

# God Of War

By

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This book is dedicated to my beloved closest family:

My Mother Patricia; Christopher & Rosie;

Louise, Simon & Aidan.

And also to my amazing editor, to who I owe so much.

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## Prologue: Into The Hole

Animals can sense the approach of death.

John Ramine knew that only too well. He began to understand this fact before he was even ten years old, when his father gathered sheep from their Yorkshire hill farm into trucks for transport to slaughter. An air of trepidation, nervous unease and helplessness seemed to emanate from the doomed creatures. They somehow knew their destruction was at hand, but trotted dutifully towards it, domesticated beyond the point of refusal. At fourteen, John studied one of his father's flocks in awe: of the two hundred livestock, one single sheep was left alone by the others – deliberately segregated by its own kind. John's father examined the animal, but found no evidence of sickness or injury; also, it continued to eat and drink normally that day. Twenty-four hours later, the sheep was dead. "Natural causes," the vet said. "But the other sheep knew", John tried to explain. "Don't be daft, lad. It's just your imagination."

On John's eighteenth birthday, another aspect of death touched his life. John's father revealed the family secret. He explained why the family could never move from their location and why the farm could never close. It grew clear why John's parents had only had one child – one was sufficient to continue their legacy and mercifully meant that no second or third child would have to endure the same existence. John was shown the family's inheritance, held in an ancient chest like some pirate's treasure. And he was indoctrinated into service... A service he was made to vow to maintain for the rest of his life. All John's hopes and aspirations, of education, of a life in the city away from the bleak isolation of the farm, were decimated. He came to realise that his fate had been sealed at the moment of his birth. Worse still, he would have to bear the knowledge that his future single child and the child of that child too, would be consigned to the same destiny.

John was thirty-six when his mother died of cancer. Her loss drew the last vestiges of happiness from John's father and he began to waste away – his twenty-stone weight halving in six months, his grey hair whitening and falling out, his ruddy skin becoming like ancient parchment. In that time, John took over the farm completely.

And The Hole became his to attend to.

Two years after his father's funeral, John Ramine took a wife. The marriage was one of convenience: two lonely people without kin or friends, looking for companionship and hoping for love. Mary found even greater loneliness in her new home and each day ate at her soul. However, she organised the book-keeping of the farm well and, after a year, gave birth to Melissa. *Tiny Melissa*, John always called her, when his huge calloused hands lifted her gently from her crib into the air so he could gaze up at her face. She was so small, delicate and beautiful; a beacon of innocence and joy in the dark home of the farm.

Time quickly took its toll on Mary. There was no love for her here from her husband. The winters were incredibly hard. The isolation was unbearable. If it hadn't been for Melissa, she would have left – but for Melissa, and the love John had for the child, she stayed...

Gradually, Mary started to become aware of John's secrets... Once, when the bank was threatening to foreclose on their numerous loans, Mary wept all night in worry. The following day, John visited the bank. He returned with their account twenty thousand pounds in credit and with his battered Land Rover filled with presents. Dresses for Mary; toys for Melissa; a giant television for the living room. When Mary asked in one word "How..?", John simply replied, "Don't". She never dared broach the subject again... Then there were the nights each month when John would go out alone into the darkness. He didn't leave the farm, for the Land Rover remained outside the house. But he returned with his clothes dirty and his expression hauntingly blank. Those nights – once, sometimes twice a month – were the darkest times of Mary's life... The third secret was the missing livestock. Each time Mary worked the accounts, there were animals missing. "It's a wild landscape," John told her repeatedly. "They get lost sometimes. Eventually they'll come back and we could have up to a half-dozen extra head, which'll be a bonus. Think of it as swings and roundabouts, darling, swings and roundabouts..." However, none of the lost animals ever did return. When they got lost, they stayed lost. And the losses went on like a steady ebb of blood from an unclosed wound. There were between fourteen and twenty-two a year: oddly, the same number as John's nocturnal trips.

By the time Melissa was four, Mary had started to become more distrusting and bitter. At the same time, John had turned to drink – not at The Raven’s Claw pub four miles away, which he never frequented, rather in his own living room whilst staring at the television and trying to lose himself in its images. Arguments exploded between the couple, over everything from spoiled lunches to Mary’s pleas for a holiday away from their lonely prison. Only John’s secrets were kept out of the furious rows, and simply because Mary was too afraid to discuss them. Finally, Mary gave an ultimatum. One night, she demanded a change in their life – for them to go on a trip, to holiday, to do something to shatter the monotony – or else she would leave with Melissa...

John sat in silence for several long seconds as he considered the threat. He reacted not by shouting or striking Mary, rather he stood up from his armchair and grabbed her using his great, calloused hands. She struggled, but was held like an object in a steel vice. He guided her swiftly out of the house and into the darkness.

To The Hole.

Ramine returned three hours later. Melissa awoke as he closed the front door – she had missed the argument and her parents’ abrupt departure. There were tears in John’s eyes when he explained that Mummy had gone away and wouldn’t be coming back. In the morning, he burned all Mary’s possessions – all the evidence that she had ever been alive.

For two years, it was just John and Melissa. He stopped drinking and devoted his life to his daughter, the farm and his vowed service.

At the end of the twentieth century, the foot and mouth epidemic struck the county. Ramine’s farm was quarantined and his livestock were checked regularly. Awkward questions arose when the flocks’ head-counts came up short, but fortunately his lies were accepted. Ramine had to combine carefulness with duty: but whatever happened, supplying The Hole with livestock could not be halted.

After five months, the authorities came, slaughtered his flocks and took the corpses away for incineration. That left nothing for The Hole.

With Melissa safely tucked in bed, he left each night in the Land Rover and sought an opportunity to fulfil his duty. On the fifth night of searching, the chance came. Another farmer, Matthew Jacobs, was found walking home from The Raven’s Claw in the dark. John offered him a lift – astounding the neighbour, who he had hardly spoken to in thirty years – and drove halfway to Jacobs’ home before stopping. He used those big, work-hardened hands on Jacobs’ throat: crushing his larynx to cease his desperate screams, then snapping his neck with a sound like a wet branch breaking. Jacobs’ lifeless form was cast into The Hole and John’s duty was fulfilled once more.

The police visited his farm two weeks later, asking whether he had seen the missing farmer. John looked the officer in the eye and lied. The policeman thanked him and left.

Six more men and women had to die before Ramine could restore his flocks. John went further for each victim, not wanting to draw suspicion to his own location. After the final killing, John prayed he would never need to take another human life.

His prayer wouldn’t be answered. His hands were destined to claim one final victim.

\* \* \*

A large outcrop of rock dominated the centre of one of the farm’s fields. It was formed from five cracked, grass-patched lumps of limestone – seeming to thrust up out of the earth like huge grey, grasping fingertips. Between these lay the abysmal blackness of The Hole...

As darkness began to fall, Ramine arrived back at the outcrop in his Land Rover.

When he had left, an hour ago, there had been one sheep tethered to a stake in the ground and a hundred more feeding on the grass nearby. In John’s absence, the free animals had left their doomed comrade to its fate.

*Animals can sense death*, Ramine thought again. *By God, I wish I’d been able to. Maybe I could have prevented—*

He dropped from the Land Rover onto the muddy grass, then turned to collect the items he had brought from home. A kitchen knife was grasped by the handle and thrown to strike the soft earth by the captive sheep. It embedded in the ground up to the hilt. Ramine took out a cardboard box

next and placed it beside the knife. The box contained five bottles of liquid rat poison and a large hypodermic syringe. Lastly, Ramine heaved a great ancient chest from the vehicle. This object strained even at the farmer's muscled form. He cursed at every step, but managed to carry the chest up the outcrop and hurl it into The Hole.

The Ramine family treasure was united with the reason that had spawned the payment so long ago.

Returning to the tethered sheep, John knelt down in front of it. The animal looked at him, its dark eyes pleading and glistening with terror. Its body quivered. Its mouth remained silent.

John acted quickly. He grabbed the sheep and fastened his left arm into a lock around its neck. His right hand took up the knife and slit the animal's throat. The sheep bleated and struggled as its hot blood spurted free, drenching Ramine's arms and darkening the ground. In ten seconds the creature slumped, to twitch on the ground whilst its final heartbeats shook its ribcage.

Ramine spent thirty minutes injecting all the poison into the dead animal. And five more hauling the carrion up the outcrop and pushing it into The Hole.

The dead sheep fell into the void, as so many others had before it. It struck the floor far below with a crunching slap of impact and breaking bone.

"Enjoy," Ramine hissed from the brink of the abyss. His expression was not blank and dutiful as it had been on every other such occasion. Dark hatred twisted his features; his eyes blazed and icy tears poured down his cheeks. "Enjoy your final meal and die, God of War."

He was tempted to fling himself into The Hole after the poisoned animal, to end his life now.

But no, there was more to be done, and the preparations had already been made.

John turned to leave, then spotted something on the outcrop which caught his attention: a length of crimson ribbon snagged upon a patch of rough grass. Images flashed through his mind at the sight of the object.

*Melissa by his side as he had the dogs herd the sheep for transfer into another field.*

*"Daddy... can I go play?"*

*"Of course you can, my love."*

*The work had distracted him for less than a minute. Then he looked around to find his daughter...*

*On top of the outcrop.*

*"Daddy... I've climbed all the way on my own..."*

She waved her arms wildly. Her face was filled with joy – the beauty of a cherub, crowned by auburn curls and her favourite red ribbons... She slipped and fell backwards...

*To be consumed by the abyss.*

He could still hear her screams now as though they had never ended. Terror at falling, pain at the impact in the darkness... mind-ripping agony when the thing below fell upon her...

Ramine's family had dutifully served The Hole for over nineteen hundred years. Now that servitude was over. The loss of Melissa had annihilated his dedication and replaced it with a desire for revenge.

\* \* \*

The dogs had followed Ramine home earlier and stayed there at his command whilst he returned to the outcrop alone.

When his Land Rover pulled up beside the ancient farmhouse, the dogs were gone. They hadn't been scared off by the stink of gasoline which pervaded every part of the house...

*No, Ramine was certain, they had left because they sensed what was to come...*

He paced through the open doorway and across the petrol-soaked carpet of the hall into the living room. His muddy boots made squelches on the soggy flooring. The strong smell burned at his nostrils and made his head throb intensely.

In the centre of the living room was his armchair, surrounded by the wreckage of the other furnishings. A loaded shotgun and a box of matches lay across the chair. He picked up both and sat down for the last time.

His shaking hands cocked both barrels and the sound reverberated through the chamber. John

placed the butt of the gun on the floor and braced the barrel between his knees. Lowering his head, he forced the end of the weapon between his jaws. He experimented and found that his long arms were just able to reach the triggers.

Positioned ready to die, Ramine fumbled with the matchbox. Half the matches fell out when the box was opened. It didn't matter. One was all he would need.

John grasped the box in his left hand and struck his match along its side using his right. The match flared and he opened his fingers to drop the blazing ember... So concentrated were the petrol fumes that the tiny brand didn't need to touch the liquid to cause ignition. Flame erupted around Ramine's right hand like some incredible halo – agony flooded up his forearm and the igniting fumes seared his eyesight...

Then the heat was everywhere. It filled the room, seething across the floor, over the furniture and raging up the walls. Great tongues of flame roared out into the hallway and into the kitchen behind Ramine. Whispering snarls of heat-power combined with brutal crackles as fire began to devour the ancient home.

Ramine's entire body burst alight. His hair singed away to the skin. His clothes became a disintegrating fabric inferno. Skin, flesh and bone were eaten at by the merciless blaze. The pain was beyond unbearable.

Focussing all his strength, John reached down for the shotgun's triggers and pushed them back...

The double-blast transformed the upper three-quarters of Ramine's head into a spray of fragments and liquidising gore. Even as blast-scorched pieces of bone and brain-tissue flew towards the ceiling, they ignited...

Ramine's last thought had been a simple one.

*It was over. After almost two thousand years, the legacy – the curse – was finally at an end.*

He was wrong.

## Letter

March 17th

To: Jack Murray,  
Editor and one of my personal chroniclers.

Call the Police right now. Tell them you have a letter from the serial killer who has claimed four lives in the last three months. Have them examine this letter and the accompanying package using all their forensic techniques in the hope of finding a clue to my identity – but don't worry, they'll be wasting their time. There is nothing here to trace me. I'm smarter than they are. They haven't got a chance.

You haven't called them have you, Jack? You're reading on like a jackal sniffing at carrion. I can imagine the thoughts going through your mind. What would happen if you published this letter tomorrow? How much of a boost would that be to your sales? Half a million copies? A million..?

I'll make it easy for you – because, of all the newspapers, you've given me the best coverage. And because you asked a question that I felt duty-bound to answer personally.

If the Police don't allow you to publish this complete letter tomorrow, I'll kill within twenty-four hours and it will be the worst one yet. That will be an extra death on their hands – not mine. If they allow you to publish, I'll wait at least two weeks. There, your conscience is clear, Jack. You can print and not be damned. In fact, you can print and boast you've saved a life.

Now you want proof that I'm the killer – the '*sadistic slayer of men and women*' you called me, didn't you? I liked that. I could give you details on how I cut the last one or how long it took her to die, but I'll do better than that. One of the facts omitted from the Police Report on poor Joanne Davis was the organ I removed from her body.

I wouldn't open the package, Jack. Not if you don't want blood and vomit on your nice desk. Let the Police do that. It's their job. Yours is to print my letter tomorrow, without fail.

Now to your question. The one I felt I had to answer. I liked the way you phrased it, asking it three times in fact: '*What makes a man do what this man does? What motivates him? What possible pleasure can he gain from such atrocity?*'

You really want to know, don't you?

It's the screaming. I love their screams.

And I can't wait to hear more.

From now on you may refer to me as The Surgeon. Use it in your headline tomorrow, it should look good.

I'll be reading the newspapers every day. Whichever one gives me the best coverage will receive a letter after the next killing. Consider that a challenge for you and the other editors.

So, be a good boy Jack and you may be hearing from me again in the future.

Kind Regards,

The Surgeon.



## 1: Lambs For The Slaughter

For millennia, Nature has attacked the Pennine region as if wishing to exact some dark and terrible vengeance. The glaciers of successive Ice Ages scoured the landscape, gouging-out deep flat-bottomed valleys and leaving behind hundreds of acres of debris – from boulders carried immense distances to rock abraded into fine powder. Rivers have since cut at the landscape, some meandering wildly across the surface, others running underground to gradually erode-out extensive cavern networks. As there is an abundance of limestone in the region, rainwater has eaten at this porous and soluble material. Above ground, badly rain-weathered limestone outcrops have an almost melted appearance; far below, dissolved limestone is reformed over years into eerie cave-formations. Even the roots of trees silently and stealthily attack the land – by growing into unseen cracks and enlarging them to slowly crumble rock. And Man, Nature’s most modern instrument of destruction, has carved at the region to build roads, homes, mines, farms and industries... Thousands of years of assaults upon the land by Nature, in so many varied ways, have failed to lay waste to the area – rather, Nature’s success has been in sculpturing a realm of spectacle and serenity.

Julie Harrison found her attention drifting slightly, from controlling the battered old People Carrier she was driving, to admiring the valley she was passing through. The area was an amalgamation of greyish limestone outcrops, lush green grass and clusters of trees, cut by the tarmac road high in one valley-wall and crowned by a pale blue early-morning sky.

Julie’s side-window was an inch open and emitted a continuous hiss of rushing fresh air, scented with the aroma of summer foliage. The breeze across her face helped to keep the woman alert, which was essential on this serpentine road. A careless mistake could send the vehicle right through one of the buckled safety barriers and plunging two hundred feet to the forested valley floor.

“It’s bloody gorgeous here,” she said under her breath. Her left hand lifted briefly from the steering wheel to brush a frond of long blonde hair away from her eyes. Julie raised her voice to her brother beside her. “Don’t you think it’s lovely here?”

Michael was in the middle of the vehicle’s three front seats. The twenty-four year old was a twin to his sister, though their original similarity in appearance had diminished greatly since childhood. Julie was blonde-haired, and had an athletic build and a beautiful, slender face. Michael’s crew-cut hair was dark brown, his physique was thickly muscled – almost stocky – and he had developed a fuller face and a broad square jaw. Only the twins’ eyes, dark brown in colour and highly expressive, had remained identical during the passage of years.

The brother looked up from the map book he was trying to read – despite his acute intellect, he found route-making almost impossible – and he mumbled a reply.

“Uh... Yeah... It’s nice.”

To Michael’s left, his girlfriend gave a disbelieving shake of her head: “Jesus, Mike. Can you be less interested?”

He shot Liza a side-glance, initially about to snap a sarcastic response, then recognised the humour on her face and smiled back. Liza squirmed her slender form to snuggle up closer to Michael and wrapped an arm around his neck. The woman’s almost-wiry build was a product of her desire to emulate the catwalk models she revered; this and her short height disguised her considerable physical strength – attuned by years of training in kick-boxing and judo. Like her companions aboard the People Carrier, she wore denim jeans and a T-shirt, but these clothes seemed a little ill-fitting and unusual on her, particularly for those used to seeing her in short, tight fashionable dresses. Liza’s curly, shoulder-length hair was dyed a different colour every week – this time she had chosen an unnatural blazing red.

Michael kissed Liza hungrily. “I’m interested in you. How’s that for interest?”

“Well, that’s all right then...” She eagerly returned his kisses. “We can forget the scenery until later.”

“Hey, don’t mind me,” Julie chided from the driving seat. “You two just feel free to make like sex-starved bunnies right next to me...”

Michael half-turned back to Julie and laughed: “Hey, sis’, if anyone around here is a sex-starved

bunny, it's you..."

"Yeah," Liza added, more than a hint of malice in her tone. "Like what are you, a nun?"

"Busy is what I am," Julie retorted icily. Only her and Liza's relationship with Michael kept the pair from more direct confrontations, for in truth each woman truly despised the other. "Another year at University and I get a shot at the career I want. I can last that long without complications."

"Complications?" Michael repeated the word with a smile, hoping to calm the two women. "Does anyone have a less complicated life than you? Work, sleep, work, sleep..."

"Strange though," Liza continued, "that she came on this weekend trip rather than staying behind and studying. I think it's because the Prof is going... Isn't that true, Julie? I think she's a sly one... She's doing this nun act, but she's got the hots for him... our history *lecher*."

In spite of his own desire to calm the others, Michael found himself suddenly angry at Liza's suggestion. "That's not funny, Lize. Berry's what..? Fifty. And you know I don't like him."

Liza wasn't going to miss an opportunity to further aggravate the situation. "Well, he spends as much time with Julie as possible, doesn't he? She's always in on his special projects, asked to help... You're not saying you haven't seen the way he looks at her during lectures?"

"Yeah. I'm not blind. I don't like him and I don't trust him... And if Julie didn't have to take his lectures, I'd keep her the hell away from him."

Julie found her own irritation growing. "You two are assholes. There's nothing wrong with Steve Berry. He's the best lecturer we have in the whole University. He really knows his shit. So what if he's a little lonely? And as for you keeping me the hell away from anyone, Mike, just try to remember I'm an adult. I don't need your watchful eye."

"Well, we'll see. If he so much as touches you while we're on this trip, I'll rip his goddamn heart out."

"Fuck!" the sister spat. "Steve's organised the whole thing. He even invited you two and the sleeping uglies behind us before he asked me. All we have to do is pick him up and meet up with the guide. This weekend isn't gonna cost us more than the food we've packed, thanks to him."

"See," Liza hissed to her boyfriend. "The Prof – I mean, 'Steve' – is a regular hero now, Mike."

Michael looked from one woman to the other. He touched his sister's shoulder – and Liza pulled sharply away from him at seeing this.

"I'm sorry, Jules. You know I just worry about you."

"Yeah." Julie replied through gritted teeth. She switched the car radio on and turned the volume up. "Just check the map and find our turn off."

As the trio in the front of the People Carrier started to listen awkwardly to the radio, the two other passengers stirred in the back of the vehicle. Jimmy Tuscaro had been Michael's best friend from primary school and they had stayed together ever since, even choosing courses that enabled them to go to the same University, alongside Julie. In his teens, Jimmy had been a lean, underweight scarecrow of a man; now in his mid-twenties, he was on a collision course with real obesity. A poor diet, dominated by fast food and beer binges, and the stress of struggling to keep up with his studies at the University, had increased his weight dramatically over two years. Jimmy's ever-happy nature and his ruddy complexion gave people the impression that he was drunk even on the rare occasions when he was completely sober; the same nature made him dismissive of his friend's concerns about his health and fitness. The man's appearance was made a little outlandish by flowing black hair tied in a pony-tail, a pair of thick-lensed spectacles and three thick gold earrings jutting out from his right ear. Julie often introduced the dark-skinned Jimmy as 'her brother's Jamaican drug-dealer buddy'.

During the journey so far, Jimmy had been sleeping on three of the back seats; his girlfriend Debbie had been curled-up like an oversized hamster on the two remaining seats. Debbie was the latest of Jimmy's many girlfriends and five years his senior. She was pale-skinned, auburn-haired, of average height, average build and unremarkable appearance. The one thing that wasn't average or unremarkable about Debbie was her ability to complain, long and hard, unremitting and unrepentantly.

"Who the fuck..." Debbie uttered, unfurling herself into a sitting position, "...put the radio on?"

"I did," Julie snapped back. She offered no further explanation and her tone boded ill for

Debbie if she asked for any.

“Great.”

Jimmy had awoken on his own makeshift bed. He swivelled into a sitting position and smiled across at Debbie.

“Did I by any chance sleep through the whole thing?” he asked, pretending to be hopeful. “Or do we still have to go down those caves?”

His girlfriend shrugged dismissively. From amongst the piles of coats and rucksacks next to her, she found her own waterproof jacket and retrieved a packet of cigarettes from one of the pockets. Debbie drew out a cigarette and lit it with the disposable lighter that hung on a chain around her neck.

“I’m here because of you,” she stated flatly to Jimmy. Debbie inhaled on the cigarette, then breathed out through her nose before adding: “You’re buddy Mike wants you to tag along and crawl through the earth like a bloody worm, so you agree. I’m coming because I’m not staying in the Dorm on my own until Tuesday... So I get four days of watching you sweat your ass off in some damn caves, hoping you won’t have a heart attack. We’ll be cold, damp, crawling alive with bugs...”

Jimmy knew how best to deal with this kind of bitching. His smile was transformed into a broad grin. “Yeah. Should be great, shouldn’t it, Debs?”

“Oh, sure. If Columbus the map-reader up there doesn’t get us lost for the weekend instead.”

From the front of the vehicle, Michael tried to sound reassuring: “We’re on the right road now. Just about fifteen miles and we’ll meet up with the Prof.”

“Columbus,” Jimmy chuckled, rubbing at his numbed backside to bring it back to life. “Columbus is about right for you, Mike. We’ve got more chance of rediscovering America than finding the Prof.”

“Up yours, Jimmy... You wanna squeeze your lard ass into this seat and read the map?”

Jimmy shook his head fiercely. “Not my area of expertise, matey. Julie and Lizzy are the wannabe history teachers, so we’ll look to them for all kinds of boring shit about the history of this area... Me’n’Debs are computer nerds. We’re no bloody use at all out here in the wilds, so we’ll just sit on our arses, thank you very much... You, Mike, are the archaeologist – and surely any archaeologist worth his mustard would be able to find his dig site on a map. So that makes you our map-reader...” He gave a deliberately annoying belly-laugh: “So God have mercy on our souls.”

Michael couldn’t help but laugh himself. “You know, Jimmy, you can be a real arsehole when you want.”

“I practise every day.”

“Hey, Columbus,” Julie interrupted, her demeanour now normal and friendly again – a contrast to Liza, who remained icily silent and staring out of the window. “We’ve got a junction in about a mile. It’s make-your-mind-up time.”

“Shit,” he cursed, returning his attention to the map-book and frowning hard. “Oh... shit... It’s the village of Kimberley we’re after, right..?”

“No. We passed through that half an hour ago, dummy. We want Lithton next...”

“Okay...” Michael traced fingers across the map and found nothing. “Lithton... Lithton... Come on you little bastard, stop hiding...”

“Julie,” Jimmy called from the back seats. “Whichever direction he says to go in, go the opposite way, for Christ’s sake.”

\* \* \*

Just before eight o’clock, the People Carrier pulled up outside a pub in the tiny village of Lithton.

Steve Berry stood beside his own car, an ancient blue-and-rust mini that the tall professor had to literally cram himself into when he drove. Berry’s head was crowned in greying black hair; his face was ruggedly handsome and his eyes were narrow and inquisitive; a thick grey beard failed to hide his welcoming smile. The lecturer was dressed in combat pants, a T-shirt and a well-worn army-style waterproof jacket. He bore a heavy, bulging rucksack effortlessly over one shoulder.

Jimmy clumsily unfastened the side-door of the vehicle and almost fell out as the door slid sideways open. Berry caught Jimmy's shoulder and helped him back into his seat.

"You don't want to be diving out without a parachute," he quipped pleasantly.

"Nope." He took Berry's rucksack and placed it beside the others, then added as the lecturer sat down and closed the door: "Well, welcome aboard... We're not even late, are we?"

Berry glanced at his wristwatch. "Early, in fact. My directions must have been better than they usually are. I normally get people lost."

"We don't need bad directions for that," Debbie put in. "We've got Mike..."

Turning, Berry faced Michael: "Don't worry, Mike. We've only about forty miles to go – plus you have me now. I know the way pretty well. I've been several times."

Michael regarded the Professor awkwardly for a moment before forcing an answer. "Good. And I take it there were no problems with the guide you hired?"

"No, Toby's coming up from the south as planned. He'll probably arrive at Maar's Maw before us. I phoned him last night and he said the dry weather should mean we won't have any trouble at all."

Beside her brother, Julie turned in her seat to view the new arrival. When she and Berry smiled at each other, Michael felt himself tense uncontrollably.

"And," Julie asked, "this will still just be a walking trip? No climbing. No ducking under water? No stuff like that?"

Berry shook his head. "All easy going. Toby knows none of you are experienced cavers, so he won't take us anywhere risky... The cave complex runs for at least forty miles altogether. We'll be sticking to a main, simple route... Don't worry."

"Are we likely to see any other cavers?" said Michael.

"I doubt it. These caves are pretty exclusive because they're so far off the beaten track – the last thirty miles to the entrance coming from our direction is virtually a dirt track; Toby's route in is almost cross-country. There's a chance a caving club might have a team going down, maybe."

"Sounds cool," Julie enthused. She turned and started the vehicle up again.

"I hope you all like it." Berry looked over Michael's shoulder to Liza, who was still faced away from the group. "And how about you, Liza? Have you enjoyed the trip so far?"

The question brought a scornful response. Liza turned around long enough to throw a glare at her companions and rasp a reply: "Yip. Enjoying every minute... It's the wonderful company."

Professor Berry twisted in his seat, away from the two women and Michael. It was in his nature to avoid confrontation whenever possible – a result of his shyness and a closeted lifestyle. Berry chewed on his lip and switched his attention to the radio as the station chimed for eight o'clock.

"...And our news update at eight. Police continue their hunt for the serial killer known as The Surgeon, after he narrowly evaded capture in Birmingham last night. In addition to The Surgeon's ninth victim – a young woman who is yet to be named – two policemen were killed and a policewoman was kidnapped. Police are conducting widespread searches throughout the Midlands area and a number of roadblocks are in force. Anyone with any information should contact the Police immediately. Our reporter Keith Tucker is on the scene..."

\* \* \*

"...Thank you, John. Keith Tucker here... I've just attended a Press Conference and the details we've received show the situation to be even worse than we might have feared... An anonymous tip-off brought the two police cars to Tarplin Avenue at 3 AM. In the moment the police arrived, they were fired upon. Two male officers were killed and a third is in critical condition. A policewoman was injured and abducted by their assailant. The Police have no witnesses, still no description of the suspect and no details of the vehicle he left in. A young woman was found murdered in her home in Tarplin Avenue when more police officers arrived. Police have confirmed her murder bore the same trademark brutality they have come to expect from 'The Surgeon', as he has called himself in his letters to the Press. The knife used—"

The radio grew silent as Toby Barrows turned the car's engine off and removed the keys. He got out of the Land Rover, his face a combination of a smile and frown at the sight of his waiting friend.

Barrows was a tall, burly forty year old. During the first ten years of his adult life, he had lived in Manchester, with careers ranging from professional wrestling to being a swimming instructor to fitness training. Finally, Toby Barrows had found his true niche in life. He now lived in a small Derbyshire township and made an adequate, enjoyable living as a guide and teacher to climbers, walkers, pot-holers and abseilers. This granted him great freedom, plenty of time with his family and allowed him to earn from his own favourite pastimes.

Toby ran a heavily-tattooed hand over the clean-shaven top of his head. He started pacing towards the other man's hatchback car.

"So, Ray... Just what's this all about?"

The area they were at was a convenient parking place alongside a narrow dirt-track road – a route that had originally been created as a shortcut by some Pennine farmers years ago. The outside edge of the space was the crumbling upper rim of a three hundred foot sheer rock face. Toby and Ray had used the location several times for abseiling. Barrows noted that whilst he had parked parallel to the rough, unbarriered edge, his friend had parked facing the precipice. *Hope Ray's pulled his handbrake tight*, he thought instinctively.

Ray was seated on the bonnet of his vehicle, twirling his sunglasses around between his hands. A former wrestling rival of Toby's, Ray had retained little of his previous heavy muscle – toning his body down to a slender but powerful build. His face was gaunt and his cheekbones pronounced; the eyes above his hooked nose were dark and narrow. Like his friend, Ray wore jeans and a T-shirt. Oddly, he was still wearing a pair of leather driving gloves.

"How long have we known each other, Toby?" Ray chose to answer the other man's question with a question.

"Nearly thirty years," Barrows answered automatically. "From High School, through the amateur wrestling clubs, through me getting married... right to today... You know, Ray, if you have a problem, I'm here to help. I won't let you down. Just tell me what's wrong."

"I'm Godfather to your three kids," Ray went on in a drawl. "Hell, you named your son after me, you bloody fool."

Toby stopped a few steps from his lifetime friend. He tried not to be impatient. "Ray, get to the point. You know I'm due to meet with some cavers..."

"I know... When I phoned you said they were going into Maar's Maw. A good trip that one. Should be fun."

"Ray... What's wrong?"

The sitting man finished fidgeting with his sunglasses and put them on. "We're best friends. Almost like brothers..."

Although Ray's eyes were hidden, Toby felt overwhelmed by the strange distraction in his friend's manner. He was trying to guess at what could be making Ray behave so oddly when a sound caught his attention...

It was soft and muffled. Like the whimper of an animal in pain.

Toby looked past Ray into the hatchback, since he could tell the sound came from inside. The seats were empty.

The sound repeated. Now almost a squeal – there was pain and desperation in the stifled cry...

"What..?"

Ray smiled innocently at Toby, his right hand sliding behind his back.

"What, buddy? You hear something?"

"Ray?" Barrows was dumbfounded. "What is that? Have you picked up an injured animal? You should—"

Ray watched his friend's face, enjoying Barrows' confusion. Only when Toby took a step towards the rear of the hatchback did Ray finally act: withdrawing his pistol from hiding and aiming it directly for Toby's face.

"Take one more step, Toby, and I'll shoot you dead."

The baleful menace in Ray's tone stopped Barrows in his tracks. He gaped in disbelief.

“What..? Ray?”

Ray stood and gestured with his free hand. “Ssh... Calm down. You don’t want me to hurt you, do you?”

Toby closed his jaws tight and swallowed hard.

“That’s better.” Ray’s soft voice was interrupted by further cries from the boot of his car. He diverted his attention to his captive there: “Don’t worry, Alice. I’ve got everything under control. He isn’t going to do anything stupid...” A hard look at Toby again: “Are you, my friend?”

Barrows shook his head. Nervously, he risked a reply: “Ray, whatever’s wrong, I can help... Please.”

“Sssh. I know, Toby. That’s why you’re here. To help me. And you don’t know how grateful I am for your presence. Now, all I ask is that you obey my instructions. Okay?”

“All right. I will... But who... Who is Alice?”

Ray tutted, disappointed. “You really haven’t put the clues together, have you? Well, you were never the brightest guy I knew... Alice is a police officer from Birmingham...”

Realisation sickened Barrows. “You’re...”

“The Surgeon. I’ve sliced up nine people this year – or rather nine and a half, now including Alice... We had some spare time, so I stopped along the way for some fun.” Ray could see Toby slowly tensing himself, ready to attempt some desperate attack. He raised his voice to a snarling roar: “Don’t even fucking think about it, Toby. This gun will cut you apart before you get halfway to me.”

Relaxing his body, Barrows asked instead: “What do you want from me?”

“I need a distraction,” came the even reply. “A set of clues for the Police to follow. A patsy... And who better than my best friend in the whole world, Toby Elias Barrows?”

“I’m your friend...”

“Yeah.” Ray grinned. “Breaks my heart. Now let’s get started... Over to the boot.”

The captive paced slowly to the back of the car, followed by Ray.

“Grasp the handle with your right hand.” When Toby obeyed, Ray continued: “Now release it and touch the glass, the bumper, the left light fitting... Good boy.”

Gesturing with the gun, the killer directed Toby to the driver’s doorway. “Okay. Plenty of fingerprints now... The glass, the door, the roof, the bonnet... We need to make it easy for the Police, they’re understaffed remember? Now, open the door, you’re going inside...”

As Toby opened the door and slid into the driving seat, Ray moved to crouch at the open doorway. The gun remained trained on Toby’s face.

“Now, remember: D-S-S-S-M. Doors. Seat. Steering. Seatbelt. Mirror. Adjust them until you’re sitting comfortably. I’m a little smaller than you, so everything will need a bit of tweaking about.” He watched carefully until the tasks were complete. “Seatbelt off. Hands on the steering wheel... Slide them around, we don’t want perfect prints there. Grasp the handbrake and then the gearstick several times. Touch at the radio, the light switches and the glove box button... Now, hands on your lap and relax again.”

With his right hand still pointing the pistol at Toby’s face, Ray slid his left hand behind the man’s neck. The movement seemed almost casual.

“You’ve done well. Your prints and the fact that this car was stolen from your home town, will implicate you pretty badly. I only need you to do one more thing for me now Toby. You’ll do it, won’t you?”

“Yes...” the other said hesitantly. “What..?”

“I want you to die for me...”

Ray’s left hand grasped at Toby’s neck and rammed his head forward with terrific force. Toby was too surprised to attempt to stop the attack: his face smashed into the steering wheel amid a sickening crunch and his nose broke on impact. Ray dragged the man’s head back as Toby tried to struggle – hindered by a combination of his stunning injury and a glut of blood. Toby’s face struck the wheel a second time, using even greater force than before. His nose broke again. His left cheekbone shattered... Ray did it a third time, then a fourth, fifth and sixth...

By the ninth horrendous impact, Toby was already dead – his attacker was simply enjoying the barbarous act. Finally Ray allowed his dead friend to sag forward over the steering wheel.

“Should have worn your seatbelt, Toby.”

Ray leaned past the corpse and unfastened the handbrake. He took Toby’s car keys from his pocket, backed out of the vehicle and slammed the door. The pistol was slid back under his belt.

“Alice...” the killer called, his voice casual and humorous. “I’ve murdered my friend... But he had to die and I’m sure you understand.”

Striding to the rear of the hatchback, Ray placed both hands against it.

“Before it happens, Alice, I just want you to know... We’re at a three hundred foot cliff and I’m pushing you over...” He paused long enough to savour the frantic squealing cries from inside the boot. “If the fall doesn’t kill you – and I’m pretty certain it will – then I’ll honestly let you go...”

Whistling softly, he began to push.

## I: An Emperor's Desire

*Being the personal chronicle of Gaius Pertinax. Translated from the original text, dated AD 62.*

*As a scholar of warfare and a former soldier, I cannot fail to have tremendous respect for Queen Boudicca of the Iceni. Her army of so-called barbarians almost succeeded in exterminating every Roman in the province of Britannia. An entire, highly trained Roman Legion was annihilated, other contingents massacred in ambushes and direct assaults – the total death toll exceeded seventy thousand. The capital city of Londinium (London) was sacked, together with Verulamium (St. Albans) and Camulodunum (Colchester). Only the frantic gathering of all remaining Roman forces succeeded in smashing the revolt, and, though historians will undoubtedly write of an enormous triumph, our success came at a terrible final cost. Survivors have told me their Celtic adversaries fought like demons. It was sheer desperation that birthed a Roman victory that day. Queen Boudicca poisoned herself before capture, to prevent a repetition of the rape and battery at the hands of Roman soldiers which had originally caused her campaign.*

*I arrived in the province one year after the Iceni Revolt. Even as the ship approached the docks in Londinium, I could see the lingering effects of Boudicca's assault on this city. Numerous buildings were being rebuilt. Some areas were still zones of fire-blackened rubble. A great new wall was under construction around the city. On one distant hilltop, I saw what at first appeared to be a small forest of bare trees – peering hard, I identified it to be hundreds of crucified Britons... Now that Rome had crushed the rebellion, it was using merciless brutality to prevent any danger of a new uprising. Fear of lingering death is a strong and effective deterrent.*

*Britannia lay under the rule of two officials. The Governor, Petronius Turpilianus, had overall control of civil and military matters. It was his predecessor who had finally ended the Boudiccan Revolt. Petronius was tasked with overseeing the building and maintenance of roads and supervising the communities under his charge. He was the court of appeal in criminal matters and it was his order which authorised executions – the latter being a duty he had granted in abundance and with much personal satisfaction. Procurator Julius Classicanus controlled the financial aspects of the province – particularly the collection of taxes and the payment of the army and government. In his hands were the Empire's financial interests. I had heard rumours of his dislike both of Petronius' treatment of the Britons and of the Governor himself; another rumour suggested he deviously engineered the reassignment of the previous Governor.*

*My new role placed me in the service of the Procurator. As his Senior Aide, I would be responsible for the shipping of resources back to Rome, from metals to livestock to wine to slaves. Physically accomplishing these tasks would necessitate liaising with the Governor, and therefore put me indirectly in his service too. For a man of my age – barely twenty-three years – this was a position of prestige, but I yearned for greater power and, most of all, I yearned to serve in Rome rather than this outland hell...*

*Fortunately, I already knew of a way of achieving my goal...*

*On the day before I left Rome, I was summoned by the Emperor. To have Nero himself ask for your presence can mean one of two things. You are either destined for great things or your life is quickly drawing to an end. People die at Nero's whim, and some do so most despicably. I travelled to the Palace with some besitant exuberance, hoping for the best – but my thoughts were dominated by the memory of the single time I had seen the Emperor before... I had watched Nero in the arena. Eight condemned slaves had been secured to stakes in the arena and these waited, quivering with fear, as a covered iron cage was brought out in front of them. When the cover had been removed, to a fanfare, the prisoners saw not a captive wild beast, but a man garbed in animal skins. Our Emperor Nero loved the games so passionately, he wanted to take part himself. The cage had been opened and he crept out, howling bestially and slashing the air with ivory claws fitted to his hands. He had torn the eight men apart like a wild thing – disembowelling, ripping their throats, shredding their flesh, even savaging them using his teeth...*

*As I was led to the Emperor, I could not help but consider what hideous pain and death a new whim of his could inflict upon me. Mercifully, I was spared. The youthful Emperor greeted me like a brother. I can still recall his face: a rounded, child-like visage made sinister by eyes which seemed to sear deep into my soul. Nero played music for me – a series of awful melodies on a range of instruments. I applauded as though my life depended upon it. I knew it surely did.*

*"Gaius," he said later, sprawled upon a couch and sipping from a wine goblet. "You leave for the pestilence-ridden province of Britannia tomorrow..."*

*"Yes, my Emperor," I replied, realising I was about to learn the true reason for this audience.*

*"You understand your duties there, I take it."*



*“Absolutely. And I will serve with the utmost dedication.”*

*He smiled – and the expression chilled me. “I have another task for you. A personal favour.”*

*My heart raced and I forgot the dangers immediately. An opportunity to gain favour with the Emperor was a rare gift.*

*“Anything,” I managed to utter. “Name your desire, my Emperor.”*

*“You know of my love of the arenas?”*

*“Of course.” And I thought: Yes, only too well.*

*“I want sport for the games. I want them kept lively and interesting. Amusement is so important. Send me players: the fiercest animals and the most hardened warriors.”*

*“It will be my pleasure to bring you satisfaction.”*

*A strange aura of distraction and reverie came over the Emperor then. He eyed me with sincere joy: “You love me, don’t you?”*

*“Yes, of course I do.”*

*“My mother used to love me. She said she’d always love me... But she lied. She stopped loving me and that’s why I had her executed.” There was an unsubtle threat here. “Always love me, my friend.”*

*“I will.”*

*“And Gaius... If you were to find something unusual... Something unique for the games... Something no-one has ever seen before... A spectacle even I haven’t witnessed... You could name your own reward.”*

*In those words I knew my destiny was forged. I was determined from that day forth to meet Nero’s challenge and reap his reward. Whatever it took. Whatever the cost or risk.*

*And now, as I arrived in this strange and brutal province, I could begin to seek the instrument of my success.*

## 2: Into The Maw

The cave entrance gaped like a great open wound in the earth – seemingly caused by the stab of some giant blade – and the small stream of dirty water emanating from its centre gave the illusion of trickling blood. It was a fifty-foot wide, horizontal crack in the stony hillside: ten feet high at the middle, tapering away to the left and right. Due to the overhanging upper edge of the opening, even the bright morning light was only able to penetrate a few yards into Maar’s Maw. Everything beyond this region of gloom was hidden by coal-black darkness.

As Julie pulled the People Carrier up near the entrance, Michael and Liza regarded the huge black crack. It was easy to imagine this void as a gateway into Hell itself.

“Looks inviting,” Liza said to her boyfriend. She appeared to have calmed down during the last half hour of the journey.

“Cool,” Jimmy enthused from behind, having stood to peer past the pair. “I saw something like this on a documentary last year. It was about a cave somewhere in Scotland in the late Nineteenth Century. There was this family who lived in it then... They used to be cannibals and eat travellers. Investigators found hundreds of bones and skulls...”

“Nice image,” Michael replied and he shook his head. “I’ll be thinking about that all day now.”

“Any other cave stories you want to share with us, Jimmy?” asked Liza. The question was meant as sarcasm – but once she had finished speaking, the woman knew she had made a mistake.

Jimmy thought hard and grinned: “There was this time I got lost while on a hiking trip. It was pissing down and I found a cave with this couple inside making out. The bastards threw me back out into the rain. I nearly froze to death.”

“Thank God you survived,” Debbie retorted, coming to Jimmy’s side and putting an arm around his shoulders. “Humanity has withstood the loss of people like Galileo and Einstein, but I don’t think we’re ready to do without Jimmy the Perv..”

He laughed and kissed her cheek. “I know you mean that in the most affectionate way possible, Debs.”

“Of course I do.”

“Well, we’re here,” Julie said next. She withdrew the keys from the ignition. “I wonder where our guide is?”

Professor Berry unfastened the People Carrier’s side door and slid the barrier aside. He answered Julie: “He may’ve got a little delayed. I doubt he’ll be too late, though.”

Outside, the area around the cave entrance was pure Pennine wilderness. The hillside containing Maar’s Maw was mainly bare, crumbling limestone with just a few scattered patches of grass; it rose up almost vertically to two hundred feet overhead. Behind the vehicle, the land sloped down at a gentler angle and was thickly covered in grass, interspersed by rocky outcrops and clusters of trees. The road which had brought the group here was little more than a wide, worn path. Not a single house, tarmac road, strip of fence or telegraph pole could be seen between here and any horizon.

Julie and Liza opened the People Carrier’s other doors and all the travellers stepped out and began to stretch their limbs. Michael couldn’t help but notice that his sister and girlfriend totally ignored each other and chose to stay well apart. He considered what to do whilst exercising to remove a tension knot from his back.

The professor took a long, hard look around their location and smiled with immense satisfaction. Returning to the vehicle, he started to offload the rucksacks and coats; Julie, Jimmy and Debbie joined him.

On the other side of the People Carrier, Liza slid her arms around Michael’s hips from behind as he twisted at the waist and rippled his shoulders.

“Sore back, baby?”

“Cramp, I think.”

She began to massage him. “Here, I’ll fix it for you.”

Michael groaned appreciatively and directed her toward the ache. “...Ah. That’s right. Yeah, that’s making it better.”

“Should’ve just asked me, Mike. You know there’s nothing I wouldn’t do for you.”

“Nothing?”

“Well,” she hissed suggestively, “is there anything we haven’t already done?”

Chewing his lip, Michael replied slowly whilst she continued to rub his back. “So, you’d do me a favour if I asked?”

“Guess so. What’s on your mind?”

He turned and took her hands gently in his own. “For me... Will you please make it up with Julie?”

She shook her head. “That’s not fair and you know it.”

“I’m not asking you to like her, but could you not jump down her throat at every opportunity?”

“Me?” Liza’s eyebrows raised. “You haven’t noticed, Mike, but that bitch has a serious superiority complex—”

“That ‘bitch’ is my sister and I love her. It kills me to see the two of you always fighting... and you do more than your share.”

Liza’s expression hardened. “So it’s get along with her or else?”

“No... It’s: if you really do care about me, then stop hurting me by hurting her. Come on, we’re going underground for four days. Does it have to be unbearable or can we try to all get along?”

“Like you and Berry? Every time he speaks to you, he looks like he’s shitting himself that you might hit him...”

Michael couldn’t disagree. “I suppose I am being hard on Berry... Tell you what, I’ll behave with him if you behave with Julie. That should make things pretty much stress-free.”

She looked to the ground, then back into Michael’s eyes. “Okay. I agree. But you tell her too, then we’ll shake on it and bury the hatchet.”

“Brilliant.” He kissed her. “I really appreciate this, Lize. Thanks.”

\* \* \*

Berry grabbed the last bag from inside the vehicle – a grey rucksack spray-painted with luminous green stripes – and heaved it out to place alongside the others.

“Jesus,” he uttered. “This one weighs a bloody ton. Who’s is this?”

Jimmy smiled sheepishly. “Mine.”

The lecturer eyed him up and down. “What’s in it?”

“Stuff... You know, just stuff.”

“Jimmy... What stuff? It’s too heavy – you’re in no shape to lug around such a load. You’ll kill yourself.”

Shrugging, Jimmy explained: “Some food, plenty of drink – you know, six-packs and stuff – some books to read, clothes, spare boots, my laptop... and, well... other stuff.”

“Well, you’d better get rid of as much as you can. You won’t need the laptop and the books, for a start. Get it down to a quarter of its weight... The rest of us will carry a few things for you if they’re really essential.”

He grimaced and started to unfasten the rucksack. “Okey-dokey, Prof.”

Behind the pair, Michael took Julie’s elbow. He whispered in her ear and led her away.

\* \* \*

“Julie, I’ve asked Liza to make it up with you,” Michael said as they reached the front of the People Carrier.

“You’re kidding?” she scoffed. “She’d rather tear out my guts.”

“I know you two don’t like each other—”

Julie raised a hand to silence him. “That’s bullshit. When you two met, I was as open and pleasant with her as with any of your other girlfriends. She treated me like shit from day one because you and I are close and she’s jealous.”

“Come on, give me a break. I want this holiday to be great for all of us.”

“Then you shouldn’t have brought her. She’ll fuck it up however she can.”

“Jules,” he said gently. “Will you help me out? Just try. I know it’s not your fault. I’ve talked to her and she agreed to shake hands with you and start again. Come on: she could be my wife one day and if so I still want to be close with you.”

“Your wife?” she gasped. “You marry her and she’ll destroy your life. She’ll make you so god-damn miserable it won’t be worth living.”

Michael looked at her hard: “Julie?”

She relinquished. “All right, if it means so much to you, I won’t let you down. I’ll make it up. I’ll try like before... But don’t expect miracles.”

“Thanks... You go speak to her. I’ll help Jimmy with his rucksack.”

“Yeah: I think he’s got about ten six-packs in there.”

Julie paced around to the far side of the People Carrier. She found Liza waiting there, her arms folded, her face expressionless.

“So,” Julie offered. “We gonna try to be friends, now?”

Liza’s expression hardened. “Not on your fucking life, Jules’.”

“You’ve really got my brother wrapped around your little finger haven’t you? He believes all your shit like it was gospel.”

“I’m his girlfriend, you’re just his sister. If anyone’s got him under a spell, it’s you. All he wants to do is make sure you’re all right and look after you... It makes me sick.”

Julie grinned, much to the other woman’s annoyance. “Funny thing is, I’m sick of his big brother act too. If you understood that, maybe you wouldn’t be so fucking jealous.”

Liza’s answer was a grunt.

“So,” the sister continued. “What do you want to do? Keep driving him crazy or call a truce?”

“Truce,” answered Liza with a grimace. She offered her hand.

Julie clasped hands with Michael’s girlfriend. The contact was as lifeless and loveless as the touch of a corpse. Just when the two were about to separate, Liza shifted her hand and sank her fingernails into Julie’s wrist: she managed to tear four deep, two-inch scratches in the flesh before Julie could snatch her hand back.

Liza smiled. The expression was akin to that of a venomous serpent.

“You keep away from Mike, Julie. Leave him to me.”

The girlfriend stomped off around the People Carrier, leaving Julie to clutch at her bleeding wrist.

\* \* \*

“There you go, Jimmy,” Berry said, hefting the re-organised rucksack for a final time. “That’s better. Shouldn’t put a strain on you at all.”

Jimmy looked a little mournfully at the stack of items placed back in the People Carrier. Most of the alcohol had been dispersed between his friends’ rucksacks.

“Thanks.”

The Professor turned to look around at everyone. Liza and Michael had returned a few minutes ago. Julie stood at the front of the People Carrier, almost out of sight. She had a first aid kit open and was applying a small bandage to her wrist. At the risk of angering Michael, Berry didn’t ask if Julie was all right – though she appeared a little sad and angry.

“Did everyone bring what I asked? Warm clothes, boots, waterproofs, spare clothing, torches...”

Debbie cut him off and continued: “Spare batteries, sleeping bags, extra blankets... Yeah, we can read lists. We’re in university, remember. If we couldn’t read, Prof, they’d throw us out.”

Berry smiled. “Okay, you’re not kids. I just want everything to go smoothly so we all have a good time.”

Jimmy clapped his shoulder. “Yeah. You’re a nice guy... Not many of us left.”

A sound from the road made the group turn together. It was a Land Rover and this vehicle pulled up beside them. The engine was hurriedly turned off, the driver’s door opened and a tall, slender man dropped down to join them.

“Professor Berry’s team?” said Ray. He smirked and added. “Well, who else would be out here, I suppose...”

Berry approached the newcomer, curious. "We booked with Toby Barrows."

Ray nodded. "I know. There was a last-minute problem. A death in his family. He phoned me and asked me to take over for him."

"I'm sorry to hear about that..."

"Not your fault. Toby didn't want to let you down." The killer offered his hand to the Professor. "I'm Ray Brookes."

They shook hands and Berry quickly introduced his companions.

"Looks like a good little group," Ray replied. "Now, Toby wasn't in any shape to tell me much about the trip itself. I've got his maps, his gear and his Land Rover. The cave-map shows the route he'd planned to take you along. It's a fairly easy one. I take it none of you are experienced cavers or climbers?"

Berry answered first: "I've done about forty caves. A lot of climbing. Some underwater caving."

"Me, Julie and Jimmy," Michael added, "all did some rock-climbing and abseiling some years ago."

Jimmy offered whilst patting his ample waist: "And I'm not physically fit anymore, by the way."

"I gathered that," Ray agreed.

"I've done canoeing and martial arts," Liza said. "So I'm fit."

When Ray looked at the last member of the team, Debbie raised her eyebrows and told him: "I play a lot of computer games... Exercise isn't something I really enjoy."

"You came on the wrong trip then, Debbie," said Ray.

"Don't I know it."

"You'll love it when we get down there," the new guide enthused. He paused a moment. "Okay. A few ground rules – or 'underground' rules if you like. Firstly, no wandering off. Our main route is straightforward, but divert from it and you could enter a dangerous area. Secondly, we keep warm and dry at all times. If anyone gets wet or cold, we stop and sort it out pronto. I'm not having anyone fall victim to hypothermia down there. Toby would never forgive me. Lastly, if anyone starts to feel ill or tired, I need to know immediately. Okay?"

The group nodded. Only Jimmy was able to come up with a question:

"Our route... You and the Prof have said it's straightforward and easy. What does it involve?"

"There are no pitches – that's drops – on our route, so there will be no climbing. At most, we might encounter some ankle-deep water, but we certainly won't be wading or swimming. Basically, it's a walk, with as many breaks as any of us need. We go in, we walk for two days, then we turn around and walk out for the second two days. Easy."

Jimmy grinned. "It'd better be. You've got me to slow you down."

"Not to worry. It's a holiday trip, not the Olympics... Now: equipment. Toby packed me a First Aid Kit, some rope – just in case – and some spare torches..."

"We've all brought First Aid Kits," said Michael. "And Professor Berry and I have lengths of rope."

Ray looked to Berry: "And I take it you got your people to bring everything else they need: food, clothing, camping stoves and so on. Plus plenty of snacks to keep up their energy..."

Berry nodded hastily. "I got Toby to help me make a list up for everyone."

"Great. Well, I need to get my gear out and check it. You guys get yourselves ready – don't forget to put on your hard hats and unpack your torches, of course. We'll start in about five minutes."

Liza raised her hand.

Ray laughed at her action. "This isn't a school trip, Liza. Just shout it out."

"Where does a girl take a pee, before we go in?"

He gestured all around. "Wherever she likes. Those bushes over there look nice."

She shook her head and set off at a march. "Swell."

\* \* \*

The rest of the group collected their coats and rucksacks and started to dress. While Liza was away, Michael helped his sister. He noticed her demeanour and the bandage on her wrist.

“You all right, Jules?”

Fastening her rucksack straps, she simply nodded.

“What happened to your wrist?”

She eyed him briefly and said: “I caught it on something nasty. Nothing to worry about.”

“Did it go okay... you and Liza?”

Julie tried to hide her true feelings. “Just stick with her, Michael. Stick with her, have a good time and leave me to myself.”

She turned from him and went to lock up the People Carrier.

Behind the pair, Ray had already locked the Land Rover and was examining his own backpack. He saw Debbie attempting to use her mobile phone.

The woman tried again and cursed softly.

“You won’t get a signal out here,” he told her. “We’re too far away from anywhere.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. We’re all on our own.” Ray gave a broad, somewhat chilling smile. “If anything happens, we can’t call for help.”

Her expression shifted to one of nervous distain. “Thanks. I really needed to hear that.”

\* \* \*

Beyond the crack-like opening of Maar’s Maw, a tunnel led upwards for thirty paces until it reached a hump-like shape, then it began to descend steeply. Water spilled in rivulets from the roof onto the nearer side of the hump, causing the small stream that ran out through the entrance.

Using either the lamps of their hard hats or hand-held torches, the group examined their surroundings carefully. The walls and floor were worn smooth by the passage of greater water flows and the damp, undulating surfaces reflected the light-beams like melted glass. There were occasional water-filled hollows underfoot and some remnants of soil washed in from cracks in the roof.

Ray stopped at the top of the hump and squatted, shining his hat-lamp down the long descending tunnel.

“This next section is called Maar’s Gullet. It runs for three hundred metres at about a thirty degree angle and will take us roughly a hundred and fifty metres below ground level.” He stood up and started walking again. “Just watch your footing, folks. It can be pretty slippery, though your boots should keep you stable.”

They followed cautiously. Liza and Michael walked close behind their guide, with Debbie and Jimmy next, then Julie and Berry. Whereas the two couples spoke to each other frequently, Berry and Julie observed an awkward silence – caused by a combination of Julie’s bottled emotions and the lecturer’s concern about Michael’s presence. Professor Berry eventually left Julie and paced past the others to speak to Ray.

“I really appreciate you taking Toby’s place at such short notice,” Berry said to the guide.

“Toby’s been a friend of mine all my life. I’d never let him down... Besides which, I love caving – so it’s a free trip.”

“Good. I hope it didn’t screw up any of your plans... Like with your family or something.”

Ray shook his head. “No fear there.”

“You’re not married?”

“Happily divorced. With one son who’s only interest in life seems to be how many body piercings he can get.”

“I see.” Berry could help grimacing.

“Yeah. He’s got about a dozen of the bloody things in his face, his ears are like friggin’ curtain-rails... He’s even got them—”

The Professor hurriedly interrupted: “I can imagine, Ray, I honestly can.”

The guide uttered with despair: “I swear, if he ever goes missing, the police would use a metal detector to look for the little bastard.”

\* \* \*

A few paces behind, Jimmy and Debbie gave each other a smirking look at the Professor's obvious discomfort.

"Shall we rescue him?" Jimmy whispered.

"S'pose so," Debbie replied. "But why not let him squirm?"

He tutted: "Ooh, you mean bitch."

"Got to uphold my reputation..."

They paced past Liza and Michael to come up either side of the leading pair.

"Ray," Jimmy said after the man's latest rant about his son, "are you a full-time guide like Toby?"

Ray seemed to realize how worked up he had become. He answered calmly: "I'm one of those Jacks of All Trades. Toby and I started out as professional wrestlers, then he moved out into the wilds. When I was on holiday with him a few years later, I caught the 'great outdoors bug' and I started to get jobs in the Pennines. I took up climbing, canoeing, sailing, pot-holing and paragliding... Now I work for nine months a year – as anything from a guide to a labourer – so I can spend the other three months as I like..."

"Climbing and stuff like that?" asked Debbie.

"And archaeological digs," said Ray enthusiastically.

"You're not like one of those guys on TV, are you?" Jimmy teased. "You know, the ones who find a few broken pots, half a dozen lumps of stone and decide they've found a long-lost Roman temple?"

"Not quite. It's a lot slower and more laborious than you see on TV. We can go days or weeks without finding anything of value." He considered: "Actually, I found some Roman coins down here a few years ago."

Berry's interest grew immediately: "Roman coins?"

"Yeah. Two coins with Nero's head – dating them to the AD 50's or 60's – plus a few lead 'pigs'. It seems there was some lead mining and smelting going on at some time here."

The Professor asked hopefully. "Any chance we'll find anything?"

"I doubt it. Seems the mining wasn't extensive and was abandoned after a short period of time... Probably in favour of better sites."

"They had a lot in the Pennines."

The level of the slope started to grow less steep. As Ray recognised this, he shone his torch far ahead again.

"...We're coming to the end of the tunnel. This first cave is Maar's Bowel."

"Maar's Bowel?" Jimmy repeated. "We've done Marr's Maw, then his Gullet, now his Bowel? We're not gonna come out of his arse, are we?"

"I hope not."

They entered the mouth of the cavern and Michael called from behind: "What is this 'Maar's' – the name of the person who discovered the cave network?"

"Oh no," replied Ray. "The name's ancient. They reckon it's actually an aberration of the original name: not 'Maar's' but 'Mars'?"

"They named the caves after the planet Mars?" Liza said doubtfully.

"No. The name's of Roman origin: Mars was their God of War."

Berry corrected him: "Actually, he originally belonged to the Greeks. The Romans stole their Gods from the Greeks, Egyptians and others, much as they stole a lot of other things... People tend to think of the Romans as bringers of great civilisation. In fact, they were more like the Borg from Star Trek. They brutally conquered other people, then assimilated their ideas and even parts of their culture. From the Greeks, the Romans learned how to make different kinds of war machine, for instance. The Romans found the idea of the Greek Gods attractive, so borrowed their culture... Zeus became Jupiter, Ares became Mars, and so on."

"I don't believe it," uttered Michael. "We're underground and you still managed to sneak a history lesson in."

Finding Michael's tone oddly friendly, Berry smiled. "Sorry, it's instinct."

“Okay,” Ray prompted, “if school’s out, let’s take a look at the cavern.”

\* \* \*

Julie entered the cavern last. In spite of her sour mood, she found herself awed by the size and spectacle of the chamber.

From what the cavers’ beams of torchlight revealed, Maar’s Bowl had formed into the shape of a giant thick disc and was at least eighty metres in diameter. The roof reared more than thirty metres overhead at the centre and tapered to ten metres above near the walls. Hundreds of slender, spike-shaped stalactites hung down like monstrous fangs; on the floor beneath many of these lay the stumpy figures of stalagmites. Occasional beads of calcite-rich moisture could be glimpsed dripping from the ceiling – some landed in the dimpled upper faces of stalagmites, others fell into rippling pools. Near the centre of the cavern, three pairs of stalactites and stalagmites had managed to grow together and created glistening crystalline pillars. A frail curtain of calcite had grown between the closest two pillars; it was almost transparent and its lower ends appeared ragged.

Unfastening a pouch at her waist, Julie removed her digital camera and switched on the flash. In a few moments she was moving slowly through the cavern and taking photographs. The stress of her encounter with Liza was almost forgotten.

Michael smiled at seeing his sister busy elsewhere in the cave. When he looked back, disapproval was plain on Liza’s face. He frowned.

“What’s wrong?”

“You’re doing it again,” she hissed. “Your attention shifts to her all the time.”

“I’m just happy she’s enjoying herself... Anyway, I thought you two made up.”

“We did.” Liza thought for a split-second: “In fact, she asked me to do her a favour and keep you off her back. She said she’s sick of you trying to look after her.”

“Fine.” Michael shrugged. “I’ll leave her be and give you all my attention.”

“And so you should.”

The Professor had finished explaining to Jimmy and Debbie how the stalactites and stalagmites in the cavern had been formed. As he did, Jimmy reached up and touched the lower end of one of the fang-like growths.

“You’re not going to snap that off are you?” Ray called from his side.

Jimmy gave him a side-glance: “Yeah – for a keepsake...”

“No. We don’t break anything. If cavers do that, we end up with nothing for future generations to see... That stalactite you’re touching could have taken thousands of years to form.”

Retracting his hand, Jimmy nodded in compliance. “I s’pose photos will have to do.”

“Thanks.”

While members of the group took photographs, Ray withdrew a plastic-sealed map. The Professor moved to his side and examined the sheet with him.

“The cave system is even more extensive than I remember...”

“People keep discovering more of it all the time,” replied Ray. “It’s a real rat’s nest. Take this cavern. There are three routes leading off from it. Two end in chasms, the third is our route. That route then splits twelve more times in the next mile. There are hundreds of dead-ends and some massive pitches. A couple of the routes run into a great underground lake.”

“Someone could spend a lifetime mapping this place.”

“Yeah,” agreed Ray. “Well, it’s not going to be me.”

As they spoke, Ray’s eyesight shifted from the map to Liza and Debbie, who stood facing away from the men. Berry followed Ray’s line of vision and saw he was studying the rounded curves of their behinds, visible through their heavy jeans. It was obvious he was mentally stripping the pair.

The Professor coughed to attract his companion’s attention.

Ray looked back at Berry and, rather than being embarrassed by his action, he seemed pleased. He peered directly into Berry’s eyes for a moment before concentrating upon the map again...

In that glance, his eyes expressed something more than lust... something utterly sinister and capable of chilling the very soul of any normal man.

Beneath that dark look, his lips were twisted into a smile.



## II: Masters Of Britannia

*Being the personal chronicle of Gaius Pertinax. Translated from the original text, dated AD 62.*

No sooner had I managed to find quarters for myself and my two servants in Londinium, than I received an instruction summoning me to an audience with the Procurator.

We met not in his chambers or home, rather in one of the recently re-made gardens of Londinium. As I approached Julius Classicanus, flanked by a pair of armed guards, I took careful note of him. A lot can be determined just by the appearance of a person – and Julius was no exception.

He was sitting on an ornate stone bench and dressed in spotless formal robes of purple and gold. His build was lithe and athletic; his bodily movements were minimal and very controlled. Julius' face was narrow and coarsely lined – making him appear more a sixty year old than a man of forty – and his dark brown hair was streaked with grey. When the Procurator's eyes locked onto me, I knew he was appraising me just as I appraised him. His unblinking gaze revealed shrewd intelligence and a degree of compassion.

"Gaius," he greeted, rising from his seat and offering his hand. "I am pleased to see that you are well."

I took the man's hand and we shook firmly.

"It is an honour to be here, Procurator."

He beckoned to me and we sat down together. "Forget titles, young man. To me you will be Gaius, to you I will be Julius... Is that understood?"

"Of course... Julius."

"Well, what do you think of Londinium?"

"It is impressive that only a year after the Revolt, so much has been restored."

Julius' face darkened. "Your first mistake."

I was dumbstruck into silence. He smiled and explained.

"The Roman Empire was built on success and conquest. Defeats may exist, but men of our rank do not speak of them so openly. Had you mentioned the Revolt to the Governor, you would have made an enemy for life."

"I see."

"I, however, am a more practical man. A pragmatist... And I see in you a talented youth who could fall prey to words or deeds easily. So let me advise you: always think before you speak. If you have nothing to say, say nothing. If you must offer a complement, ensure it cannot be misconstrued by a man who might do so deliberately."

"I can see," I said slowly, "that I could learn much from you."

We spoke for an hour on matters of Rome and of Britannia. I learnt more in that hour than in the days I had spent during my preparations before leaving Rome. Finally, Julius turned to the subject of my new position.

"It is plain that you will work for me, organising our exports, whilst doing so through our Governor. To succeed you must balance both our priorities carefully, and fail neither of us. In truth, Petronius Turpilianus has no interest in your work and will not directly hinder it – however, his top priority is control at the moment, as you will have seen from the fields of crucified Britons. He fears a second revolt and is desperate to prevent it."

"And do you believe a second rebellion is possible?" I asked.

"Oddly, Petronius' very actions make this a strong possibility. His predecessor who quelled the revolt was removed from Britannia for fear of continued harsh retribution against the Britons – which could lead to instability – and Petronius was sent as replacement, having served as a Consul in Rome. Unfortunately, he is little different than Governor Paullinus and believes that brutality, rather than wisdom and fair treatment, are the only means to retain control. He seems to revel in punishing the Britons."

"I see."

"Also," the Procurator went on, "he has distinct hatred for me and would dearly like to weaken my position."

"And you," I suggested with some boldness, "would wish to weaken his?"

"Purely as a matter of survival, yes. Which places you in a delicate situation... You must serve his aims without depreciation of your loyalty to me... And my aims without depreciation of your loyalty to him... And, no doubt, you have aims of your own to satisfy."

Julius had peered hard into my eyes when he spoke the last sentence – and knew from my look that his suspicion was certain. I decided to confide in him, to a degree.

"My own goal has been given to me by the Emperor. He wishes 'players' for his arenas."

The Procurator smiled. "Well, you must assuredly not fail Nero – else, myself or the Governor may be sent orders for your execution." He shrugged: "You would look most... undignified... hung upon a cross."

*The conversation drifted to pleasantries of family and friends. However, through every word I retained the image of myself crucified and screaming...*

\* \* \*

*I was escorted to the Governor's Office the following day. Here there were no pleasantries whatsoever. I stood in front of his ornate desk – not having been offered one of the numerous comfortable chairs to sit in – and waited for an hour while he completed signing a series of documents.*

*Petronius Turpilanus looked like a General fresh from the battlefield. He wore an armoured uniform rather than robes and had a sheathed sword at his hip. Ten years older than myself, Petronius had an appearance sculptured and marred by warfare. Hard muscle, formed by years of training and combat, adorned his broad, powerful frame. His very pose was like that of a lion ready to strike – an image of contained energy, always about to erupt. A sword-blow had come close to cleaving his head some time ago and had left him scarred from his crown to the left side of his jaw; the scar-tissue glistened white amid his closely-cropped dark hair, but was livid red through his grotesquely split ear and down his face.*

*When the last paper was completed, Petronius sat back in his chair and gazed at me. From his expression, he might have been inspecting a lump of animal dung.*

*"So..." he rasped. "You spoke to our bastard Procurator yesterday. No doubt he used his subtle serpent's tongue upon you."*

*"We spoke," I answered guardedly.*

*"I'm certain you spoke at length, though every other word of his would have been a lie... Such as the lies which saw Suetonius Paullinus taken from the position of Governor mere months after he successfully defeated Bonduca – merely to enhance the Procurator's political standing... Yes, he's a hungry maggot is our Procurator, trying to gorge himself on the corpse of the world..."*

*"I wonder what he told you of me?" the Governor went on. "He'll have filled your mind with questions about my position. Am I merely a vicious warlord? A heartless cur who victimises the Britons? Should I not be made to suffer an ignominious reassignment like poor Suetonius...? Did he, I wonder, actually ask you to ally with him in his plans to destroy me?"*

*I interrupted: "He did not. And if he had, it would have made no difference. I am not here to side with him or you, I am here to serve Rome. To that end, you will find my loyalty unswerving and my abilities devoted to that purpose."*

*"And I'm supposed to believe you have no ambitions of your own?"*

*"I have ambitions, Governor. But how can I meet my aspirations if I fail in my duties?"*

*For the first time, a hint of a smile crossed the man's face. "A good answer. You're no dog, I'll give you that... So, what do you think of Londinium?"*

*I considered the Procurator's advice after I had answered the same question to him. Though I believed in Julius Classicanus' intellect, I could not accept his total honesty. However, I chose to abolish the word 'Revolt' from my reply to Petronius.*

*"Londinium is a true monument to your achievements, Governor. I never expected—"*

*"—to see a thriving city, only a year after the Revolt?" he finished.*

*"Exactly." I knew then that the Procurator's mentoring on the subject of the Revolt, had in fact been an attempt to shape my answer to an inevitable question and harm my relationship with the Governor. The lesson the Procurator had finally given had been to trust no one here. "May I ask how the re-building fares? Are the Britons daring to—"*

*Petronius spread his arms out wide. "They dare to do nothing. They are a crushed people. They hate us, but cannot act. Their slightest infringement upon our laws brings terrible retribution... If my spies hear even a word of dissent, it is annihilated... Members have been taken from every town and village for crucifixion. Others have watched as their families were fed alive to wild dogs. Unspeakable tortures have been carried out for the barest fragment of information – or merely to create a warning to others... We are now a mighty clenched fist throttling the throat of Britannia."*

*The Governor was exultant at this declaration. The speech gave me a perfect understanding of the man and his differences to the Procurator. Petronius was harsh, open and bold, whilst Julius was subtle, indirect and surreptitious. They were men of opposites, hence their hatred of each other. And I was placed between them.*

*Sitting back down, Petronius considered for a moment. "We will make our relationship an easy one. This will allow you to work without discord. It will allow me to focus my efforts on the military and judiciary aspects of my role."*

*It will allow our beloved Procurator to focus upon re-establishing and improving our financial controls over Britannia... You will be assigned a right hand man to assist you. I will choose him and send him to you by the end of the week. You will have him liaise your requirements to me, and he will liaise mine to you. Similarly, only you will liaise directly with the Procurator. In short, you will be a two-man bridge between the positions of Governor and Procurator. Work well and assure there is no friction."*

*The idea suited me and I agreed wholeheartedly.*

*"And further questions, Gaius?"*

*"One piece of information," I said. "The Emperor has given me a personal task to carry out... The procurement of interesting 'players' for his arenas."*

*"A task we already carry out as one of our numerous exports," Petronius replied. "Though I am sure Emperor Nero would prefer an ambitious young man such as yourself taking personal control of the work. That way he is ensured the best sport possible – and he can have the pleasure of executing you if the 'players' fail to prove entertaining."*

*I could not find words to respond to this suggestion. Amid all the insinuations and supposed truths I had been given by the Procurator and Governor, the only ones I wholly believed were those concerning the danger to my life. I did not consider this pessimistic, but realistic and cautious.*

*"Well, Gaius, let me assure you that the Emperor's pleasure is of the utmost importance. Feel free to send him whatever animals and prisoners you choose... And forget the statute that only a criminal can be forced into fighting in the arenas – if you see a Briton you want, then he's obviously guilty of something, so just take him. The right hand man I supply will see to the details."*

*We drank a toast to Emperor Nero and I left, imbued with new confidence.*

*At first I had been daunted by the prospect of serving the two masters of Britannia. Now I realised that their mutual hatred could be made to work in my favour. They would both be so concerned with each other, neither would pay attention to my efforts to meet Emperor Nero's challenge...*

*When I succeeded, I would return to Rome in the Emperor's favour and leave these fools to rot in this distant province.*

*End Of Sample*

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