

THE LOCUST HAWKS



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CONTENTS

1. THE CRASH	5
2. THE TRAIL	16
3. THE TOWN	26
4. THE MANSION	38
5. THE ESCAPE	46
6. THE CAULDRON	58
7. THE MISSION	64
8. THE JUNGLE	77
9. THE DEPARTURE	89
10. THE COMMUNITY	102
11. THE MESSAGE	116
12. THE VILLAGE	130
13. THE CROSSING	142
14. THE GATEWAY	157
15. THE DELIVERY	169
16. THE CONTACT	183
17. THE ISLAND	200
18. THE LIGHT	215

1) THE CRASH

Radar and the Norwegian trudged wearily up the steep ramp of the plane's cargo bay, the vibration of the waiting propellers shaking their bones through the metal floor, leaving a trail of snow and ice from their boots. They assumed their previous positions on the uncomfortable benches within, sat opposite each other again, they began to look around at the empty seats of their fallen comrades, a stark reminder of how costly their mission had been.

The pilot made his way down from the cockpit and briefed them on the flight plan, informing them that they were already fueled to fly directly to Cape Verde, a small safe haven off the West coast of Africa. Once here they could stretch their legs and warm their bodies under the eternal blazing sun, whilst the plane was refuelled for the last leg of the journey straight back to good old "Blighty", with their final destination being rural Oxfordshire.

As soon as he finished speaking he turned away from their beaming smiles, and returned to the front of the plane to continue his usual routines and take off procedures. Once completed he checked on them both one last time, advising them to try and get some sleep. The plane now began to vibrate even more as he accelerated to the optimal speed, eventually rising to a smooth ascent.

Despite his encouragement to do so, the solitary passengers resisted the temptation to get some much needed shut eye, still on edge from their previous experiences. Instead, they both stood up, awkwardly hugging the side of the plane, straining their necks as they tried to stare through the porthole windows, desperately trying to capture the final glimpses of the disappearing landscape and its ghosts below. As the plane continued to gain altitude the memories and vistas all disappeared into a plume of clouds, and with this sudden obscurity they now returned to their seats. The initial violent assault on their ears and senses had now been pacified to a constant muffled background noise, as their stomachs acclimatised to the flight.

“Well as the mission is over and we are on our way home, I can’t keep calling you Mr K! My name is Tommy” said Radar, extending his hand out to the Norwegian in a cautious but quaint English manner.

The Norwegian laughed loudly and pitched his arm forward in a confident and determined motion, cupping his hand into the firm grip ahead.

“My name is Karl, pleased to meet you, do you travel this way often?” he boomed, laughing even harder at his own joke and the ridiculous necessity of the absurd reintroduction.

Having both faced such an array of horrors, and witnessing the violent death of all of their comrades, in circumstances far beyond anyone’s comprehension, their sole survival was already testament of their brotherly bonding.

Radar laughed with polite restraint, receiving the exaggerated humour in the spirit in which it was delivered, but his own mind was already heavy with the burden of pregnant thoughts that he desperately needed to share, and this seemed as good a moment to do so as any.

“Karl, I’ve been thinking, I mean, the “Golden Handshake” from the army, this organised transport to take us straight back home, the promise of immediate early retirement and a full pension for life, along with the “Secret Committee’s” absolute trust in our confidentiality; it just seems all too fantastic, too good to be true! I’m not wishing to sound paranoid, but I really don’t have a very good feeling about all of this!” whispered Radar, looking over his shoulder at the silhouette of the pilot at the far end of the plane.

The Norwegian leaned forward nodding his head with a sobering look of shared concern, he murmured affirmatively in restrained agreement.

Checking the pilot was still at the controls, he continued in a low voice..

“My thoughts exactly, I was convinced we would be redeployed back to one of those other Antarctic bases, or even worse that we would be Court Marshalled on some jumped up charge, ending up in solitary confinement for the rest of our lives.

This all smells a bit too fishy for me, we really are far too expendable to be receiving such gold standard treatment” he said in the lowest voice he could that was just audible over the constant noise pollution, still cautiously staring ahead at the cockpit with suspicion.

“We best both keep our eyes and ears open for the rest of this journey, and trust no one, we have to be prepared for any eventuality that may be waiting for us at Cape Verde. We ought to seriously think about disappearing off the grid as soon as we can, either there, or as soon as we get back home!” the Norwegian whispered ominously.

"Agreed!" concurred Radar, now worried about their expendability.

Try as they did, the men couldn't resist their closing eyelids any longer, and eventually succumbed to the hypnotic drone and rocking of the journey, both falling into a deep slumber. Harboring dreams of both their bright futures ahead, as well as the dark haunting images of the past mission, that they had barely survived.

The closed curtain ahead twitched, and a pair of furtive eyes peered through the slightest of gaps, spying on how deeply they slept, and how safe it was to proceed undetected. Feeling sure his privacy would not be disturbed, the Pilot now followed previous orders and radioed back to base for further instruction.

“Charlie to Base, Charlie to Base, come in Base One!” repeated the pilot, looking over his shoulder to check his passengers were not disturbed from his call. He cautiously raised his voice, only slightly higher, trying to pitch through the thick static of dead air. He repeated the refrain again twice more. All of a sudden there was a crackle of feedback and finally the vocal response he was yearning for.

“Base One here, report your current status” replied a cold stern emotionless voice, piercing the air with its pointed command.

Having just spied on their previous conversations through a hidden listening device in the cargo bay, he had heard enough to be concerned, and to follow the protocol in reporting back immediately.

“The Cargo has been checked and found to be spoiled, repeat, the Cargo has been checked and found to be spoiled!” informed the pilot earnestly, using the secret code.

“Terminate Plan A, proceed now with Plan B, ensure the spoiled Cargo is not delivered and it is destroyed, repeat, ensure the spoiled Cargo is not delivered and it is destroyed” replied the same voice, but this time with more of a sense of urgency.

“Message understood, will proceed with Plan B, the Cargo will not be delivered and it will be destroyed.” confirmed the pilot with an equal lack of emotion in his voice.

“On completion of the destruction of the Cargo signal your coordinates and a rescue team will be deployed to extract you, use the usual channel” reassured the operator.

“Understood, standby for my signal, over and out” confirmed the pilot, now coming to terms with the gravity and consequences of Plan B.

The pilot was fully aware of Plan B, it was a safeguarding measure put in place to prevent the risk of any serious threat to any of the ongoing operations. Due to the nature of the conversations of the “Cargo”, they were now deemed rogue, compromised, unreliable, and thus needed to be eliminated immediately. In this particular case, Plan B specifically entailed the pilot sabotaging the planes controls, disposing of all other parachutes, setting the planes course for destruction so no survivors or evidence could be found, and then parachuting out to safety. This was not the first time he had been ordered to execute Plan B, and his continued success had made him a valuable asset to be relied upon.

As the passengers continued to sleep, the pilot changed course and flew due West of the Falkland Islands, past the first Argentinian airport at Rio Galedo, and on towards the Andes. After 600 miles the once distant peaks that fenced the skyline now engulfed all with their imposing majestic presence. Peaks shrouded in clouds of mists suddenly loomed out of their dispersion, triggering evasive action to avoid collision. The pilot had to use all of his skill and experience to navigate the sudden descents, using the thermals of the canyons to gain extra speed to attempt the sharp climbs required to go over each range. The narrow foggy mountain passes continued to lure him in further, as he desperately searched for an ideal location to both abandon the craft and save himself at the same time. Panic trickled down his forehead as he nervously kept looking over his shoulder, conscious that he was running out of time, as the passengers could awaken at any moment and thwart his plan.

Through the next canyon he spotted a potential drop zone ahead, where it seemed there was a high flat level to parachute and land safely on to, followed by a higher mountain range shortly after. Ideal for the unmanned plane to crash into, which would leave no chance for any survivors or any evidence to be recovered.

Quickly he gathered the remaining parachutes and threw them out, watching them plummet into the deepest of chasms below. After expertly checking his own chute was in order, and grabbing the mobile radio in its carry bag, he set the controls of the plane. Looking back at the passengers one last time, he could see that they were now starting to stir.

As he turned back to watch out for the approach of the imminent landing point, a dark mass suddenly appeared at eye level. He squinted to try to make out what the devil it could be, and as he focused more he suddenly realised that it was actually approaching the plane very fast.

A flock of large birds had been startled by the echoes of the whining whirling propellers, and now they were flying straight at the plane. Before he had time to react, one of the Giant Condors crashed through the glass window into the cockpit, its sabre beak impaling him through the throat, killing him instantly.

The rush of ice cold air and accompanying roaring howl surged through the cabin and rudely slapped both the passengers out of their slumber. As Radar stared around at his surroundings with bleary eyes, trying to ascertain what was going on, the Norwegian had already reacted and had made his way to the cockpit, standing in a trance at the bloody scene of devastation.

"Radar, get yourself up here, we have a problem" he shouted urgently, quickly assessing the situation and formulating a plan of action.

"What the hell happened here!" exclaimed Radar with a total look of bewilderment at the carnage and chaos that was ensuing before them.

"Obviously the pilot is dead, but what is more concerning to me is that the rack of parachutes is now empty, I'm afraid he has already thrown them overboard, it seems he was about to jump and leave us to crash to our deaths!" growled the clearly irked Norwegian as he dragged the slumped chimaera of man and bird off the instrument panel, throwing

them onto the floor behind, before he started to wrestle with the controls of the plane.

"Why?" exclaimed an ashen face Radar, floundering under the wave of panic that had filled the cabin.

"That hardly matters right now, getting out of this in one piece should be our only concern, now see if you can get that parachute off him, just in case the worst happens, at least you will have a chance!" barked the Norwegian with a terse tone of voice

The plane rocked from side to side as the amateur pilot tried to navigate the crosswinds and the labyrinth of walls of death, whilst trying to fathom the vast array of dials and displays that he felt he ought to be using, which distracted him too often from the sudden dead ends that blocked their desperate path to salvation.

Frantically he tried to pull up, using full throttle, the plane now voicing its discontent at the impossible demands being made of it, as the latest dead end rudely appeared through the thick mists that parted dramatically, as if it was to be their final curtain.

"Quickly, we need to lose weight, we need to climb higher! Throw everything heavy out, right now! screamed the Norwegian in desperate terror.

Radar set about his task, disposing of the body and all the other large bulky items off the ailing plane, which miraculously responded to his efforts, soon gaining the much needed altitude. The Norwegian was now able to re-direct their trajectory straight up, almost skimming the cliff face, flying over the narrow gap between the two peaks above, their only way out.

As they squeezed through the gap disaster struck as both of the wings clipped the jagged edges of the cliff that reached out to grasp at its prey. One of them tore off immediately, spiralling the plane into a hopeless dive, the subsequent turbulence shaking them violently as the Norwegian desperately tried to regain control. Skillfully he managed to raise the nose enough to avoid the next oncoming cliff edge, now aiming for the safety of the mesa-like plateau just above. Cruelly the wind buffeted them just as they passed over its edge, ramming the plane sideways onto a peak and shearing the other wing off as they passed.

The plane now belly flopped on the snow covered slope, hurtling down the mountain like a toboggan with both men at the mercy of its undetermined course, leaving in its wake a trail that scarred the virgin landscape. The main fuselage continued to carve its way down hill but now at an ever decreasing rate of speed, finally coming to rest as it buried its nose into a mammoth block of snow which consumed it completely.

Both men sat stunned in the complete darkness and deafening silence that had now engulfed them, suffocating in the stark sensory deprivation that the end of the line had plunged them into. Slowly, they began to acclimatise to their situation, and began to fumble in the darkness for a source of light.

Radar remembered he had picked up a book of matches along the way, and checked his pocket hoping they had not been destroyed. A strike of friction and a smell of sulphur simultaneously accompanied the beacon of light that now illuminated the cabin.

Furiously the Norwegian ransacked the cabin taking advantage of the vital seconds of light that were fast dwindling, quickly finding a flashlight under the seat. As soon as he switched it on Radar blew out the match and inhaled the smoke, paradoxically not wishing to burn his fingers but at the same time missing the amazing warmth of the flame.

"Well, that was a close one, someone up there is definitely looking down on us today!" sighed Radar, exhausted from the nervous energy expelled through the series of heart stopping events that had just occurred.

"We are not out of this yet, in case you have overlooked the situation at hand, we are buried alive, on top of a mountain in the middle of nowhere, with no chance of outside assistance!" quipped the pragmatic Norwegian, who was feeling somewhat claustrophobic and at the moment not enthused with Radar's eternal optimism.

"Thank-you by the way, for saving our lives, that was a mean bit of flying back there, when did you learn to fly like that? said Radar with a complimentary tone in order to try and put his comrade at ease, and to further acknowledge the impossible escape from certain death that had just occurred.

"Today" the Norwegian replied in a nonchalant tone, keeping a stony straight emotionless face, almost dismissive of any significance to the feat.

They stared at each other under the electric light of the torch which now hung from the cabin roof, its latent sway casting shadows across their faces that were soon reflecting each other's broadest of smiles, which then turned into infectious laughter. Once the levity had subsided the Norwegian continued.

"We are well stocked for food and water, well for the next three days at least, and this ice tomb is actually insulating us from the harsh conditions, the wind chill will be at least minus twenty degrees. The minute we go outside we will be burning vital energy, and the countdown for our survival will really begin.

Once we are out we will need to keep moving on, to find safer ground as soon as possible. I believe that our best course of action is to get some good rest tonight before we consider venturing out into the unknown tomorrow morning. Now let us gather the resources in the cargo hold and set camp here in the cockpit to try to conserve as much heat in a confined area" instructed the Norwegian, clearly taking control of the situation, to the appreciative relief of the weary Radar.

They gathered and salvaged all that they could, and set about building an insulating barrier between the cockpit and the cargo bay, creating a welcome pocket of warmth, in which they both fell into a deep sleep.

The next morning Radar awoke to the sound of the Norwegian being busy in the darkness of the cabin, preparing survival packs, gathering supplies, and making preparations for the scouting trip ahead. Radar pretended to be asleep, not that he was overtly lazy, but he didn't want to get in his way in such a confined area. With the Norwegian being the qualified winter survival expert, and with only one source of light, there really was nothing he could really do to help.

As the flashlight frantically flicked across the cabin, searching out every nook for useful items, it cast an array of shadows dancing their own private show on the backdrop behind. Suddenly the sound of the contracting fuselage and compacting heavy snow above creaked and moaned loudly, startling Radar who jumped out of his skin, bolting up right ready for action.

“Ah, you’re awake, just in time! I have packed us a survival pack each, collected fire wood material, and even found some food items to cook on it for breakfast! Now you break up those wooden benches in the rear and bring that with you whilst I carry this lot” Instructed the enthusiastic Norwegian, clearly in his element.

Luckily, the plane was still fully equipped with standard mountaineering rescue equipment, including a shovel and pickaxe, which they used to tunnel through the compacted snow at the rear of the plane that had cocooned them in.

As they broke through the last layer of the ice shield the bright rays of the morning sun burst through, piercing the shroud of their shelter and forcing them to squint and shield their eyes. This was followed by the crisp fresh icy air that took their breath away, of which they gulped in with a keen thirst.

Once outside, Radar set about making a fire, whilst the Norwegian scouted out the immediate area, taking great care with each footstep as he traversed the steep slope to get a higher vantage point, so he could better survey the surrounding environment. After a while he returned to be greeted by the pungent acrid smell of the grey smoke, which wrapped itself around his nostrils and lured him into the wall of heat that now surrounded the temporary camp Radar had just built.

“Nice job, nice job indeed! I will get some food out to put on there in a minute. By the looks of it we should have enough firewood to last all day and even all of the night if needed. I’ve checked the area and the only safe way out of here is to follow this slope downhill. There seems to be a passage out of here over the top of that ravine” pointed the Norwegian optimistically.

“Would it be an idea to stay here with the plane, if we keep the fire going any rescue team passing by will surely see the smoke?” Radar speculated in a hopeful tone.

“You can get that thought right out of your mind straight away! There will be no rescue team! We are hundreds of miles from the nearest city, or any type of civilization in these parts, if anyone did see us going down they would assume that we are dead. Unfortunately, the only people that

will probably be looking for us are those we really don't want to hang around for" snapped the concerned Norwegian.

"What do you mean?" queried Radar, still in shock over their situation, and too focused on his task at hand, rather than thinking about the bigger picture, as he proudly threw another piece of bench wood on his fire.

"Think about it! That pilot was only following orders, he was going to jump and leave us to crash into the mountainside, to our deaths. If he had been successful any subsequent search party that was sent, and any investigation that occurred, would conclude that it was just a tragic accident, with no evidence or witness to contradict that verdict. We know too much, we have seen too much. Our previous speculation was evidently correct, we are expendable and now it is essential that we are silenced forever. They can't afford to take a chance that we will keep our mouths shut. As soon as they don't receive a confirmation communication from that pilot that he was successful in killing us they will become suspicious, and they will send out a search party to investigate. When they do, they will eventually spot this wreck, and they will be on to us, and they will not give up until they hunt us down. We are now officially dead. We will have to assume new identities if we are ever able to escape back to civilization, if we don't they will find us and we will be killed" lamented the Norwegian. He was now becoming more agitated at the thought that their previous heroics, and survival against the odds, was now being repaid with a death sentence. Radar's face was wide eyed in shock, aghast at the ramifications of the situation that they now found themselves in, so dumbfounded he could only manage a murmur in agreement with the Norwegian's assessment.

"The more I think about it, the more I'm certain that we should make tracks ASAP. We will have breakfast now and after make preparations to leave here. Before we go we will try to conceal as much as we can, it will only delay their eventual discovery, but it may just buy us some much needed time. Further snow drifts should cover the skid to the crash site, but we can't bank on that" he speculated.

After a substantial meal they decamped, hiding all the debris inside the plane, covering all their tracks, and finally putting the lifeline of the fire out. Fully equipped with survival packs on their backs, trusted spikes tied to their boots, and with a warm stomach to march on, they set off with earnest zeal. As they left the slope they both turned and looked back up

at where the plane was buried beneath the snow, possibly their last sanctuary for some time. As they marched down the mountain a weather front moved in, with fierce westerlies blowing up the Andes with violent intent, one false step could present the freezing winds with an opportunity to topple them over the edge. With no trees or vegetation to be seen for miles, it was amazing how dramatic the scenery could be, with a vast array of ice formations and snow covered outlines conjuring dreamy landscapes beyond imagination upon the unexplored glaciers.

“You know this is the third largest ice mass in the world, after Antarctica and Greenland, the largest in the Southern hemisphere. They say some parts are a mile thick and this whole ice sheet is over forty times the volume of the Alps!” cheerily explained the Norwegian, breaking the silence with his impersonation of a tour guide.

“ How much farther do you think it will be, until we're off this mountain and can find some shelter, even build a fire?” chattered a frozen Radar, completely shattered and now struggling with the falling temperatures.

“I suppose we have made good progress today, we can set up a tent in the shelter of the side of that mountain cliff edge over there and try to rest for the night. If we start at first light we should make it off this mountain before the following night” enthused the Norwegian trying to keep his comrades morale up, but both knew that there was no real answer to his question, only hope.

The men survived an uneventful night on the mountain, sheltered from the wind, with its constant distant howl ensuring that their sleep was not undisturbed, but the tents' integrity held when it counted. The next morning they continued their trek, and now progressed onto the lower levels where shades of brown and grey now began to dominate the rock faces as the snow and ice gradually started to disappear. On the horizon, stretching their necks towards the sky, now stood proudly their beacon of hope, the tree line of a mountain forest. Its greens, browns and oranges were a stark contrast to the shades of whites and blues painted before it. This vista now inspired a faster rate of marching and higher level of spirits between the two, with their next sanctuary almost within reach.

2) THE TRAIL

As the survivors meandered down the slope, skipping and hopping between the uneven path and the series of smooth boulders, they both stopped from time to time to look over their shoulder, sensing that they were being watched. As Radar caught up with the pace setting Norwegian he tapped him on the shoulder.

“Hey, I saw you looking around too, I’ve got a feeling, a sense that we are being followed, I can’t explain it, it could just be my imagination” whispered Radar as if saying it any louder would give away their hidden awareness.

“You are right, we are being tracked, he’s somewhere up there behind us, I haven’t spotted him yet, but I’m certain he’s there!” concurred the uneasy tracker, not used to being outfoxed in this environment.

“Who do you think it could be?” quizzed the puzzled Radar, still looking up at the rocky terrain behind them that gave no clues.

“Probably some local native, either a smuggler or hunter, is keeping out of sight because he’s more nervous of us than we are of him!” reassured the Norwegian, looking to keep his buddies morale up and avoid any panic or paranoid setting in, despite his own internal misgivings.

The men marched onward down the weathered path that became smoother and now formed a distinct trail, with Radar still struggling to keep up despite the Norwegian slowing his usual pace to allow him to do so. Both continued to pause from time to time to check the horizon and surrounding rock formations for any signs of their constant shadow. After a few hours the Norwegian stopped at the top of a small incline and turned to wait for Radar to join him.

“He’s finally had the nerve to show himself!” whispered the Norwegian looking over the shoulder of Radar and gesturing upwards with a nod of his head for him to look up in that direction too. There, on higher ground stood their stalker, staring directly at them with intense scrutiny, almost motionless waiting for their next move.

“Jesus, where did he come from, should we run for it?” exclaimed a disconcerted Radar, almost losing his footing and balance, trying to resist the urge of immediate flight.

“Stay perfectly still, don’t move a muscle, if we are lucky he will move on and not come any further, he is probably just checking us out to see if we are a threat, letting us know that this is his territory” quietly reassured the slightly nervous Norwegian.

Within a minute that felt like a lifetime, the Cougar took one last sniff of the air, its whiskers twitching, dismissing the men with an indifferent shake of its head. As it turned its back on them its tail flicked out aggressively, signalling a clear warning, before it casually strolled over the ridgeline out of sight.

“That was close!” Radar gasped with relief, rubbing his brow of sweat.

“You can say that again! The two of us together may have been able to defend ourselves from an attack, but at least one of us would have sustained very serious injuries, which in this environment would surely have been fatal! Let’s carry on towards that tree line as fast as we can in case it returns!” urged the Norwegian, not comfortable with the idea of a further meeting with the mountain’s guardian.

As they rapidly approached the new foreign land full of vivid colours and potent smells, the path that they had been following continued ahead and took on a decidedly more established look. The decades of traveller’s footsteps had worn a definite imprint on the land with their heavy traffic. The trail now led them to a rivers edge, which was slow running, narrow and shallow enough to cross with ease. As fortune would have it there lay a fallen dead tree that spanned the shortest point. The bark was almost white with age, seemingly too brittle to take any serious weight, but it managed to serve them as an adequate bridge to cross the divide. After they jumped the last few feet to the dry stony bank on the other side, they both turned and looked back up to where they had just come from. The snow covered mountains disappeared up into the clouds and beyond, with the striking blue of the ice fields adjacent adding to the palette of colour before them. The first stage of their journey was now complete, and a renewed sense of confidence and optimism returned to both men, now genuinely believing that they really could make it out of there.

“We should carry on deeper into the forest until we find a suitable place to settle for the night. We will be less exposed inside, and the shelter of the dense trees should obscure our camp fire. Let’s stick to this path for as long as the light permits before venturing into the trees” instructed the Norwegian, sensing Radar’s reluctance to dive into the darkness of the unknown.

After a few uneventful hours of trekking through the forest, in which the resolute path ensured their quick unhindered progress, the sunlight began to fade away and the shadows crept back onto their stage, trying to trespass into the corners of their minds. This was their cue to stop and set up camp, boldly leaving the path to venture through the dark woodland, until they stumbled upon a small clearing that was appropriately secluded and adequately shielded from the path. Radar immediately began foraging for kindle and branches, aided by the strong powerful rays of the bright full moon above, and once collected started building a fire, as the Norwegian set up the tent. Before long, a labelless tin of unidentifiable chum was bubbling on the flames, the warm smell of which conked both their taste buds into salivating over the welcome banquet, poured out unceremoniously into their metal dish..

“Where exactly are we, who do you think uses that path?” quizzed the curious Radar with a mouthful as he finished the last morsel of his ration.

“I’m certain we are on the border of Chile and Argentina. I have seen photographs in books taken by other explorers that look very similar to this landscape, in particular that ice field we crossed. I believe the mountain crossing we used is the infamous secret Vuriloche Pass, often used by smugglers and mercenaries to cross the Andes between the two countries. As well as smuggling, there is a huge trade in leather that keeps the local Indians going” he regaled over the steam of his hot drink, passing Radar another he had made for him at the same time.

“Indians, what Indians?” questioned an uneasy Radar with a slight degree of uncertainty in his voice.

“This path is one of the old “Mapuche trails”, used by local tribes like the “Pelche”, Indians from Southern Chile; they kept these paths secret, to hide in the forests from the Spanish Missionaries. Now it will shelter us too from our own conquistadors” joked the Norwegian.

“Are they friendly?” asked Radar somewhat nervously.

“Let us hope we don’t get to find out!” laughed the Norwegian, trying to keep the mood light to distract Radar from having a restless night, but he himself knew that if any rogue smugglers did discover them that they would probably not hesitate in shooting first.

The dwindling fire’s last glowing embers finally died just as both men fell asleep, its warmth not as vital now with the shelter of the surrounding trees, but was appreciated just as much. The forest came alive at night, as an orchestra of creatures performed their solo concertos that somehow blended together into a sublime sympathy under the stars. However, this was all wasted on the men who slept soundly throughout, in greater comfort and more at peace than they had for a long time.

The following morning they both rose early with the dew, the chill, and the mist, and readied themselves for the day. After hiding all the evidence of their camp and drowning the fire with mounds of soil, they trod gingerly through the trees back to the trail, and continued on their way along the path. As the sun grew higher and its rays flooded even the most dense thickets within, the forest adopted a new look of vibrancy. After a couple of hours of walking they climbed a steep slope that led to an obscured turn in the bend. Suddenly, from out of nowhere there on the path there was the sight of an oncoming party.

Both men froze instantly, slightly on edge, and fully conscious of their unarmed vulnerability. The party ahead had seen them. but they still continued towards them in a quiet nonchalant manner of indifference, clearly not concerned by their presence here.

The Norwegian took the initiative and cautiously approached them, speaking to them in Spanish in a slow and friendly manner. The head of the party signalled for the others to halt, and walked slowly towards the middle ground. He was dressed in what seemed to be traditional Andean dress, with a black hat and poncho, his skin almost orange and tanned like leather over his distinctively defined chiselled features. He was considerably shorter than both the Norwegian and Radar, but seemed very formidable as he was much broader and more heavily set than both. After a few successful attempts at communication, smiles and laughter were shared between both before the pow wow was over. The party passed on by, all waving goodbye with genuine warmth, and soon disappearing into the forest behind us.

The Norwegian smiled as he waved them off, and strolled over and reported his findings to the eagerly awaiting Radar.

“They are the Poya People, native Indians to this area, they thought we were lost tourists!” laughed the Norwegian.

All of a sudden, the realisation that tourism was a normality to these Indians, in such a remote area, filled both with reassurance that they were not as far from civilization as they feared. Both burst into uncontrollable laughter that lasted until their eyes were streaming with tears, more from the emotional release than anything else.

“He was very proud that they were “Poya”, the “People behind the Mountain” he said, who have lived here for generations. He said if we continue to follow the path we will eventually come to the edge of the forest where the path merges into a hiking trail, which descends down to an Argentinian tourist town” the Norwegian said, raising his voice in celebration at the end of the sentence, hardly believing their good fortune.

“Well what are we doing hanging around here for, let’s get on with it, quick march!” joked Radar, racing ahead in an exaggerated manner.

They eventually arrived at the edge of the forest, and after looking up and down a few times, they cautiously stepped out of the cover of the trees, nervously checking all angles as they ventured into the clearing ahead. This flat open space led to a broad cliff edge, from where they had a good vantage point to survey the surrounding area. As they scrambled on their bellies to the precipice and carefully peered over they could immediately see the hiking trail that snaked its way up the cliff face, which offered stunning views of the surrounding countryside. Below the series of peaks there were small clusters of woods clinging to their slopes, beyond which lay the oasis of a medium sized town, nestled in the valley below, with a huge lake beyond its shores.

As the men squinted under the high bright sun, they could now make out various coloured jacketed ants slowly climbing their way to the summit, confirming the Poya’s description of it being a tourist centred town. Adjacent to their position they spied a pair of mountaineers scaling the virtually vertical sheer cliff face suspended by various ropes over nerve shredding drops, that tested their endurance and courage.

Further away, in the deep blue lakes on the horizon the faint outlines of various pleasure boats could be seen bobbing up and down hypnotically.

“This is quite the hub of activities! We must not let our guard down, it may be wiser to remain invisible until we have scouted the town below and have a better idea of what lies ahead of us” urged the Norwegian conscious of their exposed position, and how any interaction may draw suspicion to their conspicuous presence.

“Agreed, let’s work our way along the ridge and down that less populated side of the cliff. There seems to be some type of farm house and barn on the edge of that tree line below, which could be a good place for us to set up camp and use as a base to hide from the masses until we know exactly how safe it is down there“ said a confident Radar, taking charge of decision making, and clearly more comfortable with the prospect of a recon mission.

With considered timing they diligently made their way down the cliff face avoiding any contact with any tourists, using the environment to remain undetected. Taking their time along the mountain trail, they eventually made it to the small patch of woods at the bottom, traversing this more quickly and confidently under the cover of the trees. Once through here they were greeted by the overgrown grassy field in which the big faded red barn stood, empty and forgotten. With its back to the woods it proved to be an ideal location to use as cover.

As they trespassed across the threshold of the perimeter fence there was clearly no sign of any recent activity, of any life whatsoever. Heading straight to the back of the barn, the Norwegian quickly found a loose board which provided easy access, as they both cautiously entered. Inside was the standard layout of a typical farm barn, with bales of hay stacked several feet high, with furthermore that were stacked up on a higher level, which could be reached only by a long wooden ladder. With no animals, crops, or any sign of industry, it seemed virtually abandoned. The Norwegian gestured for Radar to go up the ladder, and he quickly made his way to the front door, to check its security, which he could see through a crack in the panel that was locked with a heavy padlock from the outside.

“All clear up here, it seems like a good place to set up camp with those high stacks of bales of hay at the front hiding our presence from any intruders” whispered Radar cheerfully, relishing the prospect of a warm

comfortable rest under the shelter of a roof, with no wind or outside hazards to disturb them during the night.

“Excellent idea, you set up camp and rest a while, I will go check on the other buildings to make sure that they really are as abandoned as I suspect. If I’m more than 20 minutes you best come and rescue me!” instructed the Norwegian with a chuckle, before exiting from the rear of the barn and replacing the loose panel back in place.

Within 15 minutes he had returned, sneaking into the barn without a sound, suddenly appearing with a brace of freshly silenced chickens. Their legs were tied together swinging limply from his bloodied hand, as he carried a large brown hessian sack over his shoulder like Saint Nicholas.

“Nice job!” beamed Radar nodding in welcome appreciation, as the Norwegian returned the smile.

“The farmhouse at the other end of the plot is all locked up and doesn’t seem to be being used, it’s not derelict or abandoned, they must have gone away, but just in case they return we best hold up here tonight. The other buildings on the farm are all empty and seem redundant. I had a quick look at the surrounding area, and there are no neighbours or any other buildings nearby, so we should be safe to light a fire at the back of this barn, outside, and cook these two up tonight! enthused the Norwegian with a real sense of pride with his kills.

“After we have eaten we can scout the area further under the cover of darkness, it should be quieter, but we won’t venture into the town just yet, just around the outskirts to make sure” said the Norwegian, but Radar was already lost in a cloud of feathers as he rapidly set about preparing a long awaited decent hot meal with fresh meat.

After a welcome hearty feast, the men doused the flames and cleared the area of any evidence of a fire, just in case any passerby should stumble upon it, before busily preparing themselves for their recon mission. Under the light of the full moon they took advantage of the late hour, as all slept and nothing stirred. They combed the area, checking all buildings as they passed, mapping the entire outskirts of the town for several hours, without ever stepping out into the pool of electric light that marked their border. Once satisfied that the area was clear of any potential threat, they retreated back to the farm and their snug barn for a well earned good night's sleep. As the men settled in their warm beds of

straw, hidden away on the upper level of the barn, they quietly discussed their plans for the following day.

“If we are going to explore the town tomorrow we are going to have to try to blend in, we can’t go in looking like this, we look like we have been sleeping rough for a week on a mountain side, and we stink as though we have too!” laughed Radar, self-conscious that their dishevelled look may arouse suspicion.

“You’re right, this look won’t do, we will have to get clean and change. First thing in the morning we will go up to the farm house, and if the coast is still clear, we will break in and see if there are any washing facilities and any clothes we can borrow. It seemed like a domesticated home from the outside, so hopefully there should be a wardrobe of clothes” pondered the Norwegian.

“Let’s just hope that if the farmer has left any spare clothes that he doesn’t turn out to be a dwarf!” joked Radar, referring to the fact that both of them were over six feet tall. The Norwegian grinned before continuing.

“We will also have to work on our cover story for when we are challenged by any locals, towns such as this like to get to know everybody, and are often over-friendly, so we best have the same story! We will be under the guise of tourists, but as we don’t have any skiing or mountaineering equipment we will have to pretend we came here for the hiking” the Norwegian said, but before he had chance to continue they both looked at each other and burst into laughter at the irony, that their mammoth journey had led them to a destination where they had to pretend to be setting off to do what they had just finished.

“We best check out a local hotel first, so we have somewhere to refer to if questioned where we are staying, if we are seen entering and leaving the main entrance people will assume we are staying there too. After that we best walk the familiar trail of tourists and see all the attractions the town has to offer us!” said the Norwegian in a pragmatic but positive manner.

“Sounds like a plan to me, now let’s get some rest” yawned a weary Radar, turning off the flashlight, and falling asleep almost immediately.

The following morning the men were rudely awoken by a nearby cockerel, annoyingly it was way before daybreak, and far too loud and