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ON HER MAJESTY'S CROOKED SERVICE
ROBIN BLAND



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ON HER MAJESTY'S CROOKED SERVICE

Based on the 7TV television serial *The Daredevils:
On Her Majesty's Crooked Service* by Bryan
Clements by arrangement with Barron Studios

ROBIN BLAND



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1

Ladies' Night

May narrowed her eyes and concentrated on the target. Blocking out the noise, the heat and the smoke all around her, she focussed solely on her breathing and keeping her hand steady. Someone shouted her name somewhere off to one side, but she tuned it out and took the shot.

“Double top! I don't believe it!” spluttered one of the pub locals as May strode over to the board and retrieved her darts.

“Best of three, wasn't it? That would be twenty pounds, my dear chap.”

May, eyes twinkling beneath a sandy blonde fringe, addressed the shaggy-haired young farmer who was still gripping his own darts fiercely in one meaty hand.

“Best of five.” The young man muttered back, eyeing her with mounting hostility.

“Sorry dear, it's past my suppertime and I was rather hoping to spend your hard-earned cash on a pint and pie.” Still smiling, she put out a hand. “So cough up, there's a good lad.”

The young farmer scowled and lurched up off his barstool, coming close enough to breath beerily into May's face.

“I ain't paying you nothing,” he snarled, “You

cheated, you did.”

The rest of the locals in the pub caught the accusation and put their pints down, all eyes on the brewing trouble by the bar.

“Now, now, no need to get nasty, dear boy. There’s no shame in admitting defeat in the face of a superior opponent.”

“Superior opponent’ – hark at her!” mocked one of the young farmer’s drinking partners – a wiry fellow with close-set eyes. “Coming in here like she owns the place. Why don’t she go back to her ruddy airfield?”

“Yeah, her and her toffee-nosed girlfriends!” shouted another brave soul from somewhere beyond the fruit machine. “I seen strange stuff over at that ‘flying school’. Weird lights in the sky at night, trees all blown over one minute and all stood back up the next!”

“There’s something not right about them lot!”

The murmurs and grumbles grew from every part of the pub, as the locals began to get off their stools and close in on May. A slender woman reading a book of poetry looked up from her table with an expression of alarm.

May drew her hand back, bunching it into a fist. But before she could take any action, a dark woman in a fur-fringed leather coat detached herself from the jukebox and moved between her and the young farmer.

“Easy there, we’re just here for a quiet drink. Nobody wants a fight.” Her voice was cultured, soft and calm, her eyes bright beneath finely arched brows.

“Says you, stewardess.”

Sneering out the last words with sarcasm, the farmer waved a fistful of darts menacingly in her face. May’s gaze flicked from the dark woman to the wicked metal tips and back again. “Sorry April, I appear to have offended the natives’ local gods.”

Dark-haired April didn’t take her gaze from the red-faced farmer before her, and sighed. “You really don’t want to do-”

She got no further when the farmer jabbed his fist toward her stomach with a drunken explosion of breath, expecting her to jump back out of harm’s way. But April didn’t move, and simply looked down at the farmer’s hand as he withdrew the dart tips from her now punctured leather coat. There was no blood.

“What on..?”

With a quick punch, April smashed the man in the jaw, who reeled back into a pair of his fellow pub-goers as they surged forward, fists flying. May caught the first one in a headlock and swung him round into the second.

Back to back with April, they fought off the locals with feet and fists. Pints, stools and ashtrays flew in all directions.

“Wearing your bullet-proof vest to the pub? I thought you looked a little broad in the beam, sweetie.” May shot a quick glance down to April’s punctured but unbloodied coat. “And we may have to find ourselves another local pub, I fear!” she shouted above the roar of the melee.

“I think this was the last one in the county!” grunt-

ed April as she took a head-butt to the ribs and replied with a well-placed elbow.

On the edge of the scrum, the wiry man with the close-set eyes had scrambled over the bar and retrieved the landlord's shotgun and was even now moving in to let April and May have it with both barrels.

Then he felt something cold and hard and sharp at his throat. A gentle, well-mannered voice whispered into the wiry man's ear from behind. "I really wouldn't do that if I were you."

The wiry man froze, the shotgun now loose in his hands, as the owner of the voice moved round to disarm him. It was the slender poetry reader, sliding a thin blade back into the spine of her book. She looked down at the shotgun with something like distaste, then shoved it forcefully into the man's stomach, dropping him to the floor with a breathless oof.

"Much obliged June!" called May, catching her partner's eye as she charged past, dragging a dazed local by his belt. Behind her, April was throwing a man through the doors of the ladies and apologising to whomever it was that squealed in alarm at the intrusion.

The bell above the bar suddenly rang and everyone stopped to look round. There, perched on the bar, the bell in one hand and a packet of salted peanuts in the other, was a most attractive young woman. "Time gentlemen, please! And ladies, of course."

"Katrina!" The three women spoke at once.

"If I can drag you girls away from your Saturday night fighting, duty calls." She smiled disarmingly,

instantly defusing the air of violence in the pub, and hopped off the bar. "Your chariot awaits without."

April, May and June followed her outside, stepping over groggy locals and spilt pints. Parked immediately opposite the pub was a remarkable vehicle, twenty feet long, like a strange sort of American stretch limousine, though surely no other car looked like this, nor came in such a remarkable shade of sapphire blue.

Katrina Dare climbed into the driver's seat and started the car with low purring growl. April took the passenger seat as the other two sat behind. "You called, Milady?" she inquired coolly.

The car pulled away smoothly, rolling out of the village and down the high hedged country lanes.

"Yes indeed, April, it seems we have need of you ladies' skills once more."

"What is it this time, ma'am?" asked June, "A bomb on the trans-Australian express?"

"A tidal wave bearing down on the royal yacht?" hazarded May.

"Swarm of army ants marching on Rio, perhaps?" April added, with a tinge of dark humour.

"Not quite that exotic, but something that definitely requires the particular abilities of the Daret-roopers." Katrina took the strange car confidently down a winding lane, its sides brushing the hedges on either side. A break in the foliage ahead suggested a field entrance.

"You know of course of S.H.I.V.A.?" The three women nodded. "Well, it seems the Guru is up to an-

other mad scheme, something which would explain the strange weather we've been tracking worldwide.

"Where do you need us, ma'am?" April braced herself as Katrina steered the vehicle sharply at the break in the hedge and down a short track. Ahead of them loomed a sturdy chain-link fence and a pair of locked gates, from which hung a sign bearing the words 'DARE FLYING SCHOOL. CLOSED DUE TO INCLEMENT WEATHER.'

"I need you three to take a little flight with me. I hope you've all kept up with your parachute training. We're going to be dropping in on the Guru and his friends."

She put her foot down and accelerated towards the chain-link gates. The women all grabbed onto something, even though they knew what was coming. At a touch of a button on the car's dashboard, the gates suddenly fell backwards to lie flat on the ground, just as the vehicle streaked through the gap and rattled over the metalwork into the airfield.

"I will never get used to that." muttered May. June raised her eyebrows in agreement. Katrina was a Daredevil by nature as well as name.

As she briefed them, Katrina drove the car at breakneck speed over the grassy airfield to a low hangar whose doors swung back and forth in the wind. She brought it to a skidding halt just inside, leaping out and racing toward the hulk of an old aeroplane resting in the centre of the hangar.

"I say, we're not going in that, are we?" asked June, trotting behind her with the others. The aeroplane

was little more than a metal skeleton, the remains of an old Lancaster bomber.

“To begin with yes,” replied Katrina as she clambered up into the cockpit “It’s something Charlie’s been working on.”

“But, it doesn’t even have any wings!” April scowled at the hulk suspiciously, but had long come to accept that there was often more to the Dares’ vehicles than met the eye.

Sure enough, no sooner had they all climbed aboard the wingless bomber than it tilted forward alarmingly on hidden hydraulics, even as the hangar floor itself dropped away to reveal a dark sloping tunnel, complete with tracks large enough to accommodate the Lancaster’s fuselage.

Their stomachs collectively lurched as the bomber slid down the tunnel with increasing speed, the smooth round walls flashing by them in a blur.

Somehow, without the Daretroopers noticing, Katrina had managed to change into her uniform as they whizzed along to catch a very special connecting flight.

“How did you..?” began May, but then the bomber burst out of the tunnel to emerge into the Daredevil’s secret base, where land, sea and air vehicles of the most fantastic designs stood ready to launch.

Katrina was already out of her seat and sprinting across the floor. “Next stop: the Himalayas!”

2

Kali's Angels

She remained perfectly motionless as the python coiled up her leg. Its green and black scales glinted in the jungle light as the snake wound around her in muscular pulses. Though not venomous, the python could still inflict a nasty bite, and was certainly strong enough to slowly squeeze the life out of her, if she let it.

Kali kept her heart rate steady and concentrated on maintaining small, slow breaths. Pythons hunted by heat-detection, and she didn't want to let out a sudden gasp of hot air and in so doing trigger the creature's attack reflex prematurely.

The diamond-shaped head moved up over her chest as she clung to her perch atop an old statue at the edge of the ruined temple. Slowly, ever so slowly, she brought one hand up, mirroring the motion of the python as it inched up to her neck. A probing tongue flickered against her cheek, feeling her, sensing the minute vibrations of her breath.

At the edge of her vision, she saw the python's great head drawing back, and felt quivering vibrations up and down its coiled length, the precursor to the strike. But Kali was faster, almost superhumanly fast. Before the snake could bite down on her face, her hand whipped forward, seizing the creature just below those awful, widened jaws.

She gripped hard, straining her sinews against a

killing machine comprised almost entirely of muscle, and locked eyes with the python. Seconds passed with neither moving, the serpent held out at arm's length. The jungle seemed to pause.

Then just as suddenly as it struck, the snake's jaws snapped shut and the coils around Kali's body began to loosen, its tiny brain finally realising that it had chosen this prey unwisely. With rhythmic, unhurried pulses the python spiralled down the statue to the leaf-strewn floor, and soon disappeared into the undergrowth.

Kali looked around to see if the brief disturbance had given her position away. But with the exception of a few fluttering birds and a couple of hooting monkeys over the far side of the old temple courtyard, there was no movement, though she knew she not alone.

Across the winding pathway through the vegetation, a few stone pillars and lintels remained upright, casting strong shadows in the setting sunlight. Anyone passing this way would be sure to walk directly beneath them, as she had planned. She made a small hand gesture, and several shadows below the stonework responded in kind. Good. The Daughters were in place.

She mused at the strange series of events that had brought them down from their mountain base high in the Himalayas. How an enemy from the world outside had succeeded in planting a double agent within the ranks of the S.H.I.V.A. faithful. And how the Guru, in his limitless wisdom and piercing insight, had sensed the viper in their nest and flushed

him out.

The man had done well to get this far, this fast. Escaping from Mount Nirvana itself had been an impressive enough feat, costing the lives of several guards during his flight, not to mention several more when news of the security breach reached the Guru's ears. Doubtless the spy had employed some clever device to effect his escape, a small explosive concealed in a shoe perhaps, or possibly an electronic lock pick in his cufflinks. Kali was endlessly amused by the wonderful toys the enemies of her master brought with them.

They had tracked him down the treacherous mountain passes, through the high valleys and foothills and down into the jungle, where he doubtlessly planned to use the heavy tree cover to hide his progress from S.H.I.V.A.'s eyes in the sky. That was clever of him, but it would not be enough to save him from the Guru's long reach. Kali lived to serve her master, and to remind their enemies that the price of standing against him was death.

A sound brought her back to the present. Several pairs of feet moving carefully but quickly along the jungle path. It must be the spy, and whoever was aiding him. She pressed herself closer to the head of the statue, a rearing stylised leopard. A brief glance to the shadowy archway indicated that her companions were also ready and as still as the stones themselves. She indicated that they should wait and close the trap behind the intruders.

Presently a small procession emerged from the foliage. Several men and one woman. Most of the men were locals, armed with machetes and laden with sup-

plies for the journey. They were led by a native policeman by the looks of his uniform, doubtless one of handful of the local law authorities to have foolishly resisted the Guru's influence.

Influence... the thought brought a long-buried memory to mind. An image of herself, somewhat younger, standing before the Guru in some nameless hidden fortress. Bruised, bleeding, but defiant, her clothing – a school uniform? – torn and bloody. Had there been an accident? A crash? She could not recall. The younger Kali, though that was not yet her name, said something to the Guru, challenging him, scorning this strange being's authority.

In her mind, the Guru bristled, stepped closer to the girl. His eyes seemed to flash with an inner light as she started with a shock and put a hand to her brow as if struck by a sudden headache. Then she straightened up and leapt for him, hands outstretched, fingers clawed. The Guru took a step back in surprise, then redoubled his mental efforts, his eyes boring into the girl with greater intensity. She froze in place, her hands inches from his throat, her mouth twisted in a frustrated snarl. The Guru tilted his head, as if studying a rare specimen of insect, and leant in closer, his eyes seeing into her very mind...

Blinking, Kali shook off the distracting memories and concentrated on the mission. Below her the procession had passed under the archway and into the temple courtyard. Now she could see the spy himself bringing up the rear, a local girl clinging to his arm possessively. It was often the way with these men, using their charms and gadgets to impress some gull-

ible native into lending their aid. Doubtless she had romantic aspirations for herself and this man. A pity they were soon to be thwarted.

The man himself still wore the stolen garb of a S.H.I.V.A. cultist, torn but somehow stylish on his athletic frame. Whether it was a dinner jacket, a wet suit or a robe, his sort always managed to present themselves with a certain style. It must be in their training. How she hated him and his kind.

The spy seemed to sense the danger, but a moment too late. Kali brought her blowpipe to her lips and let fly a deadly dart, laced with poison from a rare plant found only in a remote region of China. A local man fell, clutching his neck with a wordless scream as the others shouted warnings and brought their weapons up, scanning the temple ruins.

As they had planned, the Daughters took this as the signal to strike. Deadly daggers flew out from the shadows, finding their marks among the men who had begun to fire wildly in all directions. As one, three slender female forms dropped from their hidden recesses among the stonework and landed gracefully on the temple floor. The Daughters of S.H.I.V.A. made their way swiftly and sinuously into the fray, each distinguished from the other two only by a unique decoration upon her sixth chakra; one of ebony, one of ivory, one of jade.

As the three Daughters drew swords and clashed with the machetes of the local men, Kali herself unwound from the leopard statue and somersaulted to the ground before the spy, holding her knife before her. The man seemed strangely unruffled by the at-

tack, as if was the sort of thing that often happened to him. He patted the now-screaming native girl on the arm, whispered something reassuring and stepped forward to meet Kali.

“Kali. Looks like you can’t stay away from me after all.”

He spoke with a sardonic, roguish manner. Was he English? Scottish? It was hard to tell. He fiddled nervously with his wristwatch.

“You have stolen secrets from the Guru, the all-wise.”

“You say stolen, I say borrowed. Surely we can settle this in a more civilized setting? Say the Hotel Assam, Saturday evening?”

How he mocked her. She could feel a red rage rising up.

“You, you are a spy, the enemy. You have stolen that which is precious to my master. Nobody likes a sneak.”

Why had she said that last part? It was if words from her old, forgotten life were dripping through. Distractions, weaknesses. She would punish the smooth-tongued agent for confusing her.

Kali let the rage rush up over her like fire, and leapt in, her blade flicking out. The man’s eyebrow rose as she closed in, no doubt betraying his fear as he twisted the dial on his watch. With a click, a small jet of gas puffed out from the man’s wrist and engulfed her, choking and blinding. Kali cursed. Another toy!

Then from one side a small but vicious fist found her unprotected jaw and everything went black.

When she awoke, Kali’s first thoughts were of her

failure to kill the double agent and the dreadful fate that the Guru meted out to those who disappointed him. Only afterward did she pause to consider that the spy had not killed her when she was defenceless, as she surely would have done in his place. A fool, a weak, romantic fool.

The three Daughters sat around her in a protective circle, their chakras glinting in the moonlight. The mountains seemed closer than they had been. They must have borne her some distance back to S.H.I.V.A.'s lofty abode, doubtless to face her punishment.

“Dark One,” one of them spoke, “Word has been sent from the Guru with new priorities. The spy has been allowed to make good his escape, as per the master’s great plan.”

Kali rose to her feet shaking her aching muscles loose and clearing her head of the gas’s after-effects. So perhaps she would not pay the price for failure after all, but still the denial of the kill weighed heavily on her. She indicated that the Daughter should continue.

“Others are coming, and in great force, to storm the gates of Mount Nirvana itself. We are required at the Guru’s side, to show them the folly of defying S.H.I.V.A.”

“Who? Who would dare?” Kali asked.

The answer, when it came, brought a wry smile to her lips.

“Then it is their deaths that will atone for my failure this day. Come, my angels.”

The Scourge of St Searle's

“What a rotten swiz. The Alps in midwinter and not a speck of snow in sight. Some skiing trip this has turned out to be. We’ll never be ready for the Winter Olympics at this rate!” Angelique sulked.

She pressed her snub nose against the chalet window and stared glumly out at the green valley below. Melting icicles along the edge of the steep wooden roof dripped steadily in the unseasonably warm weather.

“Cheer up Jelly, there’s still plenty of fun the five of us could have up here, even without the snow!” The irrepressible Geraldine, former house captain and demon of the hockey field, gave Angelique a playful nudge in the back as she trotted past with a fresh pile of logs for the fire.

“A fat lot of good that firewood’ll do,” pouted dark-haired Angelique, now in a dreadful funk. “It’s well above freezing outside. We might as well be sunbathing in the Bahamas!”

At that, Antigone Devere-Price looked up from her magazine.

“Did somebody say sunbathing? Count me in! It’s been simply ages since I’ve been able to top up my tan! I was rather counting on the snow to make me look less deathly pale by comparison.” She rose gracefully

from the sofa and gave herself an appraising look in the mirror over the fireplace.

“Admiring your prison pallor, Tiggy darlin’?” mocked Clare as she came downstairs, wrapped in a large, fluffy dressing gown. “Or would that be your father I’m thinking of?”

Antigone hissed like a scalded cat and whirled on the freckly young Irishwoman, her hand instinctively reaching out for a projectile and settling on a formidable candlestick from the mantelpiece.

As ever, it fell to Geraldine to act as peace-maker. Reverting back to her days as a prefect at St Searle’s, she moved to interpose herself between Antigone and Clare, fixing one and then the other with a calm but forceful stare.

“Honestly, you two, it’s like being back in the Fourth Form during wet break all over again! Do try to act like grown-ups and get along while we’re all stuck here.”

“That’s right,” said Angelique, turning from the French windows to play idly with the cushions of an old leather armchair, “In times of hardship, remember the school motto.”

“It wasn’t me, miss!” piped up the tall Lenny from the dining table, where she had looked up from a battered old book titled ‘Heavy Game of the Western Himalayas’.

Angelique sniggered, her mood lifting at her best friend’s wicked sense of humour.

“It’s omnes stare simul...” began Geraldine, adopting the matronly tones of Miss Ringworm, their old

headmistress.

“... as any fool knows!” chimed in Tiggy and Clare simultaneously, then looked at each other and broke into peals of laughter, the hot tempers of moments before already fading.

“But still,” mused Lenny, closing the old book with a thud, “Here we all are, halfway up a mountain with all of our skiing kit in the depths of winter and it’s like summer out there. As much as I’ve been looking forward to our old girls’ reunion, I was rather hoping to get in a little time on the slopes before the biathlon qualifying rounds.”

“Perhaps you could try rigging up an artificial snow machine, like that time in the chem lab?” wondered Clare, helpfully.

“Didn’t you end up freezing the entire east wing solid?” said Angelique, remembering the sight of Miss Brazzle the science teacher skidding the length of the first floor corridor on her bottom.

“I simply failed to take into account the precise ratio of liquid hydrogen per square inch in the thermal exchange pump,” countered Lenny, somewhat wounded that her scientific aptitude was being slandered so. “And at least I didn’t leave my horse in the Sixth Form common room overnight to do something beastly in Annabel Canterford’s locker!”

The memory of that particular incident reduced them all to fits of giggles once more, reminding each why they had been collectively known as the Scourge of St Searle’s.

“I think I was almost expelled for that one,” admit-

ted Angelique, "Good job I saved that exchange girl from drowning the next day."

"And good job I caught those robbers looking for Miss Ringwood's family treasure!" added Lenny.

"Not forgetting the scandal of the history exam cheat." said Tiggy.

"And the mystery of the refectory fire!" Clare added.

It was true. With the exception of Geraldine, ever the model of the honest, good-natured schoolgirl, the others had all come perilously close to expulsion at one time or another.

"Jolly good job we all stuck together then." concluded the former house captain, proud of her loyal, if high-spirited, friends. Then a slightly rueful expression came over her face. "It's just a shame none of the others could make it this year though.

"Well, some of them are busy with jobs, or fiancés." ventured Tiggy. At this, Angelique and Lenny both blew raspberries. "And some are otherwise indisposed..."

"At Her Majesty's pleasure!" finished Clare with a knowing grin.

"But I'd have thought at least Diana would have made the effort and torn herself away from the family pile." said Geraldine, the disappointment evident at the absence of her old dormitory chum.

"Too busy gallivanting around the world in some beaten up old biplane, I heard." mused Angelique, taking a cushion and tossing it across the room to Lenny.

“With those potty sisters of hers.” Lenny caught the cushion deftly and swivelled as if she was back on the netball court, passing it neatly to Geraldine.

“Have you heard any of the rumours about what they’ve all been up to?” Clare stage-whispered conspiratorially. “They’re as wild as those old stories about their daddy.”

“Don’t be such a sneak, Clare. Diana’s family business is her own affair.” declared Geraldine, her sense of fair play leaping to Diana’s defence, and flung the cushion at the Irish girl with perhaps a little too much force.

Clare had no time to duck out of the way, and was resigned to the impact, when the cushion changed course in mid-flight and veered off at ninety degrees to thud into the pine wall of the chalet, a feathered shaft stapling it firmly in place.

As one, the St Searle’s old girls turned to the now open French windows, where a striking figure clad in a daring uniform stood holding, of all things, a bow. Without consciously thinking, they had all moved to find cover, or else had reached for what improvised weapons they could find. Old habits borne of bloody wars with the wildcats of the Fifth Form never quite faded.

Silhouetted by the bright sunlight streaming over the alpine peaks, the figure was at first unidentifiable. But she quickly lowered the bow and stepped inside where her familiar, and friendly, face was instantly recognised.

“Diana Dare, as I live and breathe!” exclaimed

Clare, clapping her hands with excitement.

“The one and only. Sorry I’m a bit late for the reunion, ladies. I had a bit of a hold-up, what with the business with the funny weather and all.”

The girls exchanged somewhat puzzled expressions. What did Diana have to do with the strange weather?

“Well, if there’s anything we can do to help..?” offered Geraldine, not knowing what else to say.

“Funny you should mention that,” began Diana, eyeing the stacked skis, piles of cold weather clothing and decidedly non-regulation submachine guns lying to one side. “I was rather wondering if you could help me out of a jam. And I can definitely promise you plenty of snow.”

As Diana explained, the St Searle’s old girls gave a resounding hurrah.

Soldier on Watch

Köhner returned to base at 1500 that midwinter day with a mood as black as the old SS uniform he kept in his quarters. He had now spent some twelve weeks in the mountains and was thoroughly sick of the place.

Disembarking from the cable car and stepping out into the frigid air of the high Himalayas, he scowled at his surroundings and stamped his boots in the snow.

Mount Nirvana was the base of his employer's latest project, some nonsense to do with satellites that he only pretended to understand. That sort of thing was best left to over-educated scientists and the Guru himself, who seemed to revel in every little technical detail of his infernal schemes. To Köhner, it often seemed that his uncanny master saw these plots and schemes as little more than a game, some ridiculously complicated game of chess with thousands of pieces and a board the size of the world.

And what did that make Köhner himself? A pawn? Certainly not. Was he not a former *Scharführer* of the infamous SS, the so-called 'Butcher of Biberswald'? Had he not commanded troops of his own, leading his men into the teeth of battle? Had he himself not ordered the deaths of countless others, be they armed enemy units, bothersome captives or simply intransi-

gent local peasants? No, no pawn he, but not a king either, not while he leapt to the strange, often unknowable, whims of his cruel employer.

Köhner mused for a moment at his own self-delusion. To think of his relationship with the Guru as that of employer and employee, or even general and captain, was to put far too pleasant, far too civilized, a face on matters. Nobody ever left the Guru's service, nobody ever mustered out or moved on to other opportunities, not even valued personnel such as Eric Köhner. To his knowledge, the only way anybody ever left S.H.I.V.A. was by their death.

As he marched across the icy compound to the bunker entrance, he found himself mentally tallying the staggeringly high mortality rate of S.H.I.V.A. personnel by the Guru's own command: whether it was trial by deadly combat, to relieve his boredom or to blood a new assassin, as a hapless test subject for some new laser device or sonic cannon, or far too often, slain by the Guru's loyal, beautiful shadow Kali as punishment for some failure to please.

How Köhner himself had survived this long in S.H.I.V.A. was nothing short of a miracle, though he liked to think it had a little to do with his unique combination of ruthless efficiency and a willingness to sacrifice an underling in case of disaster. Survival was all to Köhner, survival and the glorious roar of battle.

The bunker's interior, shielded from the freezing temperature and merciless winds outside by several feet of concrete, was a welcome shelter from the elements, which Köhner had noticed had become even harsher since the Guru had begun experimenting

with his latest electronic toy. He shook the snow from his outer garments as two guards saluted him sharply, as he had drilled them to do.

Köhner flicked back a casual salute of his own, too pre-occupied with his thoughts to register their faces, though it scarcely mattered. Why waste his time with the names and faces of men who could be dead by next week? Or tomorrow? Or within the hour, should the Guru's mood take him? Besides, they were hardly soldier material, little more than uniformed thugs better suited to guarding the doors to some dingy Hamburg nightclub. Not like his old squad in *Der Zweite Weltkrieg*, his dogs of death. Now those were real soldiers; well-trained, well-armed, well-led. Not like this scum.

He turned down a concrete corridor and caught sight of a guard standing at ease by a laboratory door. Köhner came to a halt in front of him and looked the man in the eye. Snapping to attention far too late, the fellow fairly vibrated on the spot, beads of nervous sweat breaking out beneath his visor, his hand quivering against the butt of his shouldered rifle. He held the guard's gaze for a few more seconds, leaning in slightly and breathing down his nose.

"As you were." he drawled, and moved on. Spineless wretch. How could he hope to lead such as that into battle? Fear was a palpable presence in Mount Nirvana, as it was in all S.H.I.V.A. bases. It was something Köhner understood, and harnessed as best he could, though even he felt its debilitating effects scraping away at his well-ordered mind.

He came to the guards' barracks and stood at the

open door, nodding to his sergeant, an American brute called Cobb who had distinguished himself, though his former superiors in the U.S. Army might have said 'disgraced', by his bloody activities in Southeast Asia. A useful man, Cobb stood to attention, dropping an oily rag he had been using to maintain his sidearm, currently in pieces on an upturned packing case. Glad to see someone as eager as he for action, Köhner nodded to his subordinate and let the man get on with his work.

Before reaching his personal quarters, the *Scharführer* paused at some kennels, where two of the base's savage attack dogs instantly leapt at the bars of their confinement, snarling and biting, their claws grating against the metalwork.

"Ach, you are hungry, yes?" inquired Köhner, squatting down to the beasts' level, careful to keep just out of reach as they continued to snap and slaver with a near rabid fervour. He fished in the pockets of his outer coat and pulled out something red and ragged. "You like this, Struppi?" He dangled the scrap before one of the dogs, which lunged forward eagerly, teeth flashing inches from Köhner's face. He grinned. "And you Blondi, you want this too, hein?"

Now both hounds jostled for the meaty morsel as he tossed it between the bars and let them fight for the treat, tearing it to pieces between them in seconds.

Seconds passed as he took in every detail of this ferocious, primeval scene. "We are not so different you and I," he said, standing and idly wiping his reddened fingers with a handkerchief. "Like you, I hunger, for

battle, for the glorious rush of the blood, the sound of men struggling for their lives, for their deaths!”

His voice had risen considerably in volume during his address, and a little self-consciously, Köhner nodded to the squabbling dogs and let himself into his quarters, closing the door with a satisfyingly well-oiled click.

The room was small - he did not require much space for comforts - but furnished according to his needs. A bed, a clothes stand where his old uniform hung, a wall-mounted rack for a few automatic weapons, a dog-eared, black and white photograph of Eichmann and an ageing gramophone player. He put a record on and moved the needle over. Scratchy, familiar words crackled out of the speaker as Köhner shrugged off his outer coat and sat down on the bed, closing his eyes to better take in the music.

“Ah Lili, it was always you, only ever you,” his mind drifting back across the years to a younger man, a soldier alone on the front. Köhner’s whole body began to relax, the months of inactivity up here in the mountains, the endless drills, the capricious cruelties of his master, the utter monotony, all melted away with the music. Now he was at peace, now he could-

The Mount Nirvana security alarm sounded, drowning out the tinny old record. Harsh, insistent klaxons which could only mean that there was a security breach. Köhner became instantly alert, eyes now wide open, hands reaching for his weapons with practised fluidity.

Bursting from his quarters, he raced along the stark

corridors of the bunker heading toward his assigned defensive position, as he had long trained – dare he say hoped? – for.

Men scrambled from the barracks and other points, converging on Köhner, looking to him for leadership.

“You, you, you and you, with me, to the communications mast. Cobb,” the sergeant loomed at his side, “take two men and secure the radar array.” The American grunted and loped off across the compound.

“And somebody bring the dogs. *Schnell!*”

5

The Mountain

Fabrizio cursed under his breath in his native Italian as he made his way slowly up the sheer mountain face. Below him were the rest of the hastily assembled rescue team, held together by lengths of rope which twisted distressingly in the high Himalayan winds. Tendzen's rosy-cheeked face grinned up at him about twenty feet below his feet, with his brother Jangbu the same distance lower down. The others, Rikichi and Lorcas, were doll-sized figures even further below, slightly hidden by the outcropping rock. But he could feel the tension on the rope and knew he could trust them all. They were climbers, mountain men like himself. You had to rely on each other if were to survive the mountain. You just had to.

He repositioned his feet to get a better purchase and shifted his weight, probing with one hand for the next crevice. As he did so, Fabrizio could just see something above him. Something red and curved, quite out of place here in this land of grey and black and white.

"It is the tent. I see it!" he called down to the others. There were shouts of encouragement from below and reminders not to rush now that their objective was in sight. It was all too easy to forget yourself in the last few moments of any climb, to believe that all

was well now. But the truth of the mountain was that you could never relax, never let yourself believe that nothing could possibly go wrong now, because that was when the mountain would remind you who was in charge.

He chuckled to himself at the superstitious, almost religious, way that he had come to think of life up here. But he knew he was not alone in that. They all had their little mental tricks or systems, things that they believed kept them safe from disaster. Rikichi had the polaroid of his girlfriend back in Osaka that he carried in his jacket pocket all times, fishing it out whenever they reached a summit, as if to show her the roof of the world. Lorcas would softly sing old Alpine folk songs to himself as he climbed, pretending he was still a boy, playing on the lower slopes of the Eiger. As for the two Sherpas, Tendzen and Jangbu often joked that their mother would kill them if anything were to happen to either of them. And having met their mother, Fabrizio knew that to be a threat even the mountain would have to respect.

Within the hour he had reached the tent. It clung to the side of the mountain like a barnacle, its brightly coloured man-made fabric bulging out and down from the weight of its contents. Fabrizio called out when he got closer, and was relieved to hear someone answering him from inside the tent, followed by a small but obvious shifting motion, like a baby in its mother's womb.

The tent had been securely fastened to the rock wall at several points, but he could see that at least one of the pitons had worked loose, causing it to

droop dangerously at one side. Surely the inhabitant was aware of the situation, but his reported injuries must have prevented him from reaching outside his flimsy shelter to secure the piton again.

Fabrizio positioned himself just to one side of the tent, forcing himself to look straight out from the rock wall at the cavernous nothingness that felt like it was breathing him in. He thought of Jonah and the whale, and of Pinocchio drawn into the great yawning maw of Il Terribile Pescecane. Then reminding himself that this was just another of the mountain's mind games, he turned his head to one side, where Tendzen was making his way across the last few feet of rock to join him.

Together, they first secured the loose piton and then unzipped the tent's flap carefully, all the while reassuring the man inside in a variety of languages. The emergency radio report they had received several days ago had been unclear as to his exact nationality, only that he was injured and in need of immediate rescue.

By a process of elimination, they determined that he was a Russian, part of a team attempting to claim the peak for the greater glory of the Soviet people. His injuries amounted to a broken leg, caused by a fall of some forty feet from a ledge above them, and a bloody gash across his shoulder, which looked more like someone had taken several knives to him than anything else. The man himself was cold, hungry and obviously in pain, but at least there seemed to be no hint of infection. Fabrizio and Tendzen both tended to his injuries as best they could, immobilising the leg and dressing the shoulder wound, then commu-

nicated to him that they were going to start lowering him down the rock wall to firmer ground, from where they would begin the long descent back to camp.

The man nodded, clearly eager to be moving, despite the inherent dangers in moving from his relatively safe position. He muttered something in Russian several times that neither he nor Tendzen understood, and then shook his head, as if dismissing a foolish notion. But he had spent days alone strapped to the side of a mountain, suspended above thin air, and Fabrizio knew full well how that might affect a man's mind.

It took more than an hour to rig up a makeshift stretcher from the man's sleeping bag, fixing extra pitons and carabiners, and passing extra rope down to Jangbu and the others to stabilise the bag as they lowered the man down. He winced and swore more than once as Fabrizio and Tendzen took the strain and played the rope out, trying not to let the bag bounce into the rock wall too often.

At length, and with more than a few close calls, the wounded man reached the firmer ground some hundred and fifty feet below, where Lorcas and Rikichi set about making a more thorough inspection of his injuries, breaking out the morphine and oxygen. By the time the others had climbed back down themselves, the Russian was much revived, though still unable to walk, and in deep conversation with Rikichi, who spoke Russian almost as well as his own Japanese.

Lorcas came over to Fabrizio and the two brothers, a puzzled expression on his weathered face.

“It is strange. The Russian’s injuries, they look like slash wounds, not from rocks, but blades. Or maybe a great cat or bear.”

“But there’s nothing that large at this altitude. Are you sure, Lorcas?”

“Definitely, mio amico. Three parallel incisions, some two inches apart. Claws, perhaps.”

At those words, Tendzen’s and Jangbu’s faces darkened and they exchanged worried looks.

“We go now. It is not safe here.” They both looked around as they spoke, and quickly set to collecting their gear.

As the team slowly descended to the pass, Rikichi moved up to join Fabrizio at the front, both of them planting their feet carefully on the packed snow. He looked eager to talk.

“What is it, Riki? Has he got worse?”

“His injuries? No. He will survive if we get him to the camp in time. No, it is what he says. About the attack.”

“Attack?” Fabrizio wasn’t sure his friend had used the right word.

“He says he fell because something was chasing him, that night in the snow. He had wandered away from his companions for some air, and caught sight of something strange in the distance. Lights, flashing on and off, high up on one of the more remote peaks.”

“Did he say which one?” Fabrizio knew there were still plenty of parts of the Himalayas that remained unconquered. But perhaps some other team was even now attempting the ascent of an as-yet unclimbed mountain.

“Mount Nirvana.” Rikichi replied, his voice flat. That particular peak was something of a local mystery, considered bad luck among the mountaineering community. Those who left to ascend it rarely returned, and those that did often spoke of freak accidents, avalanches and members simply... disappearing in the night.

“But what was chasing him? Did he see it?” In his mind, Fabrizio thought of the legendary yeti, the wen-di-go of the Himalayas, said to haunt these high, lonely valleys.

“It was dark, he said, but whatever it was moved quickly and softly, hunting him across the snowfields until it caught him on the shoulder as you saw. He staggered back to his team’s camp where they did what little they could for him, without medical training.”

“So they hung him over the side and left? Dio mio.”

“He said they were scared Fabi, in fear of their lives. Whatever it was had come for them twice more in the night. With their own wounds, they could not hope to move fast with an injured man, so they put him where they thought he would not be easily reached, and made their own way down at first light and headed for the nearest village. Whatever attacked them, it’s still out there, somewhere in the snows.”

They both shivered, and not from the cold.

The team pressed on, making good time in spite of their wounded burden, Jangbu making jokes in broken English and Lorcias singing his Swiss tunes to raise their spirits. But still they all felt unsettled, as if

unseen eyes were upon them, from somewhere up in the rocks. That night, they took the watch in pairs.

In the morning, the sun glinting off the icy peaks above, they continued their descent, negotiating treacherous narrow ledges and crevasse-strewn ice bridges, ever aware that they were not quite alone. Even Tendzen had stopped smiling, and had his knife out as if expecting an attack at any moment. They were all tense, hardly speaking except to point out natural hazards.

They felt it first as a vibration, a low rumbling, and all feared an avalanche. Then it became a noise, grinding, squeaking and clattering. It was Rikichi who spotted it first, lumbering up the whitened slopes to meet them, belching smoke and churning the snow beneath its great treads.

Fabrizio drew his pistol, unsure what to expect. A vehicle, up here? But there was no such rescue machine within five hundred miles. And who would be mad enough to drive up here anyway?

As it rumbled closer, the team could make out a figure inside the snow-machine's cabin, wrenching the steering controls left and right with seeming abandon. Unseen attackers on the mountain, strange lights on the peaks, and now this? Perhaps altitude sickness had claimed them all.

The vehicle ground to a halt and disgorged its driver, a smallish figure bundled up in a curiously designed jumpsuit. Twirling a large spanner as another might idly flip a coin, the figure stomped through the snow toward them, a pony-tail visible beneath her

woolly hat. Fabrizio could only stare in sheer disbelief. A girl..?

“Hello chaps, Charlie Dare. I was in the area and heard you might need a lift. Hop in and I’ll explain what you can do for me in return.”

The Perfect Sage of Deaths

Nothing stirred in the chamber apart from the strange inky black smoke that curled and roiled lazily like a phantom hydra. It crawled across the concrete floor and slithered over odd stone protrusions that might have been the product of natural erosion deep beneath the waves or else sculptures carved by some lunatic hand. The smoke climbed the walls in heaving exhalations and drifted across the ceiling in blind, meandering tendrils. It clung to everything, obscuring all.

With a mechanical hiss a circular aperture large enough to admit a man opened in one rough wall. Dull red light seeped in through the airlock, casting an eerie light on the smoky chamber within. A figure stood at the portal, arms by his side, body erect. He wore a jumpsuit that covered every inch of flesh, complete with hood, visor and breathing apparatus. The smoke billowed around the figure; crawling, probing.

The sound of the man's breathing was amplified by his mask as he stepped through the aperture and into the chamber, the swirling black and red rendering everything beyond arm's reach an amorphous mystery. Through his protective hood he could hear strange noises somewhere beyond sight. Low, shushing sounds like the sea, or a giant's gurgling breath.

"Master," the man's voice came out muffled and

oddly flat, as if the unsettling surroundings, which would surely have given even the most hardened pause to consider what strange forces were at work here, had failed to trigger in him that most primitive of human emotions: fear of the unknown. "The new recruits are ready for your inspection."

He stood patiently as the seconds passed, the smoke continuing to caress the seals of his protective clothing. At length, the indistinct guttural sounds receded and a figure approached from the chamber's depths. A bearded man, clad in simple loose garments of unrelieved black, he wore nothing that would ward off the smoke, nor whatever other hazardous conditions existed here. The masked figure bowed his head obediently and then swivelled on one foot to allow the man in black to pass unobstructed into the airlock.

As the heavy circular door sealed tightly behind them and the atmospheric purifiers whirred into life, the red lights in the ceiling reflected oddly off the bearded man's eyes. His pupils seemed impossibly tiny, little more than pinpricks, which would have struck the masked attendant as odd for someone who had just emerged from such a dark place. Except that the man was not capable of forming such questions, nor of speculating on any other curious aspect of his master, the uncanny Guru, supreme leader of S.H.I.V.A.

"Inform the technicians to increase the ratio of smoke to atmosphere by twenty units. The current solution is too dilute for sustained efficacy."

As he spoke in clipped, unaccented tones, the Guru's pupils began to return to normal, though his eyes seemed to flash with a certain inner light.

“It shall be done, superior master.”

The outer door of the airlock cycled open and the Guru stepped out smartly, followed by the masked man at a respectful distance. The corridor outside was of plain concrete, brightened by functional strip lights overhead. The air held the suggestion of a chill, the hint of a breeze. Distant sounds of machines and men echoed off the hard walls. The masked man disappeared through a nearby door as the Guru turned the other way, his hands clasped lightly behind his back, slippered feet leading him through double doors marked ‘RE-EDUCATION CENTRE’.

A short bespectacled fellow in a soiled lab coat hurried up to usher him into a small viewing room.

“Ah, Great One, thank you for joining us. I know your time is, ah, precious at this time of-”

With a wave of his hand, the Guru cut the man short and moved to the long one-way glass that filled the room’s further wall.

“How does the new conditioning process fare?”

The technician hovered at his shoulder, sometimes addressing the Guru’s left ear, sometimes looking down at his feet. Nervous fear rolled off the man like sweat.

“Well, as you know we had experienced some, ah, teething trouble with the process early on, but now, with the ah, acquisition of the Brodsky method, I believe we have achieved some measure of success.”

He shuffled closer to the window, through which a young man could be seen, strapped to something resembling a dentist’s chair. Before him stood a small

cinema screen displaying moving images one after another in swift succession, accompanied by taped classical music. Disturbingly, the young man's head was held in place with a metal cap, his eyelids pulled open by cruel prongs.

“He is being administered the drug?”

“Yes Great One, in increasing dosages with each session. The cumulative effect is quite marked.”

The young man writhed in the chair, unable to turn his head away from the cinema screen or even blink. The images before him seemed innocuous enough - a couple holding hands, a child playing with a puppy, a English policeman helping an elderly woman cross the road - but they seemed to induce in him reactions of the most extreme distaste and even nausea, as if these examples of simple humanity were anathema to him.

“A week ago, he was an unaffected youth taken from the streets of an urban housing development, his head full of music and poetry. When the conditioning is complete, he will find all aspects of charity, affection and rebellion totally alien concepts. Only regular bouts of extreme violence will give him any pleasure at all.”

The technician stepped back, pleased with his pronouncements. Finally, the Guru turned to look him in the eye. The man instinctively flinched under the gaze.

“And the other crucial element..?”

“Ah, yes, yes Great One. If you will continue to observe?”

The images and music faded away to be replaced

by a slide projection of the Guru's head glaring unblinkingly at the young man. The single word 'OBEY' hovered over the projected face in large, bold letters.

"Excellent. Continue with the treatment and report back to me within the week. I have plans for him and his young friends."

The Guru left the viewing room and continued on, passing several squads of guards who all stopped to bow as he approached. He halted at a door marked 'Armoury' behind which muffled gunfire could be heard. Inside, he was met by another technician, this one wearing goggles and ear protection. The room itself was a high ceilinged shooting range, where several masked guards were honing their skills with rifle and pistol. The deafening cacophony of the gunshots halted as the Guru entered and the men turned as one to acknowledge his presence.

He raised an eyebrow as someone continued to fire. Powerful reports came in regular bursts, punctuated only by the sound of the weapon being reloaded. It was the furthest booth, shielded from view. The technician gestured wordlessly and beckoned the Guru to follow him to the booth, where a man dressed in a charcoal suit and tie was firing a shotgun methodically from the hip.

The man did not seem to register the Guru's presence, pumping and firing with robotic rhythm at a series of cardboard targets before him – childlike images of a beardless Viking, a portly pirate, a saggy cloth cat – each target was shredded by the city gent's shot with cold, unemotional precision.

To one side of the man sat a small tape player, issuing a short flatulent sound as each target rolled in front of him. There was a slight twitch in the man's eyes when it sounded, as if recalling some deep-seated hostility. The noise rasped again and he pulled the trigger at whatever stood before him.

The Guru nodded in approval and motioned for the technician to follow him out of the room.

"Impressive. Where was this one found?"

"Wandering naked on a beach, master. We tend to find quite a few like him. Middle-aged, frustrated, aimless. Crying out for direction and an outlet for decades of impotent anger. He will do well in our sleeper programme."

"Indeed. Have him progress to targets of real humans. Strangers, then work colleagues and finally family. When he is ready, inform me at once."

"It shall be done, superior master."

The Guru's slippers next led him to a large room something like a gymnasium, where the smell of sweat and blood mingled with the exotic spicy incense wafting up from braziers placed at each corner of the training area. Several robed men fought each other with wickedly sharp hand weapons, watched over by a muscle-bound slab of a man seemingly held together by scar tissue and scowls.

Most of the combatants were already bleeding from cuts to their bodies, and at least one lay slumped and writhing on the concrete floor, a tell-tale pool of red collecting beneath him. Another man took a terrible slash across his chest from his opponent, open-

ing up a deep wound. But he did not scream, nor did he pause in his own counter attack. If the man even felt the pain of his chest injury, he did not show it.

At a tiny motion from the Guru, the scowling trainer barked to the sparring men and the flashing knives grew still. The men assembled into a line before their supreme master, panting, sweating, bleeding. The Guru passed along the line, gazing at each man in turn with narrowed eyes, taking in every detail.

He stopped at one man.

“You, what is your purpose?”

“I have no other purpose but to serve the will of S.H.I.V.A.”

“And what is your pleasure?”

“I have no pleasure, save to die for the glory of S.H.I.V.A.”

The called response, spoken with sufficient fervour, evidently pleased the Guru. He addressed another of the fighting men.

“And what should be done with their weak?”

“The weak cannot be suffered to live.”

At this the Guru’s head turned to where the badly wounded man continued to thrash and moan in his own pool of blood. The others understood immediately his intent and surrounded the injured man. A voice cried out. Knives rose and fell.

At length, he nodded and turned to their trainer.

“These four,” he indicated the least wounded of the fighting men, “will serve as my personal guard. Have their injuries dressed and report to me in the control room.”

“It shall be done, Perfect Sage of Deaths!” the scarred man replied smartly, using an archaic title from the Guru’s past, bringing a brief twitch of a smile to his lips.

His inspection of the trainees complete, he ascended several windowless floors, passing barracks, holding cells and generator rooms eventually emerging into the open air, the very summit of Mount Nirvana, his impregnable eyrie.

Frigid Himalayan air whipped around him, but the Guru barely registered the temperature difference, or the thinness of the atmosphere at such an altitude. He turned to take in the vista. Mighty snow-draped peaks surrounded the base on all sides, an impenetrable bulwark against land forces, should any be so cunning as to discover the location of this, S.H.I.V.A.’s most formidable fortress. Not to mention so foolish as to attempt a direct assault.

He stood on the flat, snow-blown concrete roof, overlooking Mount Nirvana’s central compound. Below him, men scurried like mice, unloading the cable car, carrying out routine maintenance on the radio mast, patrolling the vertiginous perimeter walls. He briefly considered his lieutenants, abroad in the outer world, but soon to return. The butcher Köhner and beautiful, deadly Kali should be here to witness his imminent moment of triumph.

It amused him to allow Kali to retain some measure of free will, of choice. To do otherwise would be to crush her spirit so completely as to eradicate that fiery wilfulness that made her so formidable. Making use of her was not unlike grasping a tiger by the tail,

but he remained confident of his ability to tame her when the time came.

Köhner on the other hand was a different proposition. He would never accept the Guru's control, not fully. The man was a born survivor and with that instinct came the inevitable whiff of betrayal. Still, he was useful for the time being, as long the Guru continued to place the man in the thick of danger where he would succumb to his violent nature.

So much for his own people, his pawns in the great game he played against the world. But what of those arrayed before him, he mused. The flamboyant double agents and enigmatic men of tomorrow? For the time being he was confident that none of his old enemies suspected S.H.I.V.A.'s presence up here in the remote icy heights. But that was not to say nobody was moving against him.

Unfamiliar pieces had begun assembling, moving, forming strange alliances. He had detected a distinctively feminine element entering the game. A woman... no, women, and with a strong connection to each other. A rival cult perhaps? The ties between them seemed as thick as blood, bonds as unbreakable as those of his own loyal followers once their re-education was complete.

These new pieces seemed to move across the board with ease and great speed, unfettered by restrictions of distance. Great Britain, the Alps, even here in the Himalayas themselves, he had glimpsed these new pieces gathering their own forces, their own sacrificial pawns. And always at their centre, a gap where the prime mover should be. Invisible, even to the Guru's

unearthly Game of Antares, this player was somehow shielded from detection. Truly a rival player to test his intellect.

But still... it would be well to draw his own pawns close. Just as a precaution. Perhaps an inspection of the base's defences was called for.

The security office, tucked away in one corner of the wind-swept compound, was composed largely of flickering internal television screens, depicting almost every room, corridor, and sub-basement of Mount Nirvana. As the guard on monitor duty stood to attention, the Guru saw that he had been reviewing a muted film reel.

The angle was taken from high up in some vast natural stone chamber, a cavern perhaps, or dormant volcano. In the foreground atop a fragile gantry, a Chinese man screamed silently at hard-hatted minions, his fists clenching emphatically before him. The hands glinted with a tell-tale metallic sheen in the camera lens.

"Now, he showed promised," the Guru mused out loud, and then addressed the security guard directly. "Maintain the utmost vigilance. Pieces are moving across the board in unexpected patterns."

The man nodded in dumb compliance. The Guru stepped outside into the chill air once more and crossed the compound. A flash of metal low to the ground caught his eye, as a strange mechanical construct skittered across the stones and halted before him, buzzing with electronic intelligence. He stooped to inspect the foot-long mechanoid, an oversized steel

and plastic arthropod with bulging silver globes for eyes and twitching, jointed cilia for locomotion.

Producing a small control box from inside his garments, the Guru briefly tinkered with the dials as the mechanoid reversed and turned at his command. He whistled as if to a pet robotic dog, and the bizarre construct scuttled away again, disappearing round the corner of a utility building. A robot dog? He dismissed the preposterous idea as swiftly as he had thought of it and headed for the building marked 'CONTROL ROOM'.

Like all loyal followers of S.H.I.V.A., the technicians within the main control room leapt to their feet when he entered. Below long windows which looked out on the Himalayan range, large electronic consoles blinked and beeped. Nearby banks of computer tapes whirred back and forth with the constant motion of calculation. The Guru stood in the centre of the room and breathed it all in. Here was where he would reach out and change this world.

A technician with a clipboard bent his head in supplication.

"Great One, preliminary tests of the Weather-breaker satellite have yielded one hundred per cent success, as predicted.

"Indeed. And the test target?"

"The English village you selected was completely devastated, master. Local meteorological patterns were warped to produce concentrated cyclonic and electrical conditions of unprecedented magnitude."

A television screen to one side showed a news

report of cottages and farm houses flattened and charred, a crying child clutching a tattered toy bear in the foreground.

“Excellent. Proceed with preparations for a large-scale demonstration. It is time the governments of the world learnt to respect our power.”

“Do you have a suggested target, master?”

The Guru considered.

“Somewhere large, well-populated. A capital city. London..? Washington..? Somewhere with a large lightning conductor to facilitate the destruction. Something tall and metallic...”

Then it came to him. It would be perfect.

“Align the satellite for Paris. I want it reduced to smoking rubble within twenty-four hours.”

Nothing on this planet could stop S.H.I.V.A. now. Nothing could stop him. Who would dare?

The Guru plans to hold the world to ransom with his Weatherbreaker weather-control satellite - an insidious plot uncovered by the glamorous Dare sisters – aka the Daredevils! They have gathered their allies and have launched a surprise attack on S.H.I.V.A.'s lofty fortress, Mount Nirvana, patrolled by hardened goons on snow mobiles and vicious attack huskies.

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