

Paraverse

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Part I

Unbalanced State

Chapter 1

The Clock

It was one of those vile London mornings that I loathed so much. I had spent the night behind closed curtains working on my calculations and had not been aware of the abominable peasoup fog enveloping the city. In these cold and wet circumstances I really had little sympathy for the vice-ridden city. Below my window, even in the upscale neighborhood that I had taken residence, the streets seemed filled with loathesome creatures.

But even though the morning was ghastly, the night had been thoroughly thrilling. My spirits were high because I had finally finished my calculations. Before me, in untidy stacks, were parchments filled with my own writing. The neat rows of equations and, most importantly, diagrams were satisfying to the eye and soothing to my mind. For this was the culmination of many years of searching for the true nature of the universe. These were my own rendition of the creation of the world, and one in which God had no place but the most passive part.

I was feeling tired, however, since I had worked all night without stopping once. The final stages of my computations had been extremely difficult and I had felt in my heart that halting the momentum I had gained at any time would have adversely affected my ability to continue them, perhaps even to the point where my progress would have been completely halted. There was therefore only one course of action, to finish them outright.

During these moments, all thoughts of sleep had been driven from my mind. I was focused on a singular goal and had little time to register any extraneous circumstances I might find myself in. But now that my mind had worked through the problem at hand, I was made very much aware of my own fatigue. Barely being able to keep my eyelids open, I made my way toward my bedding, yawning until my jaws creaked the whole way. As soon as my head hit the pillow, I lost consciousness and I was awakened only later the same evening by my woman friend Miss Charlotte Gray.

"Excuse me, Nathaniel. Wake up!"

It was, of course, completely inappropriate for Charlotte to be in my rooms at this hour, and in my bedchamber as well. But this was her ways, and our friendship extended so far back in my life that I could hardly muster up any anger at her behaviour any longer. But for a woman she was extremely handy and her father had been the best clockmaker in all of greater London. If she had not been a woman, she would have inherited the business after him when

he died, for her skills could match her father's almost every step of the way. In some ways she even surpassed him, something that had infuriated him on occasion. He was, like her, a sore loser and prone to fits of anger when faced with such a situation.

As for Charlottes appearance at my rooms, I could not really blame her. It was in fact me who had called upon her to visit me, for I had plans to put use to her nible fingers. I had made designs and calculations for a machine that would prove my theories once and for all and needed her to construct it.

Charlotte listened to my ideas when I had managed to rub most of the sleep out of my eyes and freshen up a little bit. Eating my breakfast and talking at the same time was hardly appropriate, but excitement had the hold of me and I was finding it difficult to keep to good form.

I told Charlotte about the results of my work, described in detail the workings of my special machine, the machine that I wanted her to build. She only shook her head when I spoke of parallel universes and the physics behind it but she lit up when I talked about the materials she had to use, the intricate workings of the mechanics inside and she was obviously excited by the prospect of working on something so complex whatever the purpose.

When I had finished by meal, I showed her the plans. She looked them over in detail and started asking questions. Her queries were very informed and I was pleasantly surprised that she grasped so much of the principles of my work. She commented on a few points where she doubted my construction would be practically viable.

"Your knowledge", she said, "of clockwork mechanics is limited. But I see the point of most of this." She smiled at me. "I'm certain that I can make it. But this part here." She pointed at a particular part of the central structure and a minute gearshift. "I can't possibly make this in gold." she announced. "It is much too soft."

"But that part has to be made of gold" I replied, "a lesser metal would oxidize during the transition phase because of the induction" she held up her hand and I stopped.

"It can't be done in pure gold. The answer could be to make it in a gold/platinum alloy. But it would be incredibly expensive."

I thought about this for a short while. "Yes, platinum would be acceptable. The other parts can be made of brass or steel, but this part here needs to be pure. That's where most of the induction takes place. But you are probably not even aware of what electricity is, are you?" I asked Charlotte and smiled. "It is a quite recent discovery after all. I won't pretend that I discovered it, but I am quite sure that I know more about electricity than any other living person. Most of that knowledge I have acquired through my calculations, it is all so very simple when you know the basic principles."

Charlotte once again raised her hand at me and I fell quiet.

"My dear Nathaniel." she stepped in closer and laid her hand on my shoulder. "You were always so excited by your fantastic theories of physics. You know that I find your enthusiasm thrilling but I do not have the same interest as you do for them. I enjoy working with my hands." she took my hand in hers, her fine-limbed dextrous digits playing with my fingers in a complex mesmerizing pattern.

I collected my thoughts, released her hands and stepped back. "My dear Charlotte, that is quite enough." She looked not abashed as a proper lady would

but almost defiant. "Don't you look at me like that, you know as well as I do that it is not appropriate for a lady to be so intimate with a man she is not betrothed to."

She spun away from me, facing the window, obviously angered at my outburst. I found myself more than a little bit insecure and wanting to go up to her and tell her that I was sorry, but I steeled myself against my emotion. I knew that I had spoken and acted as a gentleman would.

"Will you build my machine?" I asked. She could not deny me, I knew. She wanted to build it as much as I did, for her own satisfaction. She needed to know if she would be able to. She of course agreed but left my apartment, with the plans, without as much as a goodbye as she left. It would be three months before I would lay eyes on her exquisite hands again.

Charlotte returned on a monstrous autumn night. The wind howled through the London streets and carried with it all the debris and refuse that had carelessly been thrown into them by its hapless inhabitants. The rain had been relentless in the last few days and water stood high in the Thames. The streets too were ripe with water and it was not a pretty sight to see the people trying to make way to their destinations in the downpour.

My landlady opened the door after the third, most urgent, series of knocks on the door. She gasped when she saw the drenched figure of my good friend Charlotte on the other side. Half in tears she helped the poor girl inside and urged her to get out of her clothes. She insisted that Charlotte would accompany her into her quarters and receive a dry set of clothes of hers so that she would not catch her death.

Charlotte tried to explain that the package she was carrying under her arm was the result of several months of work and that I would urgently want to see it, but to no avail. Mrs Threattle simply told her that if I had waited several months for that package, I could wait a few more moments while she Charlotte changed into some dry clothes and the girl could no longer refuse.

Once into some, somewhat oversized, but considerably less clammy, clothes she quickly made her way up the stairs into my quarters. She threw open the door, much to my and my land-lady's dismay and placed gently upon the table on top of my work, which I was transcribing into a book, in front of me her well protected brown paper package.

I had failed to notice any of the actions that had taken place below and was quite surprised to find myself staring into Charlotte's lovely smiling face.

"It's done." She beamed at me. It took me a few moments to understand what she was talking about.

"Really? It is?" I could scarcely believe her words.

"Well. Open it!" she said and looked at the package. I was transfixed by the possibilities of the contents of the box and found it hard to make a motion for it. But after a thousand years of hesitation I reached out and started untying the rope she had wrapped around it.

"Oh, you tiresome man" she said and ripped the package out of my grasp. Within a few seconds she had removed all the packaging and on top of ripped paper and strings of rope on my desk it stood, glimmering in the flickering gaslight. It was indeed as wonderful as I could ever have hoped.

It was box-like in shape, about the size of a normal clock. Each corner was a cylindrical bar and the top had a glass bulb inside which you could see the spokes of the flywheel with the weights to keep the balance and speed exact. On the front there was an intricate face with several hands in several positions pointing out all the variables of the machine's function. On the back was the levers and the handles for winding the mechanical parts.

From each side you could look through the green-tinted glass into the workings inside and thought the machine was still now, I shuddered in anticipation of watching it revolve and hum with energy as I activated its main function.

I must have spent several minutes admiring the machine before I realized that Charlotte was waiting for me. She expected me to do something with the machine or at least tell her what it was for.

"As I started explaining three months ago, there is an infinite number of parallel universes." As I spoke I started winding the machine. "Each one unique but closely related to an infinite number of other universes. These universes exist and occupy the same space at the same time, separated by the thinnest dimensional barrier. Of course quite impenetrable by any normal means." I shifted the gears, turned the hands on the front into positions that I had calculated since I had finished my thesis. The machine started humming and the flywheel started spinning.

"But this machine is more than normal. Its design is so intricate, so fantastical, so amazing, that it enables the user to bend the dimensions to his will, rendering him immaterial to the barriers that separate the universes. He becomes able to travel to these parallel dimensions."

I could see the same glow in Charlotte's eyes as I no doubt had in mine. She was starting to realize the potential of our machine.

"Look inside." I had already directed my attention to the small window on the front which should be showing only the insides of the machine, but the clock was directing light through a complex moving system of mirrors and coloured stones and thus projecting an image onto it instead.

The image on the glass was that of an island, during the day, with sunlight dancing on the waves. The sky above the island was clear of clouds but full of birds of all sizes circling and diving into the ocean for fish. The shores of the island were rocky and inhospitable, except for in one place where a white sandy beach showed the island's softer side. On the top of the island was a structure of blue and green, covered in many places with vegetation. Bulbous towers and huge stain-glass windows made it look almost like a part of the jungle surrounding it.

"What is this place?"

"This, my dear Charlotte, is where we are going first."

I am not a man to rush into things. I take my time to set my affairs in order and prepare myself. This has often caused my surroundings much frustration but I refuse to be bullied into making rash actions. I sent Charlotte home, though she protested heartily. I was adamant on the point of not rushing off without due preparation. I told her that we would be able to leave tomorrow, granted that I would be able to gather the items that I required for the journey in time.

That night, I found however that I was hard pressed to gain a wink of sleep. The excitement of the events that was to come had my mind rushing headlong with visions of the places I could go and the possibilities of my future. Some half hour after the clock on the mantelpiece had chimed twelve and I had changed the side on which I slept a hundred times at least, I caught a glimpse of something through the half-open doorway into my study. The lights were off but the night outside the undrawn windows was moonlit and castling long shadows into the room.

The movement I saw was simply the silhouette of something moving over the carpet. But my room was on the second floor and a passing person or carriage outside would produce no such effect. The result of this vision was startling to say the least and set my heart and mind racing. I started breathing heavily and found it impossible to move. I convinced myself in an instance that there was someone in my study.

The shadow passed three times over the small patch of carpet that I was able to see from my bed, but during this time I could hear no noise from that location to accompany the intruder's movements. The strain on my mind was building through this ordeal and I was becoming more and more convinced that the intruder was out for my life when I heard a terrific crash and the clattering of glass falling to the ground.

At that point, fear made me jump out of bed and a new thought entered my mind which made me move instantly into the study. Maybe, whoever was in my rooms was out to get my clock! I grabbed the poker from the side of the fireplace and rose it above my head, letting out a great scream intended to scare whomever had broken into my home. I found, however, the study empty except from glass from my window spread all over the chair and the desk where I do all my work. My papers were gently blowing in the wind.

When I found no intruder, I drew the curtains and checked the safe where I had thankfully placed the precious clock. But the safe was unopened and the clock was still in its place. Next I went for the papers which I feared might have been stolen. But my fears were unfounded, all the papers were where I had placed them, except for one thing: they were all in disarray. The papers had obviously been looked through.

The thought of someone going through my papers was enough to send shivers down my spine. I knew of few in London who would be able to understand more than half of what my paper was describing and fewer still in the whole of the Commonwealth who would be able to understand all of it.

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Of course I couldn't sleep for the rest of the night and when dawn broke, I had already gathered all the necessary items for our journey. I sent a message to Charlotte to join me. She arrived in a blue dress and a rugged overcoat stuffed with all manner of tools that she was sure she would need. I did not argue with her, since I now more than ever felt that we needed to be prepared for anything.

We placed ourselves symmetrically on the chest, she on my left side and the clock in the middle, its complex web of hands showing the variables and their progression as I turned the dials facing me. I had soon set all the dials to their correct position and it was time to go.

Charlotte looked me straight in the eye, placed both of her hands upon mine on the clock and we could both feel the mechanics inside winding up. Our

excitement was tangible now and we were both expecting something spectacular to happen.

We could both feel something starting up. Something was tingling over my skin, the world around me started to look washed out and unreal somehow. The angles on my desk did not seem right and I concluded that the dimensions must have started to shift. The effect was slightly nauseating as the inner ear was trying to compensate the apparent rotation in our vision. I started then to hear the sound of waves, like an ocean far away breaking against the rocky shores of an island.

The washed out colors of our surroundings suddenly returned with an audible bang and my small apartments had been replaced with the sunlit shores of a tropical island, lined with palm trees and populated completely by exotic birds.

The sun was beating down on us as we sat mesmerized by the realism of our surroundings, as if we had expected the alternate dimension to be unreal somehow. But we could smell and feel the closeness to the ocean.

Then Charlotte screamed and her face turned pale. Her gaze was fixed upon something behind my shoulder. I turned around and was faced with a ghastly sight that turned my blood to ice and made my head swim with horror. On the ground just a few feet from our feet laid a corpse of a woman, long dead, her decaying flesh searing in the sun.

Chapter 2

The Island

The beach sand was hot under our feet, even through our shoes we could feel it. After I had gathered my wits and taken care of Charlotte, who was very brave and handling our ordeal almost better than I did, I tried to think as a scientist and approached the female body laying on the sand.

Her face was pale and spotted with sand. The body was warm, even in death, a fact that I could only attribute to the warm climate. Her body was draped in some kind of light fabric, covering the torso and the upper part of the legs. The rest of her legs were exposed, very inappropriately. Logic suggested that this woman was a primitive native of some sort. What had killed her was apparent. There was a large wound in her midsection, a lot of blood on her clothing. The damage had most assuredly been fatal.

The wound was small and round, as if made by a spear. I concluded that there must have been some kind of upset or fighting which had resulted in her death. Charlotte and I was perhaps entering the staging ground for a battle between local tribes.

The weight of the gun that I had bought for protection was heavy against my side and the pressure felt reassuring in the circumstances. With this added courage Charlotte and I looked around our immediate area to ascertain our position. Were we alone? Would this woman's assassins return?

The beach on which our trunk was situated was about 20 yards deep and continued in a slow curve out of sight. Inlands it ended in a tree line, with thick foliage. It would be possible to go that way, but we would probably need some cutting instruments to make our way through the jungle. Fortunately, I had brought such tools with me. The trunk was halfway up the beach and most likely safe from being washed away. The structure of the beach indicated that the water never reached this high.

So we took out some equipment, including a large blade called a machete that I had bought from a man who had recently returned from an expedition to Africa. He swore by it and had told me that it was the single most useful thing imaginable in a savage wilderness, not only for protection against wild animals, and savages for that matter, but also for cutting down branches, making fire, cutting rope and a thousand other reasons. We locked the trunk and armed with gun and machete we made our way into the forest toward the structure I had seen through the dimensional clock's looking glass. The clock itself rested on my back in my rucksack. I would not leave it and chance that some native

would carry it off. The clock was our ticket back home in case of danger.

Charlotte followed closely behind me as I slowly hacked my way through the green thickness of the forest. Everywhere I stepped, small insects either scurried out of our way or flew at our faces. We waved scores of biting, stinging mosquitoes out of our faces but we were not deterred. The mystery of this blue island had to be solved. What was the structure we had seen? Who had made it?

It seemed to take hours to cover even the shortest distance, but finally we made it into an opening and what we saw made the effort worthwhile. In front of us, glittering in the sunlight, was the lower part of one of the tendrils of the almost organic-looking structure that continued far above us. The slope which had been gentle at first was now rather steep and this branch of the building was reaching down what could only be described as a mountainside. The rocky surface would be dangerous and difficult to climb for any man, but impossible for a woman.

I almost despaired when Charlotte pointed out that there was a set of stairs starting just behind a particularly nasty looking bush full of thorns and red berries. This time Charlotte took point and led me up the staircase into the strange structure itself.

If it was hot and humid outside, the insides of the building were even worse. On both sides of the stairs, glass windows let the sun in, but none of the heat out. The walls could be described as some sort of wood. But the wood was alive and covered with bark, not dead and carved into planks. It was like climbing a stairwell inside the enormous root of the largest tree there ever was.

We stopped once or twice on our journey up the mountainside, both to catch our breaths and to watch the spectacular view. We were now far above the tree tops and were able to see the beach. I even imagined I could see the trunk, which also felt reassuring. But every step I took, made me more and more worried. Excitement increased in the same manner and soon the tension of what we would find once we reached the top of the mountain almost unbearable.

That was when we made our second grizzly discovery. Charlotte gasped, but the brave girl did not scream this time.

"My God." she said. "Another one. Poor soul."

At first she held on to me, but then she let go and knelt down to see if the poor fellow lying on the stairs in front of us was dead or alive. Alas it was far too late to save his life. He had a similar wound to his chest and another in his neck. The large pool of blood around his head, coagulated and blackening, told a gruesome tale. He had lain here and bled out, without anyone to help him.

Charlotte looked at me.

"Something horrible has happened here, Nathaniel, I can feel it. I think we brought something with us."

"Don't be silly, girl. This has nothing to do with us. These people were killed in some god awful war between some primitive tribes. That is a spear-wound I bet."

Charlotte became utterly agitated by this.

"Fool! Does this look like the work of primitives to you?" she indicated the stairs and the walls. "This was built by sophisticated people with knowledge of the workings of nature." she knelt down suddenly, indicating something she had found on the ground by the body. It was something shiny.

"Look at this." she picked it out, it was bent out of shape and covered in blood but the object was unmistakable. "This is a bullet."

"My good maker, you are right. Do you think that we have brought someone with us? But how? How could we possibly?"

My legs gave way underneath me and I sat down hard on the steps just below the body. "Has this man somehow died because of us?"

"Get up, Nathaniel." Charlotte dragged me to my feet. "Let us continue up the stairs, but keep that gun handy. We might just need it."

She started again, walking up the stone steps, lined with flowers and plants and I continued after her in a daze. Chock had beaten sense out of me and I was unable to think clearly. Thoughts swirled in my head and I have no recollection of my actions before we reached the top of the stairs and a wooden door, covered in what at first appeared to be vegetation but which on closer inspection turned out to be decoration.

My daze disappeared as I studied the intricacy of the carvings.

"Fabulous." I intoned, entranced by the rotating shapes. "I think this is some sort of writing."

Then the door opened and we were both faced with our first live encounter since our journey into this paraverse.

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In the opened doorway stood a tall man, with icy blue eyes and short brown hair. His face was covered with a neat beard but still it was apparent that he had recently been injured. His cheek was swollen and purple. He looked strong and able and he was garbed in a style of clothing that we could recognise from the bodies we had found. I concluded at this point that this was another native to this island.

In his hands was a long stick and he held it in front of him to ward himself from us. He looked frightened and angry at our presence and did not speak but backed away from us.

"Have no fear, sir. We are explorers. We mean no harm." I said. I had not foreseen this eventuality and felt quite unprepared for a human encounter. According to my reasoning, the paraverse should be rather void of human life,

Charlotte held her empty hands toward the man and I understood what she was trying to do. My hands, however, were occupied with holding my gun, which had slipped out of my pocket as the door opened. I replaced the gun in my pocket, assured that the native would have no idea what the item was, it was highly unlikely that he had ever seen one. But the man stared in a frantic fashion at the pocket in which I had deposited the weapon.

"We mean you no harm!" I repeated, trying to sound calm and resolute but I could see on our encounter's face that the situation was quickly deteriorating. The man would most likely run away or attack any second and I was not sure which.

Then Charlotte intervened. She stepped forward and went down on one knee, bending her head in deference. When she moved the man rose the stick over his head, clearly intending to use it on my dear friends beautiful head, but the blow never came. Instead, the man lowered it to the ground and mimicked the woman's peace-offer. I stayed back. The both of them started talking in a low voice and to my surprise and wonder, the strange man spoke perfect english.

Of what I could make out of their conversation, the man called himself Edo and had been born on this island. He was afraid of us because people like us had arrived only yesterday. After a short period of aggressive behaviour and asking all manner of questions that Edo and his friends, some of whom we had found outside, did not understand, they had started killing people. Edo had escaped only by locking himself into a stone chamber deep inside the Celestial Menage, which was the name of the building we were all inside.

Telling this story, did nothing for the man's mental stability and he wept and swore intermittently as it progressed. He told of the fiends that had arrived. One of them was some sort of gang leader. He had worn a red dress with golden buttons, black trousers and a silly black hat. I recognised the description as some uniform, possibly British. The military man had brought with him four tough men, armed with weapons of the kind that I had, but bigger. Edo was of course referring to guns. It was staggering to hear the man describe a party of adventurers, or rather from their behaviour: thugs, that were so obviously from Earth. Most likely, the men were even from the Commonwealth, for they too had spoken English. Edo explained that he was very proficient in learning languages and that he had heard the men speaking for quite a while. Though every now and then Charlotte and I had to help him with some word he had not used before.

All the while he was telling this, he was always speaking to and looking at Charlotte. He was apparently still weary of me and the weapon I kept in my pocket. I dared not, however, put it away since I still did not fully trust this fellow. After all, we had just met him, and found several people dead in his vicinity.

We proceeded deeper into the Celestial Menage and found ourselves in a large oval domed room with different colored ropes hanging across the ceiling from wall to wall in an intricate pattern, which looked almost hypnotic when passing underneath. Edo was calming down and we had walked in silence for the past few minutes.

The floor and walls here was made out of stone and in the middle of the room was a large red carpet, filled with many-colored pillows. Edo sat himself down slowly in the pile, obviously showing more relaxation in our company but still spying me out of the corner of his eyes, wary of all my actions.

"This is where I come to think," he explained. "I have not had time to collect my thoughts yet. I have not even had time to collect the bodies." a tear rolled down his cheek. Charlotte was crying also.

"We can help you bury them," she said. Her eyes full of compassion and tears.

"I do not know what that means," Edo replied, and tried to smile. "But I am thankful. It is our custom here to put the bodies of our dead in the branches."

The thought sounded horrible to us, to decorate a tree with the bodies of the dead, but we knew nothing of Edo and the customs of his people. It would also turn out that we did not fully understand what Edo had meant with the branches.

"You look very tired," I said to him. Besides being blurry-eyed from crying, he started looking woozy now as he was comfortably seated. The wear of the last few days was obviously taking its toll and I imagined that the man had not been sleeping very well since the incident here. "You should try to catch some sleep. Then in a few hours we can help you get the bodies where they are not

exposed to the elements. Get things in order. Then we will help you find out who these people are and why they did this.”

Edo looked at me, his eyes suddenly stern and icily cold. “Those men came here and they killed my friends. My wife. They took my child even. My little Oni. So, if you want to catch them, then I will help you. Only the stars know what those men are doing to my son.”

The thought was staggering. So the men had also kidnapped a small child. The reasoning driving this dark band of wretches was completely beyond my comprehension. I could not encompass the thoughts of evil men, it was not within my scope to get into their mindset and analyze their motives. They must want something, but what? How had they been able to come here.

I made one connection then. The breakin the night before the trip. The incident must have some bearing on what was happening. The people breaking in could not have been after the plans for my clock, since those had been undisturbed in their drawer. What they had looked at, however, was the calculations for the coordinates that I used to get to this world. This meant that whomever had broken into my apartments already had the means to travel but not the knowledge to make it work.

“How old was your son?” I asked. Edo looked at me sideways.

“He is 12 years old. He is so talented. He already knows how to travel.”

“Travel?” Charlotte queried. “What do you mean?”

“He was able to walk the branches of the tree and see the other worlds.”

“I still do not understand what you are referring to.” Charlotte looked at me for guidance, but I was also at a loss.

“I can not explain. Let me tell you later when my mind is less jumbled. You were right, I am so tired I can hardly think. If I could just close my eyes for a few hours I will be alright.”

We left him there in the pile of pillows to sleep. We did not want to disturb him with our talking and we did certainly not intend to stay still and keep quite for even a few hours. We had so much to discuss.

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Charlotte was still crying a bit and putting my arm around her shoulder seemed natural and calmed her a bit. Her beautiful brown eyes were a bit reddened and I wiped away the tears from her cheeks with trembling hands, for I too felt deeply the gravity of the moment. Without speaking we continued into this mysterious building. The room just beyond the one where Edo was resting was a dining room of some kind. In the middle of the medium sized oval room was a sturdy wooden table, quite elegant in its simplicity, around which stood long rounded benches with pillows to sit on. Fifteen plates and glasses were set, but there was no indication that they had been used very recently.

Beyond this dining room lay a library. It was an incredible sight to see and wherever my eyes landed there was a new book that I had never seen before. I prided myself somewhat in my knowledge of books. Though lay no claim to having read all that many books in my life, I had knowledge of many of them. I spent a great deal of my time in one of the few places that made life in London bareable; the Royal Archives.

But the contents of this library was entirely new and I was fascinated. Most of them were in strange new languages, written in alphabets that were unknown

to me. Some seemed recognizable to me, like several books in arabic and what appeared to be an encyclopedia written in russian. I found but a single book that I could read and luckily it had some bearing on where we were.

The name of the book was "The Lonely Blue Island" and I skimmed the first chapter. It described the arrival of a traveller from a faraway place, he landed on this island as the result of a spiritual quest. He found the island fascinating and decided settle down on it.

Charlotte listened as I read some of the book to her. She rightly pointed out that this book possibly had some answers to some of our queries and might even be a historical account of how this fantastic building we were inside had come to be constructed.

A look of wonder came over Charlotte's face as I read. She did not speak or ask any questions as I detailed the construction of the first shelter for our traveller. He explored the island and found that it contained all that he needed to survive, animals to hunt for meat, fruit to eat and wood to build with. But most wondrous of all, he discovered that the large inland trees were not the inert creatures as their brethren on the traveller's home world. They could move and exert a strange force on their surrounding.

The traveller also found that with practice and patience he was able to understand the trees and communicate with them. Exactly how this was possible was not evident from the text. But the result of this interaction was that the trees agreed to house our traveller in exchange for him cultivating them and helping them grow without interference from creatures that fed on them, killing most of them before they could grow large and old.

In particular one tree grew larger than the others with the traveller's help. It reached majestically into the sky eclipsing the very peak of the island. The traveller walked the interior and fashioned it as his home. But it he kept his word and kept the trees free from infestations and through time he learned the real secret of the island.

Chapter 3

Captain Moran

A horrible scream pierced the stillness of our reading and both Charlotte and I rose to our feet. Colour drained from Charlottes face and I found it hard to breathe, the howl was so terrible and the implications were grave. I dropped the book and stood frozen in my place unable to move even though the need was obviously dire. It was Charlotte that first moved and she took my hand in a firm grip and tugged me out of my stasis.

We tumbled headlong out of the room, barely keeping our feet up to our own pace as we raced to reach Edo. Through the dining room and into the pillow room we rushed and we were both highly excited when arrived. The room which had only contained Edo when we left, now held four new men whom we did not recognize. Three of them were armed with rifles, cocked and pointed straight at us and one stood in the doorway opposite, leisurely playing with his revolver, obviously some kind of leader for the group.

"Stop right there!" he commanded, without showing any urgency. "Or we will be forced to gun you down where you stand."

Naturally we both halted immediately and moved no further. My own revolver laid heavily in my pocket against my thigh and Charlotte was standing behind me to the left with a firm grip on my left arm.

When the man in the doorway was certain that we had understood and complied with his orders, he pointed his revolver at me and started towards us. To my far left I could see the pillows where Edo laid, one of the riflemen only a few feet from him, he was not moving, petrified by the reappearance of what I can only assume to be the ruffians whom had killed his family.

"I recognize you, my good man." the man with the revolver said.

"Then you have the better of me, for I do not recognize you at all."

The man laughed a short hard laugh, which made me instinctively fear him; it was the laugh of a man without soul, without remorse or empathy. He looked us all over once more, his eyes were as cold and gray as droplets of ice.

"I am Captain Patrick Moran of the Her Majesty's Royal Navy, special branch."

I was taken aback. Though I had gathered that the man had some military background, I had been convinced that the man was some sort of outcast. It could not simply be true that he was still in the employ of Her Majesty still. Then again, special branch could mean anything. I had heard of sections of the military employing shady characters to perform those dangerous, immoral

missions that no honorable person would never do.

I would be understating my position if I said I did not approve of this practice. My strong conviction is one should not have to resort to this sort of activities in order to be successful in international diplomacy, or indeed war. But I was also aware that this sort of occurrence was no new thing and had in fact been a tradition, albeit a bad one, in the scene of international relations for many years.