

opening extract from

a darkling plain

written by

philip reeve

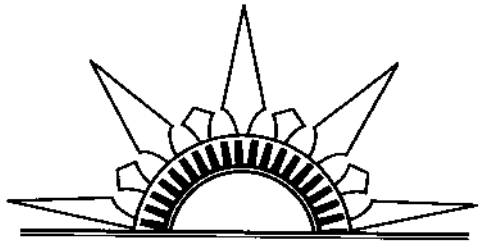
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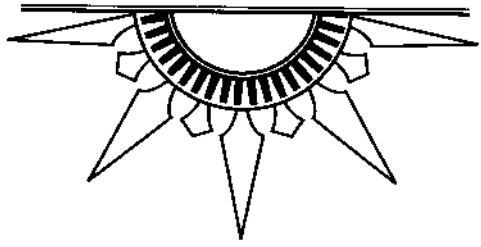
please print off and read at your leisure.

Ah, love, let us be true
To one another! for the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confus'd alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

Matthew Arnold, *Dover Beach*



PART ONE



1

SUPER-GNATS OVER ZAGWA



Theo had been climbing since dawn; first on the steep roads and paths and sheep-tracks behind the city, then across slopes of shifting scree, and up at last on to the bare mountainside, keeping where he could to corries and crevices where the blue shadows pooled. The sun was high overhead by the time he reached the summit. He paused there a while to drink water and catch his breath. Around him the mountains quivered behind veils of heat-haze rising from the warm rocks.

Carefully, carefully, Theo edged his way on to a narrow spur that jutted out from the mountain-top. On either side of him sheer cliffs dropped for thousands of feet to a tumble of spiky rocks; trees; white rivers. A stone, dislodged, fell silently, end over end, for ever. Ahead, Theo could see nothing but the naked sky. He stood upright, took a deep breath, sprinted the last few yards to the edge of the rock, and jumped.

Over and over he went, down and down, dazed by the flicker of mountain and sky, mountain and sky. The echoes of his first cry bounded away into silence and he could hear nothing but his quick-beating heart and the rush of the air past his ears. Tumbling on the wind, he emerged from the crag's shadow into sunlight, and glimpsed below him – far below – his home, the static city of Zagwa. From up here the copper domes and painted houses looked like toys; airships coming and going from the harbour were wind-blown petals, the river winding through its gorge a silver thread.

Theo watched it all fondly till it was hidden from him by a shoulder of the mountains. There had been a time when he had thought that he would never return to Zagwa. In the Green Storm training camp they had taught him that his love for home and family was a luxury; something that he must forget if he were to play his part in the war for a world made green again. Later, as a captive slave on the raft-city of Brighton, he had dreamed of home, but he had thought that his family would not want him back; they were old fashioned Anti-Tractionists, and he imagined that by running away to join the Storm he had made himself an outcast for ever. Yet here he was, back among his own African hills; it was his time in the north that seemed to him now like a dream.

And it was all Wren's doing, he thought as he fell. Wren; that odd, brave, funny girl whom he had met in Brighton, his fellow slave. "Go home to your mother and father," she had told him, after they escaped together. "They still love you, and they'll welcome you, I'm sure." And she had been right.

A startled bird shot past on Theo's left, reminding him that he was in mid-air above a lot of unfriendly-looking rocks, and descending fast. He opened the great kite that was strapped to his back and let out a whoop of triumph as the wings jerked him upwards and his dizzy plunge turned to a graceful, soaring flight. The roar of the wind rushing past him died away, replaced by gentler sounds; the whisper of the broad panels of silicon-silk, the creak of rigging and bamboo struts.

When he was younger Theo had often brought his kite up here, testing his courage on the winds and thermals. Lots of young Zagwans did it. Since his return

from the north, six months ago, he had sometimes looked enviously at their bright wings hanging against the mountains, but he had never dared to join them. His time away had changed him too much; he felt older than the other boys his age, yet shy of them, ashamed of the things he had been; a Tumbler-bomb pilot, and a prisoner, and a slave. But this morning the other cloud-riders were all at the citadel to see the foreigners. Theo, knowing that he would have the sky to himself, had woken up longing to fly again.

He slid down the wind like a hawk, watching his shadow swim across the sunlit buttresses of the mountain. Real hawks, hanging beneath him in the glassy air, veered away with sharp mews of surprise and indignation as he soared past, a lean black boy beneath a sky-blue wing invading their element.

Theo looped-the-loop and wished that Wren could see him. But Wren was far away, travelling the Bird Roads in her father's airship. After they escaped from Cloud 9, the mayor of Brighton's airborne palace, and reached the Traction City of Kom Ombo, she had helped Theo find a berth aboard a south-bound freighter. On the quay, while the airship was making ready to depart, they had said goodbye, and he had kissed her. And although Theo had kissed other girls, some much prettier than Wren, Wren's kiss had stayed with him; his mind kept going back to it at unexpected moments like this. When he kissed her all the laughter and the wry irony had gone out of her and she had become shivery and serious and so quiet, as if she were listening hard for something he could not hear. For a moment he had wanted to tell her that he loved her, and ask her to come with him, or offer to stay – but

Wren had been so worried about her dad, who had suffered some sort of seizure, and so angry at her mum, who had abandoned them and fallen with Cloud 9 into the desert, that he would have felt he was taking advantage of her. His last memory of her was of looking back as his ship pulled away into the sky and seeing her waving, growing smaller and smaller until she was gone.

Six months ago! Already half a year... It was definitely time he stopped thinking about her.

So for a little while he thought of nothing, just swooped and banked on the playful air, swinging westward with a mountain between him and Zagwa; a green mountain where rags and flags of mist streamed from the canopy of the cloud-forest.

Half a year. The world had changed a lot in that time. Sudden, shuddering changes like the shifting of tectonic plates, as tensions that had been building all through the long years of the Green Storm's war were suddenly released. For a start, the Stalker Fang was gone. There was a new leader in the Jade Pagoda now, General Naga, who had a reputation as a hard man. His first act as leader had been to reverse the *Traktionstadtsgesellschaft*'s advance on the Rustwater Marshes, and smash the Slavic cities which had been nibbling for years at the Storm's northern borders. But then, to the astonishment of the world, he had called off his air-fleets, and made a truce with the Traction Cities. There were rumours from the Green Storm's lands about political prisoners being released and harsh laws repealed; even talk that Naga planned to disband the Storm and re-establish the old Anti-Traction League. Now he had sent a delegation to hold talks

with the Queen and Council of Zagwa – a delegation led by his own wife, Lady Naga.

It was this which had driven Theo to rise at dawn and bring his old kite up into the high places above the city. The talks were beginning today, and his father and mother and sisters had all gone to the citadel to see if they could catch a glimpse of the foreigners. They were excited, and full of hope. Zagwa had withdrawn from the Anti-Traction League when the Green Storm took power, appalled by their doctrine of total war and their armies of reanimated corpses. But now (so Theo's father had heard), General Naga was proposing a formal peace with the barbarian cities, and there were even hints that he was prepared to dismantle the Storm's Stalkers. If he did, Zagwa and the other African statics might be able to join again in the defence of the world's green places. Theo's father was keen for his wife and children to be at the citadel for this historic moment, and anyway, he wanted to have a look at Lady Naga, whom he had heard was very young and beautiful.

But Theo had seen all he ever wished to of the Green Storm, and he did not trust anything Naga or his envoys said. So, while the rest of Zagwa crowded into the citadel gardens, he swooped and soared on the golden air, and thought of Wren.

And then, below him, he saw movement where nothing should be moving; nothing except birds, and these were too big to be birds. They were rising out of the white mist above the cloud-forest, two tiny air-ships, envelopes painted in wasp-stripes of yellow and black. Their small gondolas and streamlined engine pods were instantly familiar to Theo, who had been made to

memorize the silhouettes of enemy ships during his Green Storm training. These were Cosgrove Super-Gnats, which the cities of the *Traktionstadtsgesellschaft* used as fighter-bombers.

But what were they doing here? Theo had never heard of the *Traktionstadts* sending ships into Africa, let alone as far south as Zagwa.

And then he thought, *They are here because of the talks.* Those rockets which he could see shining like knives in the racks under their gondolas would soon be lancing down into the citadel, where Naga's wife was; where the Queen was. Where Theo's family were.

He was going to have to stop them.

It was strange, how calm he felt about it. A few moments ago he had been quite at peace, enjoying the sunlight and the clear air, and now he was probably about to die, and yet it all seemed quite natural; another part of the morning, like the wind and the sunlight. He tipped his kite and dropped towards the second of the Super-Gnats. The aviators had not seen him yet. The Gnats were two-man ships, and he doubted they were keeping much of a watch. The kite took him closer and closer, until he could see the paint flaking from the ship's engine pod cowlings. The big steering fins were emblazoned with the symbol of the *Traktionstadtsgesellschaft;* a wheeled and armoured fist. Theo found himself almost admiring the daring of these aviators, who had flown so deep into Anti-Tractionist territory in their unmistakeable ships.

He kicked the kite backwards and stalled in mid-air, the way he had learned to do when he was younger, riding the thermals above Liemba Lake with his school-friends. This time, though, he came down not into water

but on to the hard, curved top of the airship's envelope. The noise of his landing seemed horribly loud, but he told himself the men down in the gondola would have heard nothing over the bellowing of their big engines. He freed himself from the straps of his kite, and tried to tuck it beneath the ratlines which stretched across the surface of the envelope, but the wind caught it and he had to let go to stop himself being pulled away with it. He clung to the ratlines and watched helplessly as it went tumbling astern.

Theo had lost his only means of escape, but before he could worry about it a hatch popped open beside him, and a leather-helmeted head poked out and stared at him through tinted flying-goggles. So someone had heard him after all. He threw himself forward, and he and the aviator tumbled together through the hatch and down a short companionway, landing heavily on a metal walkway between two of the airship's gas-cells. Theo scrambled up, but the aviator lay unmoving, stunned. She was a woman; Thai or Laotian by the look of her. Theo had never heard of easterners fighting for the *Traktionstadts*. Yet here she was, in one of their ships and one of their uniforms, flying towards Zagwa with full racks of rockets.

It was a mystery, but Theo hadn't time to ponder it. He gagged the aviatrix with her own scarf, then took her knife from her belt and cut a length of rope from the netting around the gas-cells, which he used to bind her hands to the walkway handrail. She woke while he was tying the last knots and started to struggle, glaring out angrily at him through her cracked goggles.

He left her writhing there and hurried along the catwalk to another ladder, climbing down between the

shadows of the gas-cells. Engine noise boomed around him, quickly drowning out the muffled curses from above. As he dropped into the gondola the light from the windows dazzled him. He blinked, and saw the pilot standing at the controls, his back to Theo.

"What was it?" the man asked, in Airsperanto. (Airsperanto? It was the common language of the sky, but Theo had thought the *Traktionstadts* used German. . .)

"A bird?" asked the man, doing something to his controls, and turned. He was another easterner. Theo pushed him against a bulkhead and showed him the knife.

Outside, the city was coming into view beyond a spur of the mountains. The crew of the leading Super-Gnat, with no idea of what was happening aboard her sister-ship, angled her vanes and started to swing towards the Citadel.

Forcing the pilot down into his seat, Theo groped for the controls of the radio set. It was identical to the radio he'd had in the cabin of his Tumbler-bomb during his time with the Storm. He shouted into the microphone, "Zagwa! Zagwa! You're under attack! Two airships! I'm in the one behind!" he added hastily, as puffballs of anti-aircraft fire began to burst in the sky all around him, and shrapnel rattled against the armoured gondola and crazed the window-glass.

The pilot chose that moment to try and fight, lurching out of his chair and butting Theo bullishly in the ribs. Theo dropped the microphone, and the pilot grabbed his knife-hand. They struggled for control of the knife, until suddenly there was blood everywhere, and Theo looked and saw that it was his own. The pilot stabbed him

again, and he shouted out in anger and fear and pain, trying to twist the blade away. Staring at his opponent's furious, clenched face, he did not even notice the leading airship vanish in a sheet of saffron flame. The shock wave came as a surprise, shattering all the windows of the gondola at once, and then the debris was slamming and jarring against the envelope. A torn-off propeller blade sheared through the gondola like a scythe. The pilot went whirling out through the immense gash where the side wall had been, leaving Theo with an after-image of his wide, disbelieving eyes.

Theo stumbled to the radio set and snatched up the dangling microphone. He didn't know if it still worked, but he shouted into it anyway, until exhaustion and terror and loss of blood overcame him. The last thing he heard, as he slipped down on to the deck, were voices telling him that help was on its way. Twin plumes of smoke were rising from the citadel. Above them, blue as damselflies, the airships of the Zagwan Flying Corps were climbing into the golden sky.

2
MATTERS OF THE HEART

From: Wren Natsworthy
AMV Jenny Haniver
Peripatetiapolis
24th April, 1026 TE

Dear Theo,
I hope life in Zagwa is not too dull? In case it is, I thought I should sit down and write you a proper letter to tell you all that I have been doing. It seems hard to believe that it's been so long . . . it seems like only yesterday – Brighton, and Cloud 9, and Mum. . .

Soon after you left for Zagwa, Professor Pennyroyal left us too; he has friends in other cities, and he's gone to stay with some of them – or sponge off them, I suppose, because he didn't bring anything with him out of the wreck of Cloud 9, only his clothes, and they were too outlandish to fetch much at the Kom Ombo bazaar. I felt almost sorry for him. He was a help, getting us to Kom Ombo and then blustering at those hospital doctors until they looked after Dad for free. But he will be all right, I think (Pennyroyal, I mean). He told me he is planning to write a new book, all about the battle at Brighton. He promised me that he won't lie, especially about you or me, but I expect it was one of those promises he will forget the instant he sits down at his typewriter.

Dad is all right, too. Those Kom Ombo doctors gave him some green pills to take, which help his pains a bit, and he hasn't had any attacks since that awful night on Cloud 9. But he seems awfully old, somehow, and awfully sad. It's Mum, of course. He really loved her, despite what she was like. To be without her, not even knowing if she's alive or dead, upsets him terribly, tho' he tries to be brave.

I thought that once he was well enough he would want to take me straight home to Anchorage-in-Vineland, but he hasn't suggested it. So we have been travelling the Bird Roads ever since, seeing a little of the world and doing a little trading – antiques and Old-Tech mostly, but harmless stuff, not like that awful Tin Book! We've done quite well – well enough to get the ship a fresh coat of paint and have her engines overhauled. We've changed her name back to Jenny Haniver, which is what she was called before Prof Pennyroyal stole her from Mum and Dad all those years ago. We wondered at first if it would be dangerous, but I don't think anyone remembers any more that that was the name of the Stalker Fang's old ship, and if they do, they don't much care.

Have you heard about the truce? (I always thought General Naga was a good sort. When we were captured by the Storm at Cloud 9 his soldiers were very inclined to prod me with their guns, and Naga stopped them doing it. It's nice to know that the new leader of the Storm takes a firm stand on prodding.) Anyway, everyone is

very excited about the truce, and hoping the war is over, and I hope so too.

I am getting quite used to life as an air-trader. You would think me ever so much changed if you could see me. I've had my hair cut in the latest style, sort of lopsided, so that it comes down below my chin on one side but only to ear-level on the other. I don't want to sound vain, but it looks extremely sophisticated, even if it does make me feel sometimes as if I'm standing on a slope. Also I have new boots, tall ones, and a leather coat, not one of those long ones that Daddy and the other old-style aviators wear, but a tunic, with a red silk lining and pointy bits at the bottom called tappets or lappets or something. And at this moment I am sitting in a café behind the air-harbour here in Peripatetiapolis, feeling every inch the aviatrix, and just enjoying being aboard a city. I could never really imagine what real cities were like, growing up in sleepy old Anchorage as I did, but now I spend half my time aboard them I find I love them – all the people, and the bustle, and the way the engines make the pavements throb as if the whole of Peripatetiapolis is a great, living animal. I am waiting for Dad, who has gone up to the higher tiers to see if the Peripatetiapolitan doctors can find some better pills than the ones the Kom Ombo lot prescribed. (He didn't want to go, of course, but I talked him into it in the end!) And sitting here, I got thinking about you, the way I do quite often, and I thought. . .

It wouldn't do, Wren decided. She scrumpled the page and lobbed it into a nearby bin. She was getting to be quite a good shot. This must be the twentieth letter she'd written to Theo, and so far she'd not mailed any of them. She had sent a card at Christmas, because although Theo wasn't very religious he lived in a Christian city and probably celebrated all their strange old festivals, but all she had written was *Happy Xmas* and a few lines of news about herself and Dad.

The trouble was, Theo had probably forgotten her by now. And even if he did remember her, he was hardly likely to be interested in her clothes, or her haircut, or the rest of it. And that bit about how much she liked city life would probably shock him, for he was an Anti-Tractionist through and through and could be rather prim. . .

But she could not forget him. How brave he had been, on Cloud 9. And that goodbye kiss, on the Kom Ombo air-quay, amid all those oily ropes and heaped-up sky-train couplings and shouting stevedores and roaring engines. Wren had never kissed anyone before. She hadn't known quite how you went about it; she wasn't sure where her nose was meant to go; when their teeth banged together she was afraid that she was doing it all wrong. Theo had laughed, and said it was a funny business, this kissing, and she said she thought she might get the hang of it with a little more practice, but by then the captain of his airship was hollering "All aboard that's coming aboard!" and starting to disengage his docking clamps, and there had been no time. . .

And that had been six months ago. Theo had written once – a letter which reached Wren in January at a shabby air-caravanserai in the Tannhäusers – to tell her that he had made it home safely and been welcomed by

his family "like the prodigal son" (whatever that meant). But Wren had never managed to compose a reply.

"Bother!" she said, and ordered another coffee.



Tom Natsworthy, Wren's father, had faced death many times, and been in all sorts of frightening situations, but he had never felt any fear quite so cold as this.

He was lying, quite naked, on a chilly metal table in the consulting-room of a heart-specialist on Peripatetiapolis's second tier. Above him a machine with a long and many-jointed hydraulic neck twisted its metal head from side to side, examining him with a quizzical air. Tom was pretty sure that those green, glowing lenses at its business end were taken from a Stalker. He supposed that Stalker parts were easy to come by these days, and that he should be glad that all the years of war had at least spawned a few good things; new medical techniques, and diagnostic machines like this. But when the blunt steel head dipped close to his torso, and he heard the machinery grating and whirring inside those shining eyes, all he could think of was the old Stalker Shrike, who had chased him and Hester across the Out-Country in the year London died.

When it was all over, and Dr Chernowyth switched off his machine and came out of his little lead-walled booth, he could tell Tom nothing that Tom had not already guessed. There was a weakness in his heart. It had been caused by the bullet which Pennyroyal had shot him with, all those years ago in Anchorage. It was growing worse, and one day it would kill him. He had a year or two left, maybe five, no more.

The doctor pursed his lips and shook his head and told him to take things easy, but Tom just laughed. How could you take things easy, in the air-trade? The only way he could take things easy would be if he went home to Anchorage-in-Vineland, but after what he had learned about Hester he could never go back. He had nothing to be ashamed of – *he* had not betrayed the ice city to Arkangel's Huntsmen, or murdered anyone among its snowy streets – but he felt ashamed for his wife's sake, and foolish for having lived so long with her, never suspecting the lies she had told him.

Anyway, Wren would never forgive him if he took her home now. She had the same longing for adventure that Tom himself had had at her age. She was enjoying life on the Bird Roads, and she had the makings of a fine aviatrix. He would stay with her, flying and trading, teaching her the ways of the sky and doing his best to keep her out of trouble, and when Lady Death came to take him to the Sunless Country he would leave Wren the *Jenny Haniver* and she would be able to choose whichever life she wanted for herself; the peace of Vineland or the freedom of the skies. The news from the east sounded hopeful. If this truce held there would soon be all sorts of opportunities for trade.

When he left Dr Chernowyth's office Tom felt better at once. Out here, beneath the evening sky, it seemed impossible that he was going to die. The city rocked gently as it rumbled northward up the rocky western shoreline of the Great Hunting Ground. Out upon the silver, sunset-shining sea a fishing town was keeping pace with it beneath a cloud of gulls. Tom watched for a while from an observation platform, then rode an elevator back to base-tier and strolled through the busy

market behind the air-harbour, remembering his first visit to this city, with Hester and Anna Fang, twenty years before. He had bought Hester a red scarf at one of these stalls, to save her having to keep hiding her scarred face with her hand. . .

But he did not want to think about Hester. When he started thinking about her he always ended up remembering the way they had parted, and what she had done made him so angry that his heart would pound and twist inside him. He could not afford to think of Hester any more.

He began to walk towards the harbour, rehearsing in his mind the things he would tell Wren about his visit to the doctor. ("Nothing to worry about. Not even worth operating. . .") Passing Pondicherry's Old-Tech Auction Rooms he stopped to let a crowd of traders spill out, and thought he recognized one of them, a woman of about his own age, rather pretty. It looked as if she had been successful at the auction, for she was carrying a big, heavy package. She didn't see Tom, and he walked on trying to remember her name and where he had met her. Katie, wasn't it? No, Clytie, that was it. Clytie Potts.

He stopped, and turned, and stared. It *couldn't* have been Clytie. Clytie had been a Historian, a year above him in the Guild when London was destroyed. She had been killed by MEDUSA along with all the rest of his city. She just *couldn't* be walking about in Peripatetiapolis. His memories were playing games with him.

But it had looked so like her!

He took a few steps back the way he had come. The woman was going quickly up a stairway to the level where the airships berthed. "Clytie!" Tom shouted, and her face turned towards him. It *was* her, he was suddenly

certain of it, and he laughed aloud with happiness and surprise and called again, "Clytie! It's me! Tom Natsworthy!"

A group of traders barged past him, blocking his view of her. When he could see again she was gone. He started hurrying towards the stairs, ignoring the little warning pains in his chest. He tried to imagine how Clytie had survived MEDUSA. Had she been outside the city when it was destroyed? He had heard of other Londoners who had escaped the blast, but they had all been members of the Merchants' Guild, far off on foreign cities when it happened. At Rogues' Roost Hester had encountered that horrible Engineer Popjoy; but he had been in the Deep Gut when MEDUSA went off...

He pushed his way up the crowded stair and saw Clytie hurrying away from him between the long-stay docking pans. He could hardly blame her, after the way he'd yelled at her. He must have been too far away for her to recognize him, and she'd mistaken him for some kind of loony, or a rival trader angry that she'd outbid him in the auction rooms. He trotted after her, eager to explain himself, and saw her run quickly up another stairway on to Pan Seven where a small, streamlined airship was berthed. He paused at the foot of the stairs just long enough to read the details chalked on the board there and learn that the ship was the *Archaeopteryx*, registered in Airhaven and commanded by Cruwys Morchard. Then, careful not to run, or shout, or do anything else that might alarm a lady air-trader, he climbed after her. Of course, with her Guild training, Clytie Potts would have had no trouble finding a place aboard an Old-Tech trader. No doubt this Captain

Morchard had taken her on as an expert buyer, and that was why she had been at the auction house.

He paused to catch his breath at the top of the stairs, his heart hammering fiercely. The *Archaeopteryx* towered over him in the twilight. She was camouflaged, her gondola and the undersides of her envelope and engine pods sky-blue, the upper parts done in a dazzle-pattern of greens and browns and greys. At the foot of her gangplank two crewmen were waiting in a pool of pale electric light. They looked rough and shabby, like Out-Country scavengers. As Clytie approached them Tom heard one man call out, "You get 'em all right, then?"

"I did," replied Clytie, nodding to the package she was carrying. The other man came forward to help her with it, then saw Tom coming up behind her. Clytie must have noticed his expression change, and turned to see why.

"Clytie?" said Tom. "It's me, Tom Natsworthy. Apprentice Third Class, from the Guild of Historians. From London. I know you probably don't recognize me. It's been . . . what? . . . nearly twenty years! And you must have thought I was dead. . ."

At first he felt sure that she *had* recognized him, and that she was happy to see him, but then her look changed; she took a step backwards, away from him, and glanced towards the men by the gangplank. One of them – a tall, gaunt man with a shaven head – put a hand to his sword and Tom heard him say, "This fellow bothering you, Miss Morchard?"

"It's all right, Lurpak," said Clytie, motioning for him to stay where he was. She came a little closer to Tom and said pleasantly, "I'm sorry, sir. I fear you have mistaken me for some other lady. I am Cruwys Morchard, mistress of this ship. I don't know anyone from London."

"But you. . ." Tom started to say. He studied her face, embarrassed and confused. He was *sure* she was Clytie Potts. She had put on a little weight, just as he had himself, and her hair, which had been dark, was dusted with silver now, as if cobwebs had settled on it, but her face was the same . . . except that the space between her eyebrows, where Clytie Potts had rather proudly worn the tattooed blue eye of the Guild of Historians, was blank.

Tom began to doubt himself. It had been twenty years, after all. Perhaps he was wrong. He said, "I'm sorry, but you look so like her. . ."

"Don't mention it," she said, with a charming smile. "I have one of those faces. I am always being mistook for somebody."

"You look so like her," said Tom again, half-hopefully, as if she might suddenly change her mind and remember that she *was* Clytie Potts, after all.

She bowed to him and turned away. Her men eyed Tom as they helped her up the gangplank with her package. There was nothing more to say, so he said "Sorry" again and turned away himself, blushing hotly as he made his way off the pan. He started across the harbour towards his own ship's berth, and had not gone more than twenty paces when he heard the *Archaeopteryx*'s engines rumbling to life behind him. He watched her rise into the evening sky, gathering speed quickly as she cleared the city's airspace and flew away towards the east.

Which was curious, because Tom was certain that signboard beside her pan had said she would be in Peripatetiapolis for two more days. . .

3

THE MYSTERIOUS MISS MORCHARD



"I am sure it was her!" Tom said, over supper that night at the Jolly Dirigible. "She was older, of course, and the Guild-mark wasn't on her brow, which threw me a little, but tattoos can be removed, can't they?"

Wren said, "Don't get agitated, Dad. . ."

"I'm not agitated; only intrigued! If it is Clytie, how come she is still alive? And why did she not admit who she was?"

He did not sleep much that night, and Wren lay awake too, in her little cabin up inside the *Jenny*'s envelope, listening to him pad along the passageway from the stern cabin and clatter as quietly as he could in the galley, making himself one of those three-in-the-morning cups of tea.

At first she was worried about him. She hadn't quite believed his version of what the heart-doctor had said, and she felt quite certain that he should not be staying awake all night and fretting about mystery aviatrices. But gradually she started to wonder if his encounter with the woman might not have been a good thing after all. Talking about her at supper, he had seemed more alive than Wren had seen him for months; the listlessness which had settled over him when Mum left had vanished, and he had been his old self again, full of questions and theories. Wren couldn't tell if it was the mystery that appealed to him, or the thought of a connection with his lost home city, or if he simply had the hots for Clytie Potts; but whichever it was, might it not do him good to have something other than Mum to think about?

At breakfast next morning she said, "We should investigate. Find out more about this self-styled Cruwys Morchard."

"How?" asked her father. "The *Archaeopteryx* will be a hundred miles away by now."

"You said she bought something at the auction rooms," said Wren. "We could start there."



Mr Pondicherry, who was a large, shiny sort of gentleman, seemed to grow even larger and shinier when he looked up from his account-books to see Tom Natsworthy and daughter entering his little den. The *Jenny Haniver* had sold several valuable pieces through Pondicherry's Old-Tech Auction Rooms that season. "Mr Natsworthy!" he chuckled. "Miss Natsworthy! How good to see you!" He stood up to greet them, and pushed back a great deal of silver-embroidered sleeve to reveal a plump brown hand, which Tom shook. "You are both well, I hope? The Gods of the Sky are kind to you? What do you have for me today?"

"Only questions, I'm afraid," Tom confessed. "I was wondering what you could tell me about a freelance archaeologist called Cruwys Morchard. She made a purchase here yesterday. . ."

"The lady from the *Archaeopteryx*?" mused Mr Pondicherry. "Yes, yes; I know her well, but I'm afraid I cannot share such information. . ."

"Of course," said Tom, and, "Sorry, sorry."

Wren, who had half-expected this, took out of her jacket pocket a little bundle of cloth, which she set down upon the blotter on Mr Pondicherry's desk. The

auctioneer purred like a cat as he unwrapped it. Inside lay a tiny, flattened envelope of silvery metal, inset with minute oblong tiles on which faint numbers still showed.

"An Ancient mobile telephone," said Wren. "We bought it last month, from a scavenger who didn't even know what it was. Dad was planning to sell it privately, but I'm sure he'd be happy to go through Pondicherry's if. . ."

"Wren!" said her father, startled by her cunning.

Mr Pondicherry had put his head down close to the relic and screwed a jeweller's glass into his eye. "Oh, pretty!" he said. "So beautifully preserved! And the trade in trinkets like this is definitely picking up now that peace is breaking out. They say General Naga hasn't time to fight battles any more, now that he's found himself a lovely young wife. Almost as lovely as Cruwys Morchard. . ." He looked at Tom and winked, one eye made huge by the glass. "Very well. Just between ourselves, Ms Morchard was indeed here yesterday. She brought a job-lot of Kliest Coils."

"What on earth would she want with those?" wondered Tom.

"Who knows?" Mr Pondicherry beamed and spread his hands wide, as if to say, *Once I have my percentage, what do I care what my customers do with the rubbish they buy?* "They are of no earthly use. Trade goods, I suppose. That is Ms Morchard's profession. An Old-Tech trader, and a good one, I believe. Been on the Bird Roads since she was just a slip of a girl."

"Has she ever mentioned anything about where she comes from?" Wren asked eagerly.

Mr Pondicherry thought for a moment. "Her ship is registered in Airhaven," he said.

"Oh, we know that. I mean, do you know where she grew up? Where she was trained? You see, we think she comes from London."

The auctioneer smiled at her indulgently, and winked again at Tom as he slipped the old telephone into a side-drawer of his bureau. "Ah, Mr N, what romantical notions these young ladies do have! Really, Miss Wren! *Nobody* comes from London!"

Afterwards they took coffee on a balcony café and looked out eastward across the endless plains of the Great Hunting Ground. It was one of those warm, golden days of spring. A haze of green filled the massive ruts and track-marks that passing cities had scored across the land below, and the sky was full of swerving swifts. Away in the east a mining town was gnawing at a line of hills which had somehow been overlooked until now.

"The strange thing is," said Tom thoughtfully, "I'm sure I've heard that name before. I wish I could remember where. *Cruwys Morchard.* I suppose it was on the Bird Roads, in the old days. . ." He poured Wren more coffee. "You must think me very silly, to let myself be so affected by it. It's just that the thought of another Historian, still alive after all these years. . ."

He couldn't explain. Lately he had been thinking more and more about his early years in the London Museum. It made him sad to think that when he died the memory of the place would die with him. If there really were another Historian alive, someone who had grown up among the same dusty galleries and beeswax-smelling

corridors as him, who had snoozed through old Arkengarth's lectures, and listened to Chudleigh Pomeroy grumbling about the building's feeble shock-absorbers, then the responsibility of remembering it all would be lifted from him; the echoes of those things would linger in other memories, even after he was gone.

"What I don't understand," said Wren, "is why she won't admit it. Surely it would be a selling point, in an Old-Tech trader, to say they came from London and were trained by the Historians' Guild."

Tom shrugged. "I always kept quiet about it, when your mother and I were trading. London was unpopular in those years. What the Guild of Engineers had done upset the whole balance of the world. Scared a lot of cities, and led to the rise of the Green Storm. I suppose that's why Clytie took another name. The Pottses are a famous London family; they've been producing aldermen and Heads of Guild since Quirke's time. Clytie's grandfather, old Pisistratus Potts, was Lord Mayor for years and years. If you want to pretend you're not a Londoner it wouldn't be a good idea to go around with a name like Clytie Potts."

"And what about those things she bought at Pondicherry's?" Wren wondered.

"Kliest Coils?"

"I've never heard of them."

"There's no reason why you would have," her father said. "They come from the Electric Empire, which thrived in these parts before the rise of the Blue Metal Culture, around 10,000 BT."

"What are they for?"

"Nobody knows," said Tom. "Zanussi Kliest, the London Historian who first studied them, claimed they

were meant to focus some sort of electro-magnetic energy, but no one has ever worked out a practical use for them. The Electric Empire seems to have been a sort of technological cul-de-sac."

"These coils aren't valuable, then?"

"Only as curios. They're quite pretty."

"So what's Clytie Potts going to do with them?" asked Wren.

Tom shrugged again. "She must have a buyer, I suppose. Maybe she knows a collector."

"We should go after her," said Wren.

"Where to? I asked at the harbour-office last night. The *Archaeopteryx* didn't leave any details of her destination."

"She'll be heading east," said Wren, with the confidence of someone who had been studying the air-trade for a whole season and felt she had its measure. "Everybody is going east now that the truce seems to be holding, and we should too. Even if we don't find Clytie Potts there will be good trading, and I'd love to see the central Hunting Ground. We could go to Airhaven. The Registration Bureau there must have some more details about Cruwys so-called Morchard and her ship."

Tom finished his coffee and said, "I'd been thinking you might want to go south this spring. Your friend Theo is still in Zagwa, isn't he? I expect we could get permission to land there. . ."

"Oh, I hadn't really thought about that," said Wren casually, and blushed bright red.

"I liked Theo," Tom went on. "He's a good lad. Kind and well-mannered. Handsome, too. . ."

"Daddy!" said Wren sternly, warning him not to tease.

Then she relented, sighed, and took his hand. "Look, the reason Theo has such good manners is that he's really posh. His family are rich, and they live in a city that was part of a great civilization when our ancestors were still wearing animal skins and squabbling over scraps in the ruins of Europe. Why would Theo be interested in me?"

"He'd be a fool if he isn't," said her father, "and he didn't strike me as a fool."

Wren gave an exasperated sigh. Why couldn't Dad understand? Theo was in his own city, surrounded by lots of girls far prettier than her. His family might have married him off by now, and even if they hadn't, he was sure to have forgotten all about Wren. That kiss, which had meant so much to her, had probably meant nothing at all to Theo. So she did not want to make a fool of herself by chasing off to Zagwa, knocking on his door and expecting him to pick up where they'd left off.

She said, "Let's go east, Dad. Let's go and find Clytie Potts."