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opening extract from

The Joshua Files: Ice Shock

written by

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published by

Scholastic

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The Lebanon Revi

News for the English-speaking community of Lebanon

Paragliding daredevil steals ancient Sumerian artefact

Paragliders enjoying the views from Mount Lebanon near Beirut were the first to spot the lone American who launched his flight from behind the mountain's cedar trees.

Under an electric blue canopy, the thief with a taste for a daredevil stunt rode the air currents until he reached the luxurious villa owned by successful banker Abdul-Quddus Al-Thani, 52.

Under the nose of Souraya, 32, the wife of Abdul-Quddus, as well as six armed security guards, the paragliding madman swept over the high perimeter walls of the property, cut himself free of the canopy and landed in the azure waters of the villa's 20m swimming pool.

The reckless bandit then held the terrified wife of Abdul-Quddus at gunpoint with a Beretta 92F pistol and forced her to pour him a glass of her husband's liquor, before helping himself to the wealthy banker's most prized possession – an ancient Mesopotamian artefact rumoured to be protected with a magical – and deadly – curse.

A curse to which the robber seemed strangely immune. . .

"Once he had the artefact in his hand, no one dared to go near him," Souraya told our reporter. "When the piece was originally brought here, our houseboy died. He got too close to it. Everyone in my household was terrified of that artefact. That's why we kept it behind glass."

However, Abdul-Quddus's wife refused to comment on claims that the object was originally stolen from the Baghdad National Museum during the Iraq War, later purchased by her husband as part of a collection of relics from the ancient Sumerian city of Eridu, near modern-day Abu Shahrain in Iraq.

The theft was captured on closed-circuit TV cameras around Abdul-Quddus's villa. The daring thief made his getaway on a vintage Ducati motorbike stolen from Abdul-Quddus's own collection.

Although the ruthless outlaw wore a helmet throughout, the image proved enough to identify him as US citizen Simon Madison, a suspected terrorist known to be wanted by both the FBI and CIA.

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The sound of humming gives it away. I'm wide awake within seconds, listening to a sound that I haven't heard for months: the unforgettable sound of a UFO. This time it's hovering above my house. By the time I pull on a sweater and some jeans, the sound has gone. I'm left waiting.

Minutes later, there's the roar of a motorbike riding up my street on a chilly December morning. I lean out of my window to see the outline of a guy in a leather jacket zoom up to my front door riding a Harley Davidson. I peer at him through the early-morning gloom.

"All right, Benicio?" I mutter as casually as I can. But inside I'm fizzing with anticipation.

Benicio here, in Oxford!

The sound of my voice is swallowed by the damp air. My second cousin Benicio pulls off his helmet, shakes his hair free of his eyes. He peers back at me.

"Yes, thanks, Josh, I'm all right."

We stare at each other for a second.

"You gonna come down, then?"

"You're not coming in?"

"I thought we agreed. Safer to go somewhere away from your house. So get a jacket, cos it's *really* cold!"

I can hardly remember what I'd agreed. I mean, when you get a call at two in the morning on a strange-looking mobile phone that you've never heard ring before . . . a phone you thought you'd switched off. . . Well, you're not in the most focused state of mind.

Mainly, you're excited.

A call like that comes in and it shakes everything up – in a good way. In a great way. I needed to be woken up like that. Feel like I've been asleep for months.

Josh, there's something I need to tell you, to show you. Some important news from Ek Naab. And . . . I'm gonna come in person.

Good old Benicio – I can always count on him.

Only a few minutes later I'm squeezing my head into Benicio's spare helmet, wrapping a scarf around my neck (it really is freezing), closing the front door softly and joining Benicio on the back of that Harley.

We zip down our little suburban Oxford street and head out towards the main event – Sunnymead Meadow – where Benicio's hidden the Muwan aircraft that flew him from Ek Naab in Mexico to Oxford.

"I've always wanted to see Oxford," Benicio tells me, his words muffled against the visor.

Well, me too. I've always wanted to see Oxford – from the air.

The bike speeds across the short river-bridge near the meadow; then we're riding over slippery grass in the meadow. I stop for a second, admiring the "UFO". Because deep within the wisps of low cloud, that's exactly what it looks like – a humming object covered in blue and orange flashing lights. Nothing like any airplane I've ever seen.

"How did you land here without anyone noticing?" I ask Benicio as we slide off the motorbike. With a remote control, he opens a panel in the belly of the Muwan. It's parked behind some low, scrappy trees. "We're right next to the ring road!"

Grinning, Benicio pushes the bike into the Muwan and closes the panel. The Oxford ring road is less than fifteen metres away, on the other side of a row of trees and hedge. Even at this early hour it's so noisy that I need to raise my voice to be heard.

"Maybe someone saw me. But UFO sightings are so boring now – most people won't bother to report them." He opens the main body of the plane. "Anyway, Josh, I'm not gonna make a habit of this."

"So why are you here?"

Benicio shrugs. For a second or two, he tries to look serious. "Get in. We need to have a talk."

He takes the Muwan up almost vertically. In just over two seconds we're above the low clouds. I'm in a seat behind Benicio in the Mark II Muwan; in Mayan it means *sparrow-hawk*.

I can't think of it as "Mayan" technology. The people of Ek Naab may be descendents of a hidden tribe of the ancient Maya, but their technology comes from somewhere and someone else. When I was in Ek Naab they didn't tell me from *where* or *who*. Could it be they don't even know?

The Muwan has room for one pilot and two seats in the rear. The cockpit window covers the pilot's seat and extends just over the passenger seats, so I can see up as well as ahead. The glass – if it is glass – is tinted a sort of pinky-gold colour. Or maybe that's a reflection of the Oxford dawn sky? As I watch the cloud layer through the window, it's as though the tint actually changes colour, cycling through pinkish-gold to silver-grey.

"Where do I go for a good view of these 'dreaming spires'?" Benicio says.

I remember my dad once driving me up a hill near a golf course, where he showed me the famous view of the spires of Oxford. "Hinksey Hill," I say.

A few seconds later we drop below the clouds, swoop over the golf course and land in a quiet spot. Benicio gazes at the view before us. The lowlands near the city are

waterlogged from recent rain, settled over by thick white mist. The spires seem to rise from the centre of a magical island surrounded by clouds. I can't remember seeing Oxford look so beautiful.

"Wow," Benicio murmurs. "That's something."

I unbuckle and lean forward, touching the edge of his seat. "Yeah . . . Oxford's pretty cool."

He takes a folded piece of paper from his jacket pocket. "It's from Carlos. For you."

I start to unfurl it. "A letter?"

It's not a letter but a newspaper cutting. Still crisp and new – from a recent edition of a newspaper called *The Lebanon Reporter*. I scan it. At first I don't get why Benicio's given it to me. Until I read the end.

"Simon Madison. . .?"

"Carlos is watching every news source in the world. Waiting for any mention of Simon Madison. He made us buy some incredibly expensive software to analyse news – the kind the intelligence services use."

Well, that sounds like the Carlos Montoyo I remember. Totally single-minded – I reckon he'd do anything to protect Ek Naab from being found. And if there's one guy who ever got close to discovering the secret entrance to Ek Naab, it's Simon Madison. The newspaper report makes out that Madison is a suspected terrorist. But until some US secret agents from the National Reconnaissance Office – the NRO –

told me the same thing, well . . . I honestly thought Madison worked for *them*.

"So Madison's back," I say to Benicio. "And what's this artefact he's taken?"

"No clue," Benicio says. "Montoyo wanted you to know that he's on the move. Madison was in Beirut – but he could easily return to Oxford. He broke into your house once . . . so take care."

"We've changed all the locks since then," I say. "And we have a really high-tech alarm."

"Just keep your eyes open," Benicio says. "OK?"

I nod, glancing at the newspaper article again. "Gotcha."

"And, Josh. . ." Benicio sounds a little embarrassed. "There's something else."

"Yeah?"

"Your blog . . . it's gonna have to stop."

"My blog?"

"Montoyo found your so-called secret blog. The one you'd been keeping since you supposedly closed it down."

My mind goes immediately to my last blog post, just a few days ago. Probably the most personal post I've ever written. I begin to turn red. Luckily Benicio isn't looking at me.

"Montoyo found it with this amazing new Web-searching program he bought. If he found it, Josh. . ."

"I get it. If Montoyo found it, then so might the NRO. So might Madison."

And whoever Madison really works for.

I sigh, resigned.

"So I can tell Carlos that you'll delete it?"

I sigh again. "All right."

Benicio becomes brisk. "*Excelente!* OK, good. Now – is there someplace I can take you?"

"Take me?"

"In the Muwan. Do you need to go to school or something?"

I check my watch. "It's a bit early. . ." How can I pass up the chance to fly over Oxford in a Muwan and be dropped off near school. . .? "But all right. Yeah! I'll go wake up my friend Emmy. . ."

Benicio starts up the anti-gravity engine, locks his piloting visor in place.

"That dream about your father," he says. "Your latest blog post, 'Blue in Green'. . ."

OK, here it comes. . . That's a post I really didn't mean to be read.

He pauses. "Quite a revealing dream, Josh. You should maybe talk to a psychotherapist. I think you're having some trouble handling your father's death."

"Well, yeah!" I'm indignant. "I don't even know how he died . . . chased by the NRO in their own Muwans, I know, but . . . after they captured him, who killed him . . . and why?"

Benicio sounds sympathetic. "I'm sorry, buddy. That's gotta be tough."

The Muwan rises with barely a whisper and floats out over the city. The golden stone of the college towers seems tantalizingly close as we drift across the city centre. As we approach the east end of the city, I see the high, doughnut-shaped main building of my school. Benicio dips into the clouds for cover. Then the Muwan drops like a stone to land in the shady park next door.

"You're mad!" I tell him. "We're right in the middle of a built-up area! Loads of people could have seen us!"

Benicio opens up the cockpit and watches me climb out.

"Trust me, nothing's gonna happen. In about three minutes, I'll be hundreds of miles away. There'll be a story in your local paper. Maybe a fuzzy video or photo taken with a mobile phone. Probably not even that. And no one will believe it."

He's dreaming. A flying craft the size of a fighter plane just dropped me off in a public city park! The story has to be bigger than that.

But Benicio seems pretty confident. "Trust me, coz. I've done this many times. And I'm guessing – so have our friends in the NRO."

As the window closes, Benicio takes one last look around. "You're a lucky guy to live here. I sure hope you realize what you've got."

"Ek Naab isn't exactly a dump."

"Small horizons, my friend. Sometimes I think it would be nice to live in the outside world."

With that, the window seals. Benicio grins, does a mock salute, then raises the Muwan slowly over the trees.

And with a sudden whoosh of air being sucked upwards, he's gone.

I tighten the scarf, zip my jacket, check my watch. It's only six a.m. Still buzzing from the rush, I walk out of the park.

Practically floating.

BLOG ENTRY: BLUE IN GREEN



I've had the dream every night this week. By now I'm pretty exhausted. Here's how it goes.

On a hot, sunny day, I'm taking a stroll. I don't recognize the street, but something tells me that I should. Then I realize what's so strange – there are no cars. I'm walking, then I notice I'm barefoot. The tarmac is warm, feels good on the soles of my feet. The sky is a deep powder blue. Not a cloud in sight. Every garden I pass is filled with rosemary and lavender – the air is thick with the smell. I notice grapevines and fig trees, all plump green leaves. I'm just beginning to wonder where I'm going when I see my house. That's the first time it hits me that I'm on my own street.

The door to my house is open, swinging gently on the latch.

There's no one in sight. It feels eerie – there's always someone hanging around in this neighbourhood. Today it's just me.

The door blows open, inviting me in. Faintly, I hear music playing. Miles Davis – a tune from Kind of Blue.

And my heart picks up a beat.

I wander into the kitchen. It's all been cleared, no food in sight. The fridge door too – none of the usual papers or my fading artwork from year five.

There's just one postcard.

There's a noise behind me. I swirl around and nearly faint. He walks through the kitchen door. It's him – my dad.

He's so tall, so alive. Tanned, a picture of health, wearing his usual check shirt and cords, dark hair slicked back with gel. Watching him standing casually in our kitchen, as though he'd just dropped in from college, I can hardly breathe.

Dad doesn't look at me, just reaches for the fridge door.

"Hey, son. Do you ever feel like you forgot something? A little thing? I do it all the time; overlook things. Detail, that's the name of the game. But then, you've already begun."

That's all he says. He pours himself a glass of milk.

Maybe I finally manage to mumble something, I can't remember. Whatever I say, he gives me a quizzical look. "Where've I been? Well, yeah. Been meaning to talk to you about that."

He takes my arm. "Listen, son, your mother and I, we've had some problems. This is how it goes between grown-ups sometimes. You know?"

I shake his hand away, frozen. "I don't know." Mouth dry, I tell him, "I thought you were dead."

Dad looks disappointed. "It wasn't my idea."

"What?!"

"The whole death thing. Not my idea."

He shakes his head now, looking annoyed.

"Then whose?"

"Your mother's."

"And you agreed?"

He pauses, hands on hips. "Yeah."

I stagger, lean back on the kitchen worktop for support.

"You and Mum . . . decided to make me think you were dead?"

"She decided."

"What?!"

He says nothing for a while, just stares at me as though wondering what to do next. "I guess so, son. Like I said, I'm sorry. I was in Mexico."

Now I'm starting to feel furious, betrayed.

"You were in Mexico? Why didn't you call? One lousy phone call? You left me thinking you died?"

His eyes fill with sorrow. I'm totally confused, not to say upset. What kind of parents would deceive their child like that? And how the heck did he engineer that plane crash?

Then (always then), the dream ends; I wake up.

The first few times, it feels so real that I wake up in actual tears, sobbing.

Then in some weird way, I start to enjoy it. Somehow, it's like seeing my dad alive again. Even though we keep playing out the same little scene, it feels real. I sense myself in his presence again. That's way better than nothing. I go to sleep and I'm hoping it's going to happen again, the dream.