

Orange Sound

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(Chapters 33 – 47)

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On this moonlit night, Snaz had in fact been watched closely since arriving in the village. From behind hedges, walls and crags, unseen observers had carefully noted everything he had done. They had tried to interpret what they had seen, and had struggled to comprehend what was taking place. Now they had decided to take action.

As he wrestled with the wheelbarrow in pushing it towards Boldlaw Road, Snaz realised that the sample he had taken earlier was beginning to affect him in a peculiar way. It was true that he now felt stronger, but he also felt increasingly as if he had entered into some sort of alternative state of reality. He almost tipped the wheelbarrow and its contents over when his long-dead maternal grandmother suddenly appeared on the hill in front of him picking mushrooms. Crouching down on the hillside, she was placing the

crop inside a small basket. She said nothing as he passed by with the wheelbarrow and its unlikely load, and only looked at him with an expression of contempt and hatred. Then before anything else had happened, she began duplicating herself, appearing at six or seven different locations around him; all of these copies eyed him with the same contemptuous and hostile manner.

A moment later, all the facsimiles of his grandmother changed in appearance, and now looked like a pack of fantastic reptiles. These frightful scaly creatures stood upright and from their eyes seemed also to be endowed with a human-like intelligence. They seemed to view him with the same contempt and hostility that his grandmother had shown. Snaz decided to ignore them, sure that they would eventually vanish or at least undergo a further transformation into something else. Without wishing to pay further heed to them, he continued struggling with the wheelbarrow along the side of the hill. Feeling increasingly anxious, he urgently felt the need to reach the lay-by so that he could dispose of the bodies, and be on his way as soon as possible.

But the reptiles would not go away; moreover, they began to close in on him from all directions. Rather than experiencing fear, he felt deep anger towards them. And perhaps in order to gesticulate this anger, he momentarily let go of the wheelbarrow, causing it to tip over. Its human load fell out and rolled over the ground. Feeling even more agitated by these imaginary beasts, Snaz pulled out the hammer he had kept in his inside jacket pocket, and ran furiously towards the nearest reptile. He wanted to see what

one of these illusory creatures turned into when struck with a hammer. And if it turned into his grandmother once again, then he would duly hammer her until she finally disappeared; he had had enough. But much to his surprise, the intended blow to the head of the reptile was parried, and the hammer fell to the ground. Then he was struck by the terrifying realisation of the truth. Urinating uncontrollably, he felt the very real and iron grip of the reptile upon his arm.

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Needles of light pierced Jack Hume's half-opened eyes. His world was defined by pain and by incomprehension. Even death would be embraced as a release from this torment; this supposed, however, that he had not already died and woken up in hell.

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Alan Crawford and his son were up before anyone else the following morning. Whilst having breakfast, they heard an urgent knock on the front door. Opening it, they found Nok Hume standing outside in her nightdress, shivering and obviously distressed. She was immediately invited inside, where it was learnt that her cottage had once again been broken into. Nok said that she hadn't heard anything at all through the night, and had just come out of her bedroom to find the patio doors at the back of her cottage open

and the wooden carving of the crocodile missing. The alarm system, which she had activated, had apparently failed to go off.

Alan Crawford and his son accompanied Nok next door. “Is there anything else missing, Nok?” he asked, examining the broken locks on the patio doors. He realised at once that the method of entry this time was clearly different from the previous break-in. He had already noted that someone had managed to switch off the alarm system. “No, I don’t think so,” replied Nok. She had given this answer before noticing the crumpled coat lying in a heap on the floor behind the sofa. “How can it be?” she cried out, picking up what looked like a man’s coat, and then exclaiming: “This is Jack’s.”

“It wasn’t there last night?” asked Alan Crawford.

“No! No! He took this coat with him to Saudi Arabia.”

“Then someone brought it here last night, or he...”

“Jack must have come home last night!” screamed Nok. She collapsed onto the sofa still clutching the coat. “Did he say anything about coming home?” asked Alan Crawford. Nok shook her head to indicate that he hadn’t. “Please check the coat pockets, Nok,” instructed Alan Crawford. She searched through them, and amongst other things pulled out an aircraft boarding card. The destination printed on the boarding card was London and it was dated the previous day. The name of the passenger was Mr Jack Hume.

Jack Hume’s presence would explain how the alarm system had been switched off. Alan Crawford had no idea why Jack had suddenly come home unannounced, but it

appeared that at some time last night he must have been involved in a struggle with the intruder or intruders. And now he was missing. With this disturbing conclusion in mind, Alan Crawford tried to reassure Nok. "Don't worry, Nok. It's going to be okay," he said, trying to sound as sure as he could of that fact. She rubbed her eyes, nodded slightly in acknowledgement to his words, and remained silent.

Alan Crawford went outside into the garden. He then called the police in Hexham on his mobile telephone. After this, he began looking around for any indication or signs of what had happened last night. His son, who remained indoors, wanted to comfort Nok, but didn't really know how to begin. Now the problem wasn't just the disappearance of her wooden carvings. It was something altogether more terrible. "Do you think they took him, David? One of those things you saw on Wet Rain Hill," she asked suddenly, breaking the silence. He hesitated for a moment. "I don't know, Nok," he answered. "But please don't imagine the worst. I'm sure it will all be okay." She leant forward and touched his hand, and then turned her head away. He knew that she had begun to cry. They sat for several minutes without speaking. Her sobs punctuated the silence. He took hold of her hand, which felt as soft and warm as an oven glove. She briefly squeezed his hand before withdrawing hers and taking hold of the Lord Buddha medallion around her neck. Then something caught his eye glistening on the floor nearby the sofa. He leant over and picked it up. It was a lady's ring. He immediately offered the ring to Nok. "Is this yours, Nok?" he asked. She took the ring from him, and examined it. Then she shook her head. "I've never seen this ring before, David," she said, handing it back to him. He

now looked closely at the ring for the first time and noticed something very significant about it.

A few minutes later, Alan Crawford reappeared in the room. David handed him the ring. He had already recognised the name inscribed on it. After looking at the ring, Alan Crawford gave his son a meaningful look. It was clear from this communication that they should say nothing about the significance of the name 'Karen Hill' in front of Nok Hume. "Do you think Jack dropped that ring?" she asked, looking at Alan Crawford. "No, I don't think so," he replied, adding: "But I think that whoever stole the wooden crocodile dropped this ring."

"Is Jack still alive?" she asked.

"Of course he is, Nok," he replied, wondering what else he could say in the circumstances. "Where is he?" she asked.

"I don't know, Nok. But Jack is going to come home safely. I'm sure of that," he replied, forcing reassurance and conviction into his tone.

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Alan Crawford made several attempts to telephone Professor Brock, but each time got no reply. He was sure that the professor had spent the previous night in the village, and had not returned to his permanent home in Durham. Moreover, the time was not yet eight in the morning, and so he shouldn't have departed for the university yet. Alan

Crawford walked the short distance along Main Street, where he saw that the professor's car was still parked on the driveway. He rang the doorbell at the cottage, but got no reply. Then it struck him there was a possibility the professor had taken an early morning stroll down Wet Rain Hill to look at the bell. It was a dry and clear morning, ideal for such an excursion. A few minutes later, Alan Crawford started to walk down Wet Rain Hill. Almost immediately, it was apparent that the bell was no longer standing by the entrance to Bell Hollow. He ran down the hill towards the cave, and began looking around for any indication as to how it had been removed. After a while, he found several metres of a crudely constructed rope discarded amongst some brambles. The rope was made from twisted strands of twine, which put him in mind of the material used to attach William Avon's corpse to the cross in the graveyard of St George's.

As he began walking back up the hill, he noticed something else. About half-a-mile away, in the direction of Boldlaw Road, there was what at first looked like just one more rocky outcrop on the hillside. On closer inspection, however, it was apparent that it had distinctly unnatural features: The rock was shaped like a trapezium, and its smooth surface glistened in the rays of the morning sunshine coming from low in the sky behind him. Running towards the object, he saw that it was in fact an overturned wheelbarrow. Looking around, he noticed lying on the ground a few metres away was a hammer. To his horror, he saw that the head of the tool was matted with frozen gore. Turning the wheelbarrow upright, he saw a further indication that something terrible may have

happened on Wet Rain Hill: the inside surface of the barrow was speckled with drops of blood.

Less than one hour later, twenty police officers were sweeping out over Wet Rain Hill, carefully searching for any further clues connected with the disappearance of Jack Hume and the theft of the wooden crocodile. Alan Crawford kept in mind the possibility that Professor Brock had also gone missing, and that this was somehow connected with the disappearance of the church bell. Then there was also the ongoing investigation into murder of William Avon on Wet Rain Hill to be kept in mind.

At around ten-o'clock that same morning, Detective Sergeant Alan Crawford heard that two cars had been discovered abandoned in a lay-by near to the village. One of the cars contained the body of a man, brutally murdered by a heavy blunt tool such as a hammer. The police had already run checks on the cars, and discovered that both had been hired in London from different agencies. One of them had been hired in the name of John Wakes, and recognised by the police as the same car observed outside the village two days earlier. The other car had been hired by Mr Jack Hume at Heathrow airport yesterday. Alan Crawford's heart sank at this news. There had not yet been a positive identification of the murder victim inside the car, but he feared the worst.

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Not surprisingly, Geoffrey Adams had slept badly the previous night. He emerged from the vicarage still feeling tired, and walked briskly towards St George's carrying his portable compact disc player. He had brought it with him so that he could listen to Gregorian Chants whilst he sorted through some documents inside the church. Although not Roman Catholic, he found that the unaccompanied plainsong of that Church evoked within him a deep sense of peace, not to mention profound feelings of contentment. These choruses of hope from a lost era of Christian certainty were something he needed badly at this particular time.

Before entering the church, he stopped and glanced in the direction of his terrible discovery yesterday. He half expected to see some new horror posted by the lich gate. But thankfully there was none to behold. Relieved, he took out his keys and was about to open the doors to the church when he found to his surprise that they were already unlocked. Perhaps he had forgotten to lock them the previous evening. Warily pushing open one of the doors, he stepped inside the church. Instead of feeling that he had entered a place of protection or sanctuary, a sense of imminent danger descended upon him. As he walked up the aisle, carefully looking around for any signs of disturbance, his unease began to increase. Midway to the altar, he stopped for a moment like a reluctant groom; his footfalls on the stone floor abruptly terminating. A roaring silence filled the church. He proceeded again up the aisle. Reaching the altar, he did not as usual make the sign of the cross. Instead, he stood facing the apse and then perhaps surprising even himself, called out: "Hello; is anybody there?" Still holding onto his portable compact disc player,

he turned around and faced the entrance of the church. He instinctively wanted to run towards the doors, back out into the bright wintry sunshine. But something held him to the spot. He felt somehow it was his duty to stay and face whatever was lurking inside the church, even if it was just his own fears that had to be confronted.

He moved into the apse, beyond the altar. Rays of sunshine streamed through the stained glass windows high up the walls, illuminating a myriad of fine dust particles suspended in the air. An old wooden staircase climbed up to a small balcony where there was a door opening onto a stairwell. Inside, a spiral stone staircase wound its way to the top of the belfry. Standing still, his gaze moved upwards towards the balcony. He noticed that the door was slightly ajar; this was unusual. He waited to see if there were any signs of movement. There were none. He called out again, but this time more loudly and with a more determined tone in his voice. "Hello. I say is anybody there?" But once again, there was only silence.

Geoffrey Adams then prayed, and asked for protection. He was afraid, but felt compelled to start climbing the wooden staircase to find out why the door was open. He had barely set foot on the stairs and begun to ascend when he heard a sound from inside the belfry. It resembled the rapidly muffled peal of a bell. But this brief sounding was sufficient for him to realise that it was not the church bell with which he was familiar. After stopping momentarily, he resumed his ascent up the stairs and eventually reached the small balcony. Then he carefully pulled the small door further open and peered into

the stone stairwell. Shafts of daylight streamed in from the intentionally placed gaps set in the stone structure, illuminating the empty stairwell. His heart pounding, he began the spiral rise up to the belfry. He needed to know who had gone to the extraordinary lengths of returning the old bell to the church belfry. This might also surely reveal the identity of those who had taken care of the bell over the centuries that it had lain inside Bell Hollow. He called out in as clear and as firm a voice as he could muster in the circumstances: “Hello, there. Please do not harm me, whoever you are. Please trust me. I come as your friend.”

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“What’s up?” asked David Crawford, as he opened the door and found Paul Jackson standing outside. “Something ..., there’s something in the graveyard,” gasped his friend in response. He had never seen him as agitated as this before. “What is it; another body?”

“No! No! Come on! It’s even stranger than that. We’ll inform the police later. But first, you’ll have to see this for yourself.”

David Crawford closed the door behind him and left the cottage. He quickly walked with his friend across Main Street. “So, tell me then, what is it?” he asked impatiently.

“About ten minutes ago, when I was in my bedroom getting ready, for some reason I looked out across to the graveyard of St George’s. You know that my bedroom looks directly onto it? Anyway, I noticed that large unusual tombstone, the one that is in the

shape of a four-poster bed commemorating some children who died in a house fire about a hundred-and-fifty years ago,” explained Paul Jackson.

“Yes, I know the one. The tombstone used to give me the creeps when I was younger,” acknowledged David. Jackson continued his story. “Well, the grass in that part of the graveyard is a bit overgrown these days. I suppose because there are no remaining relatives left alive in the village to tend to it. Anyway, as I was looking over towards the tombstone, I thought I saw something moving in the grass. My first thoughts were that it might be a dog. But then I realised that it must be something much bigger than a dog, probably a person. Bearing in mind what had just been discovered in the graveyard yesterday, I was eager to find out who it could be. I felt that whoever it was, they were going to extraordinary lengths to avoid being seen in what was already a very secluded spot.” Jackson paused for a moment, as if reluctant to move onto the conclusion of his tale. David remained silent for a while, and then asked: “What did you see then?” They were now just outside the lich gate on Church Lane, and halted for a moment. “I think this is going to sound far-fetched,” said Jackson excitedly. “But as I kept looking at the spot, I briefly caught a glimpse of something that I couldn’t understand. You see, it didn’t look like a, well a ...”

“Like a person or a human?” interjected David.

“Yes, that’s right,” agreed Jackson. “Then it just seemed to disappear into the thick grass near to that tombstone. I kept looking for several for minutes, but it didn’t reappear.”

As they passed through the lich gate, David glanced nervously towards the area around the church notice board and saw that the wooden cross was no longer in place. The police had probably already removed the setting for William Avon's staged crucifixion in order to carry out forensic tests. As ever, there was a silence and stillness in the graveyard of St George's that did not seem to be completely accounted for simply by the high stone wall surrounding it. This was a breezeless place, a kingdom of moss and cobwebs, canopied cold corners, sad tilting stones and patches of uncut lank grass. It was a place where only speaking in hushed tones was appropriate, and having anything other than a morose demeanour was an anathema.

From the path, they could see the top of the large gravestone in the shape of a four-poster bed, commemorating the babies who had perished in a fire. They stood still, not relishing the prospect of reaching it by walking over frozen earth, past old graves and through overgrown grass. As they watched nervously for any signs of a presence in the graveyard, a single muffled peal of a bell suddenly rang out from the belfry of St George's. Startled ravens shot out from the tops of trees near the church and, circling around above, filled the air with a chorus of harsh irritable squawks.

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Jack Hume decided that if he had indeed died and was now facing the torment of the damned then it was an ordeal that had some unexpected aspects. There was no doubt

that he was in such pain that could only be described as hellish. But in the background, he could hear the plaintive cadenced voices of a Gregorian chant. Surely, he reasoned, this was the music of monasteries and therefore of heaven, not hell. Feeling slightly reassured by the sound of monks singing in Latin, he struggled to make more sense of his predicament and surroundings.

He was aware that he was lying on a cold even surface, probably of stone. He extended his legs so that the tips of his shoes came into contact with the hard and uneven surface below him. On his right hand side, he was able to feel a hard rocky surface. To his left, he sensed nothing but open space. He realised that he was lying in something resembling a niche carved into a rock wall, but felt too weak and pained to make any effort to move.

In the black void outside, indistinct needles of light flickered like distant stars in the firmament. He could no longer see the full moon, which had previously shone so brightly in the cold night sky above. The air around him now was warm and slightly stale. He had a sense of being somewhere underground. The Gregorian chanting in the distance was continuing unabated. His throat felt dry, and he began cough. The sound of his coughing echoed as if he was inside a cave.

The remorseless pain he experienced was in addition to extreme bodily discomfort. He felt like vomiting, and also needed to urinate. His bladder demanded

nothing less than to be emptied immediately. This was followed by an eruption from his mouth of warm bilious vomit, which spilled out onto his face. He moved his head to one side in order to drain off some of this additional misery.

How had he come to be in this situation? He could recall being attacked by someone. The weapon his attacker had used had been hard and heavy, perhaps a hammer. It had happened whilst he had been out in his garden at night. He had not seen his attacker until it had been too late. There had been a blow to the temple followed by the most excruciating pain imaginable. Then he must have passed out. How, he wondered, could he have survived such an attack, and why had he been brought to this place? He lifted a hand up to his head and carefully touched the spot where he sensed he had been struck. Expecting to find evidence of an open wound, he was surprised to find himself touching what seemed to be surgical stitching. The thread that had been used was thick and coarse, and he managed to count ten stitches. The area around the wound was still swollen and very painful, but it had evidently been cleaned up and operated on.

More memories began to return. Following the attack, he must have lain on the ground unconscious for a while. Some time later, he could recall falling onto the ground again, possibly as the result of being pushed from the top of the garden wall. This might account for all the pain he was now feeling in the rest of his body. Then he had moved across the hillside, lying uncomfortably astride something like a wheelbarrow. During his conscious moments, he had been aware of the full moon above and had realised how

visible this would make him and his assailant should anyone be looking out across Wet Rain Hill at the time. Then something seemed to have thwarted the progress of his assailant. He could recall hearing not only angry words and curses, but also some very strange and unfamiliar noises around him. The wheelbarrow had then tipped over and he had fallen once again onto the hard cold ground. But there was no recollection at all of what had happened after that.

He continued lying in the stone niche without making any real effort to rise up. Both his pain and weariness would not allow it. Soon, he began drifting fitfully in and out of consciousness. At one point, he became aware of a pair of large black obsidian eyes peering intently down at him. The eyes belonged to a nightmarish creature that was standing by his side holding a flaming torch. It had a massive crocodile-like jaw and a forehead that was not too dissimilar in shape and size to that of a human, except that it was covered with leathery nodules. But its reptilian eyes, oversized and inscrutable, were not the windows to any human soul.

He closed his own eyes to see if the creature would possibly vanish from his imagination. But even as he did so, he could still hear the steady rasp of its breathing, and could smell the strong odour of its breath and body. He opened his eyes again, and saw that the creature was now holding in one hand what appeared to be a wooden cup. It poured a small amount of white powder into the cup from a plastic bag it had in its other clawed hand. Then the creature offered the cup to him. Terrified, but disinclined to refuse

the offer, he feebly took hold of the cup. The creature then indicated by imitative actions of its head and clawed hands that he should drink what was in it. Although lying on his side, he still managed to turn his head to such an angle that he could look down into the cup. Aided by the light cast by the flames of the creature's torch, he saw that it appeared to contain a mixture of the white powder and water. Still lying on his back, he lifted up his head slightly and placed the cup against his lips. After drinking down its tasteless contents, he felt almost immediately that the pain in his head, and indeed in the rest of his body, had begun to lift. He even started to feel something approaching being comfortable. And he also sensed that he had begun to hallucinate.

People began to walk up to his side. He realised that those he recognised had all been long dead. But there were others whom he didn't recognise. They all spoke to him as if they were visiting a patient lying recovering in a hospital bed. Some gave reassuring words, and told him not to worry, that everything was going to be fine. Others spoke of their anger and outrage at what had happened to him. One old lady, whom he didn't know, said that she was related to the man responsible for the attack on him. She also said that she was sure that the man in question would be deservedly punished. A young woman, whom he had also never seen before in his life, then appeared before him. She was the saddest visitor he received. This young woman described how she had also been attacked by this man. And she too believed that this man needed to be punished for his extreme wickedness. Jack Hume could only slightly nod in acknowledgement at

everything that was said to him. He wanted to converse, to ask his visitors questions, but found he was utterly incapable of speaking during this experience.

Even the reptilian creature, which he somehow knew was female, returned to his side and began to comfort him. It spoke using what seemed to him like an archaic form of the English language, with a laboured rasping hissing voice as if the spoken word was not its normal or preferred mode of communication. After swabbing his mouth and face with what looked like a large piece of wool, it carefully placed a cold-clawed hand on his forehead as an apparent gesture of reassurance. Even in this singular predicament, he found that he could not prevent himself from repeatedly drifting in and out of consciousness; a somnolent state of momentary wakefulness and dream-packed sleep.

After what may have been a few hours or even only just a few minutes, he once again seemed to wake up to the fact that he was still lying inside a stone niche in the most unusual of circumstances. He still felt weak and less than comfortable, but nevertheless was aware that there had been a considerable improvement in his condition. For a start, the wound on his head no longer hurt as much. In addition, he didn't feel nauseous. He was also alone, and noticed that his surroundings appeared to be better illuminated than they had been before. From where he was lying, he could see the flames of four or five cressets fixed to the walls of what looked like the inside of a stone cavern. He was sure that not all of these had been previously lit. The flickering star-like pinpricks of light he had sensed whilst in his former state of delirium were the reflections from the iron pyrites

and other minerals in the rock surface. The scene reminded him of a dungeon in a medieval castle. Then he realised something else that had changed: there was now nothing but absolute silence; the Gregorian chants had stopped.

After some time spent gathering his thoughts and contemplating his next course of action, he was just about to try and stand up when he was checked by dark shadows moving quickly across the uneven rock surface before him. From his position inside the niche, he was unable to see what these shadows preceded. Suddenly, there was something by his side. It was a person, someone that was very real and recognisable as the vicar, Geoffrey Adams, from St George's church. The vicar, however, was not alone. But neither was he accompanied by another person. And although this was not his first encounter with such a creature, the sight of one, if anything, was now even more shocking than before for Jack Hume. Now that he could see and comprehend his surroundings with a far greater degree of clarity than before. He tried unsuccessfully to move deeper into the niche like a frightened hermit crab retreating into a commandeered shell.

The sight of the vicar, dressed in a cassock and wearing a dog collar and a large crucifix around his neck, was clearly not as startling, but was in some respects as equally astonishing. He had a peculiar and somewhat disconcerting smile on his face, as he stood holding onto what appeared to be a large portable cassette player. It was as if the vicar was slightly drunk or maybe drugged. And his demeanour was all the more remarkable

given his proximity to a creature that could have come straight out of a science fiction tale.

Perhaps, Jack Hume concluded, the vicar was not real after all. He must be just another of the illusory characters that had previously visited him. But closing his eyes and opening them again did not make the vicar vanish. A short while later the vicar began to speak. "Don't worry Mr Humes! You're going to be okay," he said with a reassuring tone of voice. Jack Hume had no wish to doubt this sentiment. "Where am I, vicar?" he asked, finding the sound of his own weakened and echoing voice strange and unfamiliar. "You're somewhere under the graveyard of St George's," replied the vicar.

"Then I guess I'm dead," responded Jack Hume sharply.

"No, you're not dead," assured the vicar. "You're very much still amongst the quick."

"Well that's something to be grateful for at least. And standing right beside you, is...er, who or what?" Jack Hume did not look at the creature in question as he spoke. He suspected that it was the same reptile that had apparently nursed him earlier. He also sensed that all who were present understood the question. "She's one of God's children," replied Geoffrey Adams with evident enthusiasm. "And what is simply wonderful, is that she, and all the others like her, are Christians!" Jack Hume pondered the vicar's bizarre assertion. But all he could think of in response was to ask: "And how do they tolerate infidels, non-believers? Because I'm not sure if I'm really a Christian." Geoffrey Adams smiled at this, and responded to it with a further question: "Have you then become a Buddhist, just like your dear wife?"

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Snaz regained consciousness with a start. Beads of sweat ran down his forehead and fell off his face into the darkness before him. He grimaced at the excruciating pain that now beset him. The agony at having almost every muscle in the upper part of his body pulled into an unrelenting state of tension was intolerable. His abdomen felt as if was being pierced by a thousand hot sharp pins. In order to shift some of the weight away from his upper body, he tried to stand up on the single wooden peg around which both of his feet were crowded. After a few minutes of standing on the tips of his toes, he became tired and relented. But the moment he allowed his body to drop down again, he once again fell into a state of extreme agony. His shoulders screamed out for release from the burden of supporting all his body weight. The twine with which his outstretched arms were attached to the crossbar burned deeply into his wrists. Breathing was difficult as well as being exhausting. Fluid began to flow willy-nilly out of almost every orifice in his body. He screamed out, pleading to be released from this most extreme and agonising of all tortures. Death, and its accompanying termination of all the senses, would be welcomed.

The wooden cross bearing Snaz's contorted body was securely fixed into the rock floor of a house-sized subterranean cavern. The base of the cross was further supported by a cone-shaped structure of small rocks, whose individual shapes had been put together

with all the felicitousness, firmness and strength of a farmer's dry stone wall. The light provided by a single cresset hanging over the entrance to the cavern revealed walls covered by red ochre and charcoal paintings. The illumination provided by the dancing flames gave the representations of animals the illusion of movement; an unlikely dance involving the lion and the lamb.

Snaz struggled to make sense of his predicament. He tried in vain to utter an audible call for help, or for mercy. But to whom could he appeal? Then he became aware that more light had appeared at the entrance to the cavern housing his simulated Calvary. Too weary even to lift up his head, he waited as the brightness drew nearer. But his torch-bearing hosts now standing beneath him brought no reprieve. There was not even a Roman centurion to offer him a sponge of vinegar; and no weeping Mary Magdalene. In his extreme agony, he now also had extreme terror. Scores of reptilian eyes gazed upwards at him. And looking down on them, he knew that they were there to watch his final wretched final moments.

Towards the end, there was a fleeting recollection of what had taken place during the previous evening: all the anger, the violence and the murder. There was also a recollection of all the other murders that he had been responsible for in the past. And amongst the reptilian gazes below, he imagined that he could see the faces of several women; he could recognise them all. The one now standing at the very front, he knew from a newspaper photograph: she was called Karen Hill.

Finally, his body shuddered violently; and without any last words voiced either inwardly or outwardly, he fell limp upon the cross and was dead.

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Professor Brock was sitting on what seemed to be an old wooden park bench. He was inside a room-sized cavern illuminated by a single burning cresset fixed onto the rock wall. On his legs was a pair of rusty antique shackles, which he could well believe dated back to the time of Cromwell. This restraint, however, seemed to be more token than anything else. His hands were still free, and he would be able to stand up and shuffle away from his seat if he so wished. One reptilian creature stood guard just outside the entrance to the cavern. His captors had so far not physically mistreated him. Nevertheless, he knew that they had administered some type of hallucinogenic substance to him after his capture last night. The types of hallucinations and sensations he experienced as a consequence had been more or less as he would have expected based on his own research. This first-hand experience of entering into altered states of reality had however still taught him a great deal. But no matter how strange the places he had visited in his imagination last night, they surely could not compare with the strangeness, nay terribleness, of his current environment.

With some dismay, he surveyed his surroundings as revealed by the flickering torchlight in the cavern. Like some ghastly storehouse in a Nazi concentration camp, bones and bone parts, some of which were recognisable as human, were arranged in piles. There were also piles of what looked like human hair, as well rags and fragments of cloth, animal skins, furs and wool. But in his opinion, the most disturbing items were two old, and rather small, coffins standing opened on a stone bench in the centre of the cavern. It appeared that his captors were harvesting the contents of the graveyard of St George's. He recalled the strange cross that Steve Bone had located in the narrow passageway leading off from Bell Hollow: it too had been made out of carved bone. He now knew that there was a likelihood the laboratory tests would reveal that it was in fact human bone. The warm stagnant air inside the cavern was musty, thick and unwholesome, with the lingering reptile-house odour of his hosts adding to the miasma.

In these abysmal surroundings, uncertain of his fate, the professor reflected on how his attempt to photograph the reptilian creatures had gone so horribly wrong. Firstly, the creatures had turned out to be much more alert than he had supposed them to be when he had set out down Wet Rain Hill last night. Despite his best efforts at concealment and stealth, they had detected him on the hillside as he had approached Bell Hollow. The reptiles had also displayed a surprising amount of speed. He recalled his terror as he tried in vain to run back up the hill towards his cottage and the village. But these swift-moving and powerful creatures would not be outrun. In his final seconds before capture, he was sure that he had managed at least one cry for help before a shove from behind had sent

him, and his camera, crashing to the ground. Further attempts at crying out for help had been smothered by a cold leathery-clawed hand placed over his mouth. Shortly after being subdued, he must have been forced to take the hallucinogen. With regard to everything that had happened afterwards, he could not be sure what had been real and what had only been imagined. He could recall with certainty, however, that he had awoken to find himself inside a dim underground cavern like the present one. Stretched out on a stone slab, he had opened his eyes and had been mortified at the sight of four or five of the reptilian creatures standing before him. After this paralysing shock, came the intense thirst. The type of thirst where one would enter into, without a moment's hesitation, a Faustian pact and sell one's soul in return for simply a glass of water. His thirst was so strong, that slaking it even took priority over feeling afraid of his captors. But those same captors had understood his condition perfectly, and had offered him water. Lots of water; ice cold, clean and more refreshing than anything he had ever tasted. One of the creatures had offered him cup after cup of it, which he had drunk gratefully. They had also offered him what appeared to be mutton, but he had had no desire to eat anything. Then he had been brought shackled to his current quarters.

Whilst being escorted along gloomy torch-lit passageways, some apparently bored through solid rock whilst others were adapted from existing natural features, he had tried to communicate with the creatures in an attempt to find out what they planned to do with him. He had addressed them using the type of simplified and amplified English habitually used by some when speaking to foreigners whose command of the language is considered

to be less than fluent. He was painfully aware of how ineffective or even ludicrous this approach can be; but either his hosts couldn't communicate with him or they had no desire to do so, because he got no response from them as he was guided through their abode.

Obviously, another question that was at the forefront of his mind was: what were these creatures? They were clearly endowed with a high level of intelligence that was approximately human in its level of sophistication. In this respect, there were no other reptiles or even mammals with which they could be compared. The professor decided to assign the creatures the scientific name: 'Lacerta Sapiens', or 'Intelligent Lizards'. These 'Lacerta Sapiens' must have followed a separate and quite different evolutionary path from their reptilian ancestors, following a parting of the ways aeons ago. Crocodiles, acknowledged as the most intelligent of known reptiles, had stayed still in evolutionary terms for millions of years, but 'Lacerta Sapiens' had clearly not done so. They had evolved limbs that enabled them to stand upright. Moreover, their bodies had evolved in a way that allowed them to use tools and to develop a technology for successfully manipulating their environment. And like the first modern humans, they had already received the Promethean gift of fire. The cave paintings found in Bell Hollow were a sure sign that they had within them that spark of consciousness, which up until now had separated man from all the other living creatures on the planet. He could not begin to guess how widespread 'Lacerta Sapiens' might be over, or rather under, the face of the earth.

He felt that it was truly remarkable that these creatures had managed to survive undiscovered and undetected by mainstream science for so long, and wondered if evidence of their evolutionary development was in fact present in the fossil record but had either been passed over or simply misinterpreted. For more than a hundred years mankind had been piecing together the history of the dinosaurs, those terrible lizards of old, but had somehow missed finding any trace of these most singular offshoots from what was evidently the same evolutionary line. Or had the presence of these creatures actually been acknowledged in the mythical beasts of folklore and legends? How ironic, he noted, that the village church was named after St George, who symbolized the slaying of terrible scaly beasts.

To the professor, the driving force behind the present activities of the creatures around Wet Rain Hill appeared to be religious in nature. It was apparent that they had acquired some sense of spirituality, notwithstanding the more disturbing and primitive aspects of their behaviour such as the charnel house scene in the cavern. He believed that within the last three-hundred-and-fifty years or so they had developed a belief system that had its origins in their discovery of the church bell from St George's inside Bell Hollow. Perhaps it was something not too dissimilar to the cargo cults that had sprung up in New Guinea during the Second World War. The creatures had, it seems, drawn inspiration from the imagery found on the bell, namely: the crucifixion scene, and the graphical representation of the lion lying down with the lamb. The lion and the lamb may have

become totems, and the cross a sacred symbol. A sort of reptilian offshoot from Christianity, adapted to the realities of their subterranean world and reptilian worldview, could have developed. The professor wondered, however, if he would ever live to communicate all his observations, speculation and insight to the outside world.

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David Crawford and Paul Jackson crept nervously towards the spot. The four-poster-bed gravestone lay in a section of the graveyard that was shaded from the light of the morning sunshine. The stone bed leant over noticeably to one side, and was partially covered in moss and weeds. The inscription on it was weatherworn and now almost impossible to read. They halted and crouched down a short distance away. Behind the gravestone lay the thicket of grass where Paul Jackson believed he had seen something earlier on. Both young men felt that the sound of their heartbeats must surely be audible above the silence of the graveyard. Then after waiting for some time to see whether anything stirred, they moved cautiously into the overgrowth. Parting the grass, they were immediately shocked to see that a section of the gravestone had been removed. David took out a pencil torch from his pocket and, crouching down, nervously directed a beam of light into the darkness at the side of the tomb. To the astonishment of the two observers, a tunnel dug into the earth beneath the grave was revealed. It was supported by wooden planks and poles, and ran nearly horizontal for about five metres. Then the tunnel

appeared to gently slope down into the earth where it eventually disappeared into an inky blackness from which no sound came.

Crouching by the entrance, the two young men exchanged puzzled glances. They maintained a breathless silence as they pondered their next move. Suddenly, they were both startled by the loud shrill tones of David's mobile telephone as it rang; he had forgotten to turn it off and was in no doubt that it was his father calling to ask where he was. "Come on, let's get out of here!" shouted his friend whilst springing to his feet. "Sorry," responded David sheepishly, also standing up quickly and switching off his telephone without answering it.

As they began moving away quickly from the entrance, a figure suddenly appeared behind them. Without waiting for a closer look at what had just emerged out of the tunnel, they began running. But it was Paul Jackson who was marginally slower in making his escape, and who consequently was felled from behind by the figure. "God help me!" he gasped in terror, before his cries were stifled. David instinctively stopped to consider giving his friend some assistance, only to see him being dragged into the overgrown grass. It was also clear that more figures were emerging from the tunnel. He felt that there was no option but to escape first and then to seek help from outside. He ran for his life, out from amongst the gravestones, onto the path through the graveyard, through the lich gate onto Church Lane and down towards Main Street. Only then did he begin to expend energy yelling for help.

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By evening, despite an extensive police search, Paul Jackson had still not been found. The search for him had initially centred on the graveyard of St George's. Based on David Crawford's story of events, a light mechanical digger was brought in and used around the spot where he reported finding a tunnel earlier. Although no such tunnel entrance could now be seen, it was evident that the earth around the damaged gravestone had been disturbed recently. The advice of the vicar of St George's was sought on this matter, but strangely he could not be found. The vicarage was empty, and there was no sign of Geoffrey Adams anywhere. No one in the village connected with the church could explain his absence. The part-time sexton of St George's, however, was tracked down, and he was adamant that no digging had taking place recently in the graveyard around the spot in question. The sexton was both mystified and horrified by the sight of the freshly turned over earth beside the gravestone. He, along with many others, was at a loss to understand why anyone should want to carry out such a ghoulish activity on what was a very old grave.

After about an hours' worth of digging in the vicinity of the grave all that was uncovered, apart from further evidence that the soil had indeed been recently dug up and filled in again, were several wooden planks, stones and small artefacts from various times

in the village's history. The fact that there were wooden planks amongst the soil seemed to corroborate the story of a tunnel. Hardly anyone involved in the search, however, could believe his description of what had taken place around this tunnel. In particular, his description of Paul Jackson's monstrous assailant was treated with almost total scepticism; this was, however, with the clear exception of his father.

Nevertheless, the police generally accepted the claim that Paul Jackson had been abducted. They realised that he had recently witnessed a murder in the village. The fact that he had now also been abducted, and that the other witness to the murder had narrowly missed the same fate, was considered by the police to be significant. It was obvious that the Thai couple, who had already been arrested in connection with the murder, could not have carried out Paul Jackson's abduction themselves. But they were known to have some accomplices. And disturbingly, it seemed that one more of their accomplices, namely John Wakes, had now also been murdered; his body having been found that morning in a car in a lay-by outside Wet Rain Hill.

The fact that it was not Jack Hume who had been finally identified as the murder victim in the lay-by provided some relief for those who knew him. Nevertheless, considerable anxiety remained over his disappearance, especially because of the disturbing circumstances in which it had occurred. In addition, the discovery that someone intimately connected with another murder, namely of Karen Hill, had been inside Jack Hume's cottage was also very worrying. There was even a slight suspicion

amongst some police officers that Jack Hume himself might be involved in her murder, though Alan Crawford himself did not for a moment believe this to be the case. The fact, however, that Nok Hume had not been able to explain the unannounced arrival of her husband late at night at the cottage had not been helpful in this respect. It did nothing to allay any suspicions there might be about her husband's character and his evident past connections with Thailand. And now he was missing along with a growing list of people from the village.

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Just after eight-thirty that evening, Alan Crawford answered a loud knock at the front door of his mother's cottage. Standing outside was a lean man, who appeared to be aged somewhere in his late twenties. "Sorry to disturb you, my name is Steve Bone," he announced. "I believe you are Detective Sergeant Crawford?"

"That is correct," responded Alan Crawford cautiously, thinking that the caller might be a news reporter hoping to garner some information about the murders and disappearances in the village. "Professor Brock told me about you, and that like him, you are a frequent visitor to the village," explained the caller. "I was keeping my fingers crossed that I would find you in."

"Professor Brock!" repeated Alan Crawford in surprise. "Have you spoken to him today?"

"No, that's the problem. I haven't spoken to him today, which is unusual. You see, I'm a

research fellow at the university in Newcastle. I work with Professor Brock. This afternoon, whilst I was working away from the university, I needed to get in touch with him about something. So I tried calling him first at the university, but was eventually told that he hadn't appeared in his office yet and nobody knew where he was. Then I tried his home in Durham, again without any luck, and then his cottage here in the village; again without any success. I even sent him an e-mail, which has gone unanswered. Unfortunately, he prefers not to use a mobile phone."

"So, you were worried about him and drove over to Wet Rain Hill to investigate?"

"In a word, yes; this was after I had called into my office earlier this evening on the way home to collect some papers. A colleague told me there was some concern about the professor's unexplained absence. He hadn't called in to say that he was either ill or had some other problem. I also learnt that the police were looking for him."

"That would have been me," explained Alan Crawford.

"Then I immediately decided to drive straight over to Wet Rain Hill."

"Do you have any idea where he might be?" asked Alan Crawford.

"I don't know for sure, but I'm concerned that his disappearance might be connected with the discoveries our team made in Wet Rain Hill over a week ago."

"No doubt you've heard about the discovery of a dead body in the village graveyard yesterday morning?"

"Yes. The professor called me last night and we talked about it. Naturally, his first thoughts were about the murder, but he was displeased with the way the television news attributed the discovery of the church bell to the police. Anyway, he talked about how the

victim was actually murdered as the result of being pushed into Bell Hollow. He explained how he had already been obliged to reveal to you the discoveries our team had made in Bell Hollow because of their apparent connection with some crimes in the village. He also told me one detail about the body in the graveyard that was not reported: That it was found hanging on a cross, displayed in what appeared to be an imitation of the crucifixion. When I heard this, it was not difficult for me to link this gesture with what I already knew about the discoveries made in Bell Hollow. You see, I think those responsible for the murder and those who displayed his body on the cross are not the same,” explained Steve Bone. Alan Crawford nodded in general agreement with the last statement. Then he looked back over his shoulder, before saying: “Look, Mr Bone, I really apologise for not inviting you in, but can we go somewhere else and discuss this?”

Five minutes later, both men were in the Blackbird public house. As they sat down at a table with their drinks, it was Steve Bone who spoke first. “The reason I was away from my office at the university today,” he explained, “was that I was getting some tests carried out on a small carved cross I found inside Bell Hollow. To my astonishment, the tests revealed that it was made out of human bone.”

“Do you have any idea of the age of the bone, Steve? And I hope you don’t mind me calling you ‘Steve’?”

“Not at all; the bone was at least two-hundred years old.”

“That’s some consolation,” responded Alan Crawford. “At least we don’t have one more murder victim to worry about.” In his mind, he had made a connection between the

human bone and the graveyard of St George's. "Just now, Steve, you referred to the display of William Avon's body on the cross in the graveyard at St George's as 'a gesture'; could you explain what you mean by that?" But before he replied, Steve Bone hesitated and looked at Alan Crawford. He was reluctant to begin saying something that was quite unorthodox and which would sound utterly crazy to most ears. Alan Crawford sensed this reluctance and tried to give some reassurance. "Don't worry, Steve, I'm open-minded. I realise that something very odd is going on in this village."

Steve Bone cleared his throat, and began speaking. "I don't know exactly what they meant by hanging the body on the cross, leaving aside for the moment the problem of what I actually mean by 'they'. But the sudden arrival of a body in Bell Hollow might have been seen as a sacrifice carried out for their benefit. They responded by imitating Christ's crucifixion on the cross, which also looks very sacrificial. And they did it in a place where it would be clearly seen." Alan Crawford thought to himself how Christ-like, at least according to tradition, the bearded William Avon had appeared to him. "They thought someone said 'hello' to them and so they politely replied 'hello' in return?" he suggested. "Maybe something along those lines," agreed Steve Bone.

"The placement of the bell, all those centuries ago, inside Bell Hollow was something else they appear to have interpreted in a particular way. Though ironically, at least according to something once suggested by Professor Brock, the bell was put there by the villagers to protect them from the dangers of Bell Hollow," noted Alan Crawford.

Steve Bone continued: "Then the recipients of the bell maintained it for nearly three-and-a-half centuries. They developed something like a religion, a cult, based around the bell

itself and the imagery on its surface. I think the professor has already told you about the beautiful cave painting of the lion and the lamb, as well as the cat and sheep carcasses found inside a niche in the cave. I'm sure we would be able to find many more similar examples of this theme if we explored the cave further. The professor told me that cats and sheep have a history of disappearing in this area, both nowadays and at various times in the past. There was also the carved head of a cat found inside the same niche. The professor has since told me that it came from a carving stolen from a home in the village. It was apparently stolen the night before it was found inside Bell Hollow. They must have seen the statue of the cat on display, and because of its lion-like, or leopard-like features if you want to be pedantic, could not resist taking it."

Alan Crawford nodded in agreement, and added: "They left a dead cat in return. Maybe they saw it as a fair exchange. But the wooden carving they took in fact contained drugs; hallucinogens to be precise."

"The professor also told me about this," acknowledged Steve Bone. "I think this might be the reason why the wooden carving of the cat was eventually smashed and broken open after they had sensed that there was something inside it. I would be really interested to know how those hallucinogens are being put to use."

"The use of hallucinogens in the context of religious belief is something I'm sure Professor Brock would also be interested in," noted Alan Crawford ruefully, before adding: "But I can remember reading that the word 'assassin' literally means 'hashish eater'. The assassins were members of a secret Moslem cult who murdered crusaders whilst under the influence of this drug."

They continued their conversation in the Blackbird public house. Steve Bone, again with some reluctance, outlined his thoughts concerning the hitherto unknown life form that he believed were Wet Rain Hill's subterranean residents. He described his own terrifying encounter inside Bell Hollow. Alan Crawford then mentioned Paul Jackson's abduction in the graveyard of St George's earlier that day. In fact, because of this, David Crawford had finally also related to his father how he had seen a creature, like the one that had abducted Paul Jackson, once before on Wet Rain Hill. And had explained that he had not mentioned this before because of some doubts he had harboured over whether or not he really had seen it, not to mention the fear of ridicule. Steve Bone explained that he too had remained silent about what he thought he had caught sight of inside Bell Hollow for precisely the same reasons.

Alan Crawford felt instinctively that there was a pressing need to act quickly to save those who had disappeared from the village. It would be difficult trying to persuade his colleagues in the police force about the true nature of the situation in Wet Rain Hill. Precious time would also be wasted. He decided that he would act with the help of the only two available people who had sufficient understanding and experience to be of use at this time: namely his son and Steve Bone.

"Do you think we can communicate with them and try to obtain the safe release of those they seem to have in their custody right now?" he asked Steve Bone.

“We can try. But not having a complete feel for their mental outlook on the world is going to make it difficult. They will be viewing some of the recent events in the village from their own unique perspective, which will be possibly quite different from ours. But if we can make contact with them, perhaps establish a dialogue, and promise them something in exchange for the safe release of those they are holding, then there might be a chance,” replied Steve Bone.

“What do you think they might accept as a fair exchange?” asked Alan Crawford.

“Perhaps: a guarantee of their future safety; a promise not to reveal what we know about them,” suggested Steve Bone.

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Detective Sergeant Alan Crawford, David Crawford and Dr Steve Bone said nothing as they made their way thoughtfully down Wet Rain Hill. There was a cold easterly wind blowing that threatened to bring with it some rain. Although it had not rained for several days, the hillside remained damp and difficult to negotiate in the darkness. The moist ground was cut-through with swaths of mud on which it was easy to slide given the steepness of the hill. Small rocky outcrops, and concealed holes made by a variety of hillside animals, provided additional peril to the traveller. There was almost a full moon. But at times, its luminescence was obscured by the darkening clouds rolling in from the North Sea just over twenty miles away. The three men travelling down the hill took great care not to get noticed. They avoided using torchlight whenever the moonlight

was sufficient.

An airliner passed by overhead on its descent into the city of Newcastle-upon-Tyne. The hum of its jet engines resounding around the hills. An unseen night owl sitting in one of the trees at the side of Liz's Burn hooted ever more loudly, as if in contempt at the mysterious large grey bird briefly silhouetted against the emerging moon. The babbling waters of Liz's Burn became steadily more audible as they approached Liz's Rock. All three men briefly touched the side of rock as they passed by, as if in a gesture to signify their arrival at an important place. A group of sheep, which had been sheltering against the anvil-shaped monolith, scurried away at the arrival of these night time intruders.

Steve Bone was carrying a soft shoulder bag containing a laptop computer. Alan Crawford had hold of a small case containing a projector, whilst his son carried a small haversack holding miscellaneous cables, batteries and compact discs. The time was now ten-twenty. They found a clearing amongst the brambles around the entrance to Bell Hollow, where Steve Bone placed his laptop computer on top of a protective plastic sheet. He turned it on. As the Windows operating system began to load into memory, the laptop issued an unwelcome series of loud bleeps and chirps. This was accompanied by the grinding noise of the hard disk drive being accessed. Finally, the machine settled into a quiet hum as it awaited further instructions. The projector, complete with sound speakers, was also taken out the small case and connected to the laptop via a long cable.

Speaking in a hushed voice, Steve Bone asked both Alan and David Crawford if they could position the projector at the entrance to the cave. Steve Bone then activated the software that was going to be used to project images and sounds into the cave.

After several minutes, everything was nearly in place. Although the cave's dark and uneven surface would make a less than ideal projector screen, Steve Bone believed that the extraordinarily powerful projector beam would be able to utilise the presence of shiny iron oxide particles within the rock as a reflective surface. Being mindful of not wishing to draw any unwelcome attention from the village, the speakers were arranged so that as much as possible of the sound produced would be directed into Bell Hollow.

It was almost eleven by the time all the equipment had been tested and Steve Bone was ready to begin his slide show complete with sound accompaniment. Standing behind the laptop computer, Steve Bone and David Crawford were able to see on the laptop screen the images that were being projected into Bell Hollow. The accompanying sounds directed into the cave could also be heard through small speakers fitted in the laptop computer. Alan Crawford crouched close by the entrance to the cave. His duty was to monitor the clarity of the images as they appeared on the rock surface and to make sure that they were being successfully projected into the cave.

The first of the images was a painting of an idyllic pastoral scene: a classical representation of paradise on earth. The scene was complete with verdant hills, water and

trees, an azure skyline and a set of romantic ruins set in the background. But the centrepiece was a lion and a lamb lying down together on a hillside in a state of mutual tolerance and peace. The sound accompaniment to his particular image seemed somewhat incongruous. It resembled a combination of snake-like hisses and dinosaurian roars, alternated by the sound of people laughing and chatting. Steve Bone briefly explained that the hisses and roars were amplified and electronically filtered recordings taken from Bell Hollow during the recent exploration. The significance of it all, however, needed no real explanation.

The next image was that of the church bell when it had been situated inside Bell Hollow. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this was accompanied by the sound of church bells pealing out in celebration. The third image was that of a renaissance painting of Christ's crucifixion with Mary Magdalene weeping at the foot of the cross. No sound accompanied this image.

The fourth image was a photograph of crocodiles on a muddy riverbank, accompanied by a wildlife soundtrack. The fifth image was that of a mixed-race couple: a black woman and a Caucasian man. This image was presented with the opening bars of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, the 'Ode to Joy'. At the end of this image, however, there was still no response to the 'son et lumiere' spectacle from the intended audience within Bell Hollow.

Starting with the lion and the lamb lying together in peaceful repose, Steve Bone ran through the whole show once again. This time he lingered on each image several minutes longer than in the first showing. But again, Bell Hollow displayed a contemptuous silence. The moon had momentarily faded from view behind the clouds, and the hillside was cloaked in total darkness. The three men felt cold and increasingly disillusioned as they neared the end of the third showing, wryly referred to by Steve Bone as the midnight matinee.

Alan Crawford was the only one of the three facing towards Wet Rain Hill. Looking up from the cave entrance, his eyes were suddenly drawn to the movement of a large number lights on the hill. His immediate thoughts were that the show at Bell Hollow had finally been noticed from the village, and that a team was coming down to investigate. But as the opening bars of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony played out in Bell Hollow, and the moon reappeared from behind the clouds, confirmation came that they had indeed been noticed. It came in a form that shocked him to the core. "What on God's earth!" he cried out.

The others immediately turned around and looked up the hill. About two hundred metres away, an incomprehensible scene presented itself. Eight creatures, in most respects resembling crocodiles walking on elongated hind legs, moved purposefully and quietly down the hill towards them. But they were not alone. In the moonlight, and by the light from their burning torches held in clawed hands attached to powerful forelimbs,

their eight charges could be seen. These were: Jack Hume, Professor Brock, Geoffrey Adams the vicar, Paul Jackson and four uniformed police officers. They all appeared to be unnaturally subdued and strangely unconcerned about their predicament. There was no acknowledgement given to the three witnesses at Bell Hollow, who themselves felt immobilised by fear and disbelief.

Then, Nok Hume appeared on the hillside. Clearly not yet under any spell, she ran down towards Bell Hollow shouting hysterically: “Jack. Jack!” Another one of the creatures suddenly came into view behind her. Seen from a distance, it looked like some terrible giant flightless bird. It quickly closed in upon Nok. But the creature did not attack or even take hold of her; instead, it showered the air around her with a cloud of fine white dust. She stopped shouting. Moments later, a snowstorm was similarly falling about the heads of the three men who had observed all of this from beside Bell Hollow.

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Rhoda Crawford had been unhappy with her husband’s decision to carry out the secretive late-night mission to Bell Hollow, and even more so at the involvement in it of her son. She felt this way especially when a nightmarish and wholly abnormal danger now seemed to stalk the village. Feeling deeply troubled, she had struggled both to understand and believe the reasons why their dangerous journey down to Bell Hollow

had to be made in secret and in the vulnerable hours of darkness. She had listened to her husband's hurried explanation of what he was convinced had taken place in the village; and of how the efforts of the party of three might be the only prospect of saving those who had vanished. Had she not already heard her own son's terrifying eyewitness account of his experience in the graveyard, she would have doubtless scoffed at the outlandish thesis presented to her. She might also have questioned the wisdom and sanity of her husband. But she knew that there must indeed be some element of truth in the things that had been put before her. And so, feeling like a mother about to send her loved ones off to fight a just war, she had finally and reluctantly agreed with their plan. Elsie Crawford naturally also felt very scared. She could scarcely comprehend what was taking place in the village, and recalled that her son had once said that nothing remarkable ever happened in Wet Rain Hill anymore. How wrong he had been on that score.

To provide some reassurance, the party of three had promised to keep in contact with the cottage by mobile telephone for the duration of their mission. David's mobile telephone was set into vibration mode, with the ring tone switched off. Calls were exchanged at regular intervals starting from the time the three men had set off down Wet Rain Hill. Contact was maintained in this way until just before midnight. Then a call made by Rhoda Crawford was not answered. Sitting together with Elsie Crawford in the cottage living room, she anxiously redialled, but still got no response. It had been discussed beforehand that in a situation where a call was not answered, attempts should be made for about a further fifteen minutes before contacting the police. Rhoda

Crawford, however, already at the end of her tether, waited only a further five minutes before she reported the disappearance of the three men to the police. Then she called the Jacksons across the road to explain that something further was amiss in the village.

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A medical examination was carried out on the eleven men and one woman discovered in the early hours of Thursday morning in a confused and disoriented state around Bell Hollow. The results indicated that they had all ingested a potent hallucinogenic drug. The drug had affected the twelve individuals to varying degrees of severity; eight of them exhibited extreme symptoms to the extent that they were completely unaware of their surroundings at the time of their discovery. In all cases, however, the effects had begun to wear off during the course of the following day. What remained afterwards were fractured dreamlike memories, fleeting recollections of things apparently experienced in the altered states from which they had just returned.

In the judgement of the sober-minded police officers brought in to investigate the ever-widening circle of crime and mystery surrounding the village, it was the hallucinogenic drug that was the root cause of the murders, crimes, and bizarre train of reported events and disappearances that had taken place recently. A Thai couple had been formally charged with one of these murders, namely that of William Avon, and with involvement in the illegal importing of the hallucinogenic drug. In addition to the twelve

people found late at night on Bell Hollow alive but suffering from the effects of this drug, an unlucky thirteenth dead person had also been discovered at the same time. A post-mortem examination revealed that his body contained traces of the same hallucinogen and that he had died from being subject to prolonged and extreme physical stress. The police were not yet able to account for the circumstances of his death. He was labelled as a former associate of the murdered John Wakes, an accomplice of the Thai couple. They proved that he was also Wakes' murderer. His fingerprints matched those on the hammer that had been used as the murder weapon against Wakes. He was also identified in the same manner as being the person responsible for inflicting a head wound on one of the eleven men found on Wet Rain Hill. But most remarkably, he was also shown to be very likely the murderer of a young woman called Karen Hill, who had been killed last November in the city of Newcastle-upon-Tyne. A key ring bearing the engraving 'Snaz', and holding a collection of lady's rings was found near to his body. A lady's ring belonging to Karen Hill, previously found in the cottage targeted by the criminals, was shown by metallurgical analysis to have once been on this key ring. Tests also showed that the ring contained traces of his DNA on its surface.

The list of the twelve people who had been found alive and drugged on Wet Rain Hill made for remarkable reading. For a start, it included a world-renowned professor of archaeology who was, amongst other things, an expert on the usage of hallucinogens by prehistoric man. The irony of this was not lost on those who reported and speculated about the incident. A researcher working under the professor was also amongst the group,

as was a couple that had unwittingly been used to smuggle the hallucinogen in question. Then there were two young men, one of whom had apparently been abducted prior to his reappearance on the hill, whilst the other had given a description of the abduction that clearly seemed to be drug-induced. And as with all good mysteries set in an English village, the local vicar had also played his part. The vicar had apparently vanished without trace the day before and had turned up amongst the group of twelve on the hill. Finally, five policemen, including a Detective Sergeant who had been originally involved in investigating the drug smuggling and related murders, completed the total.

The police, however, admitted that only a broad picture of events in the village had emerged, and that they were still having difficulties filling in some of the finer details. They suspected that many of those involved, including family members, were for some reason withholding information. Moreover, a few of those touched by the events in Wet Rain Hill had made rather curious, some would say far-fetched, claims of having strange experiences involving reptilian-like creatures. But the only evidence remotely related to reptilian involvement that the police had uncovered were the smashed fragments of the stolen wooden crocodile, used originally to smuggle the hallucinogen. This discovery was made in the car also containing the dead body of John Wakes.

The hallucinogen at the centre of the events was a substance that appeared not only to affect how those who took it perceived reality, but which also seemed to endow them with remarkable strength. This was evidenced most dramatically by the remarkable

feat that appeared to have been accomplished by the group of twelve. It seemed that they had managed to push the anvil-shaped outcrop, known locally as Liz's Rock, away from its ancient and weatherworn base. Detached from the bedrock, it had rolled a short distance down Wet Rain Hill and ended up blocking the entrance to Bell Hollow. The ancient cave was now all but closed to the outside world. It was said by some that this closure was an ancient wish of Wet Rain Hill that had at last come true.

The strength-enhancing properties of the hallucinogenic drug had surely also been put to use in carrying the long-lost church bell away from Bell Hollow and in hoisting it up into the belfry of St George's church; though by whom, when and why remained a mystery. It was also a mystery as to how the bell had been preserved in such an immaculate condition during the long march of the centuries for which it had been lost down Bell Hollow; or at least it was so for most people.

On the Sunday morning following its reinstatement, the church bell of St George's had rang out continuously for the first time in nearly three-hundred-and-fifty years over the village of Wet Rain Hill.

The End

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