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Opening extract from

Jigsaw

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Call me Max - everybody does.

Welcome to my blog. I travel a lot with my dad and I set this up so you can see what I'm up to. There's also another reason . . .

I have this big secret. Huge. I have lots of secrets of course, who doesn't? But this secret's special. It's time I told you, because stuff like this starts to fight inside you. It's like having a small animal trying to get out. I can't keep it in much longer. It's best I do it now in this way. It's going to get out anyway, somehow.

Here it is then, the whole story. I took it from the diary I kept in Jordan and on Krantu Island. You can believe me or not. I don't care. *I* know it's true.

29 April, Krantu Island

We were told by Ram that Krantu Island was formed by an underwater volcano. You can see it in the rocks: they're sort of jagged and sharp as chisels: they rip your knee open if you fall



on them. Bits of volcano stick up in places, as weird pointed stacks which will probably look like the spires of drowned churches when the island gets covered by seawater. Dad says they remind him of Gothic towers.

Krantu is a good way off the coast of Sarawak, a Malaysian island. No one lives on Krantu anymore and it'll soon sink into the sea. Or the sea'll come up and cover it. I'm not quite sure which. Something to do with global warming maybe, but dad also said the reef is crumbling. A tsunami recently passed over the coral shelf and covered it with sand. Coral polyps are live creatures and I suppose they suffocated. Anyway, most of the reef itself is now dead. Dead stuff just rots away. Inside the reef, in the lagoon itself, some of the coral is still alive though.

When we first arrived we helped dad repair this massive fish-drying shed that the island people had left. There used to be fishermen on Krantu but they moved to somewhere else when this island was threatened. They left a village of sorts, though their huts aren't any good to live in. Mostly made of palm leaves, the walls and roofs have rotted and some have been blasted to bits by storms. There's also a sort of stockade made of thick bamboo poles, probably to keep out the wild hogs, but there are big gaps in it where clumps of the poles have fallen down.

We just moved into the village and made it our own. The fish-drying shed was to be dad's workshop. Dad and Rambuta, the Malaysian zoologist he'd picked up in Kuching on our way through Sarawak. Once they started work I knew we wouldn't see a lot of dad. He gets engrossed.

Repairing the fish-drying shed was fun though. I got to use some great tools. We sawed planks, nailed things together. It

was fun somehow, to make a rotten old shed into something weatherproof. And when we had a break, we used to kick a ball around.

Rambutu is a terrific guy. He's a small man, very light on his feet. We have this open square of hard-packed dirt where we play football. Talk about twinkle-toes. Rambuta could give lessons to any top-class striker. His footwork's incredible. He's taught me and Hass some tricks I'd never have learned anywhere else. Dad got annoyed. He said he'd hired Rambuta because he had a p-h-d, not because he had magic feet.

You could see dad was impressed though. He even started playing himself. It was me and Rambuta against dad and Hass. I don't know why, but dad always seems to choose Hass over me. Sometimes it seems he doesn't like me much at all. My nan reckons it's because of mum, but that's not fair. I wasn't even there when mum died. Anyway, I try not to get jealous of Hass. Nan says it's not his fault either.

Whatever, dad was no footballer. Rambuta could take the ball away from him in an instant. It made dad mad as fire. He'd blunder across the pitch, trying to take it back again and end up tripping over his own feet.

We had a lot of fun. That was before the serious work started. Afterwards we hardly saw dad, and Rambuta only for lessons. They were busy making bamboo frameworks for something inside the fish-drying shed. They wouldn't say what. Not that I was *that* interested.

Hass and I went off and did our own thing in the rainforest, and in the lagoon.



1 May, Krantu Island

Trod on a spiny anemone and my foot puffed up like a balloon. Ram put some ointment on it which made it burn, but it went down again. Had to stay sat in one place till I could walk. Boring. Boring.

2 May, Krantu Island

This is just like when I went on digs. Dad is up to his eyeballs in work and hasn't any time to eat even. In fact it's worse. He never seems to come out of that fish-drying shed. As usual something strange is going on, but I don't dare ask what. Dad would just tell me to mind my own business and when I ask Ram he says, ~ It's not up to me to say anything to you, Max. That's something for your father.

So here we are, up to our ears in work and secrets, just like in Jordan, where I first met Hass. Even there, in the desert of Qumran, we were able to make our own fun, Hass and I. Maybe this is a good place to say what went on there, when dad went crazy over a new find.

My dad has spent most of his life in the deserts of Jordan and Syria, looking for old things: weapons and pots and stuff. Mum too, when she was alive. They both discovered some pretty mean artefacts. Most of them are in museums now, or in universities, or somewhere like that. I was quite proud of my parents, though I never said so. I just sort of bragged about them to kids at school, even when I was younger. I have this joke which came from me boasting about him. Some kid said his dad

was a famous caver and had discovered a new cave in Brazil. I told him my dad was famous for finding ancient weapons.

~ What then? asked this kid. ~ What's he found?

I searched my brain for a name, but nothing would come – my head had gone empty, the way it does in moments like this.

~ Wouldn't you like to know, I said weakly.

~ Yes, I would, said the kid, folding his arms as other kids gathered round us. ~ You tell us just *one* rare weapon your famous dad found.

~ He found . . . I had just come from an RI lesson, and I grinned as I thought of it ~ . . . he found the axe of the apostles.

The other kids burst out laughing.

The axe of the apostles.

I still smile to myself about that now. I told dad at the time but he didn't see the joke then and now I think he's forgotten all about it.

I love the desert. Everything seems so clean and clear out there: the space between earth and the stars, the moonbeams amongst the rocks, even the very dust itself seems cleaner. And the sounds! Kids at my school back home who haven't been to the desert think it's a silent place. It isn't. Not at all. It's *quiet*, but in that quietness you can hear lizards rattling the gravel and birds turning over stones. There are creatures calling each other: scruffy pi-dogs, brown kites with ragged wings. Even the beetles make noises, clambering over the gravel. Some beetles are as big as your fist, with a back as hard as a bullet. These sounds aren't threatening, not to me anyway. They're kind of comforting, like hearing your parents moving downstairs when you wake from a bad dream, or the milkman coming in the early dawn. Good sounds.

~ When are you going to bed? asked my dad one night, looking up from his work as if only just noticing I was there. ~ It's past midnight.

~ I know. Just a few more pages.

~ All right. He went to his laptop computer, connected online through a satellite. ~ I'll send a few emails, but when I'm finished we really must pack.

My dad's an archaeologist. He says he's one of the lucky ones, who gets to do what he does best. This was his patch, the Middle East. Three years ago he was in Syria and found a load of old weapons that the British Museum went mad over. Then it was Jordan, a place called Qumran. There's lots of *wadis* – dry river beds – where there used to be towns back in ancient times. This dig was pretty boring so far as I was concerned. Only jars and agricultural tools. An adze. A thing for prising out roots of stubborn shrubs. Not much more. No swords or spearheads, like at the dig in Syria.

I kept reading, hoping dad would forget about me once he started studying the pottery again. But the yellow light of the bulb run by the generator was dimming and straining my eyes. The current needed turning up and if I asked him to do it, he would definitely give me marching orders. At that moment though, the flap opened and one of dad's Jordanian colleagues came in.

~ James, said Professor Ahmed, ~ we have a visitor.

Dad's eyebrows went up. ~ At this time of night? Then when he saw how serious Professor Ahmed's expression was, he said sharply, ~ What is it?

I knew straight away that he was thinking that it might be terrorists, or bandits, come to cause trouble.

Professor Ahmed must have caught the anxiety in dad's voice because he replied, ~ It's nothing bad, James – it's a goat-boy. He says he wants to see you.

~ Good lord! Doesn't he sleep?

Professor Ahmed shrugged and smiled. ~ He's a goatherd. He watches his goats.

~ Oh, yes. Yes of course. Bring him in then, though I can't think what . . . never mind, bring him in.

The professor lifted the flap higher and motioned with his arm, out into the night desert.

~ *Taal hinna*, he called to someone, meaning 'come here'.

A young Arab boy entered. He was about my age, maybe a bit older. He had a thin face with brown eyes set wide. Those eyes glanced at me and were a bit scathing, I thought, bloody cheek. His body wasn't broad, like mine, at the shoulders. It was sort of lean and whippy, especially about the wrists and ankles. There was white trail dust on his face and arms, and all the way up his legs from his bare feet. He needed a shower, but he didn't smell. It was clean desert dust. Not dirt.

When he'd run his eyes over this kid in the knee-length surfers and Arctic Monkeys T-shirt, he turned back to dad again.

You could see this was a kid who wouldn't take to being messed about. He had that sort of grown-up look of a boy twice his real age. I learned later that, not like me at all, he'd had some tough times and had had to grow up fast.

The boy was carrying a big urn which looked quite heavy. He put the pot on the ground and faced dad, at the same time as unwinding the ragged scarf he had on his head. At that moment someone called to Professor Ahmed that one of the camels was



sick. I was pleased my Arabic was good enough to pick up the words. The professor grunted.

~ Excuse me, James.

~ Of course, said dad. ~ I'll deal with the lad.

~ Sir, said the goatherd in a hoarse whisper, once Ahmed had left the tent, ~ I bring you something very valuable. Very old.

~ You have remarkably good English for a watcher of goats, dad said to him. ~ Where did you learn?

The boy stiffened slightly. ~ My father was a teacher, he said, ~ in a school in Amman. He taught me well.

~ Indeed he did.

The kid seemed to think he needed to explain further.

~ My father was killed in an accident. I have no mother – she too died, when I was born. I was sent to my uncle, out here.

~ Your uncle owns herds of goats?

~ My uncle is a rich man with a big house, but he does not like me, so he sends me to a farm. I must work for the farmer.

~ I think I understand. Now, what have you brought me? This magnificent urn? It does indeed look quite valuable . . .

It seemed to me from his tone of voice that he was feeling sorry for this Jordanian boy. Me, I wondered whether this kid was just putting it on. Making up this sob story to get more money. Maybe the pot was worth something, maybe not, but dad was going to buy it from him anyway. Dad bent down and studied the pot, running his hand over it, tracing a pattern with a fingernail.

~ This design . . . he began, but the boy interrupted him.

~ Not the pot, sir – there is something inside.

Dad looked up at him quickly, studying his face in the sallow light of the lamp.

I stepped forward quickly, crickets buzzing in my ears.

~ A snake?' I cried. ~ Have you got a snake?

Why I yelled that, I don't know, but snakes had always been a thing with me. Local people, when they caught snakes, often put them in pots like this to carry them somewhere. It's not that I'm *scared* of snakes. I am a bit, the poisonous ones, but they excite me. It's the way they move in the sand, sliding along without any effort at all. It's the patterns on their backs and the way they shine in the sunlight.

The boy turned and looked at me again. There was utter contempt in his gaze.

~ A snake? he said. ~ Why would I bring a snake?

~ I dunno, I replied weakly, shrugging. Then rallying my own form of schoolboy contempt, ~ I give in. Why would you?

~ Don't be stupid, Max, dad said. ~ Have some common sense.

The two of them then ignored me, the boy saying to dad, ~ Please, sir, look in the urn. You will find skins. Goatskins, with writings on them. I found them in a cave in the mountains. There are twelve, sir. The writings look very, very old. Even I, a teacher's son, cannot read them.

Dad's eyes widened. I wasn't my father's son for nothing. I knew immediately what he was thinking. He'd told me time and time again that this was the area in which the Dead Sea Scrolls had been found. And other such writings. The story dad told me was this:

A bedu shepherd boy named Muhammad-the-Wolf (what a cool name! – what I'd give to have a name like that! – imagine your teacher calling *that* out in class) found the Dead Sea Scrolls in a cave after one of his flock went missing. The treasures were in



sealed earthenware jars, a total of seven, wrapped in linen. There were other scrolls (more interesting I would think); one was called the War Scroll, on which there were lists of armies and weapons and battle plans. It said things like '*the sons of light fought a ferocious war with the sons of darkness*'. Really cool stuff like that. Like something out of a fantasy film.

Anyway, if you wanted to find ancient documents, this was the place to do it, and it seemed like history had repeated itself, as they say.

Dad reached inside the jar.

5 May, Krantu Island

Krantu Island is our tropical paradise, with lots of play and only a few hours each day of school work from Rambuta, thank you very much St Thomas Aquinas (Patron Saint of Education). Hass and I, we still wonder what's going on in that shed, but we've given up asking. Dad won't tell us and neither will Ram. We boys are forbidden to go anywhere near it and have been told that if we do we'll be sent back home to England straight away and our feet won't touch the ground.

That shed is a sort of dark temple into which my dad disappears each day. It's like, say, a demon's castle on top of a hill that you can't climb, or something at the bottom of a hell-deep chasm in a place no ropes are long enough to reach.

Not being allowed to look inside makes us desperate to look, but we know if we do the worst thing in the world will happen. We'll be banished from our island, never to return. I always thought banishment was a soft punishment, when I read about

it in stories – much less terrible than death by execution – but now that I've found somewhere I really like, I've changed my mind.

I spat out my snorkel.

~ Did you see that stingray? I cried to Hass, coming up for air in the lagoon. ~ It was massive. Big as a coffee table.

We were snorkelling above the coral. There were hundreds of different types of fish in the crystal-clear water below us. Fish of all shapes and so many colours they dazzled you. The deadly ones were the most interesting. Lion fish with their poisonous spines; ugly warty stonefish with their kill-you-in-two-minutes dorsal spikes; sea snakes fifty times more venomous than a king cobra. They all swam through coral gardens that took your breath away. Brain coral, stagshead coral, fan coral – you name it, we had it here, all to ourselves.

~ What's that?

Hass was treading water, his face mask pushed up on to his forehead, his snorkel dangling.

He was pointing out over the reef.

I pushed up my mask and followed the finger. At first I could see nothing. The waves crashing on the reef were often a metre or more high and you had to wait for a lull. Then I saw it. A white sail on the horizon, dipping and rising through the troughs.

~ It's only a boat, I said. ~ Some kind of yacht.

~ It's coming this way.

~ Nah. Nobody's allowed to come here now. You heard what dad said. We're the only ones who've been given permission to stay here.

~ Maybe it's in trouble, Max? Or they're running short of water?

~ Who cares? Come on, have a look at this stingray. He's

settled between two rocks. You can see his eyes sticking up out of the sand . . .

Later though, when we walked back towards the camp inside the rainforest edge, we saw the boat again. It was moored *inside* the reef. The sail was down and I could see a tall man moving about the deck.

~ Dad won't be happy about this, I murmured to Hassan. ~ You wait.

Sure enough, he wasn't.

~ A *what*? he cried.

~ A yacht. A biggish one. 'Sout there now, in the lagoon.

Dad's hands went on his hips and he stared in the direction of the boat as if he could see through the rainforest trees.

~ Hass reckons they might be just taking on water, I suggested. ~ Didn't you, Hass?

Dad's face cleared a bit. ~ Ah, yes, that'll be it. Of course. Well done, Hassan. I was just about to march over there and make a fool of myself. Water. Yes, that'll be it.

But it wasn't it. Two hours later the tall man I had seen on the deck of the yacht appeared in the clearing. Dad was just coming out of the big shed and on seeing the man he slammed the double-doors shut with a *bang*. The man strode towards him with an outstretched hand, with what dad always called 'a company smile' on his face. The sort of smile bank managers and insurance men have when you first meet them.

~ Grant Porter, said the man in an American accent. ~ It seems we're to be neighbours for a while.

Dad ignored the hand.

~ This is private property, said dad. ~ You need permission to make a landfall here.

The smile instantly vanished.

~ Is that so? Well, it just so happens I *do* have permission.

Dad's hands went on his hips.

~ From whom, may I ask?

~ From the Malaysian government.

Dad said, ~ I was assured by the Office of Island Administration in Sarawak that we would not be disturbed here.

~ And my authority comes from Kuala Lumpur, the central government offices. It seems you only have local authority, whilst I have it from the top. What do you think about that, then?

Mr Porter's tone was very belligerent now. I knew something about Americans from the US expat kids who'd boarded at my school. When you first met them they almost always proffered the hand of friendship. But if it was rejected they turned really nasty. Dad had to watch himself; this Yank was twice as big as him. And dad was no good at fist fighting. He had a brain as big as a cathedral but even I could get the better of him in a rough-and-tumble these days.

However, Mr Porter turned out to be a gentleman. Like dad, he seemed to prefer words to fists.

~ Now see here, dad said, ~ I'm in the middle of a very – an important experiment here. I can't have strangers running about willy-nilly disturbing my concentration. You'll have to find another island. This one's about to disappear into the sea, in any case, so whatever it is that you've come here for you won't find it. It'll be gone soon.

Porter said, ~ It's precisely for that reason I *have* come here, and I have no intention of leaving for somewhere else. My papers state I have permission to remain here until I see fit to leave or six months have expired. How about *that* then?

With that the American stormed off, down the rainforest path, back towards the lagoon.

~ Bloody cheek! cried dad, kicking a lump of wood in anger. ~ Who the hell does he think he is?

Rambuta tried to calm things down.

~ James, he said, ~ if he has permission there's nothing we can do about it.

~ If he comes near this camp again, dad fumed, picking up the lump of wood, ~ I'll brain him.

Hassan then spoke up. ~ We must kill them, he said quietly. ~ It is the right thing to do. When your family is threatened . . .

My eyes opened wide. Hass was serious.

This reaction from his adopted son stopped dad in his tracks. It seemed he had gone too far. He was always talking about the differences in culture that mattered.

~ Hassan, he said, now in a calm tone, ~ I didn't mean what I said – about braining him. It's just an expression.

Hassan suddenly grinned and his eyes glistened with delight. ~ I had you both there.

I heaved a sigh of relief and punched my brother on the arm. Hass had been kidding. But dad didn't see the humour. He simply carried on with what he'd been saying.

~ If the man has permission from the authorities then there's nothing we can do about it. We must suffer in silence. But we needn't have anything to do with this intruder. I want you two boys to avoid him and anyone else from his yacht. Is he alone?

~ We didn't see anyone else, I answered.

~ So, he's most likely a lone yachtsman. Good. Avoid him. But Hassan – no violence. Do you understand? As your father, I forbid it.

Hassan nodded, widening his eyes at me and shrugging his shoulders. He wondered why dad took him seriously and where his joke had gone wrong. I explained later that it was very difficult to wake dad's sense of humour. It slept in a deep part of his brain. You had to hit him around the head with a joke like a wet fish to get it out of bed.

~ Come on, I said afterwards, ~ let's go and have another look at the yacht.

We raced along the path to the beach. It was a brief but brilliant red sunset. We were so often tossed such quick sunsets we now took them for granted. The white coral-sanded beach glistened in the soft warm evening air. Fiddler crabs dived down their holes as we leapt over a fallen coconut palm. Hermit crabs paraded the strand in their stolen homes. We raced along the edge of the surf to the point on the headland, there to stare out at the expensive-looking craft that swayed gently on the lagoon.

There was someone with Mr Porter. A woman was on deck with him, coiling ropes and fastening sheets. His wife or girlfriend, probably. She was about half his size and was plumpish and pleasant-looking. Like him she looked tanned and weathered by sea winds. Her hair was awry, probably stiff with salt. She had on the shortest white shorts I'd ever seen on anyone, and a man's shirt, the tails tied in a bow in the front.

When she straightened up she saw us watching her. There was a moment's hesitation, then she smiled and waved.

Without thinking, I waved back.

~ Traitor! whispered Hass.

~ Well, I said defensively, ~ it's only good manners.

~ They are our father's enemies.

~ Nah, I replied, ~ they're just unwelcome neighbours. Race you to the old log!

I ran off, along the beach to the massive white stranded driftwood log that had once been a massive brown living tree. Even on its side it rose over two metres from the sand: a waist that Moby Dick would have been jealous of. It was the skeleton of a giant tropical tree which had floated to our island. We could only get on top by climbing up through the sun-bleached network of branches and broken boughs of this pale ghost. This was our den, our meeting place, our parliament. From its highest point we could see far across the blue expanse of ocean.

A great lookout point.

A place to chill out.

As for Mr and Mrs Porter, I was embarrassed that we had been caught staring and embarrassed that I'd returned the wave. I always do that. I do things automatically. Yet when someone has a go at me I'm never quick enough to make a smart reply. It's sometimes years later when I think, I should have said such-and-such, *that* would've shut him up.

Why do I act quickly in some things, but can't do it when it matters? It's frustrating. I hate it. I wish I was clever.

6 May, Krantu Island

Told to stay in camp *all day* and study *Far From the Madding Crowd* by Tom Hardy. Dad said this wasn't punishment, but it felt like it. He said it was education and to stop us from running wild. Read the bit where Sergeant Troy dumps Bathsheba.

Sad, but if I'd got a girlfriend with a name like that I'd probably dump her too.

7 May, Krantu Island

Although the beach is our main playground, me and Hass spend a lot of time in the rainforest. In the middle of the island there are these ruins. Mum had told me Polynesians were in the Pacific, but Ram says these aren't Polynesian. He says Polynesia's further east than we are. Anyway, there's a sort of stone roof held up by four wooden pillars covered in carvings. Dad says not to go inside the temple because it was dangerous. The wooden pillars are rotten, he says. It's only a matter of time before the structure collapses.

We go in anyway. We dare each other to run under the temple. The one who's been dared then makes a dash while the one on the outside yells things like, ~ It's coming down. You're gonna die. You're gonna get crushed to death. You'll be squashed flat.

Alongside the temple is a raised platform. Rambuta told us this is an altar for human sacrifices. The black stains on it are old blood.

~ *Most Sacred, Most Feared,* was the way they viewed their dark gods. They would take the most handsome, the most exceptional youth or maiden, the most loved young person among them, and sacrifice them to their ancestors, to their past heroes and to their death-demanding deities, Rambuta told us. ~ It was a long time in the past of course. At least a hundred and fifty years ago.

A hundred and fifty years! That didn't sound so old.

~ Why the most loved? Hassan asked.

~ Because to sacrifice someone you don't care about is no sacrifice at all. It must be someone who means a lot to you.

I said, ~ Sounds a bit daft to me.

But I found myself shivering.

~ You have to remember, Rambuta said, ~ these people were very superstitious. They came here over thousands of miles of oceans in huge canoes. They had no charts, no instruments with which to navigate. Instead they used the stars, the colour of the sea, wild birds, the direction of the waves and other natural elements as their instruments. When they reached here, despite storm and tempest, despite hunger and thirst, they had to find some reason for their good fortune. They chose to believe the gods had guided them. Sacrifices were made to these gods, to show them how grateful the people were for giving them a fruitful island.

Dark gods! Yes, we could see that. We could sense them in a place like this.

A few days after the Porter yacht had arrived Hass and I were playing in the ruins. We'd become a little wild since we'd come to the island. We wore nothing but a pair of swimming trunks each. More often than not our bodies were filthy from falling on the forest floor. We carried assegais dad had brought back from South Africa. Assegais are Zulu weapons, with long blades and short handles, ~ Similar to the Roman short sword, dad told us, ~ they're not throwing spears, they're for stabbing.

Hass and I thought assegais were great for using in the rainforest. We were hunter-warriors and let everyone know it with our yells.

We chased wild bearded hogs with our assegais in the hope of killing one for supper. It was a futile hope. They were much too quick for us and we were scared of the boars. They were big. Big as St Bernard dogs. The long grey beards on their faces made them look like strange old men with small piercing eyes. Rambuta had told us they could bite through a seven-centimetre log their jaws were so strong.

~ They could bite right through your leg! said Hass, adding in his usual graphic fashion, ~ All they'd leave is a bloody stump.

That morning we had a taste of their temperament.

We found a boar grazing near the temple. The young boars were very quick, the sows even quicker. But this old boar looked like a slow lazy fellow. He lumbered when he walked. He breathed heavily, snorted a lot, and we knew the eyesight of these creatures was very poor. If you came at them from downwind they didn't know you were there until you were two or three metres from them.

~ We will do it this way, whispered Hass. ~ I will stun him first with my slingshot. Then we will rush in and finish him off.

~ Will that work? I asked doubtfully.

Hass stood tall. ~ I am a deadshot, he said. ~ I will strike him on the head and he will go down like a felled tree.

My heart was beating fast. ~ If you say so.

I imagined us carrying the carcass into camp, slung upside down on a long pole.

~ Wow, dad would say, ~ you boys made a kill, eh? Well done. We'll barbecue him for supper tonight. You get the choice pieces of meat, since you're the hunters . . .

Or something like that.

Hass fitted a stone into his sling. He whirled the sling

around his head. The humming noise made the hog look up. His tiny deep piggy eyes tried to penetrate the forest edge. Finally released, the stone went flying through the air. It struck the old devil cleanly on the brow. But he must have had a skull as strong and thick as a castle wall.

Instead of dropping to its knees the boar went mad.

It let out a terrible shriek that would have frozen a grown man to the spot.

Instantly it began to charge around the clearing in ever-increasing circles, looking for its attackers.

~ Run! cried Hass in fright.

I didn't need him to tell me anything. I ran, thrashing noises all around me.

Hass and I both flew off in different directions, hoping the boar would chase the other one.

I dropped my spear. I headed for the beach, thinking to jump into the water and swim. Blundering through the undergrowth I lost my sense of direction. In my fear I didn't stop to think. My legs wouldn't let me. My racing heart wouldn't let me. I became a victim of my own terror. Every vine, every rattan creeper, seemed intent on impeding me. They wrapped around my ankles. They whipped my face. I was scratched and scraped everywhere. Blood mingled with the dirt on my body. I scrambled through dense vegetation, not caring if I was torn.

At one point I fell and dived into the undergrowth. My face hit one of those carnivorous pitcher-plants chock-full of stagnant water. They always have this black raft of rotting flies floating on top. The foul gunge splashed up my nose, in my mouth, in my hair. I spat and rasped, horrified that I would get

some deadly disease from the smelly sludge. Then I was up on my feet again, and running, running, running.

Finally I blundered out of the dark musty world beneath the canopy on to the sunlit beach with its dazzling sands.

I stood there, gulping down breath for a few moments, trying to get used to the brilliance. Bright blades of light were ricocheting off white foam and coral sands and piercing my eyes. It was almost painful to lift the lids. When my sight came back at last I was shocked to see someone sitting on our parliament log.

~ Hi! You need a wash. Oh my God, you're covered in blood. You've got scratches everywhere. Look at your hair! You're filthy. Did you fall in the mangrove swamp? You'd better go in the water or those cuts will go septic – the salt will sting like mad, but you need to wash that dirt off, boy. Go on! In you go.

The vision was misty, hazy. It was a girl. A girl in shorts and T-shirt. She was staring at me with an amused expression on her face.

My terror was gone, indignation in its place.

~ Eh? I said. I have always been good with words when it comes to the opposite sex. ~ What?

~ You're disgustingly filthy.

~ That's our log, I said. ~ We found it first.

Our log had been bleached by sun, salt and sea. Our for camp. Our laager. It was ours.

~ This old thing? She looked down but made no att rise. ~ Why, it belongs to nature, not you.

She had a soft American accent which was alm

~ Bugger nature, I said impolitely. ~ That's ou

She patted the drift-tree, studying it.

~ What is it, your ship? Your galleon?

~ Never you mind.

My annoyance was starting to fade. I wa
what I looked like. Here I was in just
trunks. My hair was full of bits
bruises all over me. I stank
dirty from head to
decomposing fli
On the
She

had t
Hass w
lessly to
~ I near
but stopped
asked, ~ Who's
~ She is the ca
Georgia. You mus
de to my father. We
thers should learn go
at separates man from
hhh . . .

Georgia squealed at the sar
drift-tree. She scrambled t
ining her. A snorting an

~ Hass is short for Hassan, said my brother, a bit stiffly, I thought. But then his name is more important to him than mine is to me.

She smiled. ~ And Max is short for . . . ?

~ You don't want to know, I replied. ~ It's a million times longer.

Amazingly, she got the joke straight away. ~ Oh, I get it — Maximilian — he was an emperor of Mexico, you know, in the nir teenth century.

We blinked.

There was silence for a bit, then Georgia said, ~ bit geeky?

~ Only a lot, I replied.

~ It doesn't matter, she said, ma
~ because I can swim better than eith

~ Who says so? cried Hass.

~ I do, she laughed. With tha
down to the lagoon. Within
better than I'd ever seen
Hass or me could do it
from California, shed
How's that for
I wasn't
Then Hass