.

## CHAPTER 4

Night-time in London – or rather the electric dusk that passes for night in city, where the sky develops a perpetual orange glow that conceals all but the brightest stars, and a thin haze softens everything into indistinctness.

Patches of light from the street lamps intensify the areas of shadow under the long landbridge supporting the railway line, and cast doorways and corners into obscurity. Beneath the overhang arches curve along the pavement. The shops and offices are shuttered against the night, rendered uniform by the dark outlines of graffiti etched into them. The street is littered with the debris of daytime and has that peculiar sense of isolation of the shuttered outdoor market.

Save for the dim glimmer of reflection thrown from his lens, the Photographer is near invisible in his hiding place, black coat melting into the dark stone, dark eyes dim hollows in his pale face, camouflaged in stillness, checking for cameras.

His quarry, an aged female alcoholic entering the final stages of dipsomania, is about halfway down the street bedded down for the night in the entrance to the station. Like the market and the shops it's closed now, quiet and deserted, and she is only just visible through the metal cage that forms the stairwell. A near shapeless bundle in the darkness, even the filth and the stink of piss and stale cider have not been enough to dissuade her from the shelter that the stairwell affords in coldest hour before dawn. Shelter, the Photographer reflects, that will provide his activities with some cover too.

Everywhere these days there are cameras watching; cameras, hidden by them, tricks and feints. Even the concealed ones might be dummies, double bluffs, no escape. Watching me? He marks her and bides his time; there's no need to rush. Does anybody really see such people? Maybe not, but the camera catches everything.

The Photographer pictures a grand controller, seated in front of a giant switchboard, wired into a chamber studded with monitors in obscene symbiosis: a monstrous eye. Images flash on the screens, zoom shots, wide pans; from the grainy black and white of CCTV to the lurid polychrome of cheap porn.

Suddenly everything vanishes, every screen switches to a single shot, a magnified view of the very street, the very doorway where he is hiding, camera lens glinting in the streetlight, sight and senses straining. But what would they see? Nothing. For how can they see what they're not looking for? Blind. Blind leading the blind. Eyes closed to the patterns in the noise, fragments of the lost language. He's been watching this one for some time now, saving her up like a banquet, waiting for the moment of significance, the confluence of signs.

Even in the dark he can form a perfect mental picture of every contour of her person – from the filthy and crusted layers of petticoats, and blouses, and skirts, and coats, and cardigans, to the bloated feet wrapped in layers of plastic; conjunctival eyes squinting from the lined and bloodshot face. He is impervious to the decay, for this face still holds a promise of beauty for him, hints given in the high cheekbones, weathered cheeks, sockets spaced wide and eyes of an extraordinary colour.

He's observed her in all weathers: panhandling for change or drinking Tennant's Super on a bench by the library with the other regulars; shouting and spitting at the pigeons, at the government, at the rain, and at the great confusing conspiracy of it all; sleeping it off on the pavement, as oblivious to the passers-by as they are to her.

How many times has he asked himself: does anybody see such people? Really see them or just register their presence as they pass in the morning as an annoyance or obstacle or object of sudden pity, quickly forgotten? How many hundreds of pairs of eyes glance at this woman on a daily basis without ever seeing her at all? And if challenged to describe even one small aspect of her

appearance, what would they recall? Naturally this last is an important consideration.

It's different for him, for them; he's intimate with her, close as no other. Who else could describe, as the Photographer can describe, the colour of her eyes, the moles on her face, the deep lines carved down to the mouth? Who knows the precise number of her teeth, and which are crowns? Who traces the lines on her hands, the varicose veins marbling the back of her calves, the tone and tenor of her voice, when she wakes, when she sleeps, where she goes.

Who had last touched her emaciated body – as he would – filled with a kind of awe before the microcosm of humanity; the machinery of natural language latent in her cells, like some complex DNA strand waiting to unfold? She will be more than the sum of her parts, society's discard, nameless and invisible. She exists for this, fragment of an equation that embodies that primary relationship between the identity of the individual, and the millions of dim reflections of the original form that people the universe, the fragments of Babel that she carries within her.

And all this contingent on the camera's, the CCTV, his present concealment and his long observation of her habits: Will anybody miss her? Will anyone register her absence, and having registered it, ask questions, instigate a trace, compile footage of her haunts to establish just when and where and how she disappeared? Will they delve into the black economy of the nameless and unrecorded to discover her true identity, that long forgotten National Insurance number, the place on the Electoral role surely lapsed?

So much easier to suppose that she has moved on, succumbed quietly to the maw of the streets, been rescued to rot her days away in institutionalised peace...

All potential truths, all possibilities, all made concrete to confuse the pursuer – a paper trail laid for those who might be looking.



"Black and white. Clear-cut. No, there is nothing preventing this: she is nothing. Camera never lies. People do. I must remember as life is art, she is symbolism. Nearly time now: woo her with the camera; always works; black and white: Camera never lies. Fool the eye. Time. Now."

When he was younger he relished these opportunities. Anticipation and the quick strike, snap, run. But this is only the first step in the process. Each element is deliberate, each a part of the ritual. Above all there must be no haste in his actions.

As with each of his victims there's an element of the lover's nervousness in this first contact. Despite all his observation, even having seen inside them with the eye of his lens, clear as the cross-section of a cell on a microscope, even then first contact is a shock, recognising in each of them a fragment of the true language. Whilst others dismiss their drunken ravings, he rejoices in their deafness to the language of Babel, the speakers of tongues – Have they no ears to hear? Here, in this dark and filthy street, shuttered for the night and watched by the blind lens of a score of CCTV cameras, here, would he hear the voice of God? Her cries could be the only remedy for the lost symmetry of his soul.

Not all of his subjects have been women: although there have certainly been a few. Outwardly they differ from each other, but linked by a common theme; the shibboleth latent in their musculature, in the juxtaposition of cheekbone and eye socket, the grammar of the sacred language encoded in each like a cipher. Each of these individuals could be prepared and reduced to their essence, the barest equation. Each would become an elegant notation in the vast and complex calculation, the answer to which is the original word, the knowledge the first humans stole from the Garden of Eden, which was lost in the destruction of the Tower of Babel.

It was time now, painfully, to reconstruct that language unpick the myths and conspiracy theories of society's remnants, living on the borders of its conscience, and rework them into his own private mythology.

Time. Strike. Thrill of fear or is it anticipation? He feels himself becoming hard, the street silent enough to hear her gently snoring in the stairwell, his measured tread as he approaches.

Softly he speaks her name, all reassurance – Betty come now dear, come with me, calming her with his mild voice and gentle hands, talking to her all the time as he gathers her up from her den. Somehow it's easier than expected to convince her that he poses no threat. She comes quietly, holding his hand in hers, grasping his fingers like a child. She is so light and frail that a strong gust of wind could blow her away.

Her hand: cracked and slightly crusted – is it exposure, or some skin complaint worsened by dirt and lack of washing? The contact is uncomfortable, but necessary to reassure her; the last thing he needs is a scene in front of the cameras. He glances at her profile in the darkness, walking head-down, one foot in front of the other, and the next gets you where you're going; how many years of the same round? Deliverer.

The rented car is around the corner, but it feels like miles, like they're crawling, open targets on the battlefield. Finally they reach it. He opens the passenger door. -It's all right Betty, I'm going to help you, can't have you sleeping on the cold street at night. Got a nice warm bed and a few ciders for you at home, come along now, in you get. Slow, slow talking in a gentle monotone, reassuring smile, no sudden movements; in his pocket, the solution – just in case.

Once she's in he closes the passenger door gently and walks slowly around to the other side of the car, settling his large frame into the seat. Turns the ignition and starts the car; turns to look at Betty, already dozing, head on her chest in the comfortable seat. Good. They can drive for a while.

After half an hour or so sure that she is deep in slumber, he slowly brings the car to a halt in a residential street beneath a large tree. What infinite patience it requires to wait for a couple more minutes.

The street is quiet and dark, and she has not stirred at all. Time.  
Now.

## CHAPTER 5

Only the thought of all the invisible jungle, the lure of the empty spaces on his map keeps the Explorer going. It is solely the promise of an Eden, a place of purity and simplicity utterly foreign to the Babel of London and the insensate progress of the Western world that drives him on. It is not his first such journey. His books contain passages describing mandalas built up painstakingly from sand by Tibetan lama's, only to be brushed away on the instant they are finished with yak's hair brooms. He has illustrated first-hand locust plagues in Africa, and passed on recipes for aphrodisiacs, philtres, and near untraceable poisons, learnt from the medicine men of Haiti and the Congo to his descendants.

Sometimes he has used guides to take him to the distant and unrecorded tribes, to traverse areas so remote and strange that none of his race has ever ventured there to map their valleys and hills and secret places. Each sentence clawed out of painful ascents into the mountains, to the rocky heights where nothing grows, surviving on a few dried out grains of corn, goats milk, edible lichens, melting snow water in his mouth, staggering through blizzards over high mountain passes, eyes slitted behind wooden goggles.

And all of this he has recorded in his tiny neat and regular hand, in letters so tiny that you would need a magnifying glass to read them, to decipher the places, peoples, customs he has classified, captured and frozen, trapped between mildew-spotted covers to ensure his immortality. But none of it has prepared him for the Amazon, for the rich and hungry jungle, for the river, its life-blood, and for the unseen and unrecorded interiors.

Despite the rumours of bloodshed and war between tribes, an almost pathological distrust of outsiders, dark hints of cannibalism and the practice of head shrinking, the Explorer has made no attempt at concealment as he cuts his way through the jungle. For one, the sheer density of vegetation seems to insulate against all sound, even the crunch of branches beneath his feet are strangely

muted, so that he feels the urge to scream bubbling up within him, if only to reassure himself that he is not forgetting language, losing his voice and the habit of shaping words.

But in fact the main reason for his confidence is that he cannot imagine that the people that he is looking for are actually dangerous, that they could harm him. This is not due to a lack of imagination, or knowledge of the area. Certainly there have been reports of whole expeditions killed and tortured by indigenous people, angry and terrified at the strangers invading their territory; people who have learnt the hard to associate the white man with death, with slavery, with the loss of land and children. So why not the Explorer? What makes him so sure that he can avoid this fate? What gives him his proselytising zeal, that almost missionary fervour, and the belief that when he finally finds the people he is looking for they will not do him any harm?

Is it working on the assumption that a lone individual is less threatening than a large group, who could be perceived as a rival 'tribe'. It is partly this that is responsible for him travelling by himself. In addition he nurtures a dream of forming the tribe's first contact with the world outside their jungle home – a world that feels as distant as the moon, here, with the great walls of green rising on all sides, the tangled vegetation, warring for space and light, the possibility of creating multiple worlds existed, the real far away and half-forgotten.

Somewhere in this almost impassable jungle (impassable that is except for by a single, unaccompanied and determined explorer) dwelled people who had never heard of steam, glass, Faraday, and possibly writing. Their customs might be the strangest he had ever encountered, and their religion incomprehensible, pantheistic, sublime.

Is it a family trait, the talent for fabulism, the parallel reality created by belief that is so much more concrete to them than the real? The Photographer, no less than his illustrious ancestor would fall into this trap – the arrogance of one that assumes that he is the only master of the secret, and thus is above and beyond

normal morality; that none of the mundane disasters to which others are subject can touch them. The Explorer would learn, as the Photographer would learn that he is no more proof against the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune than Hamlet...but we have a journey to travel before then.

They would take him in, teach him their customs and their language, and through him would discover and come to know their fellow man. He would be their sole interpreter and unique point of contact. Alone in the world he would understand their ways and a grateful humanity would thank him for revealing the secrets that they had discovered, of medicine, levitation, magic and divination. Who knew what boundaries of the mind they had conquered, untainted by blundering science? All of this would be his to interpret; to add to his chronicles, to augment the pattern he was creating of the world.

Over the years the Explorer has become less and less convinced of the efficacy of language in recording, correlating and explaining the customs and tongues that he has uncovered and chronicled. He has developed a system of mathematical notation combining that of the ancient Greeks, Egyptians and Sumerians, and including symbols and constructions previously undreamed of in any Western or Eastern lexicon. This system functions as a kind of shorthand and allows him to cross-reference the elements he has taken from so many different cultures. It has the additional advantage of requiring far less space than longhand – thus conserving his limited store of paper. Now, travelling through the jungle, he makes notes in India ink on his hands, wrists, forearms, which he writes up in his notebooks when he makes camp each night, along with detailed sketches of pinpoint accuracy.

Decades of squinting at tiny characters have gradually destroyed his eyesight, so that he is in the habit of donning glasses when he is working on his notebooks. He preserves these against the damp and dirt of the jungle by keeping them in an inside pocket wrapped in silk – which is now slowly rotting away like the rest of his equipment.

As the deepening shadows remind him that the day is almost over he unrolls his hammock, ties it between a couple of trees, and hanging his pack on a nearby branch, climbs with effort into its confining folds. Night falls suddenly, the jungle becoming a negative of itself, deepening shadows where the palms and saplings and vines and trees grow into and around each other. The dark is almost complete – apart from the spark of fireflies, and the occasional star pricked out against the ink of the sky where the jungle breaks.

In the beginning he had been terrified by the chorus of calls, whistles, barks and shrieks that would start up at dusk. Sleeplessness hollowed his cheeks and lent a grey pallor to his skin. He experienced delusions, and imagined horrors – waking with a jaguar or a puma snarling on his chest, vampire bats sucking his blood at night, giant snakes crushing him and swallowing him whole.

Since, in the weeks that he has been travelling, the only animals he has seen are monkeys, lizards, tree sloths, giant rodents, capybaras, porcupines, he has relaxed his guard somewhat. Still, he builds a fire before he camps, and trusts that the hammock will protect him from the depredations of ground-dwelling creatures, covering himself well against the bites of bloodsucking bats and insects alike. He soon learnt not to leave anything on the jungle floor, for it would not stay there for long. There seemed to be a limitless number of ants, and all determined to carry away every scrap of anything left unsecured, as if the jungle were intent on gradually assimilating him.

Whilst his main interest is in the people that inhabit remote and inaccessible areas of the earth, and the way in which they define themselves and their ideas through language, their environment is of equal interest to him. As he travels he makes a minute and careful study of the life around him, in the hope that when he finds the tribe he will already understand to some extent the detail of their existence, and so be able to grasp their vocabulary and their concepts: the way that each word describes a unique set of attributes or essence. The Explorer's world is made of words; and

although he has travelled and interpreted and catalogued innumerable languages the world over, the words are never repeated, each corresponding to a facet of the consciousness of the earth, in potentially infinite variety.

And so he catalogues the plants and animals and insects and birds, trying to describe the unique and irreplaceable nature of this world, and to construct an understanding of the people that he knows are there somewhere. He collects samples, and performs rough dissections, as far as is possible given the tools to hand. He follows the trails of leafcutter ants, to their cunningly constructed nests, searches out the funnel spider's trap-doored lair, the colonies of clay globes built by termites.

He travels from daybreak to dusk with infrequent stops for rest and refreshment, surviving on fruits that he recognises and pools of water collected in jungle hollows, or tapped from the trunks of trees. Occasionally he gets lucky and catches a bird or fish; but the river has its own dangers; swift moving and silent water snakes, many-teethed amphibians, and the animals and birds usually avoid his clumsy traps.

In the beginning he had tried to shoot game for food, using the heavy musket he had carried with him, the report deadened against the deep gloom of the jungle. But it was difficult to aim and fire the clumsy weapon fast enough to hit anything, and his sightings were rare. He did not know enough of the habits of the jungle creatures to follow the trails of capybaras, or catch possums in their lairs. In the end he had given up, preparing to conserve his powder and ammunition in case he should need it to defend himself.

Occasionally he stumbles across clearings that look as though they may have once been cultivated – perhaps with maize, or manioc – but the jungle grows back so fast that it's impossible to be sure, or to tell how recently the ground was used. He's learnt to live with more or less constant hunger, and with stomach cramps, vomiting, diarrhoea, sweats, and all the other consequences of his



experiments in the edible. Each episode a painful lesson in the vocabulary of sustenance.

Poor diet, the bites of mosquitoes, and the bloodsucking of leaches and ticks have left him prey to recurrent fevers, which take him out of himself for days, wavering between unconsciousness and vivid hallucinations, so that he no longer knows where, or who, he is. When he feels the fever coming on he fills his water bottle, ties up his hammock and straps himself in, praying each time that he will survive, and waking, an unknown time later, weak, starving and parched, but with a clear head and cooler skin. For this reason he does not know precisely how long he has been in the jungle. His journals are full of gaps, dates and locations approximate, time and distance distorted by the absence of perspective.

So far he has seen little sign of the people he is searching for – found only the barest traces of settlements, tools or fires. According to the fragments of information that he has been able to gather, they should be somewhere around this area – always assuming that he hasn't lost his way or become confused during the times when he's been incoherent with fever. But the Explorer refuses to entertain this possibility. In his mind he's building a rapport with these invisible people in the way that he's adapting to their environment, acquiring the tools with which to decipher their language. Inevitably he will find them, and when he does he will be the first and only of his race to discover their unique world, to create a bridge between their reality and his own.

Half maddened and dazed, this feverish dream obsesses him as he hacks and cuts his way towards his goal, brushing flies from his lips and eyes, feasting on the stinging sweat, the suppurating bites. Bits of leaves and branches, beetles and unidentified seeds add themselves to the tangle of his hair and the folds of his clothes. His route is determined equally by compass and intuition, for it is rarely possible to travel in a straight line for long. Some of the land that he was crossing had evidently been cleared at some point in the past – the jungle had reclaimed it's own with extra ferocity, throwing up tangled areas of plants. He crossed swamps, precariously balancing on fallen logs, on stones, on anything solid

enough to hold his weight in the valleys of mud between the river's tributaries. At other times the jungle floor was clear, huge trees soaring over the ground carpeted with their dead leaves and strange species of fungi; mosses, creepers and roots hanging down from the secondary growth, high above the jungle floor. Looking up he can see ferns and orchids and parlour palms, parasites on the trunks of giant sequoias.

The sun is rarely visible, and direction further confused by the variety and monotony of the landscape, the murmur and lap and drip of water, millions of leaves brushing against each other, parrots calling to each other, monkeys screaming in protest, packs leaping through the trees, cicadas whirring. At dusk the daytime sounds segue into those of the night; the jungle is at its loudest for the brief period of semi-darkness when the sky is a riot of flame and the stars have not yet begun to emerge. At this time the frogs begin to sing, and join their voices to the spider monkeys calling for rain.

## CHAPTER 6

Tarapoto crouched lower in the cover of the giant palm, praying that he'd not been observed. He took long shallow breaths, and closing his eyes concentrated on relaxing every part of his body. Gradually he became aware that the perspiration was cooling and that insects were exploring his motionless skin. He opened his eyes and began to tune his senses to the jungle around him, the myriad of sounds, colours, smells and textures that made up his environment.

The stranger was still in the vicinity, about 20 paces away from where he lay hidden. He couldn't see him, but he could hear him and smell the acrid odour of his body – a mixture of stale sweat, urine and a damp musty stench. Beneath the odours of sap and sweat and piss he smelt quite unlike any human that the boy had ever encountered. This in itself was frightening – especially when combined with the sounds that the man was making. Low mutterings, their rhythm strangely broken, clicks, dissonant humming; altogether a meaningless jumble of sounds that sounded like the raving of someone in a dream spell. Maybe he was preparing to cast a spell, and was some kind of magician?

Maybe this was a test, a vision, and part of his initiation? Tarapoto was in the middle of the period of his isolation, part of the ceremony that would make him a man. Only if he could survive in the jungle on his own for a full month, until the moon turned again and showed his jutting cheekbone and cold smile to the world, would he be allowed to return to his people, no more a boy. Until that time he lived in isolation, spending his days foraging for food and chewing the various roots and herbs which the Speaker (who held the knowledge of the tribe and communicated with spirits) had given him so that he could discover his spirit animal. The Speaker had warned him that demons might try to trick him during this period – so Tarapoto was not sure if the apparition before him was human, or a spirit who had taken on this disguise to confuse him.

After some time Tarapoto relaxed his immobility and dared to stretch one of his legs, which had begun to cramp a little. Emboldened by the fact that the man did not seem to have noticed his presence he decided to risk sneaking a look at him. The palm he was hiding in was one of a stand, on the edge of a small clearing formed when one of the giant trees had toppled, crushing the vegetation beneath it. The Explorer was sitting on one end of the massive trunk, examining something that he held in one hand, and writing with the other, and the boy was able to crawl to a place where he could see him through the leaves. This took some time – he didn't dare risk disturbing the leaves in case it startled the birds roosting on the upper branches, so his movements were infinitesimal; he almost grew from one spot to the next.

The clearing was bright with sunlight, slanting down into the ragged hole left in the cover by the fallen palm. The Explorer was outlined clearly against the foliage by his light clothes, his head covered by a decrepit hat that had once been a creamy magnolia, but was now somewhat greenish in hue. Every so often he would remove it, and wipe his face and brow before replacing it on his head. Tarapoto noticed several things at once: he was covered from head to foot, except for his hands and face, with garments of a kind that he had never seen before. The skin that was visible was yellowed and leathery, and marked with deep grooves. On his beaky nose some kind of adornment was perched which covered his eyes, and hooked over his ears. He was hunched over, making it hard to judge his height – but gave the impression of having been a tall man. He was holding something in his hand which he squinted through, and which kept throwing off lightning in the sun – although it didn't seem to bother him. As the boy watched he put it down and began to write on a tablet with many leaves, sometimes pausing and scribbling on the back of his left hand.

Tarapoto forgot his crouched position, the branches that were digging into him, and the ants that had begun to make a regimented exploration of one of his feet. He was frozen in place and the sensation of movement a memory. The world narrowed to the bright clearing, and the Explorer, oblivious to his presence, and busy cataloguing a new species of orchid in a sunbeam.

The spell was broken when the Explorer began gathering his things, obviously preparing to continue his onslaught on the jungle. The boy suddenly woke up to his predicament, realising that there was no way he dared make a move until the man was gone. He only allowed himself to breathe again when the Explorer, having gathered up his travelling equipment, departed from the other end of the clearing. Within seconds he was out of sight, machete poised for chopping at any roots or vines, and leaving a swathe of mangled vegetation in his wake.

Tarapoto was left alone in the clearing to try to make sense of any of the things that he had seen. It still lacked a handful of days to his appointed return to the camp – the moon was not nearly full yet. To come back before that time was unheard of, nothing before this had ever made it necessary as far as he was aware. But this? The presence of this man was something that Tarapoto thought the Speaker and the Chief of the tribe would want to know about. What would happen if he delayed, and the Explorer stumbled across the village? On the other hand they were a few days walk from his home, and Tarapoto didn't have any proof that the Explorer was even aware of his people's existence. He could watch him for the next few days, and return to the village after his time was up with the news: that way he would not risk the disgrace, or banishment (or worse), that he imagined waited for one who broke his pact with the moon.

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The Photographer's apartment is in an old style mansion block, with a central well in the buildings, and barred windows, heavily netted to prevent pigeons nesting. Only a single, small and heavily obscured window lights the rooms giving onto this space. The Photographer has blacked out even this small aperture with soundproofing material, and installed a complicated ventilation system to replace the window, so that once inside the room you could be anywhere or nowhere.

The room itself is not large – a box room, or bathroom perhaps. It would make a perfect darkroom, but the Photographer has long since adapted another of the rooms in the apartment for this purpose.

Inside the room there is no furniture. The walls, floor, and ceiling are padded with soft black rubber. Concealed in black rubber studs are tiny microphones, which pick up and amplify the slightest whisper, connected to a recording system in the Photographer's study that holds two three-hour tapes. When the room is occupied they are changed every six hours.

The only entrance is through a heavily soundproofed door, with a specially reinforced lock that secures the door to the frame on both the hinged and opening sides. From inside it's hard to find the door, as the back and the surrounding walls are padded in the same material. The Photographer keeps the key on a chain around his neck at all times, and the lock well oiled, so that it turns smoothly and silently. A hatch is built into the door, allowing food or water to be placed inside the doorway for the occupant of the room, but even this works through an ingenious airlock system, so that no light or sound is allowed to enter. The room could be a womb, or a sensory deprivation tank. The Photographer has himself spent some hours enclosed between its padded walls, but the total solitude, the silence, and the whispering of internal voices frightened him; he felt as though his soul was being eaten. Now he uses it solely for observation, sending others on the journeys that he himself is too terrified to make, recording the pleas and entreaties absorbed by the padded walls, the gradual loss of identity and the dissolution of language, and attempting to piece together a deeper meaning from the babble on his tapes.

## CHAPTER 7

Tarapoto spent the next two days watching the stranger, and struggling to fit the things that he observed into any frame of reference that made sense. For a start the stranger seemed to be ridiculously ignorant of the jungle, like a child who has never left his mother's hip. Even whilst walking he kept examining and touching everything, even, at one point, standing on a nest of poison ants to sample the bark of a tree, scraping away at it with his machete. This tool, of wonderful sharpness was as different from the palm machete's of the Caposcripti as was everything else about the Explorer. Who knew, he might have some purpose for the bark that the Caposcripti were completely unaware of? It wasn't much good for anything, as far as Tarapoto knew. It was too crumbly to use for binding, inedible, no good in tea and with no known medicinal properties. But the Explorer seemed to become very excited about it and packed the sample carefully away in one of his many pockets, after wrapping it in some banana leaf, along with a leaf from the tree.

Every so often he would stop, take out something bright from his pocket, cast around for some light between the leaves, and measure it up against the sun. He would scribble symbols on his arms and on the tablet around his neck. This reassured the boy somewhat, as he understood the sun, and the practice of recording knowledge on the body. But for the Caposcripti it was a sacred process, the indelible symbols pricked on the flesh with sharp thorns, whereas for this strange creature it seemed as instinctive as breathing. There is no ceremony to the Explorer's writing – he makes notes as he goes, and the letters are not indelibly pricked on the skin, but scribbled in all on top of each other, new symbols etched over the faded tracery of the old. The implement he uses for the markings could be made of bone, but seems intricately worked. The Caposcripti had heard of tribes that had the secret of metal: it could be that he was one of those.... But that he seemed entirely foreign to this place, and Tarapoto was not even sure if those tribes still existed. There seemed to be less and less drums rumbling through the jungle each year.

Tarapoto has not been able to get close enough to see what the stranger is writing in his book with many leaves, but the writing on his hands and arms stands out clearly. The script seems regular, repeating the same few symbols in a bewildering variety of combinations. Perhaps the man is making prayers on his skin, endlessly repeating the name of his guardian spirits. The idea that the written language could combine the same few symbols to reproduce any word in the language was foreign to Tarapoto – for the Caposcripti had thousands of symbols, each reflecting the essential properties of the object, idea or event they described. You could not lie, or describe something incorrectly in the Caposcripti language; each event, each story has its own notation and style, variation but never repetition.

Tarapoto observes that he eats and drinks as he travels – but is far clumsier in his foraging than his people – ripping fruits from the trees and bushes and leaving scars on the jungle as he passes. He does not need to cut his way through the thick vegetation, instead using almost invisible paths that weave through the clearings, sometimes travelling along the beds of streams, sometimes taking entirely to the river. This is always a last resort as the Caposcripti are afraid of the open sky. They believe that the spirits of those that have left look down at them at night, glinting like so many fireflies between the clouds, and that they are jealous of the living, stealing their spirits when they can. For this reason the Caposcripti avoid open spaces, and roof over the clearings where they have their temporary settlements by tying the branches of overhanging trees together.

The days passed quickly. Tarapoto was so absorbed in the stranger's actions that he did not even notice the almost forgot to note the phase of the moon, or to carry out the meditation exercises that the Speaker had taught him to help him contact his spirit animal. One morning, however, the stranger did not stir from the hammock he had slung between two trees. Instead he lay moaning and thrashing in the net in the grip of some fever. His glazed eyes opened occasionally – staring at nothing, or at something only he could see, mumbling and shouting meaningless



words. Tarapoto could see that his spirit was wondering far from his body, engaged in a mortal battle on the spirit plane, and wondered if he should sing one of the chants that the Speaker used to guide the spirit back to the body after it has been wandering.

Although Tarapoto had to a large extent lost his fear of the Explorer over the preceding days, nevertheless it took him the better part of the morning to gather up the courage to approach his hammock. Gradually he moved closer and closer, scrambling silently up the trunk and branches of one of the trees to which the Explorer's hammock was fastened. Securing a vantage point directly above, but still screened by a couple of layers of foliage, he could see through the nearly transparent netting that covered the Explorer's hammock, and directly into the man's face.

From this close he could see that the Explorer was translucent and white hot with fever, literally burning up, with the bones in his already gaunt face seeming to pierce his tightly stretched skin. It hardly seemed possible that a man so emaciated could still be alive. At a distance, and concealed by his bulky clothing, he had not been able to guess at the wrists reduced to bones, the legs all femur, jutting sharply through the cloth. The Explorer's hands were like those of a skeleton, sheathed with parchment and inscribed all over with interlocking scribbles. His flesh looked desiccated, already dead; but his eyes, when they opened for a moment, startling the boy, were a bright and intense blue.

From the way they wandered, glazed and unseeing, Tarapoto knew that he was already halfway between this world and the next, and that he did not want the responsibility of admitting that he had done nothing if the man died in their lands. It was time to let the Speaker know everything that he had seen, and to let the tribe make decisions about what should be done.

The moon that night was bright, but it was not yet full. Tarapoto was stiff from crouching over the stranger, and light-headed with hunger as he had not dared leave him to forage for food. He had balanced the damage that the man's unsung death would have against the possible disgrace to himself for returning before the

appointed day, but faced with the figure before him, emaciated and on the brink of death, he knew that he had no choice. If the man was to have any chance of survival then he must return to his people with all possible speed and report everything to the Speaker, who would be anxious to learn the man's reasons for being in their land. Giving the man a little water, and singing a quick prayer over him to keep him safe until they returned, Tarapoto began to run back to the Caposcripti settlement. When the jungle became completely black, and he could not even rely on the light of the moon and stars for direction, he walked, picking his way by landmarks that he recognised, and trusting to his instinct.

It was already full morning when he arrived back at the camp. He was hot, breathless, and thirsty, and filled with a sick urgency for the Explorer and dread of the consequences of his return. A few children were playing in the dust, older children watching the younger ones whilst the adults were out hunting or planting. Some of the women were pulping yucca to make Masato, and stripping the maize from kernels, but apart from their low voices, and the laughter and scolding of the children, the camp was quiet. The boy made his way to the Speaker's hut, hoping he would be there. Sometimes he went into the jungle for days to meditate and carry out various rituals and initiations, now and then returning in the middle of the night, and always unpredictably.

It was with a profound sense of relief that he saw the Speaker seated on one of the platforms inside his house. He took one look at Tarapoto, whose breath was still coming in quick gasps and whose eyes were slightly wild, and motioned him to sit, calling to one of the women to bring them some bowls of Masato. He squatted and watched the boy with a quizzical expression in his eyes whilst Tarapoto took long slugs from the bowl, and then replaced it on the ground beside him. Wordlessly the woman took the bowls and refilled them from the giant clay pot where the Masato was left to ferment. When he judged the boy was ready the Speaker addressed him gently:

"Tarapoto, you have returned early. And you look frightened. You have obviously come back here as fast as possible to tell me

something – what can be so important that it would send you running through the jungle like an animal in flight to find me, and the moon not full until tomorrow? Hmm?”

“I found a stranger in a clearing, a couple of days ago, not one of us. I didn’t come back here and tell you about it then, because the moon was not yet full, but followed him, and watched what he did. But yesterday he didn’t stir from his hammock. I went up close and watched him, and he was feverish. He saw nothing with his eyes, as though his spirit had gone away from his body. And they were blue. I think he is dying. I came back here, to tell you before it was too late.”

The words tumbled out in a rush, and the Speaker took a moment to sort out the relevant points before asking his next question. Tarapoto waited silently, blinking the stinging sweat from his eyes, but otherwise making no movement.

“Go on, I am listening.”

“He’s about 4 hours run from here – longer than that, carrying him. I first saw him a couple of day’s walk away from here. I’ve been following him ever since. He’s definitely not one of us, or of any of the tribes that I have heard of I think. He was like no one I have ever seen. Everything about him was different, even the way he spoke and walked – except for one thing. Whilst I was watching him he spent some time inscribing symbols on his skin, that I could not read.”

The Speaker had his eyes closed and was listening intently. He motioned for the boy to continue with his story.

“I do not even know if he was a man – or even human, although I think he was flesh and blood, and not a spirit – I am only calling him ‘he’ because he seemed to be a male, rather than a female. I couldn’t see his body, since he was all covered up from head to foot with only his hands and his face and neck showing. He made a lot of noise, and didn’t seem to be familiar with the jungle at all – he was examining some flowers as if he’d never

seen such blooms before, and seemed to be making pictures of them on a tablet with many thin whitish leaves.”

“I think he must have been old, as his skin was very wrinkled and he stood a little hunched. He spoke to himself from time to time, but not in any language that I could recognise. And he smelt different to one of us, although the prevailing scent was his unwashed body – he used water only for drinking, after he had boiled it and mixed it with various substances.”

“Another thing. He is looking for us, or at least for something. And he is coming closer. For the last couple of days I have been following him towards the village, although at the rate he is going, it would take him much longer than that to reach here, for he is travelling in circles and seems to have little or no sense of direction. ”

This anyway is what I observed.”

The traditional Caposcriptan formula indicated that Tarapoto had finished his description, at least for the moment, and was the cue for the Speaker to reply. The boy knew that there was no point rushing him – at the moment the Speaker would be sifting through the history of the tribe to see if there was any precedent for this situation, which would give him an indication of how to act in this matter. After a few moments the Speaker opened his eyes and frowned deeply. His voice, when it came, was a little hoarse.

“I have found no precedent for this – stranger – that you have seen. I do not think in the memory of the tribe there has been such an individual in our lands, or if there has then it has not been recorded. I must speak of this to the chief and the elders, so that we can put it before the tribe. You did well in coming straight to me with this story. You have acted with wisdom, like a man.”

Tarapoto heard this with deep relief. The burden of knowledge had weighed heavy on him over the last couple of days, and whilst the Explorer had slept fitfully in his hammock, Tarapoto had lain awake wondering where he came from, and what he should do. The

Speaker's praise, the fact that he took him seriously and didn't treat him like a child, made him feel stronger, and more confident. He hoped that the Speaker would want to bring the stranger back to be healed by the tribe: suddenly he wanted the man to live, so that he could satisfy the curiosity which pricked at him like a mosquito bite, insistently reminding him of its presence.

When the boy had left, the Speaker sat cross-legged on the platform, mulling over what he had been told, and calling for many bowls of Masato and hot cigarettes. It was a good thing that the boy had come to him first – forewarned, he could be calm and decided at the meeting of the tribe. Knowledge was his power, his only fear that he would not have the answers to their questions.

And now, he did not have much time.

The Speaker was of necessity a highly observant individual. He tried as far as possible to be aware of everything that might affect his position, or the life of the tribe, and to be prepared with wise and considered advice. He did not make all the decisions for the tribe – but the chief would always consult him on issues of importance, and it was imperative that he make the right judgement now about the fate of the stranger, or he would suffer for it later.

It was only his brain, his phenomenal memory, and ability to understand and transcribe the sacred scripts and ancient stories, that had earned him the position of Speaker. He was not a physically strong person, and had been weak and sickly as a child. This sickness had gone away once he had begun his training as a speaker – it was as though his soul had been trying to escape the prison of his body, and that the fevers and weakness he had been prey to before that was its way of communicating with him. The position he held now was one of respect, and some power, and it was one he would not willingly jeopardise. The only alternative for one of his kind was exile, or suicide, which amounted to much the same thing for the Caposcripti – for beyond their lands the jungle was unknown and full of danger, and the exiles were not remembered.

He felt frustratingly impotent after what the boy had told him – despite the fact that he had been able to glean far more than had been conveyed by his words alone. As he spoke the Speaker had picked up mental images, quick flashes of the scenes he was describing, the smell of the Explorer, the boy's acrid tang of fear, his curiosity. But these tantalising hints were not enough to give him more than the sketchiest inkling of the person the Caposcripti would have to deal with.

He considered doing a spirit casting – persuading some small animal to let him be a passenger behind its eyes for a short while so that he could send his awareness out into the jungle to observe the man for himself. Such a process was risky however, and would leave him too drained to control the meeting with the elders – moreover it would spark even further rumours. No, the best thing to do was to wait until the evening, and to hold his own council until then. Calling some of the children to him, he gave instructions to the older ones to tell everyone that there would be a meeting of the tribe that night after sunset.

\*       \*       \*

"You will all be wondering why we have gathered everyone here tonight. Tarapoto has a story to tell us and we have some important decisions to make. Whilst he was on his spirit journey he stumbled upon a stranger in our lands – a stranger unlike any we have ever met before. He came back here today and told me about it, because the man is ill and might die soon – and from the things he has observed, the man's spirit is one of great power. So I have called you all together so that we can decide what to do since the man lives, or dies, on our land."

There was a stunned quiet for a minute, and then everybody started talking at once – asking the boy questions, offering opinions and shouting each other down. The Speaker let this continue for a few moments and then spoke sharply:

"Silence!!!!"

The hush was immediate. People turned expectantly to the Speaker to see what his verdict would be. There was no hierarchy to command their obedience – merely a faith that in the stories would be the answer to this new problem, and that the Speaker would be able to find it for them.

"How will we hear the voice of the ancestors when you all speak at once? Are you children clamouring for a mother's attention? We must carefully and calmly weigh up this possible threat to our people and decide what is to be done."

He glared around him, waiting for someone to interrupt– but no one dared.

The Speaker turned to Tarapoto "Tell us" he commanded, "Start from the beginning and tell everything you have seen."

The Speaker lowered himself carefully onto his mat, and Tarapoto stood up to tell the story as he had been instructed.

"Since the last full moon I have been in the jungle on my spirit journey, fasting and meditating, and following the instructions of the Speaker. A few days ago I came across the stranger in a clearing – and since it was not yet time for me to return, and I wanted to find out more about him, I decided to watch him for a few days. I held quite still for hours so that he wouldn't see me, and watched everything that he did. I followed him, and saw him eat, drink, defecate. I stayed awake whilst he slept and spied whilst he wrote on himself or the things around him."

"He seemed to be looking for something – muttering to himself and consulting a bright thing that he took from his coverings. He did not look anything like any of the other tribes that live in this jungle: his hair (what was not hidden under a covering) was not black like ours, and his skin was yellow. I did not recognise what he wore, or the things that he used. There were many things that he did that made no sense to me at all. But one thing I distinguished.

His skin was inscribed in a manner not unlike our own, although of much greater extent."

There was a mumble around the gathering at this – and the Speaker prompted Tarapoto gently – "Markings on his skin? Where? On his face? On his body?"

"As for that, I could hardly tell – for he covered most of his body, from his neck to his ankles. But there were no markings on his face, that I could see, and he had hair upon his head – although thin and greying, like an old man."

The Speaker was silent at this – and seemed to withdraw into himself for a little while – for all the world as though holding a voiceless dialogue. The Caposcripti, assuming that he was asking the ancestors for advice, held their tongues. This time, however, the silence was for effect: the Speaker had already decided what to do, but wanted it to appear that he had consulted the spirits, and that it was they who had made the decision.

After a few moments he raised his head and looked at the people gathered around him. "Do any of you think this stranger offers a threat? And if so, what should we do, given that we are peaceful people, unlike our violent cousins?"

It was Tarapoto that answered him, flushed with the adrenaline of speaking, and being listened to by the whole tribe.

"I think that he is a human being, like us, but from a different place – and that he has come here to learn about our land. I don't know why – maybe because there are more like him. But now he is dying – so I have come back here to ask the tribe what we should do. I will be responsible for him if we bring him back to the village. I am a man now."

The Speaker recognised the element of bravado in Tarapoto's tone, but on the whole he approved of the change in him. He had always been an excellent student, and was now coming into his own power.



"I believe you are right, and the spirits are in agreement. We must bring the man back if he is alive, or return to see if he has died. Find the man and bring him back to the village – but isolate him from the people – we do not know what his fever is. I will find medicine for him, and consult with the spirits and ancestors to see if I can find any precedent for this situation. If he dies we will need to know what death rites are necessary."

The chief of the tribe had been silent throughout this discussion – he was an old man and looked forward to the day when he would be able to rest, and his spirit would finally cross the great river, and take up its residence in the real world. This disturbance was unlooked-for, so, as had become his habit, he left it to the Speaker to make arrangements to deal with the situation. At the Speaker's look, he inclined his head and grunted to show that he was in agreement with his plans.

## CHAPTER 8

More will be written of the Caposcripti death rites later – but suffice it to say that they are long and drawn-out, and can take up to eight days and nights to complete. If it were not for the fear that if the man were human his unquiet spirit would roam the jungle, tricking unwary Caposcripti, and looking for a new body to inhabit, then there would be no question of taking the trouble for a stranger. The Caposcripti are not a sentimental people – they cannot afford to be.

The Speaker knew that he had four to five hours before they would return with the stranger – less if he were already dead. A part of his attention would have to be devoted to that party, and to the burden they would be carrying back to the tent. But the bulk of his concentration was focussed on the man himself. Who was he? Where did he come from? What was his purpose in their lands?

He would use the next few hours to go into a spirit trance, and consult the massed knowledge of the tribe that he held in trust along with the preserved heads of those who had gone before. This would take the greater part of his awareness, but a part of his spirit would be free to talk to the spirits of the jungle – the frogs, who are everywhere and see everything, the crocodiles who speak with the spirits of the water and the spirits of the land, and the most sacred and powerful of all, the jaguar. He would watch through their eyes.

The Speaker began to strip himself methodically, removing his loincloth, his bags of herbs and roots, the beads and necklaces and bones of his office. Finally, when he was completely naked, save for the tattoos which covered his body, he seated himself cross-legged on a piece of wood and lighted a cheroot, filling his lungs hungrily with the pungent smoke, spitting it out with a whoosh of air, clearing the space around him of distractions and malignant spirits.

After a few minutes he began to hum and sway, keening in a low tone, with his eyes fixed on the air in front of him: air that shimmered lightly, perhaps with thermals in the tropical heat. Sweat poured from his forehead, making the tattooed script shine, and on the cords of his neck it rippled like living snakes. The Speaker was oblivious to this however – his attention all for the images that were beginning to take shape in the air before him – the echoes that filled his ears.

The Caposcripti do not measure time. They live simultaneously in the past, present and future, which they read in the rings of trees and the scales of fish. 'Morning' is not a distinct parcel of time, but a collection of descriptions, or concepts, each linked to a specific moment and aspect of the jungle – each with its own name, and all existing simultaneously in a series of parallel dimensions. Thus there is the bird time – when the innumerable varieties of parrots and other avian life try to outdo each other with their calls and screeches – the dew time, the sun time, the sleep of the night creatures, the waking of those who walk by day.

Such is the language of the jungle – a language infinitely more subtle in its gradations than ours. For when the sky is rarely visible through a canopy of green; when looking up will distract your attention from the snake in the undergrowth; and time is measured by the calls of birds and frogs, the diurnal journey of the sun and moon become irrelevant. At some point the Explorer will become familiar with their language. Eventually his descendant will think he understands it.

By dint of great effort the Speaker had succeeded in projecting his own image onto the air before him, along with echoes of all those who have gone before him, tapping into the accumulated memory of the tribe. He felt his consciousness expand with faint ghosts of experience; past lives like onionskins – his body and physical self only dimly important now. It's nearly there, he nearly has a pattern, sees the man suspended between two worlds – one the everyday world that he was familiar with, the other so alien that his awareness of it was painful to him.

The connection was lost as he felt his body begin to go into convulsions, dragging him back his earthbound self. The drug that had freed his mind and sent it wandering around the paths of the spirit world had strong side effects. It was this that had made him so cautious about taking it. He struggled, resisting the pull of the physical, but could not regain the pattern he had almost grasped. As he lost consciousness he was dimly aware of someone turning him on his side. It was not unheard for him to pass out whilst in a spirit trance; they had faith that he would wake again in time. The jungle is a great teacher of the art of waiting.

## CHAPTER 9

One of the few people that the Photographer has not managed to expel from his life is his agent, Quentin. This is not through fondness for the man, but because the Photographer considers him to be a necessary evil. He invariably handles the Photographer's affairs with flair and attention to detail, and never bothers him with trivial details. This leaves the Photographer free to pursue his experiments, free from interruption by galleries, reviewers, publishers, accountants, fans or any of the hundred other irritating people who seemed to see it as a god-given right to disturb his peace.

Most of their communication is by telephone, or, preferably, letter – with Quentin under strict instructions not to contact the Photographer unless absolutely necessary. The Photographer's previous successes and the demand for retrospectives and books about his work necessitate a physical meeting occasionally. There are always documents to sign and contracts to be discussed. These meetings are held every three months, and always take place at the Photographer's apartment. Whilst the effort made in concealing all traces of his work is disruptive in the extreme. He wonders what he would do if Quentin ever found out what one of his most important clients was up to; what would it feel like to kill someone in the heat of the moment, and moreover someone who would be missed, unlike the drifters and vagrants who were his usual targets?

The doorbell gave a rusty clatter, and although the Photographer had been waiting with fierce concentration for the sound, he flinched involuntarily. For the hundredth time that morning his eyes scanned the room for anything he might have missed, anything that had escaped his vigilance to mar the consummate identity, consistent in its falsity, which he projected for his agent. He reflected that he had many of these personas, donned for every occasion. He was like a hall of mirrors, the endless reflection of himself, but each one somehow warped and untrue. At times like this he used his fractured personality to his advantage, turning one

facet to his interlocutor, and letting it shine in their reflected light.

The room was in order. He tried to make his eye a stranger's eye, which would catch details that his, accustomed to the apartment's sparseness, would miss. Nothing was out of place; no anomalies gave evidence to the scenes that had happened here. The Photographer pressed the intercom for the street entrance, and went to answer the door.

Quentin stood in the doorway, impeccably dressed as always, rolling an umbrella he had used to keep the few drops of rain which had fallen that morning from staining his immaculate suit. He was about the same age as the Photographer, but the two men couldn't have been more different. Quentin projected urbanity, a civilised man of business, who never let a deal pass him by. Nevertheless he had his secrets. He was a man who could understand the need for privacy.

Quentin was in his element with the gossip and glamour of the art world. He had long ago decided to become a prostitute to success, resolving that he'd rather be a very successful agent than a mediocre artist – lacking vision, his eye saw the commonplace, but couldn't elevate it unassisted. This, then, is the man who presented himself to the Photographer: carefully preserved, slim, about 5'9" with slightly hooded dark eyes, arched brows and dark curls with just a trace of grey at the temples.

The Photographer asked him in, and Quentin headed towards his usual chair, setting his laptop, mobile phone and papers around him like a general marshalling his troops for battle. The Photographer had disappeared towards the kitchen, to prepare the coffee with which they invariably started the meetings, and to give Quentin time to put his presentation in order, his usual strategy to avoid any unnecessary small talk beforehand.

As he returned with a cup in each hand Quentin gave him a list of issues they needed to get through in the meeting. They covered these quickly, signing papers, glancing at accounts. Quentin

showed him reviews and clippings of his work, most of which the Photographer ignored, and filled him in on the gossip and happenings that hadn't made it into the press.

Throughout most of this the Photographer paid only the most cursory attention, his mind on the work that had been interrupted, the discoveries that would have to wait until later. Much of the time he stared at Quentin, barely listening to his words. He had the habit of running his hand through his hair when stressing a point. The Photographer suspected that it was intended to make him look dramatic. The position exposed the veins in his neck, the defenceless nape.

The meeting was winding up when Quentin asked the question that the Photographer had been hoping to avoid.

"People are wondering when your next exhibition is, your public are hungry. They've been chewing over what's there for a while now...they're down to gristle - they want some fresh meat ."

The Photographer winced; Quentin had a way of stretching a metaphor just that little bit too far.

"At least do some interviews?"

He shrugged: "Can't we give them a retrospective?"

"A retrospective of what? The last retrospective? They won't buy it. I don't buy it."

"Nevertheless you'll have to. I have neither the time nor the inclination to pull together a show at the moment. The work's just not ready; it's too important for any distractions. You'll have to put them off with something."

"So you are working?"

"Yes, I'm working."

"On what? At least you could let me know, I'm your agent."

"I can't tell you; I'd have to kill you."

"Very funny. Oh well, at least I can tell them there's some new work in progress."

"Yes, I suppose you deserve a few scraps for the Jackals to fight over, if it's meat they're after."

Quentin winced at the inference that he too was a parasite on the great man's work - he like the others when he had done so much. But, then, in the end, it was true to a point. He lacked the frightening intensity that lay just beneath the Photographer's seemingly affable front, the dark vision that infused his work. Nevertheless he pressed on.

"And me? Don't tell me you're going to hold out on me too?"

The Photographer stared Quentin down, looking at him as he might a specimen on his work-desk, but with considerably less excitement, and thought irritably that it was time he went. They had covered all that was necessary in the quarterly meeting; he wanted to be alone once more to pursue his work - to straighten the chaos that the man's visits made. He looked at him, sitting across from him. This urbane, confident man - who nevertheless was a little frightened of him, who could see in his eyes when he had gone too far.

Quentin shifted uneasily under his gaze - pinned by the microscope glare of the Photographer's eyes, which despite his attempts at levity were flat, devoid of humour or compassion. Finally he deigned to answer Quentin's question, his manner final and dismissive, his voice dangerously low and soft.

"I'm not sure if you, or the world, are ready to understand what I'm working on yet. Certainly not now - perhaps not whilst I am alive. It is a labour, you might say, of blood, ink and tears."

He stared fiercely at Quentin, as if daring him to challenge him. Quentin just laughed nervously and replied "I'll quote you on that if I may. Anyway, it can't do any harm, making them wait awhile."



"No. The world has waited 150 years for this - they can most certainly wait a while longer. Anyway, I think we've covered everything now. I'll see you in three months time."

Quentin was used to these sudden dismissals and so gathered his things together in silence. He looked around the room but as ever it gave away no clues. As they passed the desk he looked at some books that were on there. Much later he was to realise their significance, but at the time the volumes were meaningless to him: Montaigne, De Galle's Phrenology, Voodoo practices, studies in anthropology. The Photographer noticed him looking.

"It's this way out Quentin". His dry tone reproached Quentin's curiosity. They proceeded to the hall, with its profusion of dusty houseplants.

"Well, I guess it's goodbye then, for a few months. I'll call if there's anything that urgently requires your attention."

"I'd prefer to be contacted by letter, as usual. It's been a pleasure Quentin. Goodbye."

Quentin found himself in the outer hall, and the door closed behind him. He emerged onto the street with a sense of disquiet, and with a shake of his head headed for the main road and a taxi to the warm and welcoming delights of Chelsea, and the places where he was known.

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The Speaker awoke at dusk, with a raging headache, cramps in his stomach, and a taste of dust in his mouth. It took him a moment to connect these sensations with the events of the afternoon, and then the realisation of what he had discovered hit him like a blow in the chest. Everything would change with the stranger that was arriving – but the Speaker could not see how, and he struggled to hold onto the connections he had made in his trance before they dissipated.

He became aware that there were several people watching him, who had been waiting patiently for him to emerge to his trance, confident that he would have all the answers, as he always did. This only increased his sense of dread, as he stared at the chief of the tribe, at the heads of the families, and tried to gather words to describe what he had understood. Nevertheless, he could not lie – he had not been given the language with which to do that. His grave face told his watchers that the news would not be good.

"Brothers. I have looked in the memories of our people, and questioned the spirits of the jungle. I have gazed through the eyes of animals, and studied the patterns of probability. I could not understand much of what I saw, but I know that this man is far outside our experience, and that his people speak a language that we could never learn. His mind is like black water – I could not see into it. I have found no answers to our questions, nor could I see our future clearly, or the future of the stranger. I do not even know if he will live or die. Yet one thing came through clearly: everything that we have known will change."

The news caused a rumble of disquiet. In living memory, there had never been a situation or problem for the tribe that the sacred scripts had not provided a solution for. The Caposcripti were so used to being able to consult the Speaker, who held in his head the tribe's memories, and could consult the shrunken heads preserved against the jungle for generations for any information that they required, that the very thought that there might be no answers caused some panic. The Speaker continued imperturbably.

They will soon be returning with him. I don't know whether he will live or die, but I think we should keep him away from the rest of the tribe for the moment, I will nurse him with Tarapoto and his mother until he is strong enough to be taught some of the ways of our people.

"If he lives, we will have to learn to speak with him. If he dies, we have no guide, no words with which to free his spirit, nor any way of understanding the knowledge that we would gain from him.

Nevertheless, it may be that we will find some connection with him. For the boy said he is inscribed in our manner, if not in our script, and his spirit was not invisible to me. I think that they will soon return with him. Gather the women, and tell them that we had better make everything ready to receive them. The man is still alive, but may not be for long."

## CHAPTER 10

The Photographer returned to his work with relief once Quentin had left, removing the tapes and the player from the drawer where he had concealed them.

The tapes were neatly labelled, and represented 3 days of continuous recording, the cartridges changed every six hours. Transcribing them was a time-consuming process, but the Photographer had invested in the most expensive equipment – allowing him to scan through hours of material automatically, taking his verbal snapshots. The machine would stop at the slightest utterance, the smallest piece of the jigsaw that constituted the original language, as they gradually forgot the speech they had learnt to communicate in this society and returned to a more primal language encoded in their flesh.

The Photographer cross-referenced another sound on his card system, and made a copy of the portion of the recording that contained the original sample. Checking his watch he realised that it was feeding time for the latest guest. He went into his small kitchen, and prepared a tray: a plastic beaker filled with water, a bowl of soup, and 2 pieces of toast. They often refused food at first, but even the strongest would crumble after a couple of days in the room, and the dishes would be returned to the dumbwaiter licked clean.

This took five minutes, no more. He crossed the hallway to the door of the room, its all-but invisible frame set flush in the wall. The outline of the hatch was equally indiscernible, and was heavily insulated. Silent enough for the room's occupants who had heard their last human voice. The only sound that escaped its padded walls was through the reassuringly mechanical medium of the tape recorder, divorced from the messy physicality of it all. That, and the complete darkness of the room created a sense of isolation that divorced one completely from any awareness of the physical world. The Photographer had tried it himself on a couple of

occasions, and had not liked the sensation. Luckily he could leave at any point.

Only when the recordings began to lose any semblance of coherent language did he stop bringing the food each day. All that escaped the room when he opened the hatch was the smell of shit and urine, unwashed body and fear – and the Photographer would stop opening the hatch until his recorders picked up nothing but silence. Then he would open up the room and remove the body.

He is gradually building up a library of these tapes, strange moans and broken words. The positioning of the microphones makes them sound as though they are coming from the bottom of a deep well, an oubliette whose occupants are not so much as forgotten, as never known in the first place.

**CHAPTER 11**

Tarapoto led his companions unerringly to the place where he had left the stranger the day before, and when they were a few minutes away from where the Explorer had pitched his camp motioned to them to stop and wait for him to scout the situation. Since his discovery of the stranger, and his transition from adolescent to adult, Tarapoto had made a pact with himself that he would take responsibility for the man and the task of healing him from his illness. With infinite care and silence he threaded his way through the vines and trees and grasses that twined thickly together around the little clearing until he could see that the stranger was lying in his hammock just as he had left him. Tarapoto did not think the stranger would be in any state to attack him, but took great care to ensure that the crack of branches or the rustle of dead leaves underfoot would not give his approach away.

As it happened, there was little need for such caution. The stupor of the Explorer was so profound, so wrapped about with hallucinations, that even had one of the giant anacondas embraced him in its tightening coils, he would probably have been smothered unaware. Tarapoto called softly to the others to approach, and together they untied the knots that held his hammock, gathered up his belongings, and scattered the ashes of his long-dead fire. Then, slinging the ends of the hammock along a long pole that they had cut from a nearby sapling, they returned almost as silently as they had come.

After many hours they arrived back at the camp, where the Speaker and some of the women were waiting for them. Even the Speaker's usually impassive face betrayed some hints of worry – in the lines which smoothed themselves as he realised that the party had returned and the set of his wiry shoulders. Anticipating that it would be necessary to nurse the stranger, he had prepared a shelter a little distance from the village, with a platform on which they could lay the man, and water and medicines. The men gently laid their burden on the platform, where the Speaker indicated, and then sprawled in a circle on the ground, still silent and panting

slightly from their journey. The Speaker approached the hammock with the unconscious Explorer lying in it and took his first - long and measuring - look at this intruder.

The Explorer could not at this moment have looked more different from his former self – his once strong frame rendered fragile by age and under-nourishment, his skin yellowed and translucent from the fever that was consuming him. His clothes, from his weeks in the jungle, were tattered and filthy, and hung on his diminished frame in rags. He smelt strongly of himself and damp, and open sores covered the parts of his flesh that were visible.

Every so often he would stir and mutter – his eyes twitching behind his closed lids, or opening for a short time to stare sightlessly before him. The Speaker did not at this moment doubt that he was flesh and blood like the Caposcripti - and that he did not have long to live. It was not just the glimpse he had had of his mind during the trance that had almost killed him: the man's physical condition particularly convinced him, for spirits were not prey to the fevers and illnesses that killed mortals, and would not be so covered with sores and bites. Of course, they were very cunning. A spirit could have disguised itself in this way, and let itself be carried unresisting and seemingly unaware into the heart of the Caposcripti lands, where it could cause all kinds of mischief. However the Speaker had confidence in his ability to banish such evil spirits, and strip them of their earthly manifestations or pseudo bodies – and did not think such a creature would put itself at such risk, however cunning it might be.

No, this was definitely a man, like themselves but completely foreign to their experience. A quick glance would have been enough to show him that, taking in the strange coverings, the height and shape of him, the bags and bundles that the Caposcripti had brought back with them that no doubt contained more strange and inexplicable objects. This man obviously came from a place entirely foreign to their experience and comprehension, and populated by people like himself. It would be important for them to learn as much about him and about his people as possible, in case more followed this lone traveller.

Concluding his observation of the Explorer, the Speaker withdrew a few paces and cleared his throat. The Caposcripti, who had been watching him closely, and trying to guess what was in his mind, waited expectantly for him to speak.

"My friends, this before us is definitely a man, and no spirit. We have no time to waste if we are to save his life."

Those who had carried him back had already come to the same conclusion – or would have been far more reluctant to put themselves as close to the man as had been required to convey him back to the camp. Silently they waited for the Speaker to continue.

"Therefore we have a choice, which I will put to everyone. We can keep the man here, where he will either die or survive, or we can return him to the jungle, and leave his fate in the hands of the spirits. This last, however, might be dangerous. Now he knows where we have our camp, and his vengeful spirit could come back to try to take possession of one of us, unless we move to another part of the jungle."

"If he should survive, however, we may be able to discover more about him, and about his people – and to estimate whether more of them are likely to follow him."

"Tarapoto and his mother will stay here to help me care for the ma. The rest of you should return to your work. I will tell you if there is any change in his condition."

Whilst the men filed away, Huitota handed the Speaker a gourd containing black water from a nearby spring, and a soft piece of leather, which he dipped in the water. He dribbled some of it onto the Explorer's lips and rinsed his face, before laying the cool leather on his forehead. The Explorer stirred a bit, and mumbled, but did not wake. The Speaker continued this treatment patiently – in between settling back on his heels and looking at the man speculatively.



## CHAPTER 12

It was a greyly humid day - smog low on the pavements and the West End traffic snarling its contorted loops through Soho. The streets teemed with young and beautiful affluence, coy glances darting round the pavement cafes.

The Photographer noted careless caresses, faces and bodies strewn about with metal, fashionable clothes and coked-out eyes. He observed men in business suits, expensive cars, exclusive restaurants. He watched with interest the derelicts, the homeless, and the uncared-for populating doorways and lingering on street corners.

"Got any spare change mate?"

The dull voice instantly commanded his attention. From the pavement, frayed cuffs wrapped around grimy knees, a hopeful face looked up at him. His eyes are pleading but also aloof: he's probably asked that question a hundred times today, and his faith in human nature survived a bare week of the west end treatment.

The Photographer decides to become involved - up until this point he could have walked away, and he would risk nothing. But he feels a need for human contact, for games, for gambling. It has become too easy, too safe, the temptation to break some of the rules he has made for himself too strong. Or maybe it's just that he no longer needs them. He feels attuned to them all, the lost people that he saves, the heads he steals from corpses in the morgue, from the scenes of accidents when he can get away with it. There is a poetry to events that he thinks he has the measure of - the grand controller, the prestidigitator of reality, shaping lives like a clever illusion for motivations both obscure and subtle.

Rules are made to be broken.

"Of course I haven't any 'spare' change - it's all accounted for - but I'll buy you a coffee if you want - how about it?"

"Milky, three sugars please - nice one mate"

"Oh it's alright - come and drink it with me - there's a very good place just around the corner"

"Oh I'd rather stay here if you don't mind... I... I'm waiting for a friend; he'll lose it if I'm not here when he gets back"

"How long is he likely to be? Surely you've time for a coffee? I'm a photographer - I'm doing research for a book on street life. I'd like to talk with you."

"Where's your camera then?"

The Photographer reached into one of his pockets and pulled out a pen and a small notebook.

"Let's just say I'm taking verbal snapshots at the moment - now, how about that coffee?"

The young man is still suspicious, his manner aggressive. "Do you take pictures for magazines and stuff then? Any I might have heard of?"

Deciding at this point not to reveal that magazines in fact ran features on his work (anonymity being crucial to his plan), the Photographer just smiled, nodded, and replied

"You might say that...I'm freelance - what's your name anyway?"

"Gerard"

"OK Gerard - so - are you going to help me out with my research? Talking to people, first hand, best material...only it's hard to write standing up in the street!"

Gerard considered this for a moment, whilst several things warred in his mind. Abandoning such a lucrative pitch was risky - but the man might recompense him; a hot coffee in a dry cafe was an enticing prospect...but the guy was a bit creepy...could even be plainclothes, or on the cruise...Soho a natural stamping ground for nonces.... Still - couldn't do any harm if he kept his wits about him and his eye open for any possibilities.

"Alright then" Gerard stood up, shook out his blanket and rolling it up, shoved it in his bag, pocketing the few coins which had been

thrown on it by passers-by. He shrugged his shoulders, smoothed down his pants and said, "Where's this cafe then?"

"Oh, not very far" replied the Photographer "it's this way"

The Photographer led the way, walking rapidly and with purpose, his arms swinging, and his black coat billowing around him. Gerard shuffled his feet and followed him with a loose stride, shoulders slightly hunched and hands in pockets. The Photographer turned his head to ensure that Gerard was in fact following him and continued his questioning as they walked.

"Where are you from Gerard? You're not from London?"

"No - I'm from Bristol, originally. I've been down here a few months. A friend said he'd get me a gig as a sound engineer - I've had some training. You know, tape op and that. But he blew his contact with the studio. Some of the kit went missing - so that's out. Still I thought I'd stick around. See what's happening."

"You don't like Bristol then?"

"No man, I've done that you know? There's too much hardcore drugs down there, too many angry people. Anyway - the West Country isn't going anywhere. There's opportunities down here for someone like me - someone with a bit of smarts, knows the score - know what I mean?"

"But what about your family, your friends - you must miss them?"

Gerard pulled up and looked at him so sharply, that for a moment the Photographer thought he had blown it - that Gerard had seen through his gently probing questions - designed to elicit the maximum amount of information whilst giving away nothing about himself. He felt his stomach churn and a tight feeling in his chest, where a fist seemed to clutch and roil. But, unwittingly, he had hit upon a nerve. The fact that Gerard had not even asked the Photographer's name suggested that he was too self-absorbed to notice the slightly clinical manner in which the Photographer was stripping him of information about his home, his background. That was fine with the Photographer. He wasn't intending on giving much away anyway.

"I don't have any family man. My mum died when I was small - grew up in a home. I never knew who my dad was - not sure my

mum did either. I got by. Are we nearly there yet? You said it wasn't far. I have to get back soon. I've got shit to sort out man." Gerard's jerky voice gave away a tinge of nervousness, and suggested just the hint of a habit. Nothing too serious, but some dependency was conveyed by the way that he spoke.

"No – it isn't – in fact here we are. Don't worry – you'll be recompensed for your time". The Photographer kept his voice steady and smooth, giving no hint of the turbulent anticipation beneath. The important thing now was to gain the young man's trust.

They had arrived at a typical Soho café – the tables in the front facing the street, for maximum posing value, those at the back tucked away, to allow intimate little tête à tête's, secretive assignations. The Photographer had been concerned that the staff might not allow Gerard, whose hands and face were grimy, whose shoes were crusted with dirt, and who smelled none too clean – inside, but either they didn't notice or didn't care. At any rate no one tried to stop them. The Photographer chose a table at the back that couldn't be seen from the street, and which was slightly cut off from the rest of the café. He seated himself with his back to the other customers, whilst Gerard took a seat against the wall, facing outwards. He told Gerard to order anything he liked. Maybe he was hungry?

Almost immediately, an insouciant waiter came to take their order: an espresso for the Photographer; a hot chocolate, a large coke, several sandwiches, and a cake for Gerard, who was bent on taking full advantage of this free lunch ticket. As the waiter walked away with the order, Gerard asked sharply: "Got any fags?" The Photographer didn't smoke – had not anticipated this eventuality. Spotting a cigarette vending machine at the far side of the café, he dug some pound coins out of his pocket and handed them to Gerard, telling him to buy himself some cigarettes. Gerard manoeuvred himself out from around the table – nearly colliding with the waiter who had returned with their order. As he fumbled the coins into the machine and squinted at the various brands on offer, the Photographer watched him and thought about this ritual – not a ritual in this case, but a departure – for Gerard was different from

the others, more aware, sharper. A change from the drifting human wrecks for whom, the Photographer believed, death was a release, and the means to free the potential in their souls. Gerard had something in common with them – living as he did on the borders of society; and as such might not be missed for a while if he were to disappear, nor looked for too long. His youth made the Photographer a little uneasy, but he seemed to suspect nothing.

As Gerard scooped the cigarettes from the machine, and turned around to come back to the table, the Photographer carefully rearranged his features so nothing of his thoughts would show. Gerard sat down and laid into his sandwiches with the gusto of someone who hasn't eaten properly for several weeks, washing it all down with huge slugs of coke alternating with hot chocolate. The Photographer let him eat in peace for a few minutes, and then, carefully, casually asked him

"Gerard, you've got good bones, you could be quite photogenic. I'd like to take some pictures of you, for the series that I mentioned, on street people. I'd like you to come over to my studio. Naturally I'll pay you for your time – what do you think?"

Gerard looked at him for a moment, considering, hand grasping the chocolate glass, his jaws still working on the sandwich. Their eyes met. The Photographer saw nothing but an interminable boredom there.

"Sure man, just say the word"

**CHAPTER 13**

The Explorer sweated out his fever under the care of the Speaker, Tarapoto and his mother, Huitota. All three were protected to the best of the Speaker's ability by tattoos that he had pricked out on their skins using a large thorn, and by special charms that he had made using the teeth and claws of Caiman, guardians of the spirit. It wasn't much, but it was the best that the Speaker could do against the danger he felt, but could not name.

On the third day the fever broke. Huitota observed that his sweat ran freely, and that his skin cooled to the touch. His brow was merely warm and somewhat damp, rather than as hot as a stone that had been left in the fire. She began to hum a song of thanks to the spirits of water and air, for healing the man whom they had all thought would soon die. The Explorer would be weak for many days after the fever had abated; but it now appeared that he might live.

She herself felt as weak as he looked. The last couple of days had been exhausting. Someone had had to stay awake to ensure that the Explorer did not become dehydrated, and to be ready in case he died. What sleep she had had was snatched and interrupted by his shouts and ravings; the fever made him call out and talk to people that they could not see, in his strange guttural language. At other times he thrashed loudly and had to be held down, a branch between his jaws to stop him biting off his own tongue. The Speaker said that he was arguing with the spirits, who had taken his body whilst his soul was out wandering, and who now refused to relinquish it. One sound in particular, recurred with some frequency. They took this to be the name of the spirit that was invading the man's body, and the Speaker said that this meant that he would be likely to recover. Since he knew the name of his tormentor he had at least some power over it, and would be more likely to drive it out of his body. She saw now that the Speaker had been right, for the man lay in a deep and natural sleep.

The Caposcripti had stripped him naked, so that they could apply cotton soaked in cool water from the river to his hot flesh, and treat the ulcers and bites that festered on his torso and limbs. The clothes that they removed had astonished them - they had never seen metal or such finely woven cloth. Since they did not want to cut through the clothes, they patiently worked at the fastenings, marvelling at the workmanship of his belt buckle. Although this was basic and un-ornamented, it was nevertheless a source of wonder to a people who made any tools that they needed with palm bark, leaves, bamboo, wood and stone.

He covered his body with many layers - beneath leg coverings they found an inner layer of soft, yellowed material, tightly encasing his legs. They wrinkled their noses at his smell; it seemed as though he had been wearing the same coverings for many weeks. His top half was wrapped in several layers - a continuation of the inner leg coverings covered his skin up to the neck and continued on his arms almost to the elbow. Above this he wore another, looser covering of lighter material and above that a heavier covering with many pouches, most of which were fastened. Although his face was nearly as dark as theirs, when they had removed all of his coverings they discovered the rest of his body to be of a dirty whiteness, blotched and discoloured with sores and with the marks of old scars. They were astonished to see that he grew hair on his body - his legs and arms were covered with long wiry hairs, and on his chest formed a thick curling mass over the breastbone, which was greying like the hair on his head. They guessed that he had not eaten properly for many weeks, for his body was emaciated and his ribs prominent.

The Caposcripti surmised a number of things about his culture that were to surprise the Explorer in the coming weeks. From the number and complexity of his coverings; the protective leather which covered his feet; the material in which he concealed his whole body, they conjectured that he had a terror of coming into contact with the natural world, and that his skin must be very delicate. For this reason they had laid him in a bed of extremely soft fibre, which they had removed from the inner bark of trees, and shredded so that it was as fine as raw silk. They surrounded his

bed with smoking hornet's nests – to drive away flies and other pests, and slathered a paste made from lemongrass and termites on his skin to repel mosquitoes and sand flies. These were the same measures that they took to protect the skin of new-borns and very young children, whose tender skins and fresh blood were more susceptible and attractive to parasites.

The Speaker discovered the Explorer's books – and sat and stared for many hours at the markings and small sketches that the Explorer had made. He was a fair draughtsman, and the Speaker marvelled at the washed ink drawings that seemed to capture the very essence of birds and plants that he himself was familiar with. The tattoos of the Caposcripti were in some senses representative of the world around them – but in a far more ritualised and formal way – each symbol corresponding to a system of classification of the multiple species with which they shared their land, and by which they identified themselves from birth to death. Since their concept of time was synchronous, a person might have many different names throughout their life, to describe life stages. However, these life stages were united by the self of the individual, which was continuous.

In one of the pages of the small books the Explorer had represented 'bird' – but for the Speaker even his faithful renderings of the plumage of one of the innumerable species of parrot provided only the barest hint as to which he was referring to. The Caposcriptan representation would have included the cries of the bird, the time of day or season at which it was observed, and, if it was heard to utter any human tongue, of what it spoke. It seemed to the Speaker that the Explorer must have a very limited awareness of the jungle – which confirmed Tarapoto's description of what he had observed in the days before his collapse.

The Speaker thought hard about all of these things, and spoke at length with Tarapoto and his mother – mulling over the old stories, and essaying trances to find out what the stranger's arrival meant. At length he came to the conclusion that since the Explorer was far from his people, and travelling with very few possessions, the books must contain (like their preserved heads) a copy of the



experiences of his ancestors. Maybe he was writing down both what he remembered as he walked, and what he observed of this new country for his descendants – both on his own skin, and on the bundled skins he carried with him. This much they could discern from memory and talk around the unconscious figure of the Explorer - but had no way of confirming the truth of their suppositions. They began to wait with increasing impatience for him to wake from his stupor, and to discuss whether they should use a stimulant to rouse him if he didn't come to of his own. In the end they decided to be patient – even the weakest of the stimulants that they had to use on him might be dangerous in his feeble state.

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Gradually, the Explorer began to be aware that he was conscious and lucid again. He felt as though he had come back to this state from a long distance, as if he had been away for a while. He lay there, with his eyes closed (not feeling any need to try opening them yet) as he gradually pieced together the fragments of his recent life – the weeks in the jungle, why he was there, what he had been looking for. The fevers. He began to wonder where he was, and to realise that he was not, as he should have been, suspended in his hammock, but laid flat on his back with his head propped on...something. His hands lay by his sides, and he felt incredibly weak and dizzy.

He guessed that he had been unconscious for some time - yet retained some memories of the lost days all mixed up, lacking form or sequence. Flashes of coppery faces, strangely ornamented and tattooed, alternated with a speech seemingly composed of clicks and vowels, singing and whistling, the smell of smoke and headgear made of feathers, strangers leaning over him – all these remembered or constructed? He wanted to open his eyes, to confirm at least some measure of reality, but although he could feel the warmth of the sun, and see its light red through his lids it felt as though they had been weighted with coins, and glued shut for good measure. He wriggled his fingers to reassure himself he

was not paralysed, for he felt strangely disconnected from his own body.

With an effort of will he cracked open his eyelids, and immediately winced at the brightness of the sun, slanting down through a crack in the foliage which seemed almost deliberately positioned above where he lay. He pieced together what information he could gather lying there. Odours, sounds, images – and then closed his eyes and concentrated on hearing and smell alone. The quality of light suggested it might be around noon; he could hear running water – somewhere near, a stream – and the scent of smoke? Fire? People.

Of course. Someone had removed him from his hammock. Someone had tended to him whilst he lay ill. Someone who could have killed him while he was helpless. If that had been their intention – unless of course there was a reason they needed him alive. Probably best not to assume that his hosts were acting from purely altruistic motives for the moment. And he felt too weak to stand, let alone try to make some kind of escape. Then too there was another thing, which he was just realising with his returning awareness- he was almost completely naked and he needed to urinate. Who had been taking care of that whilst he was unconscious?

As if on cue he heard steps approaching. He opened his eyes to a crack, just enough to see, but not enough to make it appear that he was awake. The steps came closer, and he got his first look at a member of the tribe that he had come to find.

He could not doubt that it was they, and that they had been the ones who had brought him here and nursed him back to health. The man who was bending over him was completely bald, and his scalp and face were covered in tattoos. He was small and wiry, with a huge round belly that jutted proudly over the brief piece of cloth that was wrapped around his hips, and tied around with bark. His feet were splayed, short and wide with toes spatulate from a lifetime of climbing and walking in the jungle. His skin was coppery, where it was not covered with tattoos, and his eyes, set in deep folds of skin, were the eyes of a jaguar, tawny and piercing.

The Explorer realised that he was looking straight into these eyes, and that his own must have widened in astonishment at the sight of the man, who could no longer be under any illusion that he was still unconscious, and who was staring at him piercingly. They remained like that for a few moments, before the Explorer began to feel uncomfortable with his gaze, and turned his head away.

The effort made his head swim, and he blacked out again for a few moments. When he came to the Speaker was bending over a pot of some substance, with his back to him. The Explorer decided to try out his voice. He did not know the word for water (he would later learn that there were many, depending on its how drinkable it was), or how to address this person, so he reverted to English "Water. Please."

The words rasped out, cutting his vocal cords. His throat felt swollen and dry, his lips cracked. The man turned around questioningly – the Explorer worked his mouth a little and tried again, running his tongue round his cracked lips to convey his thirst.

Perhaps it was this that alerted the Speaker to his need, for he suddenly seemed to understand, and poured a bowl of water from a large clay gourd, of a slightly different type to those that the Explorer had seen other people of the region use. His head was too fuzzy just now to connect this with other things he vaguely noticed. It required all his effort and concentration not to choke on the water that the Speaker carefully dribbled onto his parched lips. He fell asleep again almost immediately, feeling strangely reassured by the candid glance of the man's strange eyes, which seemed to hover there in front of him even though his own were closed.

## CHAPTER 14

Gerard and the Photographer took a minicab to the Photographer's apartment. In the cab the Photographer noticed how Gerard's cheap sweatshirt clung to his back, outlining thin shoulder blades; the skinny hips encased in grimy low-slung jeans, with a strip of greyish skin showing. He felt a great wave of disgust washed over him, for this man who seemed to care nothing for his life, living on London like a parasite clinging to the back of an elephant. He was bright-eyed and cocky, and talked continually, apparently blissfully unconcerned as to whether the Photographer was listening or not. After a while the Photographer tuned out both his words and the heavy sweetish odour, which made him suspect that he had not bathed in some time. He wondered if the cab driver had noticed the mismatched nature of his passengers – but then reflected that London cabbies are trained to ignore pretty much everything, and anyway he'd his hands full trying to negotiate the heavy traffic around Westminster and Parliament Square.

Gerard was quite aware that the Photographer's guard was down. And also sure, by this point, that the man had asked him back for sex. It did not for one moment occur to him that he actually wanted to photograph him, but he was happy to go along with his fictions. They dovetailed rather nicely with some plans of his own. Whoever the guy was, he didn't seem strapped for cash. Who knew what equipment he might have stashed away in his house? Gerard knew that if he could get a few quid together, he could vanish beyond this man's ability – or that of the police – to track him down. All of this, however, rested on his act now. He strove to appear innocent and stupid, and tugged the Photographer's sleeve "I love that wheel man, it's poetry"

Gerard's touch broke into the Photographer's reverie, and instinctively he flinched. Masking his irritation with difficulty, he looked across at Gerard, then followed his pointing finger with his eyes "What's that?"

"The wheel – you know, the London Eye, whatever it's called. It's fucking class: you been on it?"

"No, I'm afraid I haven't had the pleasure."

"Me neither. Bet it's fucking cool though. I mean, you're up there for 45 minutes, hundreds of feet above London – suspended like a fucking fly in a web. I bet it's amazing. I bet the views are fucking awesome. When it's not raining, of course. Fat chance of that in London though. Call this a fucking summer?"

"Hmm" – The Photographer not really listening, let Gerard rattle on. He didn't think that too many people would miss this one. His kind dropped out of the scene all the time, sucked in by the spider's web of London, a quick trip they never returned from. So much potential wasted by the cruel city, a grinding wheel that never stopped turning. The Photographer saw symbolism in this, as with the other elements of the day, and the meeting, and the journey back to the flat; they would all be recorded and correlated against the picture he was beginning to build up of Gerard, and his place in the collection.

"I mean – you can fit 20 into one of those cars. 20 people flying around up there. You could have a party, or a wedding, for fuck's sake – you could have a murder up there. I bet it's pretty cool at night. You could write a book about that: Murder on the London Eye. Doesn't it make you want to take pictures of it?"

Gerard was spaced, talking fast and frenetic, eyes fixed on the wheel as they crossed the bridge and headed for Waterloo. The Photographer felt a familiar twinge of relief as they left north London behind, and remembered that he was supposed to be putting Gerard at his ease.

"No. I don't do much of that kind of work anymore. I've been working on a number of ...portraits. Why I want to use you. People's heads tell you a lot about them, if you know how to read the lines. The whole of human existence, encoded there – just waiting for someone with the right eye to bring it out."

"You got one of those china heads with all the markings on, like they have down in Camden market. What's that they call them?"

"Phrenology models – developed by Franz Joseph Galle, end of the eighteenth century – but that's a much abused approach – crude science at best. I don't believe that you can tell people's

personality as easily as that – although it's been convenient for some to lend it credence."

Gerard shrugged at the Photographer's use of the word 'credence' – it meant little to him.

" - So how come you know about that shit man – you been reading up on it?"

"Phrenology interested me...for a while. You might say it had a bearing on my work. Systems, numbers. It survives even now. Did you ever assume that someone was weak willed because they had a small chin, or intelligent because they had a high forehead? And how often were you right?"

"Yeah – I get what you're saying. Still sounds pretty dodgy to me though – like all that stuff and that they're doing at the moment; cloning sheep and that? I saw something about that on the telly awhile back – people will be able to design their children, like kitchens. It seems like everyone will be the same – I mean you're hardly going to have a kid that you know will end up being a murderer or a moron are you? So: what you're saying is you think you can work out everything about someone, just from looking at their head?

"You'd be surprised Gerard. You'd be very surprised."

The two of them sat silently in the back of the black cab. Gerard felt canny to the Photographer – a harmless eccentric, easy touch. He was pretty sure he could handle him. The Photographer ignored him for the moment, mulling over the next stage of the plan. He had managed to persuade Gerard to come back to his apartment for a shoot, and to continue their interview there. That he had achieved this astonished the Photographer – but Gerard's initial suspicion had transformed into an ingratiating friendliness, a rather pathetic eagerness to please, after the sandwiches and coffees, a few beers in a pub (the photographer sipping at Virgin Mary's), and a few carefully phrased sympathetic questions.

How strange – to be that naïve? Or trusting? Or was it a simple arrogance that nothing could happen to him? Of course, he could

be planning to rob him once they got home – attack him in his own apartment, and then nick any money or valuables that he could lay his hands on. As if reading his thoughts, Gerard piped up again

“- So, what’s your gaff like then?”

“We’ll be there in a few moments.”

“Bet you’ve got loads of stuff in there. Loads of cameras and lot’s of your pictures like? Bet you take pictures there all the time. Do you have one of those rooms, all lit up red with the photo’s hanging off washing lines?”

“You’re talking about a darkroom?”

“Yeah. Man, I reckon that’s half of it. I mean anyone can take a photo – but the skill’s in the developing, all the chemicals and that.”

“There’s an element of the chemist in what I do. You have to get the balance just right, or you’ll ruin the picture. So long as you stick to the formula, you’re pretty much guaranteed the right results though.”

“Scuse me gov’nor – what end of the street did you want?” The cabbie slotted back the window and slowed the cab at the end of the Photographer’s road.

“Here’s just fine, thanks” The Photographer gave the cabbie a note and jumped out of the cab. Gerard got out too, and stood looking expectantly at the Photographer from the kerb. Without comment, the Photographer strode off down and across the street, stopping, and turning into a mansion block half way down. Gerard hurried after him, and reached the entrance just after the tall spare man stepped inside, door swinging in his wake. Gerard caught the handle and went in after the Photographer.

Inside, a dingy hall greeted them – an old-fashioned wrought iron lift making the dark space seem cramped. The Photographer ignored the lift and inserted a key into the lock of one of the ground floor apartments. Opening the door he stood aside and, somewhat ironically motioned Gerard inside.

Gerard stepped through the door into a small hall space dominated by a huge rubber plant, dark and lit only by a heavily shaded bulb.

The Photographer reached behind him to pull across a heavy velvet curtain, which completely concealed the door, and motioned Gerard through to the rest of the flat, following him inside.

"My study's just here. I'll be through in a minute, Gerard, make yourself comfortable."

"Sure man," Gerard replied, and went through into the room.

The Photographer's study was quite large with long windows from floor to ceiling, set at regular intervals in the thick walls. It would have been bright and airy, but heavy curtains cut off outside light. The only light in the room was artificial - deep shadows cast by angle-poise lights, walls covered with bookshelves, framed and unframed photographs and old lithographs hanging in the spaces between them.

Only a few pieces of furniture relieved the severity. The straight-backed black mahogany chairs, an ebony table, and a spare, unornamented desk gave the room an ascetic feel, heightened by a floor of highly polished inky boards with no rugs to relieve its starkness. The general effect would have been pure monochrome if it weren't for the dusty houseplants that grew everywhere, cramped and twisted even with the relatively high ceiling - their huge leaves casting strange shadows on the walls. The lack of a central light and the use of many small sources of illumination gave everything in the room multiple shadows, frozen fingers clawing the corners.

Gerard settled on the edge of a chair, and scanned the objects and furniture around him. The unfamiliar environment made him feel flat, distinctly apprehensive; his plans in the car unrealistic and absurd. The flat was completely silent, and he wondered what had become of the Photographer, and whether there was anything worth nicking in the room. He couldn't see anything particularly valuable and portable from where he was sitting - he'd probably need to turn the place over to find anything worthwhile.

"Coffee Gerard? Two sugars is it?"



The Photographer's voice made Gerard jump guiltily – it sounded as though he was right behind him. He decided to sit tight for the moment and see how the situation panned out. "Yeah mate, cheers n' all"

In the kitchen the Photographer worked with deft and practised skill. He had already reckoned Gerard for about ten stones, and prepared a dose that should lay him out for a good few hours – far longer than he needed, but always better to be on the safe side. In the meantime he would allay Gerard's suspicions by setting up the interview, the shoot – pandering to his vanity. It always amazed the Photographer what power the camera gave him; they would do anything, subject themselves to any indignity, he sometimes thought, for the sake of the picture, the shot.

Subtly the Photographer assumed another of his many personas, the trick hypnotist, his power total as his victims willingly give up responsibility to him, control to him. In this frame of mind he strode back into the study and handed Gerard his coffee with a flourish, laying a blank notebook and a pen on the table as if in readiness for an interview.

"Sit there for a minute, Gerard, while I set up the equipment. I'll probably want you to move then so that I can shoot you."

"Ha Ha – that's funny – it's a whole different language this photography lark, isn't it? So how long you been doing that then? What's that you're setting up now?"

The Photographer didn't reply immediately, and Gerard watched as he set up tripod, camera, fiddled with a light, positioned a chair just so. In the back of his mind was the thought that now was the time, now was his chance to clock the guy and clear out of here with his stuff. But his curiosity was stronger: he wanted to see how the kit worked first. Then he could take that too, and fence it a little more knowledgeably. He had this situation. He was master of it. Certainly he could afford to wait a little?

The Photographer appeared to have finished setting up the equipment. He made a final adjustment, straightened up and looked towards Gerard

"All ready now. If you'd like to come over and sit in this chair, we can begin. I'll probably be moving around, taking shots and making notes – just talk to the air in front of you, that should do."

Gerard got up to move to the chair he had indicated. He noticed, as he stood, that he felt a little dizzy. Probably just the after effects of the E. He threw his shoulders back and walked across the room. A screen had been placed behind the chair that he was to occupy. No details to identify the room the pictures had been taken in. Gerard was suddenly reminded of having his picture taken for the identity parade.

"Going to give me a number to hold then too are you?" He motioned to the screen with a grin to indicate that he was joking. The Photographer looked puzzled for a minute, and then replied slightly more sharply than intended.

"Don't be foolish – the screen's to cut down the glare from the lights, so I can get good clean pictures of you. Just relax – I'm a professional remember."

This last an attempt at humour – He'd had a shock there, the reference to the number as if the boy knew that he'd be part of a sequence. But of course, he was just referring to the police station, who knows how many times he's probably been there. Not too much longer now – distract him so he doesn't feel the effects too soon.

"Right, we're ready to begin. I'll just take a few preliminary shots, to get the range. Just relax, look normal. That's it. Ok, now turn your head a little to the side. Tell me Gerard, what are your ambitions? You're obviously not going to be on the streets all your life, clever chap like you?"

"I don't know. I used to think I wanted to be a pilot – before I found out about the navy, basic training, all that. I couldn't take it – bastards shouting at you all day long. So I quit" Gerard shook

his head as if trying to clear it "I quit, and you pretty much" he was tailing off, fading visibly now, lids dropping with the effort of keeping his eyes open "know" he lost the battle "the rest." His head dropped to his chest, and he slumped a little to the side.

The Photographer emerged from behind his camera and stood looking at the young man, head cocked a little to the side. When he showed no more signs of movement the Photographer walked up to his chair and laid his hand on his loosely clasped fingers. There was no reaction. He lifted one of Gerard's eyes, checked out the slack iris. There was no doubt about it. He was out cold.

**CHAPTER 15**

Where is it going a good question and one that she was only just after asking herself as she walked down the road. Just where indeed is it all going, Nina - and are you up there at the front, or only just after catching the tail end of it. Life's running away and one of these days you'll not be holding the reins girl: that's for sure. Coming down off a trip and she's feeling blue, blue and mottled, thoughts scattered and useless.

She is tall and pale from a decade under London's gunmetal sky, with red hair and faded freckles. A slightly too-sharp nose points upwards and (at this moment in time) her mouth points downwards. Her eyes are shadowed; one keeping an eye on the pavement while the other looks inside. She might be enchanting but she tends to the tawdry. Her clothes are garish.

Her one firmly held belief is in chaos. In the beginning was the word? Bullshit. So what was before the beginning? What was outside the universe? What was inside the apple? Chaos. There is no truth. There is no law. There is no reason. We are not even a humorous error: geometry and nature are only by some strange synchronicity connected. What is left, then, when the creed of irrationality rules? Language only hides the fact that there is no truth.

What makes her distrust truth, all truth, to such a degree? Who held her back with custom, with prejudice and with guilt? Who still daily smothers her with silent grief?

People are far more complex than they appear. These are not characters. The only names that have been changed are to protect the guilty.

There are no innocents.

\* \* \*

Her room is small, untidy, littered with books, with bright things, things she's found, and things she'll find a use for sometime. A mistress of disguise, her collection of wigs, false eyelashes, hats and glasses allows her to express her protean personality and exercise her obsessions; self is after all, only a construct. Books are visible scattered amongst underwear, feather boas, glossy magazines and shoes. Energy without expression, painful vision of a world in shades of grey, lost to the simple dichotomy of black and white, opposite and equal, and one in the middle makes Trinity, Church, Our Father, Hail Mary - and Christ I still know all the words after all these years; cold knees and the chill hand of the devil down the back of her neck.

She drags her past behind her like a trawl net.

Her age? Indeterminately twenties. Stance? Defensive. Voice? Mellifluous. Object of desire? Freedom. For desire.

What do we mean by freedom? All of these threads will at some point conjoin. She will discover, and they will realise, and he will decipher, and yet another will record freedom, under 3, under seven, or infinite criteria. At which point there will be a denouement and it won't matter any more. Sure someone will care, but you and I won't know about it, and sure what's the point when I'm only young and I've no desire for a church wedding or knitting lessons. Because after all St Peter's retired, and the hinges rusted off the pearly gates, and God gave up, and man got stubborn: and now here we are faced with this crap. They always say you can spot a convent girl a mile away. Especially the ones with the veils and black habits.

She has no piercing in her body: her earlobes are unblemished, her tongue in one piece, her nipples and navel framed only with fine hairs. She has no scars, no tattoos; none of life's signifiers. She doesn't dye her hair. In this respect she is entirely as nature intended her and thus eminently suited for this narrative. For someone as precise and devoted to rules as the Photographer she is ideal. Her skin is variegated: he could read volumes from her

wrists, the flesh on her cheekbones. She is an obsession waiting to happen.

She doesn't have a job in any recognised sense. She gets by on the dole, and on a series of get-rich-quick-earn-£££££'s-at-home schemes that haven't yet made her fortune but consume enough hours to stop her feeling guilty for doing nothing constructive with her time – and keep the DSS off her back. When she's not scratching a living from London's unwelcoming streets she spends her time in libraries, watching the other readers: ostensibly there to borrow books, but perhaps like herself lost in contemplation of the library's patrons, constructing imaginary lives and fantasies around them. The British Library is best. She loves the smell of books long untouched, the dark corridors of shelves and the dim recesses where gems of intellect rest. She has her regulars there, each tenuous connection: students, writers, harmless crackpots engaged in researching their genealogy and serious academics with their air of abstracted genius, gestating theories. Glances across the wide tables, eyes not quite meeting, relationships formed but not consummated.

The reader's ticket she has had since her college days gives her access to the stacks. Down here direction is confused by the fact that the shelves are on casters and can move in any direction, creating a maze of shifting passages where bearings are soon lost in the dim light. You see few people, but they are often the most interesting; each struggling with their own private obsessions. Practice has helped her to develop techniques of observation so subtle that her victims have no idea that they are under surveillance, and she is able to reconstruct their research with astonishing accuracy – checking the notes that they make for themselves, and then carelessly leave on tables, the queries made of the vast catalogues, monitors detailing the location of volumes buried deep in the library's bowels; vicarious intellectual. Is she looking for truth amongst those millions of words, a copy of every book mapped out like a blueprint of humanity's imagination? If so, she hasn't found it. Yet.

She lives near Elephant and Castle in a council block that's been condemned. In this sense she's technically homeless, but the block has been squatted for long enough that it's inhabitants feel reasonably secure. The corridors have been trashed beyond all recognition, graffiti scrawled in unreadable palimpsest on the filthy walls. The floors are a mess of rubbish, broken furniture, syringes, old newspapers and other, unrecognisable, detritus. She tries not to examine it too closely, and watches where she puts her feet.

Some of the flats have electricity and water – the utilities companies don't care if the tenants are legal or not so long as someone is happy to feed coins to the meter. Five or six people share the one she lives in. She doesn't trust any of them, and padlocks her door when she is at home, and even more securely when she is not.

She has no friends, but innumerable acquaintances. She's known, on the scene, always at the edge of parties, always caning it. She has her contacts with the e-dealers, speed freaks, acid punters. Base, coke, 2CB, pure MDMA when she can get her hands on it – which isn't hard, at the right parties. The wasted addicts lying in the corners in the hallways– eyes glazed and cunning, sizing her up for her cash, looking through her at the next fix, are enough to dissuade her from indulging in anything harder. They make her think of a certain genre of film, the 'gritty hardness' of the 90's, smug revelations of society's decay, drug addiction, violence, crime. – But the comparison is meaningless in the face of their reality. The books she had read, films she had seen always glamorised the addict to some extent. But there was nothing seductive about these wrecks. So she watched her step, was careful and kept her eyes shuttered.

She comes from everywhere and nowhere: one of London's dispossessed, her accent has mellowed and been adulterated in the city of Babel until she speaks in a flat London drawl, with just a tinge on the R's to suggest her origin. The honey pot of the city has drawn her in, as with other character in this story – and now holds her fast in a web of seeming coincidence, where all time's strands conjoin and conspire inexorably to draw her into the centre.

If you asked her where she comes from she would probably name some anonymous small town in middle England – but it's not home to her anymore. Going back there she's a stranger. She remembers a couple of bars, but they're different. She's unlikely to meet anyone she once knew on the street – and if she does, it only confirms her lack of contact. They will have nothing in common, and will soon drift on, having established their separateness. Her life is a list of outdated contact numbers.



**CHAPTER 16**

The next time the Explorer awoke he felt much stronger, and the Speaker helped him to sit up, and supported him whilst he gave him some water and fed him a thin but tasty gruel. Once he judged he'd given the Explorer as much as his shrunken stomach would hold the Speaker stood back, leaving Tarapoto to support the man.

They stared at each other across a gulf of language – both full of questions, but knowing that any attempt at communication would likely be met by a frustrating inability to understand. The Speaker could pick up some mental images from the Explorer's mind, as he stared into his eyes – a curiosity as strong as his own, and a sense of relief, of trust. He detected no aggression or anger there, just an insatiable desire to learn.

Looking around the Explorer could see no signs of habitation, except for the obviously temporary low lean-to that looked as though it had been built solely to shelter the few possessions that they had. Who were these three that had found him? Could they be all that remained of their tribe, or perhaps were living apart from the rest? Yet it didn't seem as though they alone could have carried him here from the place where he'd been camping when he was struck down by the fever (not that the Explorer would have been able to say which direction they had brought him from). The questions cued up, unasked, and exhausted him – he could not ever remember ever having felt this tired and wasted, and realised how close to death he must have come.

The Explorer closed his eyes, fighting the waves of lassitude that came over him. So much time lost – and who knows how much remaining? One thing was more important than any other. One thing was required to set his mind at rest, before he sank again into the comforting realms of sleep, the embrace of dreams. He must make sure that his books, too, had survived.

He opened his eyes, blazing now with the fire of his determination, and began to mime opening a book, following the sentences with his finger, writing words, saying "my books, mis libros, donde estas?" But of course, they shared no common language. The Caposcripti had not been discovered, and decimated by the Spanish, for they had nothing they wanted. They had their own language, unchanged for who knows how many millennia? The Explorer reckoned, however, without the Speaker's perspicacity. He had realised almost instantly what it was that the strange man was gesturing for, and returned quickly to his hut, where he had kept the books safe, along with the rest of the Explorer's belongings.

The Speaker returned in a few minutes, minutes that seemed like hours to the Explorer, who could only wonder where he'd gone. Wordlessly he handed the oilcloth-bound package to him, and stepped back with a strange expression in his eyes as the Explorer feverishly undid the bindings, and leafed through the pages of his notebooks as if to reacquaint himself with a world he had temporarily lost. He retied the bindings slowly, and folded his hands gently over the parcel he had made. He closed his eyes, and Tarapoto gently laid him back down. His chest felt as though a fist had unclenched, with the knowledge that he had not lost all that he had worked for, that he had found the people that he had come looking for, and that at least that part of the dream was fulfilled. The rest would have to wait for tomorrow, whilst he regained the strength that the jungle, in its insatiable hunger, had robbed from him. The Explorer relaxed into the embrace of the soft matting they had laid him on and fell into a deep sleep.

\*       \*       \*

The relationship began again as unfinished words; rough shibbolim passed between the sterile medium of the microphone, trapped behind the padded walls, the soundproofed door. Between them they explored new languages – the vocabulary of sustenance, of abstinence, of delirium. The Photographer never counts the conversations he had with them before they enter the room: these were merely the words of one of his personas, assumed for the

sole purpose of seducing the subject, of gaining their trust for the few short hours it took to make them his forever.

He has amassed a considerable knowledge, by now, of the drugs that are still used in certain areas of the Amazon basin. Through patient sifting through the descriptions of certain substances used by the Caposcripti and related in the old man's notebooks, and through questioning a network of Colombians and Peruvians, with whom he has cultivated a relationship, he has obtained the necessary substances and learnt how to prepare them. In London you can find anything if you look long enough.

By far the most interesting of these drugs, for him, was Iahuaska. He was sure that this was the substance, by a different name, that the Caposcripti had used to escape the lie of this reality and discover the true language, the actual names of things and of themselves. He had had to travel to Brighton to find a Chaman who would perform the Iahuaska ceremony for him, but it had opened the door to a world he had not known existed. Before that his eyes had only seen the surfaces, frozen forever images and moments, juxtapositions and visual statements in the lens of his camera, on glossy, on matt, on silvered paper; on the reels and reels of celluloid that still didn't tell the full story.

And then he had had that strange journey, a journey into himself where he left his body and opened his mind to terrifying visions of a place he thought he would not return from. Perhaps sensing the canker in his soul the Chaman had sung him a dark song, tantalising glints of some strange language, a music that resonated in his soul with a pattern and a meaning that he could not quite grasp, but which still hooked him. The Chaman had purged him of everything that was in him, the drug causing the Photographer to retch and gasp and vomit until it seemed that his very stomach would be expelled through his unwilling oesophagus. He felt emptied, hollowed, and gradually he didn't feel anything at all beyond the thoughts that seemed to follow each other beyond his control, logical and inevitable as a string of pearls, through the voided chambers of his mind. And as each memory, each realisation clinked into place in the magic lantern of his awareness,

he felt a click of resolution, and they disappeared, as if the events and things that they described had been once again unmade.

He was afraid to go back down that route again – accepting that maybe in the end the sacrifice of himself might be required to learn the original language: but not yet ready to give up ego. But others could also discover the glimpse that he had been given of the sacred language. He took them so much farther than he dared go himself, and at the last stole from them what they had found in that other world.

He thought of these people less as victims than avatars – finding the secrets for him, lending their voices to the babble that he would then decode, and absorb through the ceremony of shrinking their heads. Metempsychosis. All that they were would become part of him; a faceless Jesus surrounded by light.

The Photographer couldn't describe the way in which he thought at these times: it was as if he had discovered a different mode of expression – a language that manifested meaning, somehow revealing the history of everything – encoded at the moment through multiple mediums. He hungered for the language that creates merely through description. Writing, photography, sound recording: at the end of the day they were all just different mediums for information, which can exist in any form. The message there somewhere, fragmented through many media. This is what they had all been looking for, the Alchemists, the templars, whether searching for the grail or the philosopher's stone. But they had all been wrong. It was not a thing, nothing concrete. The thing that gave power was language, was an idea. And it would be his.

**CHAPTER 17**

That morning the Explorer was shaken awake some time before dawn. In the dark he could just make out the shape of the Speaker, outlined against the fading stars. He shook off the sleep, and the remnants of a confusing dream of home, and pulled himself painfully to his feet.

The Speaker waited somewhat impatiently for him to put on his boots and hat, and then motioned for the Explorer to follow him, moving silently and gracefully on bare feet down one of the more heavily used paths that led to a plantation of manioc. In the near dark the Explorer stumbled after, tripping over roots and wondering what the purpose of the journey could be.

They reached the field of manioc in a few minutes, and the path ended in a confusing network of runs through the plants. The Speaker cut straight through with the Explorer following as close behind as he could manage in the near dark, cutting past the bole of a huge tree, climbing over its massive draping roots, and heading up a steep muddy slope onto higher ground. The Speaker seemed to glide over all these different surfaces, whilst the Explorer struggled behind, beating plants out of his way, and grasping the long vines that hung everywhere for balance. It was getting light very quickly now, in the way that it had here, and the Speaker gradually increased his pace. The Explorer battled his own weakness and followed as best he could, for he didn't dare lose sight of him.

Suddenly the Speaker darted off the path that they had been following, and catching up with him the Explorer saw that he was pointing at a giant woody liana vine with shiny, dark green leaves, long smooth ovals with pointed ends. He ripped off part of one of the leaves, crumpled it in his hand, and thrust it under the Explorer's nose. The leaf smelt strongly herbal, It was slightly reminiscent of bay, but with something darker and more bitter underlying it. The Speaker crouched down on his haunches and began to dig at the ground beneath it with a sharply pointed stick

he had stuck through his waistband. Once he'd uncovered the roots he sawed some off with a large catfish spine, and slipped them into his bag, carefully wiping off the dirt that clung to them. Straightening up again, he looked at the light coming through the trees, and continued back along the direction they had been following with great rapidity. It was only by sticking close to the Speaker's heels, placing his feet in the same spots, that the Explorer was able to discern a path at all. He certainly would not have sworn after they had been walking for half an hour or so that he could have found his way back to the camp very easily on his own. As always he had his instruments on him, but they were of little use when paths were rarely straight, and direction changed all the time. The Jungle was so dense that you could pass within ten feet of a village and not even know it was there, unless the sky was clear enough to see thin lines of smoke from their fires – if you were fortunate enough to find a rare break in the canopy. The Explorer appreciated afresh how close he had come to not finding the tribe at all.

The Speaker continued gathering various leaves, roots and seeds from the plants, picking up banana leaves and balsa wood bark as he went and making neat parcels of them which he tied to his waistband or slipped into his bag. Some he handed to the Explorer to smell or taste, indicating by gestures and words what they were used for; the Explorer thought he could make out some of the explanations, but others mystified him completely. One plant with lethal looking red and black berries went into the same pouch as the liana roots that the Speaker had found earlier, but the Explorer couldn't make a connection between them. He realised that the Speaker was trying to teach him something important, and felt a great frustration at his inability to grasp the Caposcripti language. One word the Speaker kept repeating was 'so'-om-wai-yajé' - which the Explorer decided to assume for the time being meant medicine.

At length the Explorer realised that they were nearly back at the camp, as the route they were following became more recognisably a path, with logs laid over streams and muddy patches of land, and a well used appearance. He judged it to be about mid

morning, from the heat and the sun, which although lighting the jungle in patches, was not yet directly overhead. The Speaker continued, his pace unvarying, until they reached his hut.

Once there the Explorer sank gratefully onto a log at the front of the hut that served as a chair. He was still weak from his illness, and the gruelling walk had left him drained and sweating. The Speaker did not appear to be much affected by his exertions, and whistled one of the children over, giving him quick instructions. In the meantime he began to build up the fire inside his hut, and to grind and shred the leaves and seeds and other ingredients he had gathered in the jungle, muttering in a low, almost singing tone. He mixed some of these with a dried and twisted root that he had ground to a fine powder in a coconut shell, using a stick with a rounded bole at the end as a mortar.

By this time several children had returned with vessels containing water from the river. The Speaker took one of these and poured a few drops into the coconut shell, singing a wordless song as he did so, until he had reduced the mixture into a thick dark red paste, with an acrid, leafy, earthy smell.

He scraped the lot into a pot he had hung over the fire, and poured the rest of the water over it, stirring until it had dissolved completely in the water. Once he was satisfied he began to shake a bunch of leaves tied together (which the Explorer had assumed to be one of the ingredients) so that they rustled like rain, and to whistle and sing gently over the pot. He remained like this, stirring and adding water for the rest of the day. The mixture was reduced, diluted, reduced and diluted until the Explorer estimated that the Speaker had evaporated pints of water from it.

When, the Speaker finally lifted the pot off the fire, and set it aside to cool the brew was smooth and thick, and the dark red of arterial blood, with the consistency of cream. The Explorer was very hungry by this point, as he hadn't eaten since the previous day, but the Speaker had not broken his own fast, and only offered the Explorer a little water to drink. When the Explorer got up to leave, the Speaker motioned that he should stay where he was, and

pointed towards the pot cooling beside the now banked fire. He sat silently, and meditatively, banking his jaguar eyes beneath heavy lids, knees and feet forming a triangle, on the upturned side of which his folded arms rested. He seemed a figure carved in amber, tattoos etching complicated figures which made the features upon which they were carved appear as immobile as stone, and as inscrutable as a statue.

It was well past dark, and the Explorer had dropped into a light sleep, when the Speaker tapped him on the shoulder. He held a lighted taper in his hand, which had been dipped in fat, and the Explorer could just make out two sitting mats facing each other on a flat patch of dirt in the middle of the clearing. Two bowls, a pile of rolled dried leaves that looked like small cigars, and the bundle of leaves that the Speaker had been shaking over the brew were laid out between them. The smaller of the two bowls held the distillation, now reduced to about a pint of thick liquid, and the larger was empty.

The Speaker motioned to the Explorer to sit on one of the mats, and lit one of the cigars with his taper. Once he was satisfied that it was alight, he blew out the taper sharply, leaving them in darkness, and began to circle the area around the mats, stopping at a number of points to blow sharp blasts of smoke and shake his bundle of leaves. When the circle was complete, he pointed to the sky, and to the jungle forming a circumference of dark verdure to their clearing, and made a gesture of warding with his out-turned palms, as if to say nothing from outside can enter here. He picked up the large pot, which was empty, and held it up to his mouth, miming a person being sick, and pointing to the Explorer, and grinned quickly. The Explorer felt a moment of doubt, realising that he would be required to drink the noxious brew which the Speaker had spent that day preparing, but he had sampled many strange drugs during his travels: Chinese opium, Mexican peyote, the Bhang Lassi of Northern India. Perhaps the effects of this distillation could not be so very different. The Speaker smoked quietly for a few minutes, whilst the Explorer listened to the sounds of the jungle around them, the tree frogs, cicadas and birds all



calling in counterpoint to one another, and wondered what would happen next.

The Speaker produced a drinking cup and poured some of the mixture in it. He blew smoke over the surface of the liquid with a sharp whistling sound, before handing the cup to the Explorer to drink, and throwing back his head as if to mime finishing the draft. The Explorer drained it in a few swallows, and only then had time to reflect how bitter the taste was. The Speaker nodded approvingly, and poured a cup for himself. He then rubbed lemongrass into his temples, chest and neck, filling the air with its sharp citrus smell, and began to shake the bundle of leaves so that it made a sound like rain, and to whistle a haunting melody.

The Explorer realised that it had started to rain heavily; flashes of lightning lit everything for a moment, and were followed by huge peals of thunder, that made the ground vibrate. Each time the lightning struck he was temporarily blinded, and the darkness surrounding them seemed even more impenetrable afterwards. Seeing this, the Speaker reached out and closed his eyes with a gentle hand. The Explorer felt his head and his limbs grow heavy, and his heart slow, along with his breathing. He could still hear the jungle sounds, and the Speaker's voice, but they were joined by a buzzing like a swarm of bees in his left ear. The Speaker was singing in a high voice, with perfect control of pitch and timbre, so that it rose and fell like a bird swooping. The Explorer didn't understand the words he was singing, if they were words at all, but he began to see pictures behind his closed lids.

At first the images were just flashbacks to the things that he had seen over the past few weeks, his mind retracing the journey until he was back at the beginning of his trip. But as each scene flashed through his mind's eye it felt as though he was emptying his memory, so that they no longer felt real, he no longer felt real, and the world that he thought he remembered just a convenient fiction, a dream he was awaking from.

He found himself standing on a dark riverbank with no sensation of body. He felt the presence of spirits around him, and could not

explain how he knew that they were the spirits of jaguar, of caiman, of the Caposcripti who had passed forever into this world, and those who were visiting it. He perceived these beings as light; gaseous shadows against the black river. He was aware of sounds, a language comprehended, but whose meaning escaped him and which reminded him of the liquid tongue of the Caposcripti.

He realised that the river before him was a portal to a different world, or a different aspect of the world that he normally inhabited and felt a compulsion to cross the water, the voices felt but not heard encouraging him on. The need warred with his growing dread, the fear of what was on the other side of the bank. Hades, the underworld and the dark boatman of the Styx. He suspected that it was a crossing he might not return from. All of a sudden the fear filled him and became a huge nausea. He was aware of the Speaker shoving the bowl into his hands as he retched and retched while tears streamed from his eyes and mixed with the sweat from his brow.

As he vomited he felt that all of the fears and prejudices, mistakes and sins that were on his soul were being expelled along with the bile from his stomach. His throat became a conduit for the darkness in his spirit, and he felt lighter and lighter, as if he was no longer a weight on the mat he was kneeling on. The vomiting was stopping now, with only the occasional spasm sending him grasping for the bowl. The Speaker was making blowing sharply through his teeth, and the Explorer realised that he couldn't hear the buzzing of bees in his left ear any more. He felt feeling returning to his arms and legs, although he still felt dazed and unreal. The effects of the drug were beginning to wear off, and with it the river and the things he had seen and heard, which became misty, like memories of having once known something.

That was the first night. The Speaker looked at him curiously and motioned to him to go to sleep. The Explorer went to his hammock, and lay down, with his mind buzzing and alert – but five minutes later he was in a deep slumber.

He didn't wake up until the next afternoon, realising that he had slept the morning and half the day away, and that there were only a couple of hours until dark. The sun was low in the sky, and his sleeping place was in deep shadow. He had a raging thirst and it felt as though his bowels had turned to water. He left the settlement at a crouching run to find somewhere to empty them.

Returning he found the Speaker standing by his hammock. Wordlessly he handed him a bowl full of Masato, and the Explorer was so thirsty he drained it all. The Explorer patted his stomach and put imaginary food into his mouth to indicate that he was hungry, but the Speaker just shook his head, and gestured for the Explorer to follow him. They returned to the hut where the Speaker made the Explorer sit down and seated himself opposite.

They remained like this until dark. The Explorer shifting from time to time to relieve the pain of his cramped limbs, the Speaker completely immobile. As the sun was going down the Speaker picked up a bowl from beside him that the Explorer had not noticed previously. He poured some of its contents into a smaller bowl and handed it to him.

The Explorer realised that it contained more of the dark red liquid that the Speaker had given him the night before, and felt a moment of disquiet. He was not sure he wanted to be faced again with the black river of his vision. But the Speaker was insistent, and so the Explorer drank again, and listened as the Speaker began to sing, and waited as his body was taken over by the sensations that he remembered from the previous night.

But this time it was different. The Speaker changed the tone of his singing; he began to sing sharp dissonant staccato notes, rattling the leaves furiously and dancing around the Explorer plucking him with his hands. The buzzing noise in his ear returned, increased so that it sounded like a furious hornet, and the Explorer suddenly felt a wave of nausea grab him. He groped wildly for the empty bowl, was sick until he thought there could be nothing left in his stomach, and then more, until he was sweating, and shivering, and had retched until his throat was sore, on his hands and knees over

the bowl. Now the Speaker changed yet again, and began to whistle a fresh and gentle melody, until the Explorer had recovered and composed himself again.

The Speaker lit another of the cheroots, and began to blow smoke over the Explorer's head and around his body. The Explorer felt his gentle hands on his eyelids, closing them, and heard the soft shuffle of the Speaker seating himself opposite. This time the Explorer didn't feel the effects of the drug wearing off – they intensified, until the Explorer had an uncanny sensation of seeing and understanding everything that the Speaker was singing about. He saw plants and animals that he had seen in the jungle, but with a new recognition of their properties. He saw reality layer upon layer, so that he felt he was peeling it's essence like an onion, each skin a casting off of illusion, confusion, to the centre where there is only truth and calm. The Speaker was singing directly to his soul, in words that transcended language. The Explorer saw the faces of the Caposcripti, some he recognised, and some he was sure he had never seen before, appearing before him in a long succession. In their faces, in the ideograms which covered their cheekbones, and spiralled around their crowns and foreheads, he began to read the history of the tribe, and the procession of souls, the birth of language.

He found himself once again on the bank of the river – its waters still and black. This time he knew he must cross, for the Speaker was trying to show him something by returning him to this place; he suspected that he would keep sending him here until he understood the lesson. He must remember this was a dream river; there must be a way to get back. But it seemed so real, and there was such a palpable sense of menace from it that still he hesitated. Finally he could stand the tension no more. He moved towards the river, realised that he was floating over it into darkness and silence. He began to lose his frame of reference, himself, memory, language. His brain whirling and making sense of nothing. He forgot who he was and found himself making sounds that he couldn't understand, and that had no meaning. He would have been afraid that he was lost, but he no longer remembered that he had come from anywhere.

The Speaker looked at the man that was seated cross-legged in front of him. There was no doubting that he had gone far away, into himself and past himself, until only the thinnest link connected his spirit to his body. His eyelids no longer twitched and his breathing was so shallow that he looked dead. It was time to bring him back across the dark river, for the Speaker knew that he would never find the way back by himself.

The Speaker changed the rhythm of his song yet again, and began calling the Explorer back to him, reminding him that he was alive, calling him back to an awareness of himself. As he sang the Explorer understood his words, as though he had known the language all along, and had merely forgotten it for a while.

Listen to my song; is not our world beautiful?  
 Come back from the dark river; it is the first soul,  
 Let not your spirit be eaten, for the first soul is hungry,  
 He is the eater of worlds.  
 He has swallowed the spirits of our first fathers, all those that have left

But that world is not for us.  
 Listen to my song, this music is a medicine for your mind;  
 The draught you have taken is strong, the knowledge of us  
 Listen to my song, return to us now,  
 Remember, that language you had forgotten –  
 Do you remember it now?

Now, I think, you will begin to understand a little,  
 it is only that you have forgotten,  
 and need to be reminded.  
 Now, for now has always been,  
 and will be, the lie of the everyday  
 is momentarily confused  
 Can you can see reality, taste the bitter core?  
 Bring knowledge back from the dark shore...  
 The ceremony is over.

The Explorer heard these words, spoken as a hypnotist would to his subject, and realised that once again the tide of the drug had receded, leaving him light-headed and his limbs tingling. But the world around him was once again as it had been and he was no longer connected to his body by a thin chord, but wholly inhabiting it. As he sat thinking about these sensations he heard the Speaker's voice.

"Go and sleep my friend. Today we have found a common language; tomorrow you will begin to learn the true history of our people."

\*

With time the Photographer has been able to refine his methods, so that the ceremony allows him to distil a much purer language from the subject than was previously possible, thus increasing the power that he gained from the ritualistic tattooing, subsequent decapitation and final reduction of the subject's head.

The reasons behind this ceremony, and the previous isolation of the subject were complicated, and entangled within the private philosophy the Photographer had constructed for himself. From the story of Babel the Photographer had surmised that we had not lost our capacity for natural language – it had merely been confused. The ceremonies and methods he had developed were drawn from the old man's journals, and then refined by the research that the Photographer himself had carried out. That this original language had given extraordinary powers to its speakers, the Photographer did not doubt for a moment. The secrets of the Philosopher's stone, of the animation of golems, and of zombies, the building of great edifices and the control of minds were all bound up with natural language: a cipher that he intended to unlock.

Over the years the process has been refined and he no longer uses a razor to remove the hair, the eyebrows and lashes.

Depilatory creams make the process far less messy, and there's no chance of damage to the skin.

Through a process of trial and error he has found a cream that doesn't affect the action of the chemicals that he uses for the rest of the process. It claims to be 100% natural and Ayurvedic and is neither cheap, nor easy to get hold of – supplied only erratically by a mail order company in New Delhi. He sometimes thinks it's ironic that in death their skins are softened and pampered so much more than when they were alive, and at such expense.

Next he prepares the tattoo needles - black India rubber ink because it is traditional and will not fade with the heat or humidity. He lays them out in a prescribed order – by size and so that they will come easily to hand when he needs them. He does not use a tattoo gun – the process must be entirely manual.

Through all this the subject's expression is totally blank. All lines have been smoothed, and all emotion erased before rigor mortis set in. The eyes have been closed, giving the face a peaceful look.

In the beginning, he would steal some of the heads from mortuaries – or bribe hospital attendants to let him have them – whichever was easier. However he's found that some parts of the process work better if the subject is alive, but unconscious – so he's taken to obtaining fresher specimens.

He has laid out about him his notes, transcriptions from the tapes, and one of the journals. Scattered in among the old man's notes on life with the tribe, and their customs and language, are his thoughts on a variety of other topics – developments in nineteenth century medicine and other branches of learning – mathematics, the natural sciences, physiognomy, phrenology. Much of the thinking seemed dated compared to the advances that had been made in the last 150 years – especially in the areas of neurology and linguistics, but the notes about the Caposcripti provided a framework for the inscriptions that form the next part of the process.

The smooth and expressionless head is now ready for his ministrations. Sometimes he photographs it at this stage - a side shot perhaps, an art shot, light angled to create a false profile. These seductive and vulnerable portraits adorn his darkroom - colour and shadows bleached in the red light, as he sits with templed fingers, contemplating their anonymity.

This could go on for days.



## CHAPTER 18

Nina cast another oblique look in the direction of the Photographer, with whom she had become more and more preoccupied, to the point where she had begun to neglect the usual subjects of her scrutiny and to frequent the library at all hours in the hope of seeing him. Whilst she had quickly discovered that his visits were regular enough to set a clock by, so far he remained a cipher to her – inscrutable in his dark clothes, his cold glance measuring but not engaging with the other readers, with the librarians, and with her.

Today she is doing her frumpy actress look – moth-eaten black wig, velvet draperies, Dame Edna glasses and many-buttoned black boots. She can barely see him, for he is half concealed behind a tall and meticulously arranged pile of books, bent low over a reporter's pad in which he is making notes in his tiny handwriting. He is not so absorbed in his work that he is impervious to the interest of those about him, and seems to be making a conscious effort to prevent others from seeing the notes he is taking. Walking quietly past him she can just make out the titles on the spines of the books, creating a signature that she has learnt to interpret. Yet there's no immediately discernable pattern in his choices: studies by anthropologists long since gone to dust, ancient anatomy books, treatises by Egyptologists, photographs of catacombs filled with the desiccated flesh of my flesh, Victoriana: the fetishism of death. With these are books on linguistics, the bible code, the tower of Babel, language, hermeneutics, Kabbalah, the Philosopher's stone, numerology – even the Rosicrucians get a look in somewhere, woven into the pattern of this strange man's researches.

She has never encountered someone who confuses her so much, nor who covers his tracks so well, requiring all her stratagems to watch him. Then too there is that nagging sense of recognition: familiar in the sense of someone that you've met, somewhere, sometime, but can't quite place. This is a face she's seen somewhere, frozen in attitude in a black and white photograph. Or

is it his black clothes, dark hair, cold eyes and pale, spare frame that makes him seem as though reproduced on celluloid? Then, she has it. From somewhere deep in her memory she dredges up a recollection of where she has seen him before, his face ever before her eyes, teasing. The memory goes back to her college days, and to the fine art degree she had read for, but never completed. A photographer, she was sure, but what was his name? She could not explain her growing obsession with him – but this inability to identify him, the disturbing familiarity of his physiognomy, intensified the feeling and the sense of a connection between them. She began discern in his habits special messages intended only for her.

Today the Photographer turned up at the Library at his usual time: he seems a man of impeccable precision and inflexible habits. This makes Nina's task much easier – for once she worked out when he would be in the library, she was able to relax the schedule which had kept her there at all hours, and anticipate his arrival to the minute. She prepares for these sessions as though for an assignation – spending hours on her costumes and make-up – for she is invariably in disguise, veiled like a coy bride.

Curiosity burns like heartburn in her chest – where does he go to when he is not in the Library? Where does he live? What is he working on that drives him to dig up such a strange mixture of volumes from the library, and what is the significance of his obscure choices? Once he has finished with the reference books, he invariably amasses a stack to take home – although how he can read them all is a mystery to Nina, as he invariably returns each one within the week. She can only suppose he is doing some giant work of cross-referencing, collating different branches of knowledge, and creating some kind of index. Watching him, seeming to absorb light into himself in the dim reading room, bent low over a book, so that the stack before him half conceals his hunched figure, she resolves that she must begin to find the answers to some of these questions, which will never be answered within the Library's walls.

At precisely 3.30 the Photographer consulted his watch, and began to gather up his notebook and pen, and to stack the books neatly for the librarians to return them to their appointed shelves. Nina knew this meant he was about to leave, and made her way quickly out of the reading room and towards the exit. She would wait for him on the street.

The Photographer came down the steps with an abstracted air, hands clenched in his pockets, and eyes scanning the stairs before him without seeing them, as if totally absorbed in mulling over the facts and myths that he had been collating in the Library. From across the road she could make out his tall figure, and watched him turn and flag a taxi, which soon joined the traffic on the Marylebone road, and meant that for the moment she had lost him.

Slowly she turned and made her way down into the tube station, and the Northern Line, for the Elephant, and home. Once upon a time she would have stayed in the Library until closing time – but now she needed to be alone to think over their silent dialogue.

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The Photographer settled himself in the back of the black cab, and gave his address to the driver. The traffic was heavy, as always on the Marylebone Road, but the Photographer registered little of the passing cityscape, his mind on the work that awaited him at home, the tantalising fragments of information that he had been able to unearth at the library, and the system that he was evolving based on this research.

You must not assume that just because he had taken a cab today, he always travelled this way – it depended on his mood. Sometimes he would take the bus home from the library, the old-fashioned kind, with an open platform. He would sit at the back and watch the other passengers, and the city going past the steamy windows. He felt both connected and disconnected at these times – both a part of the scurrying London populace and above, outside of it. But today he felt like paying for the solitude and

discretion of a black cab driver. Should the cabbie be in a talkative mood, one glance in the rear-view mirror usually stopped attempts at conversation dead.

Crossing London Bridge, with it's black suited city professionals he felt a sudden rush of anger at their antlike existence – which only confirmed for him the value of his work. He resisted the temptation to pull across the glass that separated him from the cab driver and ask "Do you believe in free will, I mean do you? Really? Look at them with their pensions and peps, policies and endowment schemes, insurance against anything which could possibly happen except, of course, the death of the soul: what price", he felt like asking, "do you put upon the soul?" The driver wouldn't listen of course, inured already to the men with sandwich boards; Jehovah's Witnesses daily knocking "Do you believe? Do you believe in an inalienable right to dictate your own actions, reactions to the world about you? Do you believe in the consequent FULL RESPONSIBILITY for all possible results of your actions? Does it make you scream, and shudder, paralysed with indecision, crushed beneath the weight of that awful knowledge?" He wanted to scream "do you believe do you understand?"

He realised that he was sweating, breathing hard, knuckles white and strained. But the taxi driver had not noticed anything, or if he had had ignored it with the sanguinity of his kind, and the Photographer spent the rest of the journey in silence, mulling over the work that awaited him at home.

**CHAPTER 19**

The Speaker had kept the Explorer apart from the tribe during his convalescence from the fever, but after the Iahuaska ceremony he decided it was time that they returned to the village. Whilst the Explorer was still weak, the fever itself had gone, and the Speaker judged that there was little chance of infection. Thus, when the Explorer woke the next morning it was to see Tarapoto, Huitota and the Speaker packing up the camp and their supplies in preparation for a journey. He looked questioningly at the Speaker, who indicated that he too should pack up his belongings. The Explorer did as he had been instructed, and within a short time the campsite had disappeared – only a scorched patch of bare earth, trampled vegetation, and some cut palms that had been used for the lean-to remained, and these traces too would soon disappear.

The Explorer assumed that these preparations were a prelude to their return to the main settlement, and could hardly contain his excitement at the thought that he was finally to be taken to the tribe that he had come such a distance to find. Over the previous days of his recovery he had at first been too weak to take much interest in anything, and as his strength increased his attempts to communicate with the Speaker and Tarapoto had been frustrated by their lack of a shared language. The Iahuaska ceremony had left him with a clear head and some tantalising clues into the Caposcriptan culture – but he realised that only by submersing himself in village life would he be able to record all aspects of their unique culture.

Whilst the Explorer had not learnt the Caposcripti language overnight, the ceremony did seem to have given him an uncanny ability to understand when Tarapoto or the Speaker spoke to him, and retain the vocabulary that they taught him. In fact as the Speaker had promised it felt as though he was merely remembering something he had always known rather than learning a new language.

They set off just as the sun was beginning to cast pools of light in the forest, and followed a winding path through the jungle. The other three were setting a fast pace, despite their bare feet and the uneven ground. The Explorer was forced to concentrate all his energies on just keeping up with the party, and didn't have time to reflect on the people he was to meet or the direction that they were travelling in. Within a very short time he had completely lost his bearings, and wondered at the Caposcripti's ability to travel through the jungle by invisible landmarks, continually doubling back and going around huge obstructions, but with no sign of hesitation in their direction. The jungle was very silent – although he could hear the occasional cries of birds, and the sound of tree frogs there seemed no breeze to disturb the leaves of the plants, and the only animals they saw were insects and the occasional parrot or toucan flying overhead.

As they walked the Explorer noticed that the jungle was changing its character. They travelled through an area where there were huge trees with little but dead leaves underfoot, where the secondary canopy grew at a height of 20 to thirty feet above the ground, on the trunks of trees to a more dense jungle which had obviously been cleared, planted and then let to return to the wild. The Speaker explained that these were fields that had been let go fallow, and that they were entering the Caposcripti lands proper. It was not much further to the village, but apart from the altered character of the vegetation there was no sign of human habitation – even the cuts on the trunks of rubber trees looked as though they could just as easily have been made by the claws of the puma as by people collecting the gum. The Explorer was forced to store up many questions both because of the rate at which they were travelling, which left him little time for composing them, and because his lack of ability to phrase them in the Caposcripti language. He forced himself to be patient, however, as he knew that many things might be self-explanatory once he had had the opportunity to observe more of the tribe.

The Explorer was hot, thirsty and beginning to wonder how much further they would have to walk in the stifling heat when the Speaker stopped, and held out a hand behind his back, so that

Tarapoto and Huitota stopped too and the Explorer almost collided with them. They stepped to the side and the Speaker turned around to face the Explorer. He examined him critically for a couple of minutes, and then pulled a seed from one of his ever-present pouches. The seed was about the size of an acorn and a deep russet brown in colour, studded with small spikes. The Speaker bit the end off and spat it out. He then took a blow dart from another pouch and inserted it through the hole he had made. He worked the dart inside the seed for a minute or so, and when he removed it the tip was coated in a bright red paste. Approaching the Explorer he wiped the sweat from his face with the back of his hand and then began to draw intricate designs on his face with the blunt end of the dart. The Explorer submitted to this patiently –and only wished that his mirror were not tucked away in his shaving kit so that he could see the designs the Speaker was drawing. He wondered what relation they bore to the patterns that covered the Speaker's own visage.

Satisfied with his work the Speaker stepped back, holding the Explorer's arms (he couldn't reach his shoulders with any comfort – and as the Explorer was to note, the Caposcripti rarely exceeded four and a half feet in height) and examining him critically. He gestured over his shoulder with a jutting thumb and the Explorer realised that they were only a few moments away. The next clearing that they emerged into had been planted with manioc and bananas, with pineapples growing on its borders. As they crossed it, the Explorer suddenly caught sight of a palm-thatched roof amidst the greenery. He realised that they had reached the outskirts of the village.

They continued on past this house, which the Explorer stared at in fascination as they passed. It was more of a shelter than a house: palm trunks supported a roof thatched with dried fronds, and the complete lack of walls allowed him to see into every part of the dwelling. The floor was of packed dirt, which extended for a few feet to each side of the structure, and waist-high platforms had been built around the edges of the floor, which the Explorer assumed would be used for sleeping. All sorts of objects had been hung along the beams of the house, which were obviously used for

storage, and the floor was quite bare, apart from a few bits of detritus – coconut shells, plantain skins and fish bones, obviously remaining from a previous meal.

He only had time for the most cursory glance before they had passed the house. The Speaker continued in his usual determined fashion onwards towards the rest of the village. More roofs began to show amidst the gardens of banana plants that almost completely concealed them, and the path they were following was beaten flat and wide by the passage of many feet. Tarapoto's mother disappeared down at a fork in the path towards a house, which the Explorer decided must be where she normally resided, and they continued on until they reached a cleared area. The hut in the middle was far larger than the rest, with low benches along the sides rather than the sleeping platforms. The Speaker swung himself up onto the platform, with a fluidity that belied his jutting belly, and reached down to grab first the Explorer's pack and then his wrist. The Explorer collapsed on the platform with relief as the Speaker told him that they would rest there awhile. He could feel the sweat dripping down his face, stinging his eyes, and causing the red dye that the Speaker had painted on him to run down his face in rivulets, but he did not dare wipe it off, and left it to dry as it was.

They sat down and the Explorer noticed that Tarapoto had disappeared in the same direction as his mother. The Speaker was silent and looked thoughtful, gazing meditatively at the ground until a woman walked up slowly, balancing two red and white clay bowls. She handed the first to the Speaker, who took it carefully, and the second to the Explorer, keeping her eyes lowered and trying not to stare at him, but unable quite to restrain herself. The Speaker stirred his bowl with a finger, before tipping it towards his mouth and taking a long swallow. The Explorer followed his example and also took a good draught – by now he had become accustomed to Masato, reminiscent of sour milk, but not quite as bitter, with a watery texture and fragments of white pulp floating in it, and was actually rather refreshing in its way. As the fermented brew did its work he began to feel a slight cheerful fuzziness, and to forget his tiredness.



As they sat there various members of the tribe found an excuse to wander up to the central hut, to see the stranger that Tarapoto, Huitota and the Speaker had brought back with them. Most were glad that he had survived, so that they could satisfy their curiosity about him, but some had misgivings about the stranger in their midst and stared at the Explorer with hostility. A few stopped to speak with the Speaker for a while, but none offered to join them on the benches in the central hut, so that after a while the Explorer began to feel as though he were some exotic animal on display. From time to time the woman came to refill their bowls with masato (which they were drinking at a far more moderate rate now) and the Explorer was content to sit and examine the people that were wandering past as intently as they were inspecting him.

In between he studied the hut where they were sitting. It was subtly different from the dwellings that he had seen in other parts of the jungle. Like the house it was constructed of palm trunks, with a roof of interlocked leaves and branches – but here the beams were bare of the objects that had cluttered those of the houses. The only things hanging on them were strings of beads and seeds looped around in long strands and strung with bird's beaks, catfish spines, and feathers. At one end of the platform a fire had been built in the dirt from whole trunks and large branches, arranged so that the end of each was in the centre of the fire. It was smouldering now – and the Explorer surmised that like their campfire it was always kept burning so that a source of fire was invariably to hand. He wondered how long they had had fire and what they used to make it. His sulphur matches, flint and tinder had astonished the Speaker who had never seen fire coming from a stone before, and had assumed it was some kind of magic. The Explorer did not at that time have the vocabulary to explain how they worked, but had willingly demonstrated the trick again and again to Huitota and Tarapoto's delight.

As the afternoon wore on to evening, and the brief tropical dusk gave way to darkness people began to come and seat themselves on the long benches and on the hard packed ground. Tarapoto returned and seated himself next to the Explorer, which delighted

him, as he had grown to like the boy, who was cheerful, and friendly, always had a smile for him, and seemed to take him as his personal responsibility, watching out for him in the jungle, and showing him what was good to eat and what wasn't. As it became completely dark the hut filled up with people and the fire was built up so that the Explorer caught glimpses of their tattooed faces in its steady glow. They talked to each other in low voices and darted glances both at the stranger in their midst, and at the Speaker.

Once he judged it was time the Speaker cleared his throat loudly, causing an instant hush in the quiet babble and began to speak to the people in the hut. The Explorer had picked up a handful of words during his recuperation, and had been learning the language rapidly since the Iahuaska ceremony a couple of days before, so he was able to pick up references to himself in the Speaker's remarks, and understood that the Speaker was relating to the tribe how they had found him and nursed him back to health. He looked around the assembled faces trying to read their reaction. He did not know if the Caposcripti were aggressive people – nothing so far had suggested that they were – but he sensed it was important that he win their approval at this early and crucial stage if he was to learn much about them in the future. It seemed however that he had no need to worry, for he would be allowed to remain and live with the Caposcripti for a time. He had no doubt that the Speaker, who he had guessed to be the equivalent of the Chaman of the tribe, would have the authority to override any doubters, but he was glad that it did not appear to be necessary.

After a time it was Tarapoto's turn to speak. He stood up and spoke with gravity, aware of his new status as a man. The Explorer could not help thinking of him as a boy – he seemed so youthful – but could not deny that he had consistently displayed the presence of mind typical of someone much older, and reflected that these people matured very early.

He wondered what had happened to the boy's father – there seemed to be no indication of his presence, so that the Explorer supposed he must have met with some accident. He was pleased that he would be allowed to stay with them, since he had got used

to Tarapoto, and Huitota, and was beginning to understand them. They, in their turn had adapted to his odd ways, and even begun to copy some of them.

Tarapoto finished speaking, and the Explorer suddenly realised that the tribe were looking at him expectantly, as if waiting for him to add his voice to the meeting. He stood up, and looked over to the Speaker for some hint of what was expected of him. The man's face was inscrutable, and the Explorer realised that he was on his own, and this was part of his test, necessary if he was to integrate with the tribe. He cast about for words in Caposcripti, that would let him express his relief that he had found them, his desire to learn from them, and to teach them about his world; but his mind was empty. The words wouldn't come. He knew a moment of panic, unable to remember even a single phrase, whilst the massed faces of the Caposcripti fixed on him, tattoos swirling in complicated patterns in the dim light of the fire and wreathing their eyes. At this moment they seemed a people completely alien, with whom he would never be able to connect. Then he began to speak, in a halting tone, broken english mixed with words from their language, he clawed the sounds painfully from his memory.

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She is watching him, concealed as always, and alert for any sign of recognition or awareness on his behalf that would indicate he is aware of her surveillance. It has become a habit, this constant anticipation of another's movements, or a game that they are playing. Sometimes she thinks that perhaps he has known all along of her interest in him, and is leading her a merry dance, as though to test her dedication, his every act a challenge to her intelligence and determination.

Watching the Photographer has become an escape from herself – she has become nothing more than an eye, a conduit for this clandestine and silent relationship. She had no doubt that the relationship existed, that they shared something. Why else would he pretend not to notice her constant presence when it must have

been obvious to him? His very silence was an affirmation of their connection. Even now in the busy street he carries an air of isolation about him, an inwardness that suggests deep motives.

Nina couldn't help comparing him to all these people in the street, unconscious, unreflective as sheep, going about in their herds, always following each other around. Cannon fodder. When she has let them in, tried to share some of what goes through her head, her thoughts and fantasies, they shy away, unable to take her measure. She's seen it many times – the slightly scared look in their eyes that rapidly becomes resentment. If she met some people more on her level...but that didn't happen, even at college. She was too far out-there for the cosy art students with their received ideas; all those protests about things that were so fucking meaningless in the grand scheme of things. Clever but empty executions that gave rise to the kind of circular conversations that made them sound intelligent and serious – then going out and getting coked out of their heads, feeling down and dirty on speed, hanging out in trendy bars, all the right hair cuts, combats and second hand nighties, clothes worn for their irony factor, so cool they didn't need to care, thinking that they made a difference, ignorant gobshites. Course most of them could afford it with their Home Counties parents, the overseas students slumming it for a while in 'gritty' London. Thinking about it gave her a bitter taste in her mouth.

Wait – now where has he gone? Squinting (she ought to wear glasses) she spots him. He's wandering off. She hurries, on the other side of the street, keeping up whilst pretending to check out the window displays, concealing herself behind the milling pedestrians.

Still thinking about her life, worrying at it like a sore tooth. She'd like to think she comes across as enigmatic and interesting. If she's honest with herself she probably just appears morose, or patronising. At least, where she is now, the lowest level, the lowest ebb, surrounded by the dregs of society, there isn't much to challenge her. It's easy to be anonymous and keep her interests to herself. To float – and occasionally to provoke – safe in the

knowledge that her victims won't remember her or will be in too much of a drug haze to be freaked by her questioning. Because there must be more. There must be more. There fucking has to be more – doesn't there? There's a lot more to the Photographer than meets the casual glance, the average observer. She's worked this out from watching him closely, even now beginning to gain some idea of what that is... something... repulsive – but interesting? Whatever it was it would force her into a choice. Complicity or rejection.

He's crossing the road now – coming in her direction. With a flutter of adrenaline in the pit of her stomach she ducks into a bookshop. Was she ill? Could she stop? She told herself she could quit at any time, this strange habit, which had begun as casual observation in the library... But maybe that wasn't true any more.

When she was not watching him, she devoted her energies to finding out more about his background. Every and any bit of information, no matter how trivial, was grist to her mill, once she had finally dredged his name from the rat-trap of her memory. The web supplied her with the name of his agent, and finally, his address.

His movements tended to the predictable. She had already remarked his clockwork visits to the library – now she discovered that the same almost fanatical punctuality extended to other areas in his life. Service washes every week at exactly the same time for example. But no deliveries to his flat. He seemed to discourage people from going there – 'a very private person' said his agent. Yet sometimes brought back young people – furtively. She didn't see them come out – but then it was often late at night, and she didn't hang around that long once it looked like he had retired for the evening – not much to watch except heavily draped windows with hardly a chink of light showing. Draped in the daytime too – which was odd, but not, (given the kind of people she lived with) that unusual. Probably didn't want his neighbours knowing about his...lovers? She wasn't sure.

His agent had said there were no new exhibitions in the pipeline, when she'd phoned up posing as a journalist from one of the Sunday papers – and no chance of an interview. He didn't give them – and "what paper did you say you were calling from?" No luck there – yet he was certainly researching...something.

This afternoon he had visited the British Museum. She had followed him from gallery to gallery, almost losing him in the maze of artefacts, as he had lingered particularly fondly over the South American collection and gone straight from there to the Egyptians, giving only the most cursory glance to what lay in between. Dodging him in and out of the sarcophagi felt like some strange courting ritual, glimpses of him bisected by the open caskets, their occupants laid out like some anatomical display, thousand year sleep disturbed by the rude eyes of tourists and schoolchildren. Perhaps this was the revenge of those uncounted slaves who had died constructing the monuments that would keep the Pharaoh's remains inviolate, hidden from mortal sight. Was it a fascination with death that sent him to study the mummified remains of these ancient Egyptians, to scrutinise the Alexandrine stones? As if satisfied that he had found what he was looking for he turned on his heel and began to make his way out of the museum.

He was gone now – hurrying she caught a glimpse of his coat, heading down the back streets towards St Martin in the Fields. She saw him vanishing into the Crypt, waited a few minutes, five, ten...

It had been surprisingly easy to find out where he lived. She had (briefly) worked at a photo developer's, for the money, and the free materials, and therefore knew that he must be registered with the photographer's guild, and that they would need an address for the registration. She had looked him up on the register, and there he was. The ease with which she'd done it, the practised and methodical way in which she'd uncovered this and other details of his existence was slightly intimidating. It was as if she were discovering another personality – a woman who could patiently watch, and follow, and uncover and worry away at the truth until she has discovered everything there is to know about her quarry, wrung them dry. But where would it end? Everything must have a

beginning, middle, and an end – that's what you're always taught. But what happens at the end?

He must have found a seat by now. A large dark espresso and his ubiquitous notebook on the table before him. She could run the risk, now, of finding some nearby alcove where she could watch him unobserved. She walked down the steps, opened the door and stepped into a whitewashed underground café, a big self-service counter, cash desks, tables tucked away in alcoves and in between arches. All around black and white photos, playbills and posters advertising classical concerts. A quick coffee before the Opera darling.

She saw him and turned away, the movement instinctive now, his position plotted. She queued, ordered, paid, grabbed a plastic tray and found a table where she could pretend to bury her head in a magazine, watch him from an angle, half glimpsing his notebooks over his left shoulder. She had noticed that he often sat with his back to a room – automatically denying the possibility of human contact.

Nina knew that there would come a point when they would no longer be strangers, and the following, the watching – the stalking if she was honest – would have its natural conclusion. They would have to meet, if only to confirm the complicity that already existed between them. Is complicity always unspoken? She knew that inevitably she would be able to arrange some pretext, in due time things would be so arranged – by she or the other self that was beginning to seem almost autonomous, so as to bring them face to face. How then would he represent her, a Dali with his Gala, a side of meat and a telephone?

## CHAPTER 20

The Explorer had passed his first night in the Caposcripti village in the hut belonging to Tarapoto and his mother; hammock slung over the roof timbers, along with the few belongings that had survived. When he woke the next morning he was disoriented, and it took him a few minutes to get his bearings. The hut was empty, and although he could hear the sounds of children playing in the distance there was no sign of his hosts. For the first time in many days (since, in fact, they had rescued him from the predicament that his stubbornness had got him into) he was alone – and had an opportunity to reflect on the tribe that had taken him in, and on his unique opportunity.

Given these few free hours in which to think, he opened his notebook, got out quills and ink, and began in his methodical manner to record everything that he had experienced. He made notes about language, costumes, food, the structure of their houses, the elements of their philosophy that he had been able to glean. He even began to piece together the structure and grammar of the dialect, as well as recording everything else that seemed of note, for he realised that this might be all that he would have to leave for posterity. He sensed that he would not have much time, and felt a terrifying urgency to capture what he could of the Caposcripti whilst he had the opportunity:

*I awoke this morning with the pleasant sensation of sleeping once again beneath timbers, rather than the leafy canopy that has so often been my roof of late. Of the boy and his mother there was no sign, although the sounds that drifted from the village suggested that life there was taking it's usual course. I surmised that my kind hosts were busying themselves in collecting provisions from the jungle and had left me to sleep until my natural inclination woke me. Of the Speaker likewise I could discern no trace; that worthy must be still closeted in his own domicile.*

*Left thus to my own devices, for the first time since my fortunate rescue by the persons above mentioned, I performed a brief toilet and now*



*apply myself to this pleasant task – namely committing to my journal the incredible experiences of the last few days.*

*Who can describe the feelings that fill one's breast when at last perceiving, after the many hardships and trials described in this journal, the object of a journey so arduous as to all but result in the author's death? To find, when almost all hope has been lost that one was justified in one's belief in the existence of such an enlightened and magical people, despite the incredulity of all one's peers? That they not only exist, but seem to possess powers of communication undreamed of even in our so called enlightened age? Imagine! With no previous experience of their language, I was able to communicate not only with the one who is known as Speaker, but also with the boy Tarapoto and his mother Huitota, and furthermore with the elders of the tribe, to whom I was presented last night. But I am getting ahead of myself. I can only blame the wonder and confusion of the past few days on this outpouring of words. Permit me but a moment and I will compose myself, as befits the chronicler, and attempt to convey in detail the essential points of the people amongst whom I now find myself.*

*For the first I will permit myself the singular, but, I think, deserved, honour of giving to these people a name – for they are so isolated in their jungle home that they have never before encountered any but the neighbouring savages. These neighbours they rightly avoid, for the habits and customs too horrible to describe which they daily practice – the least of which is cannibalism. These people whom I have the honour to have encountered first amongst my race, I will henceforth refer to as the Caposcripti, or "head writers" – for the ingenious tattoos with which their faces, and sometimes their entire heads are covered. The designs are so intricate, each one so unique, that I cannot help thinking that they represent a kind of language, and that the tattoos themselves are stories. I have as yet no proof of this supposition, but the reader will, I hope, permit me a little bastardisation of the Latin.*

*Having dispensed with the first prerogative of the Explorer, that of naming and classifying what he discovers, I will continue with a methodical description of all aspects of these people's life that I have so far been able to discover – although I do not doubt that there remain still a multitude of their wonders for me to discover in the course of my stay*

*with them. The first of these is, of course, the ceremony involving Iahuaska, which the Speaker took it upon himself to perform for my benefit. I do not think it has been the privilege of any before myself to observe the preparation of this substance – and even less to participate in this type of ceremony. Mr Darwin speaks of the Fuegians that he discovered off the Coast of the Americas, but had he been so fortunate as to acquaint himself with the Caposcripti, he would not suppose that all of the indigenous people of this continent were nothing but savages; Indeed I have experienced the greatest courtesy from my hosts that one would suppose is possible outside of a London drawing room – and far greater than some of the drawing rooms it has been my misfortune to enter. But enough of this – it is not of London, of back-stabbing and false courtesy that I wish to speak to you now, but of the ceremony which took me to the mouth of the black river, and of the language that I found there.*

*It seems to me that far from learning a new tongue, I have gained the ability to decipher Babel – for that surely is what the speech of these people would sound like to the uninitiated. It seems that they possess the power to communicate having neither vocabulary nor grammar, but purely a 'translating engine' or organ that enables them to comprehend directly to the heart of their interlocutor's meaning. That this is somehow connected with the extensive system of tattoos with which they are covered seems most evident to me. It is also the result of a series of initiations, of which at present I have been afforded only the haziest indications, but one of which the boy Tarapoto was engaged upon when he chanced across my unconscious form.*

The Explorer paused and looked thoughtfully at what he had written. In some senses the Explorer was not unusual for a nineteenth century man. In an age of non-specialists, a gentleman could be an anthropologist, ornithologist, palaeontologist, and lepidopterist at the same time, and the discoveries of Darwin had lent a new humanism to the study of cultures around the world. Darwin himself had travelled around South America, and had written of some of the tribes that he had discovered in his travels. But Darwin's main concern was for the geology, flora and fauna that the continent had to offer – and he found the natives disappointingly primitive, describing them as almost bestial. The

Explorer took a completely different view – to him it seemed as though these people were angelic, uncorrupted by the worship of science, and the pursuit of material things. Even the scant few days he had already spent in the company of the Speaker, Tarapoto and Huitota had shown him a people who conducted all their relationships in an enlightened and humane manner. Their knowledge of the properties of the plants and other substances in the jungle dwarfed the clinical knowledge of most doctors that he had been acquainted with in what was rapidly beginning to feel like his former life, and hinted at a similar level of development in other areas. In short he felt that he had stumbled across Eden. It was this that he tried haltingly to convey in his journal, whilst aware that his readers might dismiss his impressions as the products of a disordered mind.

*It seems to me that I too have undergone an initiation, through the agency of the Iahuaska, which the Speaker administered to me, and the ceremonies that followed. That this was some kind of test I am quite certain; and although I do not know what behaviour was expected of me, the fact that he then judged me fit to be brought to this village, and educated in the ways of his people suggests that I passed it. Of the ceremony itself I can say very little, for even now I have only the haziest of recollections of its detail. But suffice it to say that the drug, and the chanting of the Speaker opened a door in my mind, and the mesmerising power of his eyes and his song took me on a journey to what may be another country, and forever changed me.*

*The reader of this journal may find this difficult to credit – but I have only to use as an example the effects of drugs well known to the Civilised world, such as Opium and Hashish to shew that this is possible. Having said that, it has not been recorded that these substances are capable of producing the complete shift in my perceptions that I have experienced at the hands of this Chaman.*

The Explorer filled five pages of his journal in this vein in his tiny handwriting, interspersed with sketches and diagrams. He was so absorbed in this task that he didn't notice the time passing, ignoring the pangs of hunger and the cramps in his hand from gripping the quill pen, knuckles white against its ivory shaft.

Neither was he aware of being observed by anyone, although by this point he had amassed a small but silent audience, whose eyes followed his every pen stroke.

When he finally looked up from his work, it was to see a group of serious faces; eyes round with curiosity as to what the stranger was up to. They had not dared to approach him, or to climb onto the platform of the house, but watched him from the cover of one of the palm-thatched shelters that had been erected on the bare earth of the clearing to shade the bare earth of the clearing from the sun. The Explorer closed his journal carefully, after first blotting the page he had been working on with sand, and rewrapped it in its oilskin covering.

**CHAPTER 21**

The Photographer's kitchen was one of the smallest rooms in the apartment, more reminiscent of a laboratory or a surgery than a place for the preparation of food, it was inhumanly clean and glittering, with surfaces and cupboards sheathed in antiseptic stainless steel. Along one wall he had installed a giant Aga some years before, modified according to his own specifications. Along the other was a long drainer with deep round sinks set flush in the metal.

Hidden away behind the immaculate surface, in a myriad of drawers and cupboards, is the accumulation of several years of research, minutely organised and tucked away, catalogued and sorted, so that if you opened one of the cupboards you would find racks of glass tubes and jars filled with mysterious substances, rather than the expected ketchup, tinned soup and tea. This drawer contains rare substances procured from his South American and Caribbean agents, this a selection of knives and scalpels; forceps and catgut; that one notes; and in yet another hanks of hair, desiccated skin layered like tissue paper with sheaves of intricately drawn designs for tattoos.

The refrigerator would not, at first glance, give you any clues as to the purpose to which he sometimes put it – its usual contents a bottle of wine, a pint of milk, a few camera films, and the inevitable gentleman's relish, relic of some ancient hamper. The sole clue, perhaps, is the lack of a central shelf, leaving enough room to store a polythene wrapped head in each of its stages of preparation.

The Photographer was halfway through the process that would reduce the subject's head to the size of an orange, and provide him with another fine piece to add to his collection. The head, naked of hair and minutely inscribed with characters rested on the stainless steel worktop in readiness for the next stage. On the Aga was a large pot that had been filled with water, and simmered

for hours with roots and dried plants until it had reduced to a watery paste.

The latest subject had proved problematic, and provided little for the Photographer to work from. He had starved himself rather than eat the food prepared by the Photographer – food that had been mixed with drugs designed to intensify the effect of the dark padded chamber, of 24-hour-a-day silence and isolation, of timeless incarceration.

He had proved resilient to all these methods: the relationship stillborn, holding his secrets inside. Perhaps it had been a mistake to take him - but it was too late to go back now. There had never been any question of his release. For 28 days they had carried on an invisible battle, and finally the Photographer had won, had heard on his tapes the pleas for release gradually giving way to an endless mumbling, a litany of life whose vocabulary had become diffused until nothing but a long susurrations had issued from the spinning reels. When he had opened the room he had found only Gerard's emaciated corpse, his feather-light form, the smell of fear and faeces. In some essential way he had escaped, had stolen that time from him, and left him no closer to the solution.

Still, they all went in the end – and perhaps even Gerard, who had clung so hard to the lie had something to add to the pattern. The Photographer smiled with grim satisfaction at the thought that if nothing else he would contribute his energy to the apartment, flesh to kilowatts, body becoming a shape in ashes in the hot coals of the Aga. "Dust to dust ashes to ashes – dirt we are and to dirt will we return. The body is nothing – the mind is the temple of the self. His head will hold all that there is of him, all there already, his life his knowledge – just waiting for my needles to bring it out. Done now."

He's fed enough now to the hungry Aga to keep the temperature constant for a few hours under the giant cauldron that had once been used for boiling puddings. A visit to one of the catering shops in the Edgware road, armed with a set of precise instructions, had furnished his cooker with the necessary modifications, the Aga

equipped with a large deep hotplate which he uses to heat black sand whilst the head is simmering on the other ring. Flesh falling from the bone. Tender as a well-broiled ham.

The Photographer lays Sabbatier knives, medical scalpels and long pins ready on the sideboard. Rolls of absorbent cotton and lint are lined precisely in front of him, behind a tripod that has been modified so that he can use it to support a head. All is ready now. Right tools for the job. Ritual observed but modernised. And why not? Was this not after all the 21<sup>st</sup> Century? He had a feeling the old man would have approved – well possibly.

Deftly he lifts the head out of the pot with a set of long shining tongs, and stands it on the tripod. His critical eye notes that it has survived the first stage of the process remarkably well.

Surgeon's gloves and surgeon's grace – the neat incision from crown to nape, the scalp rolls back easy as the skin on a Sunday joint. He lays it out on the pile of sand, which moulds to the shape of the face and supports it whilst he deftly trims the fat, razors the attachments to the bones. Gently now for the bridge of the nose, fingers trace eye sockets, and the sharp blade follows them almost lovingly, teasing, pinching, rolling, rubbing the recalcitrant flesh. Quickly now before it cools too much. The skull comes away clean and blanched. Stack it on the shelf with the others – he'll deal with that later.

Trim the neck, remove the flesh inside with a sharp scraper, preferably with rounded edges. Remove the fatty excess, the slight jowls. Smooth and cauterise slightly with a hot stone. He imagines describing this process. What had the old man felt the first time that he watched it? The black sand packs in smoothly, hot and dry, moulding to every hollow.

Sutures prepared, butterfly stitches hold the flaps together, quick tacking ready for the neat seam. Lovely bit of needlework there. Practice makes perfect.

Standing back he admires his handiwork – but only for a moment. Turning and smoothing the hot skin, flat stones heated on the back shelf of the Aga. From here on he's entirely faithful to the ritual – even if the stones are from the beach at Brighton, rather than some Amazonian riverbed, they're suitably smooth and rounded. Soft pads of cotton absorb the sebum leaking from the shrinking pores. Lips sewn shut. Fine needles hold eyes and brows and nose in shape; redundant acupuncture. There's a symbolism to where they're placed. He's done some research on Chakras. Always struck by the parallels between these ancient cultures.

The first batch of sand has already cooled, compacted and cemented slightly by the fatty juices that it has absorbed. Gently he scoops it from the shell, delicate and flexible as a deflated balloon. The head has already become somewhat smaller, but retains its shape. It's going well so far. He scoops up more hot sand and pours it through the neck. The rhythmic motion of hot stones smoothing the planes of the face, sculpting the death mask, the shibboleth. The tattoos become a black tracery of etching on the dark skin, taking a shine like mahogany, upon which rich beads of grease appear as the head desiccates, and are wiped away.

The Photographer has great faith in processes, carrying out the most intricate plans, step by step, performing each element necessary with care, and attention – the pleasure of watching as all the elements come together to form the perfect pattern. Ideally he would like to control everything, pinpoint everything in existence with omniscient accuracy, fix it in its place in the divine order. From this perspective every situation becomes a weighing of the odds, a balancing of all parameters – a Euclidean curve of potential and possibility.

In the journals, in the Explorer's meticulous recording of the Caposcripti's practices and beliefs, he can sense a kindred spirit. What are the Caposcriptan tattoos if not graphs mapping the individuals' journey from birth to death; forking lines suggesting avenues of possibility to be explored – or relentlessly controlled?



Playing with life, and playing with patterns. Language, Logos, the word, creates and destroys. Say something and make it so. The grand author. The architect. What was there for God to fear in the tower of Babel?

And so the he measures and marks, describes and makes so, weighs the odds and continues his grim business – each addition to his gallery a strategically pruning of the messy tree of life: a training.

Within the Photographer's plans there is no room for deviation. Because if the word is fact, is a making, it is also logic; the hard truth of the percentage. And how can it be that the Caposcripti, with their thorns, and berry juice, drugged visions and wandering descriptions of the moon, the stars, whose children gallop across the sky – can have grasped so complex a pattern?

**CHAPTER 22**

The weeks passed rapidly for the Explorer in the Caposcripti village, where time had a curiously suspended quality. You could set a watch by the rhythm of the days, the dusk that invariably fell at 6pm sharp, the rapid descent into dark, the creak of the bullfrogs calling for rain – even the showers fell regularly. Yet all of this conspired to make the Explorer feel as though he was outside time – now that he was no longer endlessly travelling there was little to tell the days apart.

In the mornings he was woken by Tarapoto or his mother, to eat with the family, and watch them prepare for work with the crops, or a foraging trip. Sometimes he would accompany the Speaker on his mysterious missions, or have painstaking language lessons with Tarapoto. In the afternoons he would watch the men drinking Masato and talking, and write his journal, and at dusk there would be hunting and fishing, the fires stoked to cook the evening meal – a mess of fish and turtle's eggs, stewed with plantain, yucca and strange herbs.

He felt peripheral to most of these activities – an observer whose help would only inconvenience. But he kept his eyes open, and he learned, and remembered, and later wrote down every detail of what he observed of their lives. When he could he gave them small gifts – the remains of his pitiful store of salt, some fishing twine and hooks. He shored up his strength and watched anxiously for the return of the fevers- heralded by nightly bouts of cold sweats and shivering. Although much recovered he had a premonitions and bad dreams that left him wild-eyed and wakeful.

If the Speaker noticed these episodes when he came to shake the Explorer roughly awake in the night, he refrained from commenting on them – or the jaundiced tint of the man's skin which remained despite his apparent recovery, the good food and rest which he was enjoying in the Caposcripti village.

The Speaker seemed to carry out most of his occult duties at night, or in the very early dawn. On rare occasions the Explorer was allowed to participate in the rituals, but generally he was merely tolerated as an observer, and he knew that there were other ceremonies about which he had no information at all, and which his very presence would pollute.

They left frustrating gaps in the framework he was beginning to develop about the Caposcripti, but the Explorer did not dare to ask the Speaker about them. The man had kept his distance, treating the Explorer with a formality that transcended his near nakedness, the tattoos that covered him, the pouches and charms all hung about his person. Perhaps they even contributed to the air of authority that made the Explorer feel clumsy, and ignorant and strangely defenceless. That, or the curious tawny eyes of the Speaker, which seemed to look right through him, and took him back to the dark places in his head that he had first visited with the Iahuaska ceremony. Although he witnessed more of these ceremonies the Speaker had not invited him to drink the bitter broth again. In part the Explorer was grateful for this, since he wasn't sure he wanted to return to that place, but sometimes it seemed that there was so much that he would never be able to understand otherwise, and those ceremonies that he did witness often left him with more questions than answers.

At least he was able to find out more from Tarapoto, who was as full of curiosity about his people as the Explorer was about the Caposcripti. Tarapoto introduced him to everyone in the village, and explained the complicated relationships between the families that made up this tribe. There were other tribes, he said, but contact was rare, maintained by Speakers who travelled around the jungle and sent messages by knocking on the roots of huge trees, the sounds thus produced reverberating for leagues around. This method could also be used for contacting or locating the other settlements. For, he explained, it was not unusual for a whole tribe to move if there were a serious disaster or bad omen, or when the rains came.

Their exchanges soon fell into a pattern, whether they were walking in the jungle or talking in one of the palm shelters in the village – composed not so much of words but of gestures and objects, of show and tell. In return for lessons in the tongue of the Caposcripti, the naming of things and the customs and taboos to which they adhered, the Explorer tried to explain some of his culture to Tarapoto. This was far more difficult, as the boy lacked any context for most of what the Explorer told him and thus developed some very strange ideas about the people on the other side of the big lake. The Explorer could see him making pictures in his mind that were completely different from those that he was trying to describe, and the more he searched, in his halting Caposcripti, for description, the wilder and more unlikely the pictures became. There some other things Tarapoto simply would not believe – for example that there were places on the earth where it never got dark at certain times of year, whilst at other times it was night time for months on end. Only the existence of the Explorer's musket, his watch and telescope, the maps that he carried with him, and other instruments convinced Tarapoto to believe that everything he said was true. The Explorer tried to teach him about the Equator, convince him that the earth wasn't flat, outline the distribution of the continents. The Speaker watched these lessons with interest: his sharp eyes taking in every detail of the Explorer's descriptions and the documents and instruments that he used to illustrate them.

The Explorer soon found that whilst the Speaker didn't accord him any particular respect, the rest of the Caposcripti perceived him as a Chaman in his own right; especially since they often saw him writing on the skins that he kept so carefully wrapped up against the humidity of the jungle. Frequently he would look up from his writing to find himself ringed with Caposcripti all staring at him from a respectful distance. At first he found it unnerving to be the subject of their constant scrutiny, but he soon became used to it and was able to ignore them completely, or stared back at them with equal frankness. He had less contact with the women, who seemed to be almost a tribe in themselves, as did the children, who ran around in packs as soon as they were old enough to leave their mother's side. However through sign language and careful

questioning he was able to pick up a lot about the foods, medicines and other areas that the women held under their iron sway. These observations joined the others that were beginning to fill up his journals, so that his writing grew smaller and smaller in an attempt to conserve space. The book had begun to lose any resemblance to a journal, no longer dated and carefully chronological, as it filled up with thoughts and observations written every which way across margins and spaces, undated and hurried in his attempt to capture everything that he saw.

*The women prepare & grow much of the food for the settlement, as well as making red & white coarse-glazed pottery & jewellery, which the Caposcripti prize highly. Their workmanship is astonishingly precise despite the coarseness of their materials. When I asked them what had informed their choice of shape & construction they gave me to understand that the patterns were passed down from gen to gen through the tattoos which adorned their faces & bodies, & that differed from those of the men. Women have their own secret knowledge, their own ceremonies, passed down from mother to daughter & across the female hierarchies within the tribe.*

*Women hold a special place in the Caposcriptan hierarchy (in so much as such a thing can exist in a people as scattered & fragmented into family groups as they.) They hold the secrets of medicine, & crafts, create new lives & give names to things & to people. For the Caposcripti, a person does not really exist unless he or she is named, & the unnamed are vulnerable to having their spirits stolen by those who have left – & to being possessed by demons & the spirits of animals. It is especially dangerous for a woman who is with child to associate with the unnamed, or with the recently deceased. Possession is taken very seriously by these people, & they take no chances with those that they perceive to be vulnerable. Infants are therefore given their name as soon as possible after the birth, & the mother is isolated from all but her closest female relatives until the child has been safely named.*

*The choosing of names is not an exact science, but follows a system of belief & symbolism as complex & inflexible as the periodic table. New-borns are particularly closely observed to see if they express a predilection for any specific plant or object. The position in which they*

*sleep, the sounds that they make, whether they cry or smile are all correlated against complicated criteria which enable the women to plot the path of the individual, & so give them the name that will be with them until death – unless some accident or event befalls them that changes the nature of their life or temperament.*

*The Caposcripti firmly believe that the shape of the new-born's skull will tell of the future make-up of the individual – & it is this that controls the first of the tattoos that are inscribed upon the young child's naked crown – before the skull has even had time to harden completely. This forms the basis of all the inscriptions that follow – spiralling out from the centre like the branches of a tree. The tattoos that follow coincide with key events in the individual's life, & might include the names of children & ancestors, the occasion of the first hunt, the name of a mate, the transition from childhood to adulthood. When the heads are preserved, great care is taken to ensure that these tattoos remain intact, for they contain the whole history of the individual, & remain as a testament to their existence & accomplishments, as well as a blueprint to learning for future generations.*

*I have so far been able to put together only a very rudimentary lexicon of their script, but from what I have been able to glean it is made up partly of representations of the natural world – birds, insects, snakes, monkeys, jaguars, trees, & other symbols of deep significance to the Caposcripti, inscribed in relation to more abstract symbols which appear to represent time & emotion. It is a complex system, & made more so by the subtlety of the Caposcriptan language, in which all things are delimited by their relationships as well as their properties; describing something, they make it so. The juxtaposition of tattoos can tell someone who knows how to read the script everything about an event – like a window into the past, a dark glass that reflects back & illuminates the present.*

*It is a culture of the mind astonishing in a people whose mode of living is so simple as to render hardly imaginable it's development, & the prodigious feat of memory it entails. Evidently preserving the language in the form of tattoos on the head ensures the continuation of the language – but only a fraction of the symbols are inscribed on each individual, with the speaker responsible for that ceremony. I can only wonder if these*

*people are born with some innate knowledge – for whilst I have been applying myself most assiduously to learning its grammar & inflexions I know that I have only the most rudimentary grasp of its complexity; much of its subtlety escapes me.*

*I am in the grip of evil premonitions; darkness threatens me; chills grip my bones; I have horrible dreams. The worst of these is that I will die here, & that this chronicle will be read by no eyes but mine; preserved for a while, perhaps, by the Caposcripti, but destined, finally, as perhaps they are destined, to be consumed in the hungry maw of the jungle. I fear that I am in a race against time to record the Caposcriptan tongue, & that it is imperative that I think of some way in which to transport my journals out from the wilderness to those that can make use of them. I fear it for a certainty that I will never leave this place, & that my wanderings over the wide world are to end here. There is so little time.*

## CHAPTER 23

The Pitt Rivers is a dark cavern of a place. The walls are wood panelled, giving on to a high and gloomy ceiling, an impression of dusty drapery, exotic statuary hanging from the roof beams.

Large old-fashioned display cases crowd each other, fighting for wall space. No question of touching the exhibits, which are locked away on shelves, or fixed to walls, stuffed with objects pilfered from around the globe, grouped according to theme rather than place of origin. In a large wall-side display, a mummy, cask positioned to show the mouldering wrappings of an Egyptian princess (perpetually 27) is accompanied by a 1950's x-ray of her skeleton, hand-labelled in faded ink. Other cadavers keep her company – from Mexico, China, the Capuchin catacombs; religious relics, miraculously preserved finger bones. It's strangely gruesome – the distance normally felt, between civilisation and the 'savage' reduced by the juxtaposition of artefacts from times ancient and modern, dust shrouding the clash between East and West, and equalising all.

The cases march in neat rows, some shrouded with dust drapes. Dark wood and heavy velvet dominate the large chamber, giving it a Victorian feel. A security guard is asleep in his chair on the high gallery, accessed by a double staircase, which runs across one side of the room. Had he been awake, his position would just about have allowed him to see into the narrow aisles between the cases in the centre of the space; the rest of the chamber is concealed beneath the overhang of the mezzanine floor and the spaces along the walls feel almost like caves.

The cases themselves are almost impenetrable: the glass thick and slightly dusty, the artefacts inside filling them so that it's impossible to see through them, even obliquely. Although the Photographer has been here before, the dusty maze nearly defeats him; he's beginning to wonder if the collection has been moved, or sold off...and then, almost without warning, there they are.



As with the other exhibits, the heads have been culled from a bewildering variety of cultures: Africans, South Americans, Haitians, islanders and mainlanders crowd together tightly on the glass shelves. Bleached skulls laced with garlands of thorns bare their teeth, brushing against the scalps of North American Indians, suspended in clusters with their long hair hanging down.

At the far end of the case the shelves have been given over entirely to the shrunken heads, mounted on thin poles, chins jutting, lips thrust out and fastened together with long ceremonial cords hanging down. Mentally the Photographer compares them to his own efforts – the lips invisibly sewn with gut from the inside, skins burnished to a high gloss, tattoos picking out the bone structure, spiralling around the naked crowns. The Pitt Rivers' heads are not beautiful objects – misshapen and blackened, with long matted hair and pained expressions. They are the faces of those that have died in agony, been taken as the spoils of war.

Hand lettered cards explain their origins, and describe the trade in shrunken heads that started when the process was discovered in 1897; the Tsantas traded for guns and beads and whiskey, the high demand which caused the decimation of tribes around the Jivaro's territory. Even though the Photographer has read the cards before, and probably knows more about the process than the curators of the museum, they still exert a fascination on him. There's something the Jivaro were missing – an awareness of the human body as an art form, the connection with the sublime made the Caposcriptan heads and expression of their own spirituality, capturing the soul of each member of the tribe. It's not hard for him to picture the scene where the heads were made. The Indians retreating from some battle, building fires and smoking the heads on their way back to camp, the process stretching out over days as they travel through the jungle, and in due time driven western demand: trophies decorated with shells and beads – as if the head itself were not enough. The Photographer comes here to remind himself why he is doing what he's doing. It's a kind of redressing of the balance. Looking at the heads he feels a kind of sickness in the pit of his stomach, revulsion for these objects, the fetishism of

death. Yet he cannot look away. It feels as though there is a silent communion between them. Complicity.

"- Excuse me –sorry to disturb you, would you happen to know the time?"

The question jerks him out of his reverie – unexpected here where there're so rarely other visitors; he can count those he's seen when visiting on the fingers of one hand.

She has never been this close to him before. Never stood face to face, measured herself against his bulk. He's a little bit taller than her, seeming massive with wide shoulders, the trademark long black coat; his dark hair. Cold, cold eyes.

"4.36."

"Oh, is it that late already? – The museum closes at five. What do you think of it – it's a crazy place isn't it? Fascinating. These heads are a bit gruesome."

She trails off in the face of the Photographer's enquiring glance. What does he see?

- Seen her before somewhere? Where? That hair – rings a bell.

"Sorry – am I distracting you? So do you know much about them? I'd be interested in anything you can tell me. They're not very well labelled are they?"

Definitely seen her somewhere before. Where. Think. Play for time. He can sense something important happening.

"They're from South America. Tsantas. War trophies of the Jivaro Indians mostly. Those that aren't fakes of course. There was a bit of a craze for them in the twenties – you could buy a shrunken head for about \$25 in those days, and have it sent by mail order. Pitt Rivers located a number of them for the collection."

A slow-dawning gleam in his eyes. The situation feels fraught as a game of 21, each card turning slowly, raising the margin of risk.

"Really? And do they still practice it? That's astonishing. I'd be fascinated to learn how it's done. I suppose you live in Oxford, and are terribly knowledgeable about this kind of thing? They're so small!"

Her questions seem fairly innocent but something tells the Photographer that there's something not quite right. The girl seems slightly nervous; she's babbling – like someone casting around for something to say, spinning out the conversation for some reason that's not clear to him yet. And asking him about the heads: coincidence? Can't be. She must know something. And if she knows, does anybody else? Has he been fooling himself that he's invulnerable, that his actions are sanctioned by some higher code? Or is there something else, synchronicity, serendipity, that's caused this meeting. Apart from themselves, and a sleepy guard on the balcony, the museum is deserted. If there'd been anyone else there, would she have asked them the time instead, would they be standing now testing each other with this ostensibly banal conversation? He frowns slightly, but answers her question:

"No - London – but I try to visit the Pitt Rivers if I happen to be in Oxford. And you – do you live here? Do you always talk to strangers in museums?"

"Umm, not – not normally. I'm down from London too, just for the day – but I happened to have some spare time and museums fascinate me. And you looked as though you might know about the heads – I don't know what made me think so – perhaps the way you were gazing at them – as though you knew the history of each one. I'm so sorry if I've bothered you?"

She must know. Have to find out. Could she have told anyone else? Could she be silenced if it were not already too late? Not the same, killing someone like that. If she knows she'll be suspicious, on her guard. Think. THINK.

"No – not at all, although you did give me something of a start. This place is usually deserted apart from the odd school party."

Look – they're about to close the museum, and I've got to get back to London on the five ten. We can talk on the train if you're going back too?

"That would be wonderful if you're sure I'm not imposing"

"Not at all –it would be good to have some company on the journey. I can tell you all about the Tsanta's too"

The Photographer led them on a winding route through the colleges and narrow cobbled streets of the town, so that within a couple of minutes she was completely disoriented. It was dark and cold, and a kind of mist hazed the street lamps, throwing the doorways into deep shadow and giving a feeling of desertion to the narrow alleys. Nina began to feel a little nervous, and studied the broad dark back of the man who was walking rapidly a couple of paces in front of her, so that she had to hurry to keep up with him, occasionally stumbling on the uneven cobbles.

Why was he playing along with her game? After so long spying, watching, observing every public aspect of this man's life, without ever having made his acquaintance she was a little thrown find herself following him down a dark Oxford street, about to spend over an hour in his company on the train. And who knows how much further?

The trip to Oxford had been a whim. She had been following him, as always, and had jumped the barrier that lunchtime at Paddington, as he walked in his usual rapid and distracted way along the platform. She had hesitated only a moment before choosing another carriage a couple down, where she wouldn't be seen. Once the train had got underway, and he had had time to find a seat, she had made her way down to his carriage and taken up a her quiet vigil.

He seemed distracted. She wondered whether his destination was Reading or Oxford - the only stops this train made. And what he would be doing there? A meeting? Possibly - she would have to wait and see. He didn't seem to have any friends, and his agent handled all his business (her mind flashed back to Quentin - something hidden. The man unconscionably disconcerted over the information requested about his client. No, he wasn't an easy man to contact. A meeting out of the question.)

The train stopped at Reading. The Photographer made no move to alight, but merely stretched his long frame as the woman across from him got off. He gazed into the middle distance, seeming

oblivious to his surroundings, deep in thought. So, they were going to Oxford.

That made sense, given the Photographer's penchant for libraries and museums. She had followed him to the British Museum, dodged him through the great stacks of the British Library. Perhaps he was visiting the Bodleian? She had never been to Oxford before, but had heard of the famous collection.

Finally the train had reached Oxford. She nearly lost him leaving the station - the front was wide open, and she had had to wait until he was almost out of sight before following him down the street he had taken. They had reached the museum of Natural History, crossed through the high light chamber with its wrought iron filigree's and dinosaur skeletons, when he disappeared down the back and she had come into the dark chamber with the shrunken heads.

A balcony or mezzanine floor ran along one side of the room, overlooking the display cases. She had gone up there, and watched him from above, seen him ignore the rest of the cases and go straight towards one. He stood there staring as if communing with something. She sensed that that whatever was in the case was very important to him and was the key to this mysterious man, the journey a kind of pilgrimage for him. If there were ever to be a time to approach him, it would have to be now. The checkerboard of cases stretched out below her, inviting her participation in the game. She had gone down to make his acquaintance.

But his response had not been entirely as expected. He had neither brushed her off nor seemed to know her - his look reflecting the polite interest of a stranger. After so long, she had expected a shock of recognition in his eye - that she should have been so intimate with him over the preceding weeks, and he have no sense of her startled her.

Yet this was apparently the case. The Photographer had not spoken since leaving the museum and she followed him obediently

– wondering if he knew that she had been his constant shadow, that this would be the second train journey they would share that day. When they reached the station the train for London was standing on the platform. The Photographer made straight for the first class carriage, and chose an empty compartment with a sliding door. The rest of the train was crowded with commuters, but she noticed, as she had before, that the Photographer seemed to carry an air of solitude with him. They sat down facing each other in the compartment, still silent. With a whistle the train departed for London.

**CHAPTER 24**

Nina sat opposite the Photographer, the grey scenery rushing past the window forming a temporary distraction, the carriage quiet and deserted apart from the two of them.

After so many weeks of hiding, watching and constructing narratives in which they were connected she found herself at a complete loss for words. Those cold eyes, now turned on her, stifled the conversation in her throat and unnerved her. She felt as nervous as a teenager on a first date. In person his presence was even more intense, almost hypnotic in its intensity. Unable to hold his gaze she looked down, wondering if the gesture appeared coy. Beneath the British Rail table their feet are mere inches apart. She has never been this close to him before.

Still the Photographer said nothing, merely examining her with his eyes, twin gimlets pinioning her in place. Was this his manner with his subjects? Was this the technique that enabled him to strip the artifice from the image, exposing the hidden corruption beneath the trappings of society? She sensed that she would have to go carefully here. Neither could make reference to her surveillance of him. He had his own agenda.

His opening gambit made no reference to their relationship, nor showed that he was even aware of it. He quickly assumed the persona that he would use with her; the artist discussing his work, and shot her a leading question.

"So, tell me about yourself – where does this interest in long dead cultures spring from?

"I went to Art College – studied photography. I've always been interested in the representation of the body after death, mummification and all that. So I read around a bit more than was strictly necessary. I think it was all that work with the body and perspective, all those shadows on the glass. It said something to me about truth, and lies – which aren't untruths, but different

versions of reality. Like most photography today is trying to be topical – but it doesn't need to be about events, or people, because at the end of the day they're all just accidents. Does that make sense? I've thought so much about this stuff, but it's hard to explain it."

She had taken his challenge; so they would both play a game, both pretend that there was nothing more to this meeting than simple curiosity. He decided to take her on her own tack, and couldn't resist tackling interpretation of his own obsession.

"Not at all. In fact I happen to be a Photographer myself – it's possible you might even be familiar with my work?"

As he said this he watched her closely, searching for the slightest signs that would tell him she was lying. Was that a tremor in her eyelid? Nina sensed that it was an important question, and hesitated for a moment before replying. "A couple of your pictures were on our curriculum at college..."

"Ah – so you've seen some of the old stuff: that's all done with now. My new work is a big departure. I've been looking deeper. Imagine. Perhaps there is a real truth, and all the interpretations you talk about are just veils concealing it? Has that possibility occurred to you? That I'm trying to show that each of these versions of reality is a lie that we are awaking from? Maybe this world is a mass hallucination, and we need to be shaken back into ourselves – and that is why we have languages upon languages, proliferating as the human race fragments, and mass communications that just raise the level of Babel, the confusion. Maybe we need to cut through all that and realise that it's a drug, an opiate – that there is a single language out there that is the key to the single truth that we are powerless to comprehend? How would you go about finding that language?"

What was he asking her? She sensed that this conversation, so incongruous with the situation, was in fact a code that he was inviting her to break.



"That depends on what language it is you're talking about. A visual language?"

He shook his head - Not necessarily - I think you would need to induce a certain state of mind to comprehend it though, a state where you could see and hear things differently.

"You mean with drugs? I don't know. I'm not sure if I agree with that. You always think you've discovered the secret of the universe and then when you come down it's all just chemicals, organic soup. Isn't it funny, all this time I've been making up my own interpretations of your work - and now we seem to be talking completely at cross-purposes? So what are you working on at the moment? You haven't shown anything for a while have you?"

"Funny, my agent keeps asking me the same question. And I always give him the same answer: sorry, I can't tell you, I'd have to kill you. Luckily he appreciates my sense of humour."

She smiled at his joke, and waited for him to continue.

"Anyway, I'm working on a series of portraits - you might say they're visual representations of verbal snapshots, observations of the subject over a period of time. I'm piecing together a language out of patterns. It's hard to describe. Maybe you'd like to see some of my latest work? No one's seen it yet. I'd be very interested in your reaction."

"I'd love that. In fact I'd be honoured, if you're sure you don't mind?"

No, not at all - in fact if you're not doing anything later, maybe we could go straight back to my place. I'm sure I could rustle us up something to eat as well."

This was beyond her expectations. He had her. She eagerly accepted his invitation, without wondering why this notoriously private man would invite her into his house. After all, she had seen him take several people home over the weeks she had been

watching him. The fact that she hadn't seen them leave again lurked at the back of her mind, but she decided not to miss this opportunity. It was one that certainly wouldn't come again...

They were quiet for a while, on the last stretch of the journey to London, each thinking their own thoughts, the Photographer sneaking quick looks at the girl as she looked out the window, evaluating her pale skin, the freckles that scattered themselves over her hands and face. He could see in her glance that she was used to concealing her thoughts – and wondered whether she was a consummate actress, with a reason for accepting his invitation so quickly, or just, as she said, a fan of his work who had jumped at the chance for an exclusive preview. Either way, she was his. It was not his way to choose a victim after so accidental an acquaintance, but he was beginning to reach a dead end with the vagrants and drop outs that were his usual targets. Yes, she would do nicely – but first he needed to find out a few more things about her.

"Do you live alone? I find solitude concentrates the mind wonderfully when I'm trying to work. I suppose that makes me a bit of a loner, but then perhaps you need to be completely alone before you can see clearly."

"Yes – well kind of – I live in a squat with a bunch of other people, but you could hardly describe it as communal. They pretty much take pains to remain anonymous. I think I prefer it that way – no one keeping track of your movements. People think you're odd if you like to be alone too much, I find."

"The vast majority of people seem to think anyone who isn't exactly like themselves is odd – perhaps it consoles them for their lack of originality. Anyway – here we are."

The train was pulling into Paddington, lights shining over the empty platform, the old station like some pre-war cathedral, with its glass roof and wrought iron supports. They stood up ready to alight, and fight the crowds on the platform. Stepping off the train the Photographer ignored the other passengers and strode purposefully in the direction of the taxi rank with Nina in tow. They

could hardly get home now quickly enough to suit him, and as soon as they were seated in a cab he began talking rapidly to cover his nervousness.

"It will be interesting to see what you make of what I've been working on lately – to get your perspective on it. It's a bit of a departure for me you see, and I suspect it's not the kind of thing that will appeal to any kind of mainstream audience."

"I'm not sure that I'm exactly typical, but I'll do my best. It's not every day a famous photographer asks my opinion! So where are we headed then?"

"South London, my apartment. I've got my studio and darkroom there. Hopefully it shouldn't take too long – looks like we've just missed the rush-hour."

Lights flash past the windows, vehicles rushing past each other, crossing lanes, swerving at the last possible moment. They had left Marble Arch behind, and were speeding down Park Lane with its ballrooms and Ferrari showrooms; Hyde Park stretching dark and emptied along one side. They drew up to a traffic light and the Photographer gazed into the darkness whilst Nina studied the windows of the Spy Shop, and thought about bugging the Photographer's apartment.

The Photographer was feeling far less nervous now – realising that at the end of the day she was not that different from Gerard. The two of them, on the surface quite dissimilar, had more in common than had first appeared. Both were equally disconnected from the world, border dwellers, and therefore vulnerable. He dismissed his concerns about anyone noticing her disappearance, and settled comfortably into the routine that he had developed over long practice.

She trusts me he thought, fingers templed under chin in a gesture common with him – she trusts me like the others, she sees this personality, donned like a disguise just for her, and thinks I've given her a glimpse of the real person. They crossed the river,

drove down dark streets glinting with damp, and arrived, rain misting the pavement with steady drizzle, at the Photographer's block.

He paid the taxi off whilst she waited on the pavement, nervous in this familiar street, and pretending that she didn't know exactly which block was his, recognise the stale smell of the hall. Behind the door was an apartment she could only guess at – the heavy drapes had concealed even the slightest glimmer of light, the slightest gap through which it's contents could be glimpsed. The Photographer opened the door for her and bowed ironically – Welcome to my humble abode – she forced a smile.

He pointed her towards a chair, and departed for the kitchen – I'll make us some coffee. She sits there only a second before following him. He is bent over the counter, fiddling with the coffee machine.

Inside she felt tense with the knowledge of something born on the journey from Oxford, a change in their relationship. Up until now he had communicated with her by tacit messages, signs that she had read in his behaviour whilst stalking him. But now they were in direct communion – and still he persisted in pretending that there was no connection between them, treating her with the politeness of a stranger. She felt his presence as a physical touch, a sensation on her skin, a tingling between her legs as though his fingers were resting there.

It was a small kitchen; bachelor sized, with an incongruously large stove, an Aga or some such, along one side. A quiet step brought her to him. She reached out a hand and touched his cheek. He froze as she moved her fingers slowly down his jaw, and fitted herself into the hollows of his back, holding him in the cage of her arms. She was just tall enough to lay her head on his shoulder and whisper in his ear.

"It wasn't just a fascination with your work that made me approach you in the Pitt Rivers – you know that don't you? You feel it too? Isn't that why you really brought me back here?"

The Photographer was completely rigid. It hadn't happened quite this way before - this was not part of the program. His thoughts flew around the network of rules that he had built for himself like rats trying to escape from a maze - her slight breasts pressed against his shoulder blades. Her touching him. The seconds passed, he stood there frozen. What to do: was this some kind of game? What was her strategy? What should be his?

He dropped his hands and grabbing her wrists, spun around and ducked out of the circle of her arms. Her eyes were level with his, but there was no fear in them

"Please don't. Let's talk about this- maybe you have the wrong idea about all of this, There's nothing complex about my motives, I just wanted to talk to you. Here, I haven't finished making the coffee - why don't you wait in the sitting room, and I'll be through in a minute?" He kept his tone level, calm and conversational. She had to buy this. He kept his back to the counter whilst she took the step that brought her to the door. He didn't think she would have noticed anything. It was all part of it.

As soon as he was sure she was following his instructions, he shouted through to the other room "Milk and sugar?" "- Just black please, two sugars." He stirred the powder into her coffee, and brought the two cups through to where she was sitting.

Nina was perched on the edge of a seat looking pensive and uncomfortable. All good - he could take the upper hand. He handed her the coffee, and took a chair facing her, but not too close. She took a sip of the coffee, grimaced at the temperature and put it on the floor to cool a little. Not enough of a sip for the sedative to work...the Photographer felt tension spring in him, his nails cutting into his palms. He forced himself to relax, fingers uncurling. He placed his hands deliberately on his knees, where she could see them.

"You don't have anything a little stronger do you?" She smiled at him, slightly mocking. She was playing with him. He should never

have brought her back. He wanted to kill her there and then, but kept his voice level.

"What's your poison?"

"Oh anything; I'm probably pretty much immune to most of them by now: Whiskey for preference."

The Photographer stood up and went across to the cabinet where he kept spirits and tumblers - mostly for effect, since he didn't drink himself. "Jameson's alright?"

"Sure, that's fine"

She brought the cup across, balanced carefully so as not to spill the hot coffee. As she moved the Photographer caught himself noticing things about her, little details; despite her height she had a childlike quality about her, a slight gawkiness perhaps contributed to by her long limbs. He sensed bravado, and curiosity. Awareness of these things made him somewhat nervous. It didn't do to become identified. It made everything that much more complicated; but there could be no going back now.

The Photographer poured a judicious shot of whiskey into the cup, the liquid swirling up almost to the rim. For a few moments they were just a handspan apart, and then he capped the bottle, stepping back to replace it in the cabinet. Nina stood there for a few moments, sipping the coffee to give herself time and walked back to her chair, once again balancing the cup precariously. As she sat down she felt a sudden wave of dizziness, and grabbed at one of the wide armrests to steady herself. The sharp eyes of the Photographer missed none of this - but it would be far too early to feel the chemicals only now entering her bloodstream, the whiskey, sugar and strong coffee concealing the taste of something sharper. He took small sips from his own cup, watching her over the brim.

The hot liquid was cooling, and Nina was conscious of a hollow space in her belly that had not been filled since the day before; her eating habits had always been irregular to say the least. It was to this that she attributed the slight feeling of dizziness; the blurred edges that made the room seem slightly unreal. As she looked up over the rim of her cup, she was aware of the Photographer watching her: was his gaze unnaturally intense? It

seemed that his eyes were bright with anticipation of something, but also heavily guarded. The whiskey would explain the slightly rough taste to the coffee, the warmth in the pit of her stomach. But not the strange feeling that started in her groin and made her feel as though her whole body was opening up and relaxing: had he spiked her with some kind of date rape drug?

Nina stood up and took one step towards the Photographer. Another. She felt heavy, as though walking at altitude, her feet blocks of concrete somehow attached to the ends of her legs, her consciousness riding high and looking out from the windows of her eyes. She took another step, which barely reduced the distance between them - although she could have sworn that they had not been sitting that far apart. The black shutters closed in fast until she was looking at the photographer down the length of a tunnel and she felt herself falling.

When he saw the girl lose her balance the Photographer sprang up from his seat and threw both arms around her. Grunting with the effort he lowered her carefully to the floor, adrenalin powering his muscles. So she was just like the others - just as trusting and stupid...

Nina felt his hands grasping her arms, the hard fingers digging into her soft flesh. She felt him seat her back in the chair, and lay her head on the rest. She wondered if she had fainted but suspected that he had spiked her with some kind of drug - the rest of her body felt as distant as the moon, although she could hear him breathing. She felt straps smooth and cool, encase her wrists and ankles, and a part of her mind panicked - but at the same time it didn't seem that important. Yet another strap crossed her chest and then she felt her head grasped firmly in his large hand as another went around her neck. It was too late to stop him now. Her only hope was to make it appear that she as helpless as she seemed.

The Photographer had some preparations to make, preparations that would normally have been a preliminary to bringing a victim back to the house. But this one had been too unexpected, throwing

everything awry. Too much could be forgotten, essential stages left out. He bent down and pulled an eyelid back - did he dream it, or was there some resistance there, the slightest flutter? No - the eyeball was rolled back in the socket, glazed and unseeing. Good.

He went back through to the kitchen to assemble the tools for the first stage, preparing her for the tattoos with which she would be marked; the story of her journey through the end of life...into death.

When he returned she was just as he had left her, almost as though asleep with just a faint line of drool on the corner of her mouth and the slack features to tell the truth. He laid the ink, the needles and the long straight razor on a small table that he had placed next to her chair for that very purpose, and leant forward to feel her pulse. The dose he had given her would normally have been enough to keep her under for a few hours, but she had drunk just under half of the coffee that he had given her, and the sedative would surely be affected by the whiskey that had been mixed with it. The pulse was slow, with just the hint of a flutter, her breathing light and regular. To the tattoo ink he added just a touch of curare - hardly one part in the thousandth, but sufficient to prevent the muscles from twitching, and to anaesthetise the skin.

These preparations were just a series of sounds to Nina, half felt and reconstructed in slow motion. She heard the click of scissors felt their cool blades against the nape of her neck, felt the softness of shaving foam the precision of the blade following the contours of her skull the fingers cupped in the hollows above her nape, the hair fall to drape across her fingers the rough touch of a towel the new coldness of her unprotected crown. A brief respite. A dawning terror. And then the thousand-fold agony of the tattoo-gun a million needles piercing her skull the spreading numbness oh god the blood dripping down her temples, like the thorny crown oh my god he is crucifying me, and the Photographer, intent on his work branding her with the first of the skeins of language, like a dark arachnid praying mantis needle following the places his fingers have caressed feeling and stealing the heart of her.



She knew he would certainly kill her.

She had lost all sense of time and movement, but it felt as though the night was well advanced. She wished she could open her eyes, but it felt as though she couldn't even conceive of movement. What the fuck had he given her that had paralysed her so?

She would certainly die. Death - the word was like an alarm bell returning her to herself, her heart somewhere in the far country of her body leaping in shock - and - was that a tingle in her toe? From the vibration she judged the Photographer to be somewhere around the back of her head, the whole area numbed so that she felt nothing more than a dull ache, silence but for the regular tenor of his breath. She guessed him intent on the pattern he was creating. Unlike a hairdresser he had not provided any mirrors so that she could view his work from behind oh god my hair... Don't panic. Think.

The steady pressure of the needle was to the left of the nape of her neck - he seemed to be heading down towards the top of her spine, and Nina concentrated on willing her circulation to return, willing movement to return, anything so she didn't feel so powerless, so removed. She was becoming his - being reshaped in some image of his own - she would no longer be herself, but something other, please God was that tingling in her eyelids, flutter, can he see. And her whole body numb, like a giant shot of Novocain - was that a twitch in her finger?

Suddenly the pressure was gone, as if he were standing back to examine his handiwork. Walking around her like a model. Oh my God not my face, please not my face. Still not accepting that she would actually die. Still a part of her believing that she would escape this.

To her infinite relief it seemed like he was taking a break - she heard his heavy footsteps receding and the click of the door closing behind him. She could definitely feel sensation returning to her body, along with movement - although she hardly had the strength to move a finger. Experimentally she tested the bands he had

used to strap her to the chair. They seemed to have some give in them – it felt as though if she concentrated she might be able to free one of her hands at least. But how much time did she have before he returned?

Her arm felt as heavy as lead, but at least she was able to move it. Slim hands and years of wearing tiny bangles allowed her to fold her fingers into slim cylinders, so that her hands became slender extensions of her wrists, the practiced twist of the thumb-joint into the Venus mound, skin slippery with blood. He had obviously been careful to leave the ties loose enough to allow circulation, perhaps so he could judge by the colour of her nails whether she had gone into shock, and had not expected her to regain consciousness for some time. Now she had one of her hands free, and her ears strained to hear whether he was coming back to the room...but it seemed as though he was leaving the house – was that the clicking of the hall door closing behind him? Her right hand was free and she concentrated on freeing the left. It was a painfully slow process – she still felt weak and disconnected from her body, but the knowledge that he planned to kill her was enough to help her find reserves of strength that surprised her. Got it. She began to work at the strap around her neck, hands bloody and fingers encountering the ridged tattoos he had left on her scalp and down the back of her neck – the shaved skin where once had been hair.

The neck strap was fastened with a buckle, which the blood made slippery and difficult to undo, but a few moments of sweating and the buckle came free. The effort got her circulation going, and she began to feel sensation returning everywhere to her body, pins and needles and cramps shooting up her thighs and calves. She bent over and started to undo the straps at her ankles, head throbbing and blood dripping from the fresh tattoos with the effort, ears straining to hear if he might be coming back. Then they too came away.

The harsh ring of the telephone nearly killed her with the shock – but when it continued without stopping she realised that she was alone in the house – unless he just wasn't bothering to answer it.

As she stood up she felt waves of dizziness almost causing her to fall – but she was free!

What to do next? Escape? Should she leave and go to the police, turn him in and tell them what she knew? But a part of her recoiled from this – she had never trusted the police. And then the sound of the hall door opening again decided her, a shot of adrenalin straight to the heart, fury and terror. Picking up the heavy chair that she had been tied to she tiptoed quietly to the door, and waited for him to come through it as she knew he would, to check on her. As the door opened she brought the chair down with all her force on his head. Surprise and shock chased each other across his face and then his eyes turned up in their sockets and he fell heavily to the floor.

As the rush of adrenalin left her, blood loss and exhaustion took their toll. Nina felt the world go black for a second time.

**CHAPTER 25**

For some days now the Explorer had not stirred from his hut. The sun was high in the sky and normally he would have been up and about since dawn, waking with the rest of the village and sharing breakfast with Tarapoto and his mother. On any other day he would be found wherever there was activity, with his ever-present journal and quill.

But all that had changed now. For several days he had not joined the family for their meals or sat talking to the men as they squatted on the platform drinking Masato and discussing the morning's fishing or the portents of the stars, or the messages of the drums from other tribes living on the river delta.

As he weakened the Explorer came face to face with the reality of his own death. And the possibility that all that he had learnt of the Caposcripti would die with him – the meticulous notes eaten by the hungry jungle, to be followed soon after by his bones, until nothing was left but a memory in the minds of people who had every reason to conceal themselves from the eyes of his fellow men. This was not a new thought – it had dogged him even before he had found the tribe, tormented him when he lay helpless with fever in the days before the Caposcripti had rescued him. But to die now, when he had reached his goal, and amassed such a priceless store of knowledge about their culture...to die now seemed cruel indeed. And it was this that paralysed him with indecision. As he weakened he sank further into a deep melancholy, which in turn fed his illness, so that his intimations of death were rapidly becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy. And still the dilemma. Even if he were to work out some way to get his notebooks out of the jungle, he knew that the Speaker would prevent the discovery of the Caposcripti if he could.

Comparing them to the society that he had left he could not help but agree. He thought of other tribes in the Amazon basin, the rape of lands and people in the name of sugar, of gold, of coffee, of guano, and all of the other rich pickings to be had on this

endless continent – the slavery, the waste of lives, the cultures lost in the scramble for power, land, and wealth. Could he in all conscience reveal the location of a tribe who up until now had managed to keep their very existence a secret? It seemed certain that if the journals were found then others would come to look for the Caposcripti. And they would find them, without a doubt.

There was always the chance that they would be discovered anyway – that his desire to hide and protect them from his society would be futile, a kind of vanity, as if by keeping them hidden he was in some way responsible for their existence. He had after all, initially hoped to reveal them to the world as his protégées. He found that he could not quite conceal what he had discovered completely, but maybe he could shroud their location in enough secrecy that they would not be discovered just yet.

He turned over memories of his long life, which seemed more real than the jungle around him – he fell into long reveries that he woke from with a start, feeling disoriented, and forgetting where he was and how he had got there. His thoughts seemed filled with a kind of lucidity that he had never experienced before, which went further towards convincing him that this was the final stretch – the dark river of his iahuaska vision beckoning him. He became further preoccupied with plans and contingencies against his anticipated demise, a prey to dreams and visions, so that he could hardly tell what was real any more.

Sometime during this period he broke his self-imposed isolation and went to look for Tarapoto. He found him mending some fishing equipment by the riverbank.

“Tarapoto”

The boy turned immediately from his task at the sound of his name, with a worried expression. The voice of the Explorer was hollow and reedy, as though already coming from a dead man.

“Tarapoto” – the Explorer’s eloquent gaze betrayed his frustration at the gulf of language that still separated them.

“There is something you must do for me.”

“What is that?”

"You must undertake a journey – a longer journey than you can imagine, travelling far from your people for me. I would not ask this of you, but you are the only one who can help me now."

"A journey?"

"Yes, Tarapoto – a journey to my people. I will die soon. I can feel it and my dreams speak to me of a dark future. But I cannot leave this reality without leaving a message for my people. They must not lose my history, for then it would be as though I had never lived. You must deliver it for me."

"Do you mean your *tsanta*? You wish it to be returned to your people after your death?"

"It is not my head that you must deliver – for they would not be able to interpret your language, or understand the ways of the Caposcripti – but the story of the last days of my life, and of your people, and of this place, which I have recorded in my notebooks. I wish that my people might have them to remember me by."

Tarapoto was unsurprised by this request – understanding that the Explorer's people would find in the notebooks the history of the Explorer's life that would have been lost to them otherwise: to lose the record of a life was like losing a part of the people, which was one reason why the Caposcripti preserved their heads so carefully.

"I will do as you ask, but how can I find your people? You told me that they live far away, so far away that the sun cannot reach there and it is always cold. Surely it would take me many years to walk there?"

"Yes, that is true, but you would not need to travel to my country: there are some of my people closer to here, living where the great rivers meet. You could take my notebooks to them, and they would send them across the great water to my country. Would you do this for me? I trust you above all others to make this journey, for you are strong, and resourceful."

"Since you ask me I must do this for you, although it will be dangerous, and I never travelled so far from my people, or for so long. I will go to the Speaker and ask him what preparations I must make for this journey."

The Explorer looked at Tarapoto – at the candid eyes, set within a whorl of tattoos that covered the boy's face and continued up

across his scalp, shaven but for a long tuft of hair that had been left to grow at the back. It was a beautiful face, the young skin taut and stretched over high cheekbones, the proud bridge of his nose. But, he reflected, it would terrify and bemuse the people of his own society, who would not see past the 'savage' exterior, so different to their own unadorned faces, to the knowledge within. All they would see was a bloodthirsty savage, like the Jivaro. It seemed a shame that all the people of this region should be tarred with the same brush.

The Caposcripti carried not just the fragments of the original language, that curses western man with a sense of his own incompleteness, and sends him wandering around the world like Ahab in search of the missing pieces, but a full blueprint of it, stencilled on their own skin. Comparing their language to English, or for that matter any that he had ever heard or read was like comparing a black and white sketch to its original. Like Plato's forms, or ideals, his own language was but a pale reflection of that of the Caposcripti. As such he was in a hopeless position – there was no way he could hope to capture the subtleties and nuances of the language by recording it in his own: but his meticulous transcriptions of the symbols which they used might be enough to give someone a clue about what he had discovered, enough to enable them to try to rebuild the lexicon. He would not have to reveal the location of the Caposcripti tribe: that little he could do to try to preserve them as they were for at least a few generations, but at least he could try to keep their language alive, if, as seemed almost inevitable, they were to be destroyed in the contact with his own people, their language diluted, polluted and eventually lost completely to them.

He noticed with a start that he had once again drifted into a reverie, and that Tarapoto was looking at him rather anxiously. He realised that he was going to have to lie to Tarapoto. It was pathetically easy. Ironically the very thing that made them vulnerable to his people ensured that Tarapoto believed him implicitly now.

"I have already told the Speaker about this, and he has given his blessing. I wanted to ask you in person, before I become too weak to do so. The spirit river is calling to me now. I can hear them talking on the other side. I have maps for you and instructions for you, as well as messages for my people, which I will give you before you go.

It is important that you leave as soon my body is cold and the spirit has left it, and do not tell anyone where you are going. Especially Huitota. The Speaker and I are agreed on this. Your mother would worry too much. The Speaker will tell her that you have gone on a spirit journey.

"But how can he tell her that which is not so?"

Tarapoto's smooth forehead crumpled as he struggled to get his head around this concept. He was an intelligent young man, but lying was completely alien to his nature. The Explorer was quick to dissimulate, having had years more practise.

"It will be so: the journey will complete your passage into manhood, which was interrupted when you first discovered me in the jungle. When you return you will have learnt enough to take your place amongst the Caposcripti as a leader of men."

Tarapoto remained silent as he considered this possibility. Sensing that he had achieved his aim, the Explorer drew their conversation to a close.

"I will return to the settlement now, to prepare things for you. Come to my sleeping place before dark this evening, and we will talk further of your journey."

Tarapoto nodded silently. The Explorer, sensing that he needed to be left alone to consider the magnitude of the task he had been set, left him to himself. There was a long discussion to be had with the Speaker, and he was already exhausted by the effort of tracking down Tarapoto and speaking with him.

As he shuffled back down the worn path to the settlement, he let his mind wander back over the last few months. He had learnt



much by now of the Caposcripti – in long talks with the Speaker, and with other members of the tribe, and in turn explained to them some of his theories on the relatively new science – Phrenology, and of some of its antecedents – Montaigne's thoughts on physiognomy. He had tried to amaze them by analysing their characters on the strength of the shapes of their skulls, their features, only to have the Speaker show him how the lines already tattooed there described contained the knowledge his science revealed so clumsily.

He had been with them long enough to witness birth, and death; to begin to know them as people and understand the harshness of the life that they lead. It was not pretty. Death was no stranger to the Caposcripti, yet they seemed strangely fatalistic even if the victim was a child. It was accepted. Nor did they spend energy on creating visions of life after death, creating false utopias, heaven or hell. The Caposcripti did not die, they merely left their bodies to decay, whilst their spirit lived on in the spirit of the jungle, and on the tattoos passed on to their descendants. It is for this reason that proper death rites were so important. For spirits could be angry as well as benign, and had the power to possess the bodies of the living if the rituals were unfinished. The Explorer had witnessed the ceremony for young and old alike.

The ritual began with decapitation. The head severed from the body with sharp stones gathered from the caves and shrunk to the size of his fist, the body left in the jungle for the ants and teeming insect life to do their swift work. He has seen the corpses, suspended in the trees, flesh swollen and split. The smell of corruption. Ants removing every trace, even the bones broken down over time, lost in the thick humus of the jungle floor.

This is what will happen to him, too. His bones will decay, his body be eaten by the jungle. The Explorer is long past any illusions. Nothing but his head will survive – shrunk and mummified – preserved by a process which he has meticulously documented in his journal – itself mildewed and stained, pages half rotted and eaten by termites, marked by the corpses of flowers and strange butterflies, petrified fragments of the landscape.

Time now to close those notebooks off, to complete, in so much as was possible, the chronicle he had written. And to remove those essential clues that would lead to their discovery by someone less altruistic than himself. He would have to write letters for the boy, and for his family. Letters of introduction, letters of passage, letters of recommendation, and explanation. He knew it would not come as any surprise to his circle of acquaintances when he did not return from this latest expedition: they counted it little short of a miracle that he had returned from other such journeys in the past. The surprise, if any, was his. Life had finally caught up with him it seemed.

The Explorer spent the next several hours feverishly writing letters and sealing them and his journals into a parcel with oilcloth and wax. His hands were trembling with weakness, and the writing swung in and out of focus, but he took especial care with the final letter, explaining that the parcel contained all that remained of his life and should be returned to his family at all costs. He also listed individuals who might be contacted regarding its conveyance and who would recompense the bearer for their trouble. As he was putting the final touches on this letter, he felt eyes on him, and looked up to see the Speaker, watching him with an inscrutable expression on his face.

"You are making your preparations for death."

It was a bald statement of fact. Even as the Explorer wondered if the Speaker had guessed his arrangement with Tarapoto the Speaker continued:

"You wish to send Tarapoto on a most unwise journey. I know well the dangers in store for him amongst your people."

"Did he tell you then?"

"There was no need. I would not be Speaker if I could not read these things. I have known for some time that this was in your mind."

The Explorer was silent, but the Speaker read shame in his eyes, coupled with a sense of desperation. The Speaker continued:

"You wish him to take your records to your people?"

"Yes."

"I must think on this. Tarapoto must be prepared."

The Explorer was incredulous "Then you will let him do it?"

"It is not in my power to forbid him. But I have grave misgivings. I am sure that no good will come of the journey."

The Explorer felt the Speakers eyes dissecting his soul. He knew that more was expected of him.

"I respect the wish of your people to remain alone here. I could not knowingly put at risk a people who have shown me much kindness."

"It was not kindness that caused us to take you from the jungle."

The flat statement punctured in a moment the whole lie of the Explorer's being, and revealed to him the wisdom and fragility of the people he had described as 'most noble savages' in his journal. The man before him was under no illusions, was in no way ignorant of the society that the Explorer had exiled himself from. It was almost as though he looked through the Explorer at the whole of his race, massed in ranks behind him. There were the wars, the death, and the enslavement of human beings. There were the thousands of tiny miseries daily inflicted and borne. The Explorer felt dirty. His eyes implored forgiveness, but received none.

"The Caposcripti are a good people."

"And yours are not. I have understood much that has not been spoken from your descriptions of your homeland, and the people that bore you. You are in flight from them, but your spirit yearns to return. This is only right and natural. If the records that you have made are not returned to your people you will disappear, it will be as if you had never been. We will perform the death rites for you, but your head will not be preserved with those of the Caposcripti who have journeyed on to the next reality. What then will become of your history?"

The Speaker tilted his head to one side, and the Explorer sensed that he was playing with him.

"I promise you that there will be no clue in my records, or in the messages that I send to my family, that could bring anyone to this place, or enable them to find your people."

"And is this one of your not truths?"

A sudden flush hit the Explorer's pallid cheeks. "No! It is my word!"

The two men stood off each other's gazes. Finally the Speaker sighed wearily.

"For us words cannot describe that which is not so, yet you twist our language, and make it dance to a strange and terrible music. Still Tarapoto will go, for I see the truth in your eyes if not in your speech. You will not knowingly betray us. I will go now, and speak with him, and help him to prepare for the journey you have laid upon him."

The Speaker turned on his heel and walked away, his shoulders a little bowed as though they weighed heavy. The Explorer was exhausted by the intensity of their exchange, and lay back on the platform, closing his eyes.

It had taken the greatest effort to sustain all those lies in the face of the Speaker's preternatural sensitivity. The journal was full of descriptions of the Caposcripti – every detail of his existence with them had been meticulously observed, every symbol of their intricate language had been inscribed somewhere on its pages. But no clue, he was certain, could lead anyone to the exact location of the tribe, still less to the hidden caves where the heads of the elders were preserved, inscribed with first Word, the whole language of the first men which the rest of humanity had lost. Those secrets would die with him, and save his conscience for the vanity that would send Tarapoto out of his world and into hell.

**CHAPTER 26**

Nina came to slowly. It took her a moment to work out where she was and then she remembered bringing the chair crashing down on the Photographer's head. She wondered how long she had been out. Her face felt stiff and crusted, and putting her hand to her head, she felt the ridges from the tattoos, the blood on them long since dried.

She looked across at the Photographer. He lay still, his body unnaturally twisted, in the same position as he had fallen. He did not appear to be breathing. Around his head was a pool of blood, which had spread out and soaked into his clothes. It clung to the polished wooden floor, and shone dully in the dim light. She forced herself to reach and touch him, to confirm what she already knew. His hand was cold, the fingers beginning to stiffen. She had never killed anyone before, but she knew that if he had woken while she was unconscious she would now be dead. It was the purest luck that the blow from the chair had been sufficient to kill him.

She pulled herself together, raised herself to her hands and knees. She'd never killed anyone before, but if it hadn't been him...She stepped over his body, through the door and found herself in a corridor. She felt a burning need to wash the blood away, the remnants of his touch. Not the bathroom though. She flinched at the prospect of seeing her reflection. No mirrors yet. The kitchen would do.

On the counter, evidence: a sachet of powder, a few scattered grains, a tiny measuring spoon. Nina headed for the sink and turned both of the taps on full. She put the plug in and stared dully at the water as the sink filled. She held her hands just below the surface, watching as the ripples distorted them, and blood began to separate from the skin in little eddies. She reached up a hand to turn the taps off and looked around for a towel. A pristine pile of them lay folded in a recess near the sink.

Dull background of pain. Flakes of dried blood fell from her face as she winced, and floated on the surface of the water. Nina dipped one end of the tea towel in the sink, wrung it out and slowly began the work of removing the clotted blood. All around her the dead silence of an empty house. She felt curiously divorced from her own body, even as she watched the blood colour the water in the sink, forcing her to empty and refill it several times. Finally she judged she had removed all of the dried blood, while more oozed from the fresh tattoos. She grabbed another tea towel from the neat pile and wrapped it around her head before emptying the sink a final time. Suddenly she wanted nothing so desperately as a nice cup of tea.

All around her in the tiny kitchen was a profusion of cupboards and drawers. Where to start? On one of the surfaces was a shining kettle. It seemed logical that tea-making ingredients would be close to hand. Once Nina had filled it with fresh water and switched it on she started opening the cupboards and drawers, looking for anything that might resemble tea bags. By the time the kettle had boiled she had found some, and a cup, and made herself some tea. She sat down on the kitchen floor, arms wrapped around her knees and tea cupped between her hands. She noticed they were shaking.

She must be in shock. A part of her mind knew this, but the various tasks had kept that part occupied whilst the rest went on automatic. Now she felt herself shuddering with reaction, and the shock kicked in. She put the tea down and went through into the sitting room to find something stronger, stepping over the body of the Photographer as she did so. She would have to find somewhere else to put him.

The drinks cabinet was open as the Photographer had left it, and stocked with bottles of whiskey and other spirits that looked as though they had never been opened. Nina grabbed one and took it back into the kitchen. Pouring a large slug of whiskey in her cup of tea, she sat down again to think.

It had taken Nina nearly 36 hours to piece together the hidden, secret self that had not been apparent from the outside. Her search was not systematic. She wandered through the rooms in a daze, opening doors, drawers and closets at random; his legacy to her. The flat was soon littered with things she had found – shrunken heads, notes, photographs, bunches of unidentifiable herbs, vials of prescription drugs obtained under a number of different names, or taken from his victims? And a collection of carefully labelled DAT tapes. Finding the hidden room, blacked out with its padded walls and microphones, she decided to keep him in there for the moment, whilst she worked out her next move.

She found dozens of shrunken heads. Blackened and polished they seem hardly human – no repository for the soul. And how did they fit in? What was he going to do with them? What was he trying to discover? Was this the 'work' he had been talking about?

In another drawer she came across a series of photographs, eerie documentaries of the transformation of each subject. And notebooks, mountains of notebooks it seemed, filled with tiny handwriting. She began to get an inkling of the scale of the Photographer's activities.

She listened to the tapes, those voices coming from the darkness and silence – pleading, cajoling – by turns angry and desperate; the gradual slide into incoherence, the voices tailing off to whispers, weak entreaties. How many of them? How often had he succumbed to that need, stalked the streets for the victims that he knew no one would miss?

Each fresh proof of his actions shocked her gradually back into a sense of herself, but also intrigued her. She sat for hours in his austere study, immersing herself in the notes and tapes that she had discovered, with the tools of his work laid out around her, as if by osmosis she could discover what he was seeking.

The Photographer had stored all the heads away in sealed boxes, hidden in the dark mahogany cabinets in the living room – each

carefully labelled and cross-referenced with their notes. Nina removed them all and arranged them around the room, strangely uniform and dark with their scrolls of bluish black tattoos and the neat threads, but in close-up each as individual as a snowdrop or a fingerprint. The sight of the heads before her was eerie: there was no denying that each had once been a human being with thoughts and feelings like her – their cries still resounded in her ears, the gradual loss of words. But as she looked at them she remembered a quote she had read once at art school, made by Paul Thek on visiting the Capuchin catacombs “it delighted me that bodies could be used to decorate a room like flowers.” Nina wondered if the Photographer had ever taken them out and arranged them like this, if he had looked for meaning in their juxtapositions. He reminded her of Doctor Dee, and his endless search for the Philosopher’s stone, experiments with homunculi and alchemical marriages. But what if it was not a thing, but an idea that he was looking for? Were all these shrunken heads the end in themselves, or just a by-product of something much more important?

As she stared at them she began to see different ways in which they could be arranged, groupings and structures, similarities and differences that suggested new combinations in their layout. But there was still something missing. She thought back to the beginning of their relationship; the days when she had watched him in the library and tried to piece together a personality and a history for him based on the books that he chose for his research. Nothing had prepared her for this though: what was the connection? Why the shrunken heads? She had never heard of a serial killer treating his victims like this before. There must be something more, something that her haphazard searching through his apartment had failed to turn up so far.

Some time later she pushed aside the last of the notes and turned off the tape recorder. She sat motionless for a long time, with her mind reeling, her thoughts grappling to comprehend the mentality of a serial killer, the mind of the Photographer. She too had killed – but knew somehow that this would be the only time, and that the killing had completed something in her and launched her into the next stage in her existence. She returned to the hidden room,



where his body lay just as she had left him, and dragged his stiff corpse through into the kitchen.

\*       \*       \*

Nina spent a long time thinking about what to do with the Photographer's body; it had kept quite well in the small room where she had been storing it, but she knew it would become a problem soon. To begin with she didn't have the slightest idea how to dispose of a body. Well this wasn't strictly true. Like everyone else she'd watched the cop dramas, read the stories in the papers and books by Ruth Rendell. But TV shows and detective novels are woefully short on details. For example, where do you get hold of quicklime if you don't happen to have any lying about? She ran through options in her mind. Bury him? That would involve leaving the flat, and she'd have to pick somewhere remote enough that his body wouldn't be discovered by accident. And she didn't have a car. Acid bath? Where would she get that much acid? And wouldn't it mark the bath? Nina had a suspicion that the answer lay somewhere in the flat. The Photographer must have had some way of disposing of the body of his own victims: maybe she could discover it. One thing was for sure. She needed to make the Photographer disappear so thoroughly that people would assume that he had fled to another country to avoid retribution for his actions. There was only one thing for it: she would have to try and burn him.

Cutting up the Photographer was a messy job, despite the plastic she had laid out over the tiles. Both Nina and the kitchen were bloodied when she finally sat back on her haunches to look at the dismembered torso, limbs and head before her. She would have to saw some of the larger pieces, but luckily the coal box on the oven was big enough to fit the pieces into without too much more work. She suspected it wasn't the first time it had been used for incinerating bodies.

It took several more hours to burn all of the pieces, and clean both herself and the kitchen from top to bottom. It would be mildly suspicious that there were no fingerprints anywhere on the taps or

surfaces, but the main thing was that no trace was left of her presence. Nina went back through to the sitting room and began to scrub the wooden floor, to remove any traces of blood.

Finally she made a great heap of the heads, the notebooks, tapes, and all of the other grim paraphernalia of the Photographer's experiments in the centre of the dark polished floor. Viewed in totality like this it made a surreal collage. But there was still something missing. The whole was still more than the sum of these parts. Nina sat, cross-legged, staring at the strange sculpture she had made. In the Photographer's notes there had been mention of an Explorer, a tribe, a hidden language. She leaned forward and plucked one of the notebooks from the pile, flicking through it to see if she could find the reference again. That damned tiny handwriting. It had been somewhere near the end, accompanied with sketches of strange symbols. There.

"The old man was onto something: The Caposcripti hold the key. Locked in the heads in the jungle. No one will find them now. No one else has seen the journals. Must keep it that way. The lost tongue must be mine alone."

A single reference – but it seemed to hold the whole key. In general the notebooks were not personal – the Photographer had maintained an objective tone whilst describing his atrocities. It was this that had made her notice, and remember, the aside.

So where were the journals? They must be somewhere in the flat – she couldn't imagine that a man as secretive as him would entrust them to anyone else.

The one room she had not turned over was his bedroom. She went down the corridor and opened the door.

Like the rest of the rooms in the house it was spartan. The same dark polished floor, the same shadows cast by windows heavily draped. There was no furniture in the room except a bed, a nightstand and a straight-backed chair. Built-in cupboards stretched along one wall.

Where to start? Nina opened the first of the doors set into the wall and peered inside. A light had come on as the door opened which threw everything into start relief. Black suits and coats hung in neat row. A long shelf stretched above them. She started feeling the pockets of each garment, looking for any clue – but there were no books hidden there. Nothing but a few old bus tickets and dry cleaning receipts. She dragged over the straight-backed chair and climbed up to see if there was anything on the shelf. Shoeboxes stacked neatly concealed nothing but highly polished shoes. She climbed down and moved on to the next cupboard. Shirts. Socks. Underwear. There was something unnerving about rifling through the dead man's things, the trappings of normality. But still no journals, no clues.

An angle-poise light was positioned on top of the simple nightstand, throwing a well of light onto the single bed when she turned it on. Under the mattress? She reached down and lifted it up. Nothing. And nothing underneath the bed but dust. Damn. She threw herself on the bed and her eye fell onto the nightstand. Surely he wouldn't keep it in such an obvious place? She tried the drawer. It wasn't locked, but slid open silently on well-oiled runners. The cover of a book slid into view. Fuck. A bible? Nina stared at the cover, her mind racing. A bible. A Gideon's bible at that, pilfered from some hotel room. The Photographer had not struck her as a particularly religious man. Perhaps he had kept it there for comfort?

As she reached down to pick it up she noticed it felt odd, the weight wasn't quite right. And when she opened it she realised why. The centre had been neatly cut out to leave a hiding place, inside of which was a stack of crisp fifties. Nina took them out – shit, there must be five grand there at least! – and noticed, that underneath was a key with a tag on it. On the tag was written "Paddington: 5606".

"Of course. His get-out clause. He never leave the journals where they could be found if someone raided the house."

Her voice sounded loud in the empty room, and Nina started guiltily. She pocketed the wad of notes and the key and went back to the sitting room. It was time for her to leave now.

Donning a pair of rubber gloves she went around the entire apartment polishing the handles of the doors and anything else she might have come into contact with. She went back through into the sitting room with a bottle of paraffin she had found underneath the kitchen sink and soaked the pile of notebooks, tapes and shrunken heads thoroughly, before lighting it. The whole pile immediately went up with a 'wumph' of blue flames, which died down almost immediately, while yellow tongues began to lick at the corners. Nina picked up the Photographer's wallet and watch, took a last look around the apartment and let herself out through the front door. She never heard the click of the hall camera as the door closed behind her.

**CHAPTER 27**

The body of the Explorer lay on the pallet. In death, and stripped of his clothes his wasted frame was laid bare, crisscrossed with a tracery of old scars. He looked impossibly fragile and ancient, as if a hundred years had passed and served to mummify him; yellow skin stretched tight over his once large frame. The Speaker looked at the corpse dispassionately. The spirit of the Explorer was long gone, his body exhausted by his final battle with the fever. Their main task now was to ensure that his spirit was sent on its journey with proper ceremony.

The Explorer was decapitated with his own machete, and his body taken into the jungle to be disposed of. The Speaker carefully threaded a length of thong through his mouth and down through the open neck, and then strung it above the fire. The smoke would keep insects from devouring the head before the Speaker had finished his preparations. He would be gone for two days, which he would spend gathering the required plants, meditating and fasting – purifying himself for the ceremony ahead.

He left instructions with the tribe for a large quantity of smooth stones to be gathered from the river, of varying sizes, but as round as possible. They also collected many baskets of sand and began to make preparations for a feast. They laid a bed of sand on a cleared patch near the river, and built up a big fire with wood and brush, which they lit through the use of several flat stones, some tinder and a dried branch. On top of the fire they laid large round pebbles from the river.

When the Speaker returned just after dawn he was carrying a large pot fashioned from the reddish clay that was everywhere beneath the jungle floor, and hardened in the fire and sun. He placed this on the ground, filled it with water, and began to drop in stones that had been heated in the fire. After a short while the water began to steam and bubble, and the Speaker carefully removed the stones with a pair of wooden tongs. Then he picked up the Explorer's head and placed in the pot. He lit one of his hot cigarettes and blew

smoke over the pot, all the while chanting and whistling invocations to the Explorer's spirit. The surface of the water was soon covered with a greasy scum, as the Speaker kept adding more hot stones to keep the water at an even temperature.

After half an hour of this treatment he removed the head from the pot and placed it on a pile of sand, which had also been heated with the stones from the fire. The first stage of the process was complete, the skin hung slack and greasy from the bones of the Explorer's face.

In order to shrink the head to the size of those that the Explorer had occasionally seen since he had been living with the tribe, the skull had first to be detached from the skin. The Speaker achieved this with the utmost care, first shaving all of the hair from the head, and rubbing the whole scalp with a paste made from charcoal and herbs.

Once the head was completely hairless, the skin was removed from the skull by making a long incision with a sharpened palm knife, from the crown to the base of the skull hard down to the bone. The skin was then turned back on both sides and peeled back from the bony structure with great care.

The Speaker carefully severed the connections to eyelids, ears and nose, working quickly and precisely to ensure that the flesh was as little damaged as possible by this process. This tricky part of the procedure completed he removed the entire skin from the skull, leaving it naked save for the blue eyes, curiously denuded now in their bony sockets, and the Explorer's few remaining teeth.

The Speaker turned the skin inside-out, and scraped the remaining flesh and fatty tissue from the inside with the edge of the knife, following this by applying a pungent smelling paste and rubbing it in well. This done, he turned the skin right side out again, and carefully laying the head face-down, cushioned by a mat of moss, filled the head with hot sand. Another Caposcripti handed him bamboo needles and palm leaf fibres (which the tribe also used to make hammocks, ropes, hand axes and fishing lines). He used

the sharp needles to push the palm fibre through the skin until he had sewn up the mouth and stitched the eyelids closed. Small bamboo spikes were inserted in the eyebrows and the bridge of the nose to stop the features from dropping. He plugged the nose and ears with soft fibres. There must be no return gateway for the man's spirit.

All of this was carried out in perfect silence, with only the sounds of the jungle and the occasional crackle of the fire to break the spell. Even the children of the tribe, normally playful and noisy, were completely mute and still.

Once the Speaker had finished, he held in his hands a slightly smaller version of the Explorer's head, strangely youthful and peaceful in death, the deep lines and wizened skin smoothed by his ministrations. The Speaker communed silently with the head for some time, marshalling his thoughts, and preparing the death chant with which he would free the Explorer's spirit. Then he began to sing the history of the man since he had been with the tribe, and what little he knew of his life before.

The fire was banked up with fresh fuel, to heat the sandy bed upon which it had been set. In the shimmering heat of the flames, the Speaker was sweating freely, and the miniature thermals created by the blaze distorted the air, causing his tattoos to twist and shimmer with a life of their own. He threw herbs on the fire that gave out a thick billowing smoke, and swapped the hot sand for stones, which he rolled out the empty shell so that they rattled in counterpoint to his chanting. The stones got ever smaller as the head reduced, until he was inserting tiny pebbles into the opening that had been left in the neck hole, rattling them around like dice in a cup. Time and time again the cool, slightly greasy sand was poured from the head, and hot smooth stones rolled around the inside. Flat stones were rubbed all around the outside, sliding easily over the smooth skin, for the contracting pores continually oozed fine oil. The Speaker continued this process throughout the night, until his voice was hoarse, and his eyes raw with smoke. By the next morning the skin was as smooth and hard as tanned leather, the head itself the size of a grapefruit. The resemblance

to the Explorer was quite extraordinary – every feature was preserved, and the deep lines that had marked his face had faded and refined until they looked more like palm lines, on deeply tanned skin the colour of mahogany. The clearing was bright with the rays of the morning sun, and the mist rising from the jungle mingled with the smoke from the fire to give everything a pearly quality. The Speaker hung up the head by its thong, and sat back on his heels. At last they were safe from the spirit of the Explorer, now free to be reborn, having cast off the shackles of flesh and breath.



**CHAPTER 28**

Although Nina was dying to know what was in the locker in Paddington (she was almost certain it was the missing journals), she decided to head back to the squat in Elephant first to change her clothes. The bloodstains didn't show up much on the black outfit she was wearing, but the skirt was still damp from where she'd tried to rinse it out. She'd taken a scarf from the Photographer's wardrobe and tied it around her head to hide the shaven scalp and fresh tattoos, but it was at best a temporary solution. And she couldn't afford to look too unusual – she didn't want anyone remembering her.

Back in the relative safety of her room, with the door firmly locked against any unwanted intrusion Nina unwrapped the head scarf and took a good long look at herself for the first time since that fateful day (Was it really only 36 hours ago?) when she had decided to board the Oxford train at Paddington. The face that looked back at her seemed unfamiliar, altered. She followed the lines of mysterious characters that seemed to mark out different areas of her scalp. That the Photographer had only had time to sketch the vaguest outlines was clear from the heads that Nina had found in his apartment. Some had been almost totally covered with the mysterious tattoos.

Nina ran a hand over the soft and slightly prickly fuzz that covered her scalp. The hair would probably grow back in a few weeks. Until then she'd have to resign herself to wearing hats all of the time. Luckily hats were one thing she had plenty of. They'd come in very useful for spying on people at the library. The tattoos also seemed to be healing fine, although the skin around them was still very tender. Nina had never had a tattoo before, but had an idea that you were supposed to put Vaseline on them to keep them supple. She found a pot of it amongst a mess of makeup and empty glasses at the foot of the mirror, and started rubbing it on her scalp. Then she hunted around until she found a velvet cap and a change of clothes and quickly stripped off the ones she was wearing, throwing the wallet, key, wad of notes and the

Photographer's watch onto the old mattress that served her as a bed. Bruises marked her pale skin in a few places, but apart from that she felt in surprisingly good shape.

Nina dressed again quickly, and sat cross-legged on the bed to count the money. It was definitely more cash than she'd ever handled before: one hundred crisp fifties. Five thousand pounds. The wallet yielded a couple of platinum credit cards, and another two hundred quid in cash. A few business cards and his British Library reader's ticket completed the haul.

Nina kept a twenty, slipped the watch on over her wrist, and put the rest carefully underneath the mattress. She took one last look at her reflection in the mirror, squaring her shoulders and adjusting the angle of her hat slightly. Then she left the room, locking the door securely behind her.

Nina took the Bakerloo line to Paddington. On the tube she studied the faces of the other passengers, and wondered what their stories were. It was mid afternoon, according to the Photographer's watch, and the carriage was almost empty. The few passengers stared vacantly into space, avoiding one another's eyes, or buried themselves in newspapers. No one seemed to take much notice of her, but then, why should they? Baker Street came and went, and the train began to fill up. A woman next to Nina unwrapped a sandwich and Nina realised that it was at least 36 hours since she'd last eaten. Well, that could wait.

All of a sudden the train burst out of the tunnel and Paddington arrived. Nina took the escalator up to the station concourse, and followed the signs to the left luggage at Platform 12. It was tucked around a corner, and there seemed to be no one about, but she knew that CCTV would be filming her every move. Still, she was pretty sure that only two people knew the significance of locker number 5606, and one of those was dead. She took the key out of her pocket and along the row of doors. There it was, near the end, and the key turned smoothly in the lock. Nina peered into the deep narrow space that was revealed as the door opened. Right at the back was a package wrapped in brown paper. It looked just about

the right size to contain a couple of notebooks. Nina felt a sense of elation as she slipped the package inside her jacket. She hurried back down into the tube, and retraced her steps to the Elephant and Castle.

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At 3.30 Quentin got a call from the Police...there's been a fire in a south London apartment – belonging to a Mr James Crichton? They wouldn't bother Quentin normally, but Mr Crichton appeared to be...un-contactable. Perhaps Quentin knew of his whereabouts or might be able to help the Police with their enquiries? There were certain...irregularities that they would like to clear up.

What kind of irregularities? Quentin wanted to know, being long used to unusual behaviour on the part of his clients.

"I'm not at liberty to reveal that over the phone, Sir, but we'll be happy to tell you everything down at the station."

Quentin wrapped up what he had been doing and headed down to Lambeth North Police station, where a series of mysteries awaited him. Inside the Photographer's apartment the police had discovered charred human remains, the result of what appeared to be a deliberate case of arson. They had also discovered a concealed room – rubber-padded with an elaborate airlock. A neighbour had smelt smoke and called the brigade – but when when they broke down the door they discovered that the fire had gone out of its own accord, fortunately before the floorboards had ignited. There was no sign of the flat's occupant – nor did it look as though there had any struggle.

No, Quentin had not seen or spoken to the Photographer since their last business meeting, several weeks before. Mr Crichton was a very private person and didn't like to be disturbed unnecessarily. No, Quentin didn't think it was odd. Mr Crichton was a celebrated photographer, and many celebrities are known to be jealous of their privacy. His client was no exception. And did Quentin have any idea of the present whereabouts of Mr Crichton? No, Quentin did

not. Mr Crichton rarely made it his business to apprise Quentin of his movements. It was possible that he had decided to go on a trip. He had travelled widely.

The policeman laid something on the table that Quentin did not immediately recognise. As he got nearer to the blackened object he realised that it was a charred human head, reduced to the size of his fist. As the sight of the thing his gorge rose. He raised his eyes to those of the police officer across the table from him.

"You realise that this is potentially deadly serious Mr Fitzallen? This is just one of the remains we found on the premises. There is a possibility that these were old specimens, bought for the photographer's collection. Our forensics department is already trying to identify their origin. But it's equally possible that Mr Crichton has been responsible for an awful lot of murders. We'll need to consider that possibility too. We appreciate any help you can give us with our enquiries, Mr Fitzallen."

Quentin was silent. He thought back to his last interview with the Photographer; his insistence the world wasn't ready to see what he had been working on. His refusal to divulge a single detail, even to Quentin, his agent. If even a fraction of what the Police were suggesting were true then Quentin was glad of his ignorance. Professional discretion only went so far – and certainly didn't stretch to becoming an accessory to murder. Quentin could well believe the Photographer was capable of killing. He remembered the look the Photographer had given him at their last meeting; those cold and measuring eyes; his own sense of unease. It didn't take him long to come to a decision.

"I'll help you in any way I can – but I'm not sure how much I can tell you – Mr Crichton is a very private person. Even I know next to nothing about his personal life."

"Well we'll know very much more soon Mr Fitzallen. Thanks for your time – we'll be in touch."

**CHAPTER 29**

Tarapoto set off before dawn on the first leg of the journey that would take him to Iquitos, and the men in the iron ships that would carry the journals back to England along with their cargoes of sarsaparilla, rubber and guano. No one was awake to see him off but the Speaker, who gave him blessings and charms to ward off evil spirits, and furnished him with the Explorer's machete. The Speaker's face was impassive as he reminded Tarapoto of the instructions of the Explorer, and added some of his own. Tarapoto was to follow the river (which the Explorer knew as the Marañon) downstream until it fed into another huge river, called the Amazon. The Explorer had told Tarapoto how to construct a raft, and suggested that this would be the fastest and safest way to travel downriver. With the last of his strength he had begun to teach Tarapoto the rudiments of Spanish, so that he would be able to communicate with any Mestizo's, or settlers, that he met along the way, although he was mindful that this might be risky, as many of them had good reason to fear the warlike tribes, such as the Jivaros who regularly carried off and killed settlers on their lands.

To this the Speaker added admonishments to avoid any other tribes that he might find along the way, and return to the lands of the Caposcripti as soon as he had discharged his promise to the Explorer.

Tarapoto travelled light: his only luggage was an oilcloth parcel containing the journals and letters of introduction that the Explorer had given him, and a pouch containing roots and herbs in whose use the Speaker had instructed him. His step was springy as he travelled through familiar lands, going over his instructions again and again until he was sure he could have recited them in his sleep.

It was the first time that Tarapoto had left his people since the journey that had led him to discover the Explorer so many months before. Then Tarapoto had been a mere boy, but full of the desire to prove himself a man. This time he felt the heavy burden of

adulthood and his promise to the Explorer weighing on him, and he was full of misgivings. Nevertheless there was enough of the child still there for him to feel that he was setting out on a great adventure, and he was confident in his ability to deal with anything that the jungle might throw at him. His fears were more concerned with loneliness, which could drive a man to lose his judgement, and about the spirits that might try to entice him from his path, for they were jealous of life. He rubbed *anato* and *uruku* into his skin to repel the mosquitoes and sand flies that swarmed everywhere, and doggedly followed the stream in its long journey to the great water, as the Explorer had instructed him to. He subsisted on guavas and on the many different types of nuts and fungi that he had learn to forage from a young age, and occasionally speared a fish, or discovered a cache of turtle's eggs on the sandy beaches of the river. He was healthy and strong, and fell victim neither to hunger nor illness, but after a while the solitude began to prey on him.

On the edges of his vision he could see the jewelled dances of hummingbirds and butterflies, and began to discern patterns in their flight that spoke to him of the Caposcripti language. He wished that the Speaker was there so that he could ask him the meaning of these things, or the Explorer, who could have explained their dances with his theory of 'Evolution' - which he had explained was a new idea of a man called Darwin, who had also travelled on this continent, and came, like the Explorer from the place called England. Maybe if he was still wandering these lands, Tarapoto would meet him on his journey, and he could give him the package that the Explorer had entrusted to him. For although he was fired with the enthusiasm and the curiosity of the young he did not think that he would want to live for long amongst the Explorer's tribe - even after this short time his people's absence was like a pain in his spirit.

Although the head of the Explorer had been shrunken according to the Caposcripti rituals, Tarapoto feared that his unquiet spirit would seek him out from the afterworld if he did not carry out the promise that he had made. The Explorer's lips had been sewn shut with the sacred chords, but Tarapoto still saw them struggling to shape those final words in his dreams. No, no matter how long the

journey, or dangerous the way, he could not fail in the task that had been set him, or he would be like the Wandering Jew that the Explorer had told him of when he was well, doomed to walk the world forever.

After a time the river became too deep and swift to wade in, and Tarapoto decided that it was time to make a raft. This task was made much easier with the Explorer's machete, which was much sharper than the Caposcripti's palm knives. Although he had never constructed a raft before (the Caposcripti rarely used them) he remembered the Explorer's instructions, and knew which creepers were good for binding, and how to weave palm fibres to make a rope. He bound the trunks of balsa trees together and cut himself a long pole to steer the craft. This whole operation took two days, and at the end of it Tarapoto was exhausted. He crawled into the fork of a tree, made himself a bed of moss and leaves, and fell into a dreamless sleep, punctuated by the din of cicadas and tree frogs.

The next day he gathered bunches of bananas, nuts and other fruits and wrapped them in plantain leaves. He lashed these to the raft along with the journals and letters, which the Explorer had wrapped in oilcloth, and stood back critically to view his handiwork. The raft was ready. It was just big enough for him to stand or lie on, and floated low in the water with the ballast of supplies he had loaded on it. He made an offering of mangoes and bananas to the river spirits and poled himself away from the bank.

As it turned out, making the raft had been much easier than controlling it. Constant vigilance was necessary to avoid the sandbanks and whirlpools, the logs and other detritus that swirled in the brown water so that you could hardly see it until you were right on top of it. The raft took many knocks, so that Tarapoto was sometimes forced to lay himself flat and grasp the bindings whilst it bucked and shuddered. He was constantly soaked by the water splashing over the side, and by the sudden rainstorms that came down so hard that the surface of the river turned into a boiling cloud of mist that made breathing difficult. Earth temporarily became a place of water, filling his eyes and lungs so that he was

chilled to the bone and thought he would grow gills like a fish. After these showers the river became swollen and angry, and his raft was rushed pell-mell with the current, but he made steady progress downriver. The showers rarely lasted for long, and provided him with fresh water to drink, which he collected in cannonball gourds. The sun soon returned with fiery heat and dried both himself and the surface of the raft as if the rain, and the thunder and lightning had never been.

Just as he had begun to feel confident in his control of the raft Tarapoto nearly came to grief. The river had widened, with red mud cliffs along one side where the land had fallen away in the floods. The current here was very rapid, and Tarapoto kept the raft as close to the bank as he dared, to avoid being swept away. But as he turned a bend the raft was suddenly and swiftly taken by the current and flung into the centre of the river. Tarapoto nearly lost his balance, but clung to the fibres that held the raft together and managed to stay on. The pole fell into the water and was swept out of sight.

Tarapoto was swept along helplessly by the current until the raft hit a large obstruction. A temporary island had been created twenty feet or so from the bank by an earlier landslide, where a large chunk of riverbank (including a tree that had happened to be growing there) had detached itself during the rains. The island had grown in size as brush collected on the upstream shore, and formed a dense floating mat. It was this that had snagged the raft.

Tarapoto shifted his position slightly, but the raft held solid. He rocked back and forth as much as he dared, but there was no movement. It seemed to be fairly firmly wedged, and he cursed the moment of inattention that had led to the loss of the pole. Not only was he now stuck on this island, unable to push the raft away, but he wouldn't be able to navigate towards the bank with any safety. He sat up and considered his options. He could try and swim to the nearest bank. It was mid morning, and not a particularly dangerous time for swimming (the piranhas and other carnivorous fish tended to swarm at dawn and dusk) but the river here was strange to him, and the unpredictable currents made it



risky. He would have to try and cut a new pole from the brush and flotsam that made up the greater part of the island.

Tarapoto unrolled a coil of palm rope from the deck of the raft and lashed the raft to a sturdy trunk as best he could. Then with infinite care, and keeping his centre of balance as low as possible, he crept off the raft and onto the floating mass of junk that the river had deposited there. In amongst the tree branches, vines and other vegetable matter that had caught there were the skeletons of animals that had been swept along the river and drowned. Small plants had taken root, and begun to carpet the temporary island so that footing was treacherous, and Tarapoto had to take great care not to cut his bare feet, toughened though they were by a lifetime without shoes.

All of a sudden he heard a shrill song of alarm, coming from somewhere by his feet. When he looked down he saw a tiny monkey, no longer than his hand, curled in a crevice between two branches. It looked shrunken, as though it were dead, and certainly not capable of making the shrill noise that appeared to be coming from it. As Tarapoto looked closer he realized that an even tinier monkey clung to its neck, frantically trying to rouse its dead mother. Tarapoto reached down and felt the warm body. The creature was shrieking in terror, and he felt its heartbeat thudding against his fingers. He'd seen these monkeys in the jungle, but they were so small, and so shy that he'd only ever caught the most fleeting glimpse of one before. Tarapoto drew his hand back slowly. He didn't want to frighten the little creature to death. As he did the little creature lay on its back, its posture full of submission, and Tarapoto could see it was a female.

"You and I are both trapped here little one. Perhaps if I find a pole for the raft I'll take you with me, eh? You certainly won't survive here on your own. There's not much for a little monkey like you to eat. And not much for me either."

Tarapoto stood up and continued looking through the brush, Eventually he found a branch that would do, and dragged it back to the raft where he set to work cutting it down the size with the

Explorer's machete. The sun was blazing overhead by now, and he was hot and thirsty. He broke open a coconut and took a long slug of the sweet and refreshing juice inside. Then he remembered the tiny monkey. He scrambled back over the brush to where he had left it, guided by the shrill song that started up again as the monkey heard him approaching. Tarapoto reached down and carefully plucked the little creature from her dead mother's neck. He cupped her between his hands, and made his way back to the raft, feeling her little body gradually calming in the warm dark space, although she still trembled uncontrollably. He spoke to her gently

"Don't be afraid little one. I'll look after you. You and I can be friends now, and travel down the great river together. I shall call you Machasqa." Tarapoto walked carefully over the uneven surface of the island, being careful not to crush the fragile creature.

When he had got back to the raft again he tried to put Machasqa down, but she squealed and clung to his fingers, so that he couldn't bring himself to do it. Then he had an idea. He lifted the little monkey up to the long queue of hair that grew at his crown. She seemed to get the idea immediately, and transferred her grip from his fingers to his hair, hanging on quite happily and settling herself in with a birdlike chirrup. She was so light that Tarapoto had to put his hand up to check she was still there, and seemed to fall asleep immediately.

Tarapoto stood up and, grasping the makeshift pole, positioned it against the brush and pushed with all his might. The raft moved fractionally and then settled back in, but he was heartened. He pushed again, throwing the full weight of this body behind the pole. The raft bucked but stayed solid. He realized that the rope still bound it to the brush and felt very foolish. He quickly untied the knots he'd made, coiled the rope up again, tied it down and shoved the raft off into the current. He steered around the island using the pole, and did his best to direct the raft towards the bank. After a while he found himself in a slower current and was able to relax a bit. He steered the raft along the bank until he found a tree growing low over the water that he could moor the raft to, and set about making himself a meal of fruit and coconuts. As the

sweet smell of the fruit reached her Machasqa woke up and scampered down his arm to explore. Tarapoto gave her a morsel of banana and smiled at how enormous it looked in her tiny paws.

Now that he had a travelling companion Tarapoto felt less lonely. He found himself talking to the little creature more and more, and spilling out his concerns about the enormous task he'd been given. The Explorer had told him that it would be much quicker for him to find the settlement on the river than it had taken the Explorer to travel to the lands of the Caposcripti, as the river coming down from the mountains would take him there. All Tarapoto had to do was follow the river downstream for twenty days, and he would find Iquitos: a settlement of some 350 people, along with a bustling port where ocean-going steamships called to pick up sarsaparilla, tobacco and salt fish, before returning down the Amazon to Brazil, and the sea - an unimaginable distance away, at the other side of the continent.

At night he saw the red eyes of Caiman glinting on the banks in the light of the moon and the stars, and heard the splashes as they slid into the water around him. The surface of the water was like glass, broken only by the rings made by fish as they leapt for flies. One dusk ten sardines leapt onto the raft, and he moored so that he could cook them over hot stones. He shared them with Machasqa, along with giant grubs that he dug out of the rotten boles of fallen palm trees.

In some places trees formed a canopy over the water, where quiet anacondas waited to snag unwary prey. His pole did double duty, both for steering and repelling the attacks of the giant reptiles, and after a while he learnt to sleep in snatches, with one eye always watching for danger. In this semi-awake state he felt as though he were travelling through a dream world, where anything were possible. It seemed as though he were living constantly in the spirit world, which he had previously visited only briefly with the aid of the Speaker's drugs and concoctions. He began to experiment with the possibilities of this, discovering that he could communicate with the Speaker, who was able to send his spirit out in the form of a toucan. He listened for the cough of the jaguar at sunset, and for

the sound of the great tree trunks, which his people beat with sticks to send coded messages to each other.

But just as he was beginning to get the hang of this distant communication, he began to be out of range of the sound and knew that he had left the tribal lands for good. Henceforth the jungle would get stranger and stranger to him.

It was soon after this that he began to see the first signs of settlements along the riverbank. Wooden tanks had been built at the water's edge for women to wash clothes, and dugout canoes were moored to sticks that had been sunk into the riverbed. Tarapoto was wary of these settlements, and kept the raft as far away as possible to the other side of the bank. The river was very wide now, so he was able to slip past the settlements unobserved. Small children playing around the canoes moored to the banks looked up as he passed, but he was gone almost as soon as they spotted him. In this way Tarapoto travelled on for several more days and nights, mooring each evening as the sun fell to find a place to sleep, with only his tiny monkey for company.

**CHAPTER 30**

Nina sat in a cafe overlooking the river port at Tabbatinga and watched the sun setting over the Amazon. She was waiting for the boat that would take her on the first leg of her river journey, up through the basin formed by the confusing mass of tributaries that fed into the Amazon proper. The boat was late, and would be even later by the time it arrived, but that was only to be expected: the few short days she had spent in Latin America so far had already taught her that nothing here happened on time; it felt as though her journey to this point had mostly consisted of waiting - for planes that never came, promises that didn't materialise. She didn't mind too much though; it gave her the opportunity to sit and watch the sun going down across the great river.

A man approached her and tried to chat her up. This too was normal - her fair skin, tending to burn too easily, the freckles that appeared at the slightest touch of sun, the red hair, all of which had tended to make her insecure in London, where people made a career out of being beautiful, seemed to have the opposite effect here. She lied and told him that she didn't speak any Spanish, and finally simply ignored him until he went away, her concentration all for the river and the port and the lights of the boats sparkling against the darkening sky.

At last there was a general flurry, and the other passengers who had, like her, elected to wait in the cafe began to surge forward. Nina lingered on for the rush to slow, and when she could bear the waiting no longer grabbed her small bag, paid the bill, and joined the crush on the muddy gangplank and the chaos of everyone trying to board at once and cargo being unloaded. The Timecito would not be leaving for a couple of hours yet, but she had been told to make sure she hung her hammock at the front, to avoid the noise and heat of the engines, and the stink of the toilets and kitchen at the back of the boat.

Nina made her way up to the middle deck, and looked about for a place to hang her hammock. She found a small gap towards the

front of the boat and tied the ropes as best she could to the metal rails running the length of the deck. The Timecito was pandemonium, with children running here and there and adults organising their luggage on the floor in preparation for the journey upriver to Iquitos. Nina decided that the best thing to do for the moment was to get into her hammock and stay there until the boat left the harbour. In any case, the long days of waiting, and the knowledge that she this was to be her home for the next four days made her feel exhausted. She lay down and was soon on the edge of sleep, hearing as if from miles away the sounds of people boarding, and the cries of hawkers selling food, hammocks, cigarettes, sweets and other travel essentials. Finally, as though from a great distance, she heard the siren that signalled that the boat was about to leave, and drifted off into a deep sleep, feeling that her journey was now truly started.

She had strange dreams – so vivid that she thought they were real, until one location would suddenly segue into another, throwing her off-balance again, so that just when she thought she had the situation in hand she would suddenly find herself in a different location talking to different people. She was searching for something, but what it was never quite clear in the dream, and try as she might she could not remember, only that it was very important that she find it. One thing only remained constant: she felt herself being watched, and judged, by someone – she didn't know whom. All that remained was an impression of tawny eyes.

Nina woke properly at 4am to find that the lights on the deck had not been switched off, even though it seemed as though almost everyone was asleep. She wasn't sure what had woken her, except a vague memory of being thirsty in her dream. She untied her water bottle from the end of the hammock and took a deep pull, swilling the water around her mouth to wash away the dust. She felt wide-awake and not at all sleepy, so made her way to the roof of the boat where she could watch the stars and their slow progress upriver.

Nina sat there in the cool night breeze for an hour or so, looking at the stars against the dark outlines of the riverbanks, and thinking

on all that had brought her here. The surface of the water was pitch black and it was very quiet, save for the dull rumble of the engines and the splash of the boat's wake. On the deck below she could see dark huddled forms of people sleeping, and see the occasional flare of a match as the captain lit one of his interminable supply of *porros*. It felt a million miles away from her previous life, and at the same time as though she had always been here, travelling on the river in the moonlight. Still this interlude would be too brief – in the next few days they would arrive at Iquitos, where she could begin to unravel the mystery of the Caposcripti.

Where had the Photographer gone wrong? Nina had read and reread the Explorer's journals on the plane to Bogotá, on the subsequent flight to Letitia and during the days she had been waiting for the boat to Iquitos at Tabbatinga. It was the journals that had acted as her guide so far. The Explorer had obviously been intentionally vague about the location of the Caposcripti, but she had one essential clue: the fact that Tarapoto had travelled down the Marañón to Iquitos to deliver the Explorer's journals to the riverboat captain. He in turn had taken them to Rio de Janeiro, and given them to the captain of an ocean-going ship bound for Portsmouth, and eventually London. These details survived in letters which each had written as they discharged their commissions, and which Nina had found folded in the flyleaf of the second journal, the stiff characters fading on yellowed paper, and signed floridly. So different from the crabbed handwriting of the Explorer, which had become increasingly uneven towards the end, the ink a curious brownish colour whose ingredients she preferred not to imagine. Comparing the journals to the Photographer's notebooks she could see the relationship between the two men – not just in the handwriting, but also their meticulous documenting of even the smallest detail that might be important. But whilst she had found a deep compassion in the Explorer's work, the Photographer's notes were those of a man who looked at humanity through a microscope, dispassionately, as though cataloguing some alien species.

This was where the Photographer had gone wrong. Although he had guessed at the power of the Caposcripti, and that it had rested with

their language, in the end he had missed the truth after all - for his had been a purely intellectual exercise. Nina was beginning to realise that the language of the Caposcripti could not be separated from their environment. It was entwined in the tangled jungle like the bindweed, which wraps itself around the mango and the lemon tree and grows into the marihuana, which fights for space and light with the ciguelan and the coffee tree and the liana, until it is no longer possible to be sure where each plant begins and ends. And growing in amongst these is the language, which holds all together. And if you pluck this vine from its natural habitat? It dies and becomes a fossil of itself, or evolves, becoming something completely different. The Photographer had recreated the language of the Caposcripti in south London, but it was an incomplete lexicon, composed only of terms of pain, loss and fear. There was so much that he had missed out on.

Nina closed her eyes and felt the breeze ruffling her short hair which was starting to grow in over the tattoos left by the Photographer. When she opened them again the scene was still there, the endless ribbon of black shores against the dark bowl of the heavens, the limitless and tangled jungle streamed past the boat on both sides. Suddenly she felt strangely vulnerable, perched there on the roof of the boat, the metal surface cool and slightly rusted beneath her. She edged carefully towards the metal ladder that led to the lower deck and carefully made her way back to her hammock. As she worked her way into it, wrapping a fold over her face to keep off insects and the glow of the ever-present deck lights she felt too keyed up to sleep. In the event she was out almost immediately, with no dreams to disturb her rest.



**CHAPTER 31**

On the afternoon of the sixth day since he had seen the first of the Mestizo settlements Tarapoto realised from the profusion of villages and boats tied up at the river's edge that he was nearing Iquitos. Soon it would be time to abandon the raft and to put into practice what the Explorer had taught him about making words in his language.

He had been poling the raft at the side of the river, where the current was slower. He guided the craft to the bank, and leapt off, driving his pole deep into the mud and testing it with his weight to make sure that it was firm. He made the raft fast to the pole with his palm rope, and then began to pile brush over it so that it was hidden from sight. Then he found a vantage point in the fork of a tree where he could get a good view of the settlement without being seen from the opposite bank.

Iquitos sat on the edge of a large plain formed by the junction of the Nanay, Itaya and Amazon rivers. Dwarfed by these vast bodies of water the settlement looked tiny from Tarapoto's viewpoint – but his sharp eyes were able to pick out several dozen structures, ranging from simple huts to taller buildings unlike any he had ever seen before, brightly painted like flowers and spaced regularly so that there were broad pathways running between them. Along the shore were many boats of different sizes tied up to long wooden jetties, and he could just about distinguish small figures moving around the settlement, some of whom were pulling large carts piled high with produce. There were none of the giant boats that the Explorer had described, but the Explorer had said that they only called occasionally – if Tarapoto was able to give the bundle of letters and journals to the Consul, then he would in turn pass it to the captain of the next riverboat that called.

The Explorer had told him that these people had a terror of Indians, since there had been war between some of the tribes and the Mestizos ever since the Spanish conquistadors had first arrived, and began to systematically wipe out the indigenous people so

that they could harvest the latex of the rubber trees and grow tobacco in the rich soil. The Indians had retreated far into the jungle, and in some cases had learned to make themselves invisible – but the Mestizo's had long memories and reason to fear the people that they had driven from their lands. Until he could talk to them Tarapoto had no way of telling them about the letters with which he had been entrusted, and so he watched and tried to learn as much as he could about the town.

Now that he had finally arrived at his goal Tarapoto was suddenly afraid to go on. The Explorer had told him many strange and fascinating things about his culture and people, but some of them had been terrible, opening windows in Tarapoto's mind and giving him glimpses of a world he didn't want to see. "Above all" he had impressed on Tarapoto "do not trust these people. They can be violent and unpredictable. Leave as soon as you have passed on my papers."

As if sensing Tarapoto's unease the little monkey ran down from its customary position at his nape and perched on his hand, chirruping up at him with its high birdlike song. Its wide eyes looked at him quizzically and Tarapoto felt irrationally reassured, if only because the company made him feel less alone.

"What do you think then little one? I'm not too keen on the idea of going over there. The Explorer was kind – but he was one man amongst our people who are many but kind. Here there are many who may be bad – and then who knows what will happen to us? Still – he would not have sent us here merely to be killed. Let us be brave then."

Tarapoto climbed down from the tree that had been his vantage point on Iquitos and unslung the string bag that his mother had woven from chambira fibres. He uncovered the stores that he had lashed onto the raft, and loosened the ropes that had lashed the oilskin containing the Explorer's papers. This and some of his fruit and stores of dried fish went into the bag. He tied the rope and the Explorer's machete onto his waistband, before covering the raft up again carefully until he was satisfied that it was totally hidden.

Suddenly he heard a rustling and crackling of branches behind him. He sprung up from the raft, simultaneously whirling around to face whatever had made the sound, with his hand on the machete at his waist.

A tall and heavyset man faced him. His face set in a grim expression, and a shotgun in his clenched hands, which was pointing directly at Tarapoto. There could be no doubting his intentions. The gun (for Tarapoto recognized its similarity to the Explorer's pistol) jerked once to indicate that he should remove the machete from his waist, and the man barked at him in a language that he could not understand, although some of the words seemed familiar.

Tarapoto untied the machete and placed it carefully on the ground. The man's attitude was not reassuring, so he tried to make his gestures as slow as possible, and smiled at him hopefully. He pointed to himself and said his name in Caposcripti, and then repeated it, adding the strange accent that the Explorer had given it. He pointed towards Iquitos, and then himself, miming going there. Then he repeated the message that the Explorer had insisted that he learn by heart in two languages:

"I have letters to deliver on behalf of an English Explorer. He wishes their return to his family. Please take me to the consul." Seeing little response to this magic formula, he tried the second phrase that the Explorer had taught him.

"Tengo letras a entregar a nombre de un explorador inglés. Él desea su vuelta a su familia. Lléveme por favor al consul."

This seemed to have more effect – the man's eyes widened and then narrowed as though he was considering Tarapoto's request. Then he turned around and grunted at the boy to follow him.

They followed a twisting path along the riverbank for a few minutes and soon came to an inlet where a canoe was tied up. The man said something to Tarapoto in his gruff Spanish that Tarapoto took to be an indication to get into the canoe. Tarapoto hopped in and the man untied the painter and maneuvered his bulk into the

fragile craft. Then he pushed off and they were on their way to the other bank, to Iquitos.

The canoe zipped rapidly through the water, being far more maneuverable than the clumsy raft that had carried Tarapoto from the lands of the Caposcripti. His companion was inscrutable, and seemed strangely graceful now, paddling the little craft across the river than he had on land. Tarapoto was nervous, but less afraid than he had been. It seemed that the man had understood his message, and was taking him to his destination.

In no time at all they arrived at the opposite bank. Tarapoto hopped out of the canoe and caught the painter, which the man threw to him. It was made of a cord unlike any used by the Caposcripti. Tarapoto knew that this was just one of many strange things he was to see in this place.

Meanwhile the man had come to shore. He prodded Tarapoto in front of him with his shotgun, and this way walked him into the centre of Iquitos. Tarapoto began to be very afraid – one minute the man had seemed perfectly calm, and the next Tarapoto had suddenly become a prisoner. With the cold metal of the barrel prodding the small of his back Tarapoto could have little doubt that this was the case.

As they walked through the settlement Tarapoto had the opportunity to look at the houses more closely, and examine the people. They in their turn stared at him – some with distrust, others with open curiosity. Tarapoto held his head up high and walked as proudly as he thought an important messenger should. Inwardly he was terrified, but there would be no indication of this on his impassive face.

For their part the inhabitants of Iquitos saw a young savage, his head mostly shaven but for a long queue of hair and covered with tattoos which continued over his face and down his neck. Necklaces of coloured seeds, catfish spines and toucan's beaks were strewn around his neck, and he was naked apart from a brief covering around his hips. Whilst many of them had seen indigenous people

before, they bore little resemblance to this proud boy – their skin dull instead of his rich bronze, their stance poor and broken. Accustomed to think of the natives as stupid and savage, the settlers found themselves reevaluating this one. Tarapoto began to see a grudging respect in their eyes.

Tarapoto and his captor came to a heavy wooden door, with bands of metal across it, which opened into a stone building. He rapped on it heavily and it immediately opened, as if the occupant had been looking out. Tarapoto could not see who opened it, for the gloom inside the building. His captor pushed him through the door, and towards a metal cage. Tarapoto stumbled and heard a rattling of metal as he turned around. The door to the cage had been shut.

Not far away Jorgé (for that was the name of the man who had captured Tarapoto) was waiting impatiently outside the Consul's office, whilst his secretary fetched his master from his tea. He looked around at his surroundings. To his eyes - more used to seeing the rough and ready architecture of a frontier town - the hallway was unexpectedly elegant, the walls half covered with multi-coloured tiles, and pictures hung from rails at the top. A stand, executed in carved mahogany, contained parasols and umbrellas, and beside it a tallboy, complete with mirror threw his reflection back at him. Jorgé had not seen a full reflection of himself for some time. He gazed back at the heavysset man that faced him, until he was interrupted by a slight cough from behind. He could see the secretary over his left shoulder, and slowly turned around. "The Consul will see you now – but please be brief, he's a very busy man."

The secretary opened the door for Jorgé and stood aside. Jorgé could see a fat man sitting at a desk and perspiring despite the ceiling fan that turned lazily above him.

"What can I do for you today? My secretary says that you caught a native spying on the town from across the way. I trust he's been restrained?" His Spanish was excellent, but a little too precise – obviously not his first language."

"Yes – they've got him in the lockup. I was checking traps on the Napa shore when I found him taking provisions from a raft he had

hidden there. And he also had a machete – expensive one too – good steel. He told me he had letters from an English Explorer – his Spanish was so garbled I hardly recognized it though.”

“I see. Do you have these letters?”

“No. The boy has them.”

The Consul raised an eyebrow. “But you have seen them?”

“No – I just brought him straight here. I thought you’d know what to do with him.”

“I see. Well – you’ve done well. Iquitos needs vigilant men like you. We’ll look after the matter from here on. My secretary will show you out.”

Jorgé bowed, somewhat awkwardly, and left the room. He wondered what would become of the young man, barely more than a boy, that he had captured, and whether he would be well treated. There was no question but that he could not be left to spy on the town, but Jorgé thought of his candid eyes and hoped that they would let him go when they had questioned him about the letters. He could not believe that the boy’s intentions were evil. The Consul watched him go and his heavy-lidded eyes closed so that they were merely slits in his fat face. He had an idea that he knew who the letters belonged to. The English Explorer who had passed that way many months before. He had not thought of him since then, except to assume idly that he had died in the jungle, since nothing more had been heard of him. It was not often that the jungle gave up its victims.

The Consul called his secretary and told him to fetch the native Shaman to whom he had sent the Explorer when he had first come asking about the Interior. If nothing else he might come in useful as a translator. No doubt the boy could provide information about the people and climate of an area that no white man had returned to tell the tale of.

Meanwhile Tarapoto examined the metal cage that he had been shut in. It reminded him of the traps that the Caposcripti made for possums, except that they were woven from fibres, and not metal. Tarapoto still had the bundle of letters and journals, safely wrapped in oilskin in his string bag, and his jailers had not attempted to take Machasqa away from him – since she was so

tiny it was quite possible that they had not noticed her clinging to his hair. He put his hand up and she crept onto his palm, wrapping her long tail around his wrist for balance. Tarapoto whispered to her quietly, reassured that he had someone to talk to in this predicament.

"What are we to do now Machasqa? I never thought about what would happen when we got here. Maybe I should have done. I don't think these are good men. They mean us ill, little one."

Just then there was a rattle and a ray of light came into the dark building. Silhouetted in the doorway was the figure of a man, who from his stature looked to be a native rather than one of the Mestizos. Tarapoto felt reassured – surely he would be able to explain his task now – but as the man approached he began to feel uneasy again. There was something about his posture that made Tarapoto's skin crawl, and as he approached an evil light glinted in his eyes. Tarapoto could see that he was a Shaman, although nothing like the Speaker of his own tribe. He gazed fearlessly at the man through the bars that separated them.

"So you are the little spy that they caught eh? Don't look like Candoshi to me – nor Jivaro either. Never seen one like you before..."

The Shaman was speaking in Quechua, which Tarapoto did not understand – but he could hear similarities with the Caposcripti tongue, and make out the gist of his meaning. He answered the Shaman by repeating the message the Explorer had taught him in Spanish, as this had had the most impact with Jorgé.

"Yes, I remember the English Explorer. So he's dead eh? And he found you. What is the name of your tribe boy?"

Tarapoto struggled to understand his meaning, and then answered in his own language.

"We call ourselves the people – but he called us the Caposcripti. I have letters from him for the chief of this place."

His accent and many of the words were strange to the Shaman – even though he spoke many of the languages of the tribes of the Loreto district. He answered Tarapoto in Quechua, speaking slowly and clearly so that the boy could follow the unfamiliar language.

"All in good time boy, all in good time. Give me the parcel, and I'll give them to him."

"I can't do that. The Explorer told me to give them to the chief and no one else."

"He did, did he? Well he's got better things to do than chat to stinking Indians in jail. Give to me now if you know what's good for you."

Although Tarapoto was terrified of the Shaman, he could not break his trust. He stared at him with mute defiance and held his ground. Machasqa sensed his distress, and ran up and down his arm, squealing shrilly, and Tarapoto calmed her with a hand.

What's this? The boy has a little familiar. The Shaman felt a thrill of fear, for it was well known that those who could speak with animals were very powerful. Abruptly the Shaman changed his tone, forcing a note of wheedling respect into it.

"Maybe I have underestimated you, and the great task you have been given. I will go and ask the Consul to come here and receive the letters into his own hands."

Tarapoto wasn't sure what had caused the Shaman's sudden change of tone – but it seemed as though his request would be listened to. The Shaman left the room quickly, and Tarapoto was left to wait and see what happened next.



## CHAPTER 32

*"October 12 1851*

*I have reached Iquitos, completing the first leg on my Journey, & the place where I hope to find information about the Peoples that live in this area of the Amazonas. I have heard that there are many Tribes, some savage & some enlightened, with very many curious customs, & hope to discover more from the Merchants that make their living here from trading in Sarsparilla & other such goods brought back from the Jungle. My plan is to go first to the Consul's house & introduce myself, & see if I can discover from him who the best people are to talk to, & how best to equip myself for a journey in these lands."*

*October 14 1851*

*I have little to report in my quest today. I managed to gain an interview with the Consul, but he either couldn't or wouldn't tell me very much, except that the lands upriver west of Iquitos are very dangerous, & I should not go there. On my further questioning him he became quite angry & said that since it seemed I was determined to bring about my own ruin, then I should seek out a certain Shaman who had travelled much in the area, & who knows more than any other living about its people & their customs & languages. I will go & seek this man tomorrow.*

*October 16 1851*

*Despite having made enquiries throughout the whole of Iquitos, I have come no closer to locating the Shaman, the object of my search. It is a small town, of only 300 souls, & seems completely at the mercy of the jungle – you can feel it trying to grow back & reclaim the city so that it is all the inhabitants can do to keep their houses from being engulfed by the vegetation. I have found many that seem to know of the Shaman that the Consul told me of, but none that can swear to have seen him in the last couple of weeks. It seems that he has gone on a journey into the jungle. I can only hope that he returns soon. In the meantime I have been questioning many about the people that live upriver from here. For the most part they have been taciturn & unwilling to speak about the area, but I have managed to convince them that I am not after trade, or rare species of plants, but simply interested in discovering new tribes.*

*Their distrust is most frustrating, but perhaps they have some reason for it after all. All I have managed to discover so far is that the lands are populated by a least one violent & warlike tribe that shrinks the heads of their enemies. These are called the Jivaro, & are feared by all the other people in the area. There are rumours of other tribes, but all tell me to talk to the Shaman, who they assure me, knows of everything in the area. I await his return with increasing anticipation.*

*October 19 1851*

*Finally I have been able to speak the Shaman! News travels fast in Iquitos it seems – he presented himself at my lodgings this morning, telling me that he had heard I was looking for him. He was certainly a shifty looking character – a native of one of the tribes from the look of him, his lowly stature & dark brow & shifty eyes do not invite trust. But for a small amount of silver he claims he is willing to tell me of the tribes which I am seeking, & even guide me a part of the way, although after that I shall be on my own. I have some misgivings about this man – as I have written he does not have the face of a trustworthy man – but as all my other enquiries have so far turned up precisely nothing, it seems as though I have little choice but to take him at his word. What he has been able to tell me so far certainly seems to suggest that he knows more about the people of this area than the rest of the inhabitants of Iquitos, but it is hard to tell what of his stories is truth & what exaggeration. He has confirmed the stories of the Jivaros, but says that they are but one of many tribes in the area, most undiscovered by the white man. Others include people he calls the Machiguenga, who pierce large holes in their tongues & earlobes, & thread wood & bones through them. This Shaman likes to drink & his tongue was much loosened by Rum. In his cups he told me of a tribe which no one has seen, but of whom many stories are told. They live in an extremely remote part of the jungle, some weeks journey upriver, & are rumoured to have a complex language & a long written history, but he did not know their name, nor did he know anyone that had seen them, although he said that they could be distinguished by the tattoos which covered their heads & which were preserved after their deaths – although no one knew how. I have an intimation that it is important that I find this tribe, but when the Shaman sobered up somewhat he refused to say anything more about them, & became quite angry when pressed, denying that he had told me anything, & claiming that I had imagined all. The Shaman has agreed to*

*be my guide on the journey, & we go tomorrow to outfit ourselves in the Market. I have my misgivings about this man – but little choice in the matter. I will have to watch him carefully & keep my wits about me.*

*October 20 1851*

*I write this in the evening, by the light from my candle, & on the final night before setting off into the unknown. Today I have outfitted myself as best I can for the journey ahead. I should be sleeping, for we have fixed to depart early in the morning, but find myself wide awake, my brain in a fever of imagining at what is to be discovered. I have made arrangements with the Consul to leave a box at his establishment with some belongings & letters should I not return, & my family send to find some news of me. Still I am full of optimism that I will discover & befriend tribes that will make my memoirs as celebrated as those of Charles Darwin, I must sleep now, & dream of what tomorrow will bring.”*

Nina looked up from the journal at the colourful houses, and promenade looking out over a flat plain, that had once been river and was now a wasteland, trying to picture the Iquitos that the Explorer had described, as it had been a century and a half before. On all sides the jungle stretched so densely that there were no roads out of it - the only access by water or air. That much had not changed, but the town itself had grown out of all recognition in the intervening time. Nina had found a few clues in her reading and re-reading of the journal, but it seemed that the Explorer had been careful not to reveal the location of the tribe he'd discovered and named the Caposcripti. Only the direction of their lands emerged from his entries. Nina realised that she was going to have to try and find a guide, as he had done all those years before.

Nina got up from her table and paid for her drink. She walked through the town until she came to the Iron House, constructed by Eiffel at the height of the rubber boom, some years after the Explorer had passed through. Upstairs was the British Consulate - an outpost in the Peruvian town, where the expats hung out. The bar was well-shined brass and mahogany, with notes and coins from all over the world as well as postcards and football pennants glued to the wood. A huge union jack was hung over the worn

billiard table, and some overstuffed chairs and coffee tables took up the rest of the interior. Through long windows she could see the balcony that gave out onto the main square. A sign advertised food and afternoon tea, which seemed somewhat incongruous here in the middle of the jungle.

She ordered a beer off the surly barman, who made a point of finishing the paragraph he was reading in the paper before getting up to pour her drink. If she had hoped to get any information from him she was disappointed – he refused to speak and pointedly went back to reading his paper when she tried to question him. Another man was at the bar and looked up with interest when he heard her voice. As she sat down in one of the chairs with her beer and pondered her next move he came over to her and introduced himself.

“Hello – I’m James Curtis – most people call me Jim. I couldn’t help overhearing you. I run the shop next door, from Yorkshire originally. Been living in this godforsaken place for the last 15 years. Still – worth it if you’re into fishing. Do you mind if I join you?”

Nina was suspicious of his motives, but there was little else she could do – any information was better than what she had at the moment.

“Sure. My name’s Nina – can I get you a drink?”

“A gin and tonic would be brilliant – purely for medicinal purposes you understand.”

From his reddened nose, the slight slurring in his words, and his presence in the bar in the mid afternoon, Nina doubted that this was strictly true, but it was hardly her place to comment. She nodded her head and Jim shouted at the truculent barman “G&T please John. The lady’s buying.”

John mixed the drink and brought it over, whilst Jim settled himself into one of the easy chairs.

“What brings you here then? Seems like you said you’re looking for one of the jungle tribes?”

“Oh I’m just generally interested in the people from this region. I was wondering if it would be possible to hire a guide to take me upriver?”

"Sure, there's lots of guides for hire in Iquitos. But you won't get far unless you've got permission from the Governor of Loreto. The tribes are very protective of their lands. Especially if they think you're a journalist, or connected with TV..."

Nina could tell Jim was probing to try and find out more about her.

"No, I'm not a journalist, just a student. I'm doing my thesis on this area, and wanted to get some location specific research"

This was the cover story she had developed for herself, realising that it was probably best to keep her true motives secret. She would have to come clean about the object of her search at some point, but not yet.

"Ah – have you been here before?"

"No, this is my first trip. I just got in from Tabbatinga yesterday. I'd certainly be interested to meet the Governor though. Do you know how I can get an appointment with him?"

"Sure. He's a very busy man, and is in San Lorenzo at the moment, but he's due back in a couple of days. I can probably get you an introduction then if you like?"

"That would be brilliant, if you're sure it's not too much trouble."

"No trouble at all for such a lovely young lady. Have you any other plans whilst you're in Iquitos?"

"Nothing specific – just some research in the library. That's quite near here isn't it?"

"Yes, just around the corner, but it's only open from eight till two – you'll have to wait till tomorrow to go now. If you come downstairs to my shop I can tell you about the area and show you some maps if you like? I'd better be getting back soon anyway."

"Sure. I'd like that."

Jim finished up his G&T, whilst Nina paid for their drinks at the bar, and then followed him down the iron stairs to the street. His shop was a tiny passageway of a place right tucked into the ground floor of the Iron House, and opening straight onto the street. Wellington boots, hammocks, sunhats and other equipment festooned the doorway, and Nina had to duck to follow Jim inside.

A strikingly beautiful Peruvian woman was sat at a table at the back of the shop, and began haranguing Jim in Spanish as soon as she saw him.

"Where have you been?! Do you think I've got nothing better to do than sit in this stinking shop all afternoon?" She abruptly left off when she saw Nina behind him, and stared at her with suspicious eyes, whilst Nina coolly returned her gaze, and Jim placated her. "Well anyway I'm off. You've made me late. I'll see you at home." So saying she got up and flounced out of the shop, leaving Jim and Nina alone.

"My girlfriend" Jim explained ruefully. "She's a little highly strung." Seeing that Nina made no comment, he hurried on.

"So, here's some detailed maps of the area to the west of here. You won't find these in your guidebooks. Do you have an idea of where you want to go?"

He spread the one of the maps out on the table, on top of precariously balanced piles of papers, whilst Nina stared at the map, which was blank apart from the winding lines that represented rivers, and the odd dot to indicate a town or settlement. These settlements were, without exception, located on the banks of the main rivers, leaving an awful lot of white space in between. Nina followed the line of the river up to San Lorenzo with her finger, on the banks of the Marañon. The river that the Explorer had mentioned in his journals. But Nina wasn't telling Jim that.

"Ah yes – San Lorenzo. That's where the Governor's gone – about a day from here by speedboat – half a day back again, of course, as it's downriver. Or two days by colectivo. If you want to go past San Lorenzo you'll have to hire a guide and a boat to go up the Rio Rimachi - and you'll need a pass to visit the tribes around there."

"Are they violent?"

"They can be aggressive – and there's plenty of rumours that suggest that we haven't contacted more than about half of them. You'll find the headshrinkers there, although nowadays they mostly shrink monkey's heads. The Peruvian government takes a dim view of tribal warfare."

"Headshrinkers? Really? What are they called?"

Nina kept her voice casual.

"The Jivaro's – you must have heard of them if you're studying this area." Of course – the Photographer had mentioned them that day, in the museum. It seemed so long ago now.

"Yes – I've read about them. It would be interesting to meet some."

"Ah – that you can, for a price. They certainly know the value of the dollar anyway."

"Have you met them then?"

"Sure, them and others. I've been up and down that river for the last two decades running fishing trips. Got a big American party coming up the week after next on a private charter as it happens. They live on the shores of the lake of the Rimachi – the biggest lake in Peru. Best fishing too."

"That's fascinating. What other tribes have you seen then?"

"Well there's the Machichuenga, the Shuar, the Candoshi – they're just the general names, and each one's split into maybe a dozen sub tribes. They used to fight a lot, before the Peruvian government started bribing them with satellite telly and concrete schoolhouses. And that's just the one's that have been contacted. There's rumours of tribes further into the interior that have never been seen by the white man. The other tribes will tell you about them if you ask the right questions. But not much. I think they're scared."

"Scared? Of what?"

"Powerful magic, allegedly – but that could mean anything. How's your Quechua?"

"That's one of the tribal languages? Unfortunately it's pretty nonexistent– I've read about it, but never spoken it. I get by in Spanish ok though."

"Well, that's better than nothing. I can probably find you a guide that speaks the lingo – you won't get far without it once you're past Loreto. And of course you'll need equipment."

Nina looked around the shop at the sad merchandise on display. Of course kindness probably hadn't been Jim's only motive in approaching her in the consulate – still, he'd given her some good information, and could continue to be useful. She smiled winningly at him.

"Sure – I'll bet you have everything I need right here."

Nina made a show of looking round the tiny shop, realising she would need to equip herself for her journey. The small bag she'd carted from London had done her up to now, but was hardly appropriate for a trip into the Jungle. Jim told her she would need Wellington boots, heavy trousers, waterproofs, a mosquito net, a hammock, and a good waterproof bag to protect them from the heavy afternoon showers. Nina suspected he was charging over the odds for them, but she had plenty of money left from the five thousand she'd found in the Gideon's bible, so she didn't complain. Peru still seemed almost ridiculously cheap to her, with four sols to the pound. She left the shop laden with purchases, and with assurances from Jim that he would look out a reliable guide for her and would tell her when the district Commissioner returned from his trip to Loreto. She dumped the stuff in the small and somewhat stuffy room she'd found a couple of blocks from the Iron House and headed off to find somewhere to eat. The library would have to wait for the morning.

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"I bought a notebook in Iquitos, to complete my cover. Who ever heard of a research student that didn't take notes? Quite a good way of thinking it seems. See why the Explorer had to write everything down. Makes it more real.

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Travelling by riverboat along the Marañon – one of the tributaries that feed what will become the Amazon at Iquitos. The eventual destination of this boat (in a couple of days time) is Yurimaguas, in the foothills of the Andes. We're only going as far as Llaguna where we should be able to pick up a colectivo to San Lorenzo, a staging post on our journey to the lake of the Rimachi."

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"We've just left San Lorenzo. We ran into the Governor in San Lorenzo, who lent us his boat for the trip to Rimachi. We are



loaded with supplies – sacks of rice and flower, fishing equipment, wellies, hammocks. We don't really know what we will find there, apart from a number of indigenous tribes, who have been described to us as 'aggressive'. According to the Governor they are still living in their natural state, and can be resentful of outsiders.

So we are bringing sweets, fishhooks, batteries, salt, sugar, rice and other goods in the hopes of sweetening them up a bit, as well as letters of introduction from the Governor. Fernando tells me everything will be fine – but it's hard to imagine what we will find there from the blank white spaces on my map...Flat dark monochrome of the horizon - I can never forget the featureless miles of jungle, broken only by the occasional band of river, or patch of cleared space that I saw on the flight to Tabbatinga. Distance seems irrelevant here – and is reduced to time, not miles. 2 hours in a plane, 20 days by boat, 3 days walk in the jungle.

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Could the heads be kept in a wooden case - like one of the drums, used for talking in the jungle, and carried around with the Caposcripti during their migrations?

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Fernando says that the tribes around Rimachi still practise the Iahuaska ceremony. I'm sure it's the one that the Explorer described in his journals. Maybe that's one way to find the Caposcripti, if they're anywhere? Still haven't told Fernando why I'm really here – but maybe he suspects. Don't really know myself. I think I did, before I left – but it's different out here in the jungle. Maybe I'll know when I find them.

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Hard to find people when you don't know their name. The Explorer called them Caposcripti – but never told anyone about them. If there were any record of them it would be under a different name. If they've ever been contacted that is. Marañon. I'm sure it's the

right area. Tarapoto must have travelled down this river to Iquitos. Twenty days by raft. And that was after he'd walked to the river. How far can that be? The Explorer didn't mention any lakes though. The Rimachi's a stab in the dark. Still – that Jim said there's a lot of tribes living round there. One of them must know something. How to get them to tell. Must ask Fernando about the Iahuaska ceremony.

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**CHAPTER 33**

Tarapoto didn't know how long he had been in the metal cage, waiting for an answer to his question, but night had passed, and the day seemed well advanced. He had been given some unfamiliar food to eat, and a little water, and had seen the cell darken and then lighten again with the dawn of a new day. He judged it must be afternoon, although with no windows he was unable to tell the time from the position of the sun. He had slept, fitfully, but had been disturbed by dreams and visions, in which the spirit of the Explorer upbraided him for his failure to carry out his task, whilst his mother and the rest of the Caposcripti looked on sadly. His people were pale and sickly looking, as if they had been the victims of some wasting sickness, and when he looked down at himself he was horrified to discover that his skin was covered in lesions, so that it had lost its usual glossy smoothness. Even now, hours after he had awoken from the dream, he still felt uneasy, as though it were a premonition of the future. He sat cross-legged on the dank earth floor of his cell and stroked Machasqa's silky fur until she arched her back in pleasure and sang like a little bird in his ear, but he could not shake off his forebodings.

Tarapoto tried to think what the Speaker would do in this situation, and drew a blank, as the Caposcripti did not imprison others, and were not used to being restrained. He thought that the Speaker would probably go into one of his spirit trances, and ask the ancestors, or send his spirit as a messenger out into the jungle. Tarapoto experimented for a while, to see if he could re-establish the connection that he had made with the Speaker when he had been travelling downriver away from the Caposcripti's lands – but he could not muster the necessary concentration, and no answer came. He was sure that the Explorer would know exactly what to do, but of course he was not there to ask – would never be able to answer Tarapoto's questions again.

Tarapoto began to feel more alone than he had felt at any point in his journey. Before he had been able to console himself with the thought that all he had to do was to reach Iquitos and hand over

the Explorer's papers to his people. Now it seemed that it would be more complicated than that. He had not reckoned with being locked up in a metal cage, and subject to the whims of an evil Shaman. He remembered the curiosity and fear that he had seen on the faces of the men and women of the settlement. There could be no help there – they had looked at him as though he were some prey brought back from a hunt, and not as a person.

The door of the building rattled, and Tarapoto could hear the clank of metal. It swung back and Tarapoto was half blinded by the light that came in from the doorway, his eyes already unaccustomed to day after hours in the dark. He could just make out the figure of the Shaman, and behind him a hugely fat man.

The Shaman spoke first, barking his words out.

"The Consul has come to see you. Stand up when you are in his presence."

Tarapoto sprang to his feet and lowered his eyes, already adjusting to the light so that he was beginning to pick out the two men's features. The fat man asked the Shaman a question, and the Shaman turned to Tarapoto. Tarapoto noticed a distinct change in his posture that told him that he was afraid of the Consul – but when he addressed Tarapoto his voice was full of scorn.

"The Consul wants to know where the parcel is that you have come here to deliver."

Tarapoto pulled it out of his string bag, and stepped towards the edge of the cage. The Shaman made no attempt to take it from him, so Tarapoto laid it on the floor just outside the bars and then stepped back a couple of paces. The Shaman bent down to retrieve the oilcloth package and handed it to the Consul. Tarapoto waited expectantly whilst the Consul fumbled with the bindings and removed the covering. He handed it to the Shaman and began to leaf through the papers inside. Tarapoto knew that one of the messages had been for the Consul, explaining who Tarapoto was, and what was to be done with the Explorer's journals. From the expression on the Consul's face Tarapoto could see that he had found it. He broke the wax seal and began to scan it intently. He looked up from the paper and stared at Tarapoto, his eyes mere slits in his fat face and his expression unreadable. Then he

opened the cover of the second journal and began to examine its contents carefully.

Tarapoto realised that he'd been holding his breath, and let it out explosively. At the sound the Consul looked up and addressed a few quick words to the Shaman. Tarapoto looked at him expectantly for an explanation.

"He says that you are free to go. He has read the English Explorer's letter, and it appears that you have been telling the truth."

"And he will give it to the riverboat Captain, so the papers can be returned to the Explorer's tribe?"

"That is not your concern."

Tarapoto's eyes flashed rebelliously and the Consul asked a question, to which the Shaman provided a quick answer. The exchange went on for a couple of minutes before the Shaman turned back to Tarapoto.

"The Consul says that all will be carried out in accordance with the English Explorer's wishes. But you are not allowed to stay in Iquitos. He wishes you to leave immediately upon your release from this place. The people of Iquitos don't like native spies." Since this was exactly the news that Tarapoto had been waiting for he didn't have to think twice before giving his joyful assent. He turned to the Consul, ignoring the Shaman and spoke to him directly.

"It is good to know that I have carried out the last wishes of the Explorer. I will return to my people with a lighter heart and many stories."

As the Shaman translated his words the Consul raised an eyebrow, but didn't answer. He fired a sentence at the Shaman and turned and left the building. The Shaman left to, closing the door and plunging Tarapoto once again into darkness. The interview was at an end.

This time Tarapoto did not have long to wait. A short time later he heard the door rattling again, and the same man who'd earlier given him food and water came in and undid the binding on his cage, standing aside to let him walk out. A few steps brought him to the door and Tarapoto found himself standing in the blazing

afternoon sunshine, with a crown of interested onlookers watching him. He was taken through the settlement and once again ferried across the river to where he had left his raft. Then, under the watchful eye of his guards he pulled off the brush he had concealed it with and launched himself off the bank, to travel back upriver to his people, and home.

**CHAPTER 34**

They arrived at the tiny village of Yanamono in the late afternoon. Fernando cut the engine of the boat and leapt out to tie the painter to a small wooden jetty. Nina stood up and looked around her. After several hours crouching in the small boat her legs were stiff, and she welcomed the chance to stretch them.

A narrow path was cut into the high mud bank. Nina scrambled up as best she could, and suddenly found herself at the top. The houses of the villagers surrounded her in a semi circle, all built from palms and open-sided so that she could see the occupants resting in hammocks from the afternoon sun.

A man stood, waiting for them, by a sun shelter in the centre of the clearing. He was simply dressed in cutoff jeans and a t-shirt, and wore no shoes. Red ochre lines ran across each cheekbone, and his hair was cropped short. Nina looked questioningly at Fernando. "It is the Shaman, who knows the use of Iahuaska" Fernando informed her in Spanish, "He is the one that we are looking for here."

This, then, was the spirit guide that would show her how to find the Caposcripti. Nina walked towards him and stopped a couple of paces short. She cleared her throat and addressed him with her single word of Quechua (hello), following it with broken Spanish. "Carap'tcho. I am very honoured to be in your village. I have brought gifts for you and your people." She held out the hot cigarettes, fishhooks, matches and fishing line that Fernando had advised her to buy in Loreto. The Shaman made no move to take them from her. He sent a quick blast of Quechua at Fernando, whilst keeping his eyes steadily on her. Then he turned on his heel and walked towards one of the huts. He mounted the shoulder-high platform with a bound, and seated himself cross-legged on the wooden floor.

Nina wondered whether she should follow him. Fernando cut across her thoughts. "He says the first ceremony will be tonight. It's

important that you don't take any food, only water. He thanks you for your gifts, and says that you must pay him two hundred sols for conducting the ceremony. It will last three days, and we will stay in this hut. Go and sit with him while I go and get our baggage." Nina rapidly translated the Spanish and arrived at Fernando's meaning. "What is his name, this Shaman?"

"That is not a question to ask of a Shaman. But you may call him Rimani, which means Speaker in Quechua, more or less.

Fernando ran back to the riverbank, and Nina walked over to the hut where the Rimani was sitting, first laying her gifts carefully on the edge of the platform, and then scrambling up there herself. The Shaman inclined his head to indicate that she should sit with him. In all this time he had not spoken a word, and he remained silent. Nina looked around her, and wondered what would happen next.

A woman approached carrying several clay bowls, and a jug. She placed the bowls in the space between them, and poured a thin white liquid into them, straining it with a woven net. Rimani leant forward and picked up one of the bowls, balancing it carefully. He tilted it back and took a long drink, before replacing the now half emptied bowl before him. Nina immediately followed suit, and took a long drink of the bitter liquid, grimacing at the unexpected taste. Fernando came back with their bags and laughed at her expression. "It's Masato, pressed from the juice of the yucca plant. It's supposed to be refreshing." A huge smile suddenly suffused Rimani's face – the first glimmer of emotion that he had revealed, and Nina felt more relaxed. It seemed that she had passed some kind of test.

Fernando was tying his hammock and nets up to one of the beams of the hut, and Nina jumped up to do the same. Her mind was buzzing with questions about the ceremony, but she kept them to herself. She would find out everything tonight. Not least, she hoped, what had become of the Caposcripti.



Nina had read the accounts of Iahuaska ceremonies both in the Photographer's and the Explorer's notes. The Photographer had taken it once, in Brighton, and recorded, in his precise way, the stages and effects of the ceremony. But it seemed he had derived little enlightenment from the experience. The Explorer had described repeatedly fasting, purging and taking the drug – and being taken to a dark plain where he learnt the language of the Caposcripti. She had some idea of what to expect from conversations with Fernando in the boat during their journey from Loreto. But she still felt some trepidation as the night drew on, and Rimani began to make preparations for the Iahuaska ceremony. She could feel hunger pangs in her belly, from fasting all day, but she knew that if she ate anything, it would make the purgative effect of the Iahuaska worse, so she ignored them.

The Shaman lit a candle and placed it next to a metal pot full of dark liquid and an empty bowl. He placed a bundle of hot cigarettes near by and a bottle of Vicks. Fernando told Nina to make herself comfortable, and Rimani handed her a cup of the dark liquid to drink. She drained it all, and then sat back wondering what would happen next.

Rimani extinguished the candle and they were all plunged into darkness. He began to shake a bundle of leaves and circle Nina, singing in an unearthly high voice in a language she didn't recognise. Gradually he speeded up the song, accompanying it with violent rustling from the leaves, until Nina heard a loud buzzing in her right ear. She closed her eyes, feeling very disoriented, and suddenly felt a huge wave of nausea hit her. Someone – was it Fernando? – handed her a bowl, and she grabbed it as she retched convulsively, bile dribbling down her chin. She would rest for a moment, and then it would start again, until it felt like she was trying to vomit out her entire stomach – surely it couldn't continue any longer? She felt floaty, disconnected from her body. She couldn't place herself, or remember what it felt like to have sensation. She seemed to be everywhere, as if her essence had thinned and spread, like gas. The song of the Shaman continued, but she seemed to hear the calls of animals intermingled with it;

the melody had become more gentle, and interspersed with whistling, like birds singing.

Gradually Nina came back to a sense of herself. She was lying, in a foetal position, on the bare boards of the platform. The faintest glimmers of dawn were lighting up the sky. Fernando was fast asleep in his hammock, and the Shaman pointed her towards her own. Then he gathered up his belongings and disappeared, presumably to sleep somewhere else.

The following night the ceremony was repeated again. During the day Nina hadn't eaten anything, just drinking pints and pints of water, so she was beginning to feel very light-headed. The second time the retching didn't last as long – once she had thrown up all the water that was in her stomach, the acids began to come up, but they didn't seem as dark and bitter as the previous day. The disconnected feeling kicked in almost immediately, and this time she found she had left her body entirely, and was observing her slumped form, with Rimani circling it and Fernando sitting off to the side. Something seemed to be connecting it to her, and she could hear a babble like a thousand people talking at once underneath the monotone of Rimani's voice. She was suspended like this for an incalculable time, and then all of a sudden everything went dark, and she found herself back in her body. She felt stiff and cold. Fernando looked at her with concern in his eyes, and she returned a weak grin to show she was ok.

Nina takes Iahuaska three times – the first, that night, merely purges her stomach of everything – she retches till there's nothing left, and then feels disconnected from her body, animal noises. The jungle seems to be breathing. The second time the retching didn't last as long, and she felt herself leaving her body. She floated above it for what felt like hours, watching with interest as Rimani performed the ceremony for her slumped body in the clearing below.

The third time, when she left her body she realized that she'd left the world behind as well.

\* \* \*

He started singing again. Nina discovered that in the darkness it didn't matter – or she couldn't tell – whether her eyes were open or closed; all she was aware of was his voice – alternatively buzzing like a swarm of hornets in her ear and chirruping like birds or monkeys. She heard jaguar's coughs and the cries of children.

Suddenly she found herself on a plain. All around her was...nothing – yet more than nothing, for she didn't seem to be standing on grass, or rock, or bare earth. Her feet made contact with...nothing. It was as though something forced her eyes away. A short? Distance away (perspective was difficult with no reference points) she seemed to see a river – although she couldn't say she actually saw it, it was more as though her mind knew that a river should be there, so had created one for her. She wasn't aware when the Shaman's voice had segued into a general background of many talking together, or at what point from this babble she realized that one of the voices was addressed to her.

"What are you doing here?"

The question was not so much heard as felt, as though the words swam into focus somewhere in her cerebellum. She felt connections being made, and meaning suddenly became apparent, like an insight.

"Where are we?" Nina had only to think her question as the answer arrived.

"It is not important; you would not understand the answer."

"I am looking for the Caposcripti."

"You will not find them."

"And their language? Is that lost too?"

"That will never disappear. It is engraved on nature; it travels with the wind; it is everywhere; we speak it now."

"But the journals speak of heads? Surely they have been preserved?"

"The past is another continent. Do you imagine you could find that place again?"

Nina cast around for more questions – but nothing more would come. Her thoughts flew around like leaves on a windy day. She tried to cling to something, feeling herself lost in this maelstrom. Nina. I am Nina. I am.

When she came to she found herself lying in a clearing. No trace was left of the Shaman's ceremony on the hard packed earth but the butts of hot cigarettes. A ray of sunlight broke through the canopy and touched her face with its warmth. Nina communed silently with this messenger from another place.