

A Tumble in the Dark

Peter lay motionless, wondering if the various parts of his body were still connected as they should be. He'd stopped moving at last but hadn't felt the crushing blow of hitting bottom as he'd expected. He had just rolled over and over, then finally rolled to a halt.

He began to test to see if his fingers and toes would respond as he wished and was relieved when they moved as he asked them to. He decided to run the risk of sitting up.

"Are you all right?" he asked Mala. As he pulled himself to a sitting position, he could dimly see her there beside him, looking round in puzzlement, doing her best to work out what had happened.

"I think I'm all right," she said. "Apart from one or two sore bits. Where do you think we are? Did we fall into the hole they dug for the swimming pool?"

"I'm not sure." Peter felt around on the muddy ground till he found his torch. He switched it on and cast its beam back the way they had come, fearing he might see the guards there, guns at the ready. But all it revealed was the muddy slope down which he and Mala had tumbled.

The guards didn't seem to have followed.

"Perhaps they thought we were killed," said Mala, "falling into the swimming pool like that. Or perhaps they never saw us at all. Those voice grenades of yours worked well. They'd be very good as a party game, don't you think?" She picked up her bag from the ground beside her. Peter's rucksack had come off his back and rolled a bit further away.

"I don't think this is a swimming pool," said Peter, as he went to get the bag. "It's more like a tunnel." To either side there were walls, and above them a low ceiling, all carved very raggedly out of the earth.

The Strange Web

“Could this be an overflow?” Mala suggested.

“Yes, it could be,” said Peter. “But if we fell over the side of the pool, you would have thought we would have landed with a bit of a bang.”

“Not if it was the shallow end,” said Mala.

“Yes, I suppose that’s true.”

“So what do we do now?” asked Mala. “Where do you think my father is if he’s down here?”

Peter was growing doubtful that Mala’s father was down here at all, but he thought it best not to say so, not just yet. He wanted her to feel that at least they had tried to find him.

“Let’s press on a bit,” he said, trying to sound optimistic. He indicated the darkness ahead, on the far side from the slope. “Let’s see where this leads to, shall we?”

“This is quite good fun really,” said Mala, as they walked along. “This must be how my father feels when he’s exploring. I can understand why he wants to do it again.”

Watching the dismal passage which the torch beam revealed ahead of them, Peter found it hard to agree. All in all, he would rather be safe in bed.

“You never know what’s waiting round the next corner,” Mala was saying. “It’s quite exciting.”

Peter decided it was time to give his new friend a harsh reminder.

“Look, this isn’t a game,” he said. “We could both get killed here. Remember what I’ve told you. Strangeness is dangerous.”

For a while, Mala went quiet and the only sound was the tramp of their feet. Peter began to wish she would start her excited chatter again. At least it had filled up the space.

“Yes, I remember what you’ve told me,” said Mala eventually. “I know all that stuff about cute little monsters is wrong. I was just enjoying pretending it isn’t. Oh, what’s that?”

They both swung round. They had heard a noise from behind. It was kind of a rumbling sound.

Peter and Mala looked at each other, likely thinking the same thing. Was something coming down the slope behind them? Were they being followed? Could it be the guards – or something worse? Suddenly, exploring didn’t seem like quite so much fun anymore.

Then Peter remembered his first visit to the vale, when he thought he was all on his own but Amanda had really followed him to make sure he was safe. She had waited till he got trapped by a jamjam plant and then rescued him with her unctuous splodger. Was she doing the same again, he wondered? Would Amanda reveal

herself and save them if they got into trouble? He really hoped so.

“Amanda,” he called. “Is that you?” He listened for a reply, but none came.

Peter gave a sigh.

“Who’s Amanda?” asked Mala.

“She’s my friend,” said Peter, which was sort of true even though they had just fallen out. “She’s lived all her life round here. She knows all about strangeness, far more than me.”

“Is she the person you said you would speak with yesterday?” asked Mala.

Peter nodded. “I asked her to come with us but she wouldn’t.”

“Why not?”

Peter didn’t want to tell Mala it had to do with her. It would be embarrassing.

“It’s complicated,” he said.

“Was it to do with me?” asked Mala.

Peter was taken aback. How come girls just *knew*

stuff?

“How did you know that?” he asked.

Mala shrugged. “I just do. It’s people stuff. It’s like how I knew you wouldn’t like my Uncle Percival.”

Peter was bemused by this. “But that was easy,” he said. “Your uncle is horrible, but you’re not.”

Mala beamed. “It’s nice of you to say so,” she said.

Peter felt a bit embarrassed.

“Er, what I meant to say was... Oh, look, we’d better get on.”

There were no more noises from behind, so Peter led the way further along the passage, while Mala followed, apparently amused about something.

But a few steps later, something appeared in the torchlight ahead. It was like someone had drawn a curtain across the passage, a curtain which rippled as though in some unfelt wind, allowing sight of the tunnel beyond to appear, flicker, then disappear again.

Peter warned Mala to stay where she was.

“We need to work out what this is,” he said. He wished

he had Amanda’s book on the Vale so he could try to look this up. Once again, he greatly regretted falling out with her.

“We could really do with something like a stick,” he said, trying to think what to do.

“Really?” said Mala. “Perhaps I can help. What about this?”

She brought something out of her bag.

“What is it?” asked Peter. “Oh, I see. It’s a stick. What did you bring that for?”

“It’s for cooking sausages over a fire. It’s the sort of thing that people do on expeditions. My father told me.”

“That’s good preparation,” said Peter. “Did you bring some sausages too?”

Mala rolled her eyes and made a tutting sound.

“You can’t expect me to think of everything,” she said. “I brought you the stick, didn’t I? Now what are you going to do with it?”

All of a sudden, Peter felt slightly confused about sticks and sausages. “I’m going to poke it at this thing and

see if there's any reaction," he told her, trying to focus his thoughts. He held out the stick and pressed it against the curtain in front of them.

Immediately, dark cords appeared in the curtain, from out of which a pair of what seemed to be hands emerged and grasped at the stick. Peter tried to snatch it away, but the grip of the hands was too strong. The cords in the curtain flexed as though it was pleased with itself. Peter thought he heard it cackle, though he couldn't be sure about that.

Mala gave a gasp. "What is it?" she said.

"My guess is it's a spider's web," said Peter. "A strange spider's web. It looks to me that whenever anything edible comes along, the web grasps it with these hands and traps it here till the spider arrives. Which kind of raises the question, where's the spider?"

He suddenly felt very vulnerable. What kind of spider would weave a web like this? He glanced furtively round and saw a large hole in the tunnel wall at the side of the web. It looked like the sort of hole that something might

live in.

"That could be a very big spider," said Mala, who had also noticed the entrance.

"There's no sign of it, so maybe it's not at home," said Peter. "I suggest we leave before it returns."

"But how do we get past the web?"

"We limbo," said Peter. "Look down there. The web doesn't reach as far as the floor. We can squeeze underneath it."

Mala was horrified.

"But if we rub up against it—"

"That's what we want to avoid," said Peter. "But don't worry too much. I've got some unctuous splodger with me."

"What does that do?"

"Take a look."

Peter drew a spray bottle out of his bag and squirted it at the curtain where the stick was trapped. The hands relaxed and disappeared, the supporting fibre eaten away in moments. Released from their grip, the stick fell to the

floor.

Peter bent down and picked it up.

“There you are,” he said to Mala. “All you need now are some sausages.”

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The Shopping List

Peter managed to scramble under the web without too many alarms. At one stage, he got his elbow caught, but Mala sprayed on the splodger and the restraining hands dissolved away in a moment or so, leaving him free to inch himself forwards and clear of the strange curtain.

“Right,” he said. “Now it’s your turn. Pass through your bag and the splodger first and then it might be a good idea to tie back your hair.”

“I don’t usually take fashion advice from boys,” said Mala.

“I meant so you don’t get it caught,” Peter explained.

Mala gave a snort.

“I know what you meant,” she told him. “I’m not that

silly. Now then, I've tied it back. Does that meet with your approval?"

"Yes, that's fine," said Peter. "And I don't think you're silly. It's just that you seem to keep on trying to prove me wrong."

"Oh, very witty," said Mala. "Just make sure you're as clever as that with the splodger. I'm coming through." Then she lay down, kicked out with a leg and somehow managed to roll under the web in a single action. Peter was able to put the splodger away in his bag without needing to use it.

"Right then, tell me," said Mala as she got to her feet. "Do I get full marks for style?"

"Don't forget what I told you," said Peter. "This isn't a game. It's dangerous."

Mala made a solemn face and gave a salute. "Yes, oh wise one." She attempted without much success to suppress a grin.

Peter gritted his teeth. It was hard to deal with girls when they got all clever like this. He turned and led the

way along the next section of tunnel, thinking he might have been better coming alone.

"You have to remember that danger can come from anywhere and everywhere," he said, as Mala followed on behind. "When I was in the vale with Amanda—"

"Who of course knows *everything* about the vale," said Mala sarcastically.

"Well she knows more than you do. Hey, what's the matter?"

Mala had come to a halt, her hands across her mouth in a gesture of alarm.

Peter looked to see what had caught her attention. Two small pools of scarlet light were shining out of the darkness ahead. They looked like a pair of eyes.

"Stay back, Mala!" Peter edged forward till his torch beam encompassed the lights. "It's a rat," he exclaimed, as the creature's body emerged out of the darkness. The two red lights were indeed eyes, set in the midst of a mass of sooty fur. In the further distance, a long tail flicked back and forth across the tunnel floor. "Good grief," said Peter.

“It’s enormous!”

“It’s the size of a cat,” said Mala. “Do you think it’s strange?”

“I expect so,” said Peter. “Most things are around here.”

And then something very unexpected happened, even by the usual standards of strangeness.

The rat began to speak.

“Three oranges, a packet of salted almonds and a Battenberg cake,” it said. Then it began to wash its face rather noisily. “And a copy of Explorer Magazine,” it continued as though as an afterthought. It spoke in the voice of a human male, embellished with just the occasional hint of a squeak.

Mala’s reaction was equally unexpected. Before Peter could stop her, she leapt forward, advancing on the rat as if she meant to embrace it.

“Father!” she cried. “What have they done to you?”

“What the—” Peter began, but before he could get any further, the rat came forward and bared its teeth at Mala,

who leapt back as though she had been slapped in the face.

Peter was worried that the rat would pounce on her, so he ran at the creature, shouting and waving his arms. The rat retreated a couple of steps then rallied and bared its teeth in defiance, its tail flicking angrily and rapidly to either side.

It was a standoff.

Fortunately, Peter had his bag to hand and he rustled around in it, trying to make as much noise as possible to help hold the rat at bay. Then, with great relief, he finally put his hand on what he had been searching for: the bag of voice grenades.

“Take that!” he cried, unwrapping a silver-covered grenade and lobbing it at the rat.

It landed directly in front of the creature, scaring it off with a loud declaration that no singing and dancing was allowed after 10 PM. The rat sped away down a hole, from which it peered out in consternation.

Peter turned to check on Mala.

She was sitting on the floor with her head in her

hands.

“How stupid of me,” she said. “I thought it was my father.”

“Er, why was that?” asked Peter, who couldn’t help but be curious.

“The shopping list,” said Mala. “They were all things my father would buy. He loves Battenberg cake and oranges, and almonds are his favourite type of nut. He always used to carry salted nuts in his pocket on expeditions. And of course, he takes Explorer Magazine, though he always complains about the poor standard of the articles.”

“So you thought your father had been turned into a rat?” asked Peter, rather incredulous.

“Is that so ridiculous?” Mala asked. “This is Peculiarshire, isn’t it? How am I supposed to know if something’s too peculiar to be true?”

Peter could see she had a point.

“I only knew it wasn’t him when he leapt at me like that,” Mala explained. “My father would never attack me

like that under any circumstances. Mind you,” she added, “how come it knew so many things that my father likes? It can’t be coincidence, surely?”

Peter had been poking around on the floor of the tunnel where they had first seen the rat.

“I think I can help with that one,” he said. “Do you recognise this?” He held up a brown notebook.

“That’s my father’s diary!” Mala exclaimed.

“I thought so,” said Peter. “It was lying on the ground, and here on the page that was open is a shopping list: oranges, salted almonds, Battenberg cake, and a copy of Explorer Magazine.”

Mala clapped her hands together. “So that’s how the rat knew. It came from the diary. It all makes sense now. But wait a minute, doesn’t that mean that the rat must be able to read?”

“That’s no big deal,” said Peter with a shrug. “This is Peculiarshire after all.”

“But how did the diary get here?” asked Mala. “What does it mean?”

“I think it’s good news,” said Peter. “It means your father must have dropped it. So he must have been down here, just like you thought. We’re on the right track after all.”

Mala gave a nervous smile. “Good,” she said. “I just hope he’s all right, that’s all.”

“There’s only one way to find out,” said Peter. “Let’s get going,”

They picked up their bags and readied themselves to take a look at the next part of the tunnel, but then they heard an extraordinary noise from behind.

It sounded like a cross between the cry of a wounded cat and that of an elephant. It reverberated all along the tunnel and raised the hairs on the back of Peter’s neck.

“What on earth is that?” asked Mala.

Peter said he didn’t know. It sounded like some kind of monster.

“You stay here,” he said. “I’m going to find out.”

“Not without me, you’re not,” said Mala. “You’re not leaving me here with only that giant rat for company,

thanks very much.”

“Okay,” said Peter, “but stay behind me. At least I’ve got the splodger to defend us with.” He brought the bottle out of his bag and held it ready, though he didn’t know how much use it would be. He was starting to really miss the bazooka. “Here, you take the bag of voices,” he said, handing it to Mala. “Give it to me if I ask for it. That way, we’ll have it handy.”

“All right,” said Mala, “though you’re being a little bit bossy.

“Can we discuss that later?” Peter said in exasperation. “This is not a good time.”

Mala said she supposed he was right.

This much settled, they retraced their steps cautiously along the tunnel until the web appeared again in the light of the torch. This time, it was shaking about as though in a high wind and Peter didn’t know whether to laugh or cry at the sight, for trapped in its grip and fighting hard to break free, her face screwed up with the effort of resistance, was a furious girl with long dark hair: Amanda Chubb.

Not Enough Splodger

Numerous hands had sprung from the web to trap Amanda. One of them was over her mouth, acting like a gag. The sound they had heard was her trying to call for help.

Peter sprayed with the splodger, freeing her mouth first.

“Thank you,” she said with a gasp. “I have to say, this is all very embarrassing.”

“Didn’t you see the web?” said Peter, standing there with the splodger. “We crawled underneath it.”

“I lost my torch when I fell down the ramp,” said Amanda. “I haven’t been able to see where I was going.”

“You could have called to us before.”

“Humph,” said Amanda. “I wanted to surprise you.”

“Oh, I see,” said Peter, “you wanted to do the big hero’s entrance again, the way you saved me last time. Ha, ha!”

“Look,” said Amanda. “I for one would really appreciate it if you could do less gloating and more splodging.”

“She’s right,” said Mala. “You really need to get splodging.”

“Why?” said Peter. “Oh, I see...”

Two enormous multi-faceted eyes had appeared at the entrance to the nearby hole. It looked as though the spider had been in there all along, perhaps having taken a rest after spinning its web. Now it poked its tentacles out of the hole, regarding Amanda with interest. From what Peter could tell, it was huge, its bulbous body almost as big as one of the children.

“She’s right,” said Amanda nervously. “You need to get splodging!”

Peter wasn’t going to argue. He sprayed round the

various hands and Amanda began to free herself. Meanwhile, the spider crept forward, visibly anxious not to lose this promising meal. Peter peered at it nervously.

“You still got that stick you brought for the sausages?” he asked Mala.

Mala was already ahead of him. She brought out the stick and waved it around to fend the spider away. It seemed discouraged by this and held back. Then it opened its mouth, perhaps to yawn, but perhaps to display its mandibles in a threatening gesture. Either way, Mala didn’t look happy.

“Come on, get a move on Peter!” she cried. “She’s only got four limbs to free. She isn’t a spider herself.”

“Your new friend is very perceptive,” Amanda muttered grumpily. Then she saw that the spider was slowly advancing again. It seemed increasingly unimpressed with the threat of Mala’s stick. Perhaps it was getting hungry.

“You really need to get on with that spraying,” said Amanda.

“It’s hard,” said Peter. “It’s getting near the end of the bottle.”

“You should have brought a full one.”

“It was full when I started,” Peter protested.

“There’s another bottle in my bag,” said Amanda. “I must have dropped it when I got caught in the web. It was too far away for me to reach or I would have freed myself.”

The spider drew closer. Mala started hitting it with the stick and it retreated a couple of steps, then stood there as though in thought. Mala hit it again but this time the stick broke in two. She had some more sticks in her bag but how would she fend off the spider while she searched for them?

“Just one more hand now,” said Peter, “but the bottle’s almost out.”

“The spider’s almost here,” said Mala, who, for want of anything better to do, was standing there trying to look threatening.

Then she remembered something which might help.

There were rustling sounds nearby and two large objects emerged from the darkness further back in the

tunnel. Two more gigantic spiders had arrived.

“Maybe you should get the bottle out of my bag,” Amanda told Peter.

“It’ll take me too long to find it,” he said. He was desperately trying to get the squirting head off the bottle. “There’s quite a lot of splodger in here if I can get to it.”

“Help!” cried Amanda.

“What’s the use of yelling like that?” asked Peter. “I’m doing the best I can.”

“I know,” said Amanda, “but it makes me feel a bit better.”

Then all of a sudden, there was a very loud voice from nearby.

“Standing room only at the rear of the auditorium,” it said. Mala had found the bag of voice grenades. She couldn’t throw them very far but she didn’t have to. The grenade had gone off right at the side of the spider.

All the insects retreated, perhaps wondering where this strange new sound had come from.

“That’s done it,” said Peter, who had got the top off

the bottle at last. He poured the remaining contents over the last of the hands. It fell away and Amanda was finally free.

“You took your time,” she said.

“I suggest you write to complain about the splodger bottles,” said Peter. “Let’s get out of here.” They grabbed their bags and scurried away down the tunnel. They had no choice but to go further into the tunnel now. The way heading back was blocked by the monstrous spiders. Peter held the torch to show them the way forward.

“I wonder where this goes?” he said, as they fled into the darkness.

“Judging from all the strangeness last night and from what seems to be the direction we’re taking, I think it’s the Vale of Strange,” said Amanda.

Mala let out a horrified gasp.

Peter grumbled something under his breath.

That was what he’d been afraid she would say.

Making New Friends

“I need to introduce you two,” said Peter, when they were far enough away from the spiders to feel a bit more secure. They were making their way through a largely featureless stretch of tunnel, which emerged from darkness ahead of their torch then disappeared into nothing again behind. Peter vaguely remembered being somewhere like this before, perhaps in his dreams.

“Amanda, this is Mala,” he said. “Mala, this is Amanda.”

“Pleased to meet you,” they both muttered, though neither seemed very convinced.

“It was good of you to come and help us,” said Mala.

Amanda stared back at her and blinked in surprise.

“Are you being sarcastic?” she asked.

Peter gave a sigh. This wasn’t a very good start.

“Look,” he said. “We’re all in this together—”

“I was only trying to be nice,” said Mala. “It’s not my fault if you got trapped in a web and had to be rescued.”

“How did you get past the guards?” interjected Peter, who thought a change of subject might be helpful.

“At the same time as you,” Amanda explained. “I was waiting there before you arrived, and I slipped inside while the guards were diverted by that voice of yours. Those are really good, by the way. Do you have any more?”

“I think there’s a few,” said Peter. “They’re very useful, aren’t they? But if you slipped through at the same time as us, why didn’t we see you?”

“I was careful to keep out of sight – of you as well as the guards. I waited till you were well away before I went down the ramp. By that time, my eyes had adjusted to the darkness there, so I could just about see it.”

“I think we heard you coming down the ramp,” said Peter.

“I thought you might, so I was careful to lie there quietly at the bottom a while until you were further ahead. Everything went to plan apart from the spider’s web.”

“That was kind of a big thing to go wrong though, wasn’t it?” Mala observed. She was sounding playful. “I mean, you could have died if it wasn’t for us.”

Peter hoped that Amanda wouldn’t hit her.

“Look, I’m grateful,” said Amanda, “really, really grateful, okay? I wish I could throw a voice grenade a yard and a half the way you can, Mala.”

“Distance doesn’t matter,” said Mala. “It’s all in the timing.”

“Look, I’m not going to put up with this,” said Peter. “We’re here in a very dangerous place. We have to get along.”

“Of course,” said Mala airily.

“I suppose you’re right,” said Amanda, sounding grumpy. “Look, I admit it, all right? I followed you both so I could spring out from nowhere and save the day just like I did last time with Peter. But it didn’t work out the way I

intended, okay? I’m grateful to you both for saving me. Now let’s move on.”

“Thank you, Amanda,” said Peter. “That’s very helpful. Mala, can I just remind you of why we’re all here?”

Mala looked a bit embarrassed. “To save my father,” she said, as though reminding herself. “And I, er, I’m grateful to you both for that.”

“So can we concentrate on what we’ve got to do?” said Peter. “It’ll be hard enough even if we work as a team.”

“All right,” said the girls, sounding almost united.

“Now is there anything we need to talk about? Can we stop and have something to eat and discuss our situation perhaps?” Peter came to a halt and sat on the ground, inviting the others to join him.

“Perhaps we can have some of Mala’s sausages?” Amanda suggested.

“I didn’t bring any sausages,” Mala protested.

“But I thought—”

“Look, I brought the sticks but forgot the sausages. It’s easily done.”

“If you say so,” Amanda replied disbelievingly. “I brought some sandwich fillings. Shame I forgot the bread.”

“That’s not the same—” Mala began.

Peter gave the deepest of sighs. This wasn’t going to be easy.

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An Underground Picnic

They ate an interesting meal of some sausage rolls and chocolate cake that Peter had brought; some vegetable rissoles, hummus, and salad from Amanda; and a packet of corn flakes, tomato ketchup, and half a lemon from Mala.

“Did you bring milk by any chance?” asked Amanda.

“No,” said Mala. “What would we want with milk?”

“Some people have it with cereals.”

“If I’d brought the milk, we’d have needed bowls as well,” Mala explained, “and that would have been inconvenient.”

Amanda threw a baffled glance at Peter, who looked away and studied his sausage roll.

“What about you, Amanda,” asked Mala. “Did you bring any fish fingers?”

“No,” said Amanda. “Why should I do that?”

“My father and I often have fish fingers with salad,” said Mala. “But it’s all right if you haven’t bothered to bring any. I don’t suppose I’ll miss them all that much.” She gave an enormous sigh.

Peter asked if someone could pass the tomato ketchup.

“This is just like a picnic, isn’t it?” he said, trying to sound cheerful.

“What I was wondering,” said Mala, while Amanda fumed at her side, “is why is the tunnel so small? An adult would have to stoop to get along it.”

“Hmm,” said Peter. “I suppose it’s because the Australovians built it. Those digging machines they were using are not very big.”

“They could have made it much bigger,” Amanda suggested. “They could have used a megamole.”

“A what?” asked Peter and Mala in unison.

“A megamole,” said Amanda, who seemed a little happier all of a sudden. “I looked it up in the encyclopaedia of the world. It’s a giant mole native to Australovia which the Australovians use to dig the underground homes they live in. So why didn’t they bring one over here? It would have dug a bigger tunnel.”

“Maybe it cost too much to transport,” Peter suggested.

“But they used lots of little digging machines,” said Mala. “They must have had to pay for all those to come over.”

“That wouldn’t be as costly as the megamole, I don’t suppose,” said Amanda. “It takes up a whole page of the encyclopaedia. And it’s a big encyclopaedia.”

“We still haven’t answered my question,” said Mala. “Why is this tunnel so small? Is it really just for Australovians – and children – to come and go?”

“Surely they must have built it for Mala’s father,” argued Peter, “as a safe way to get to the vale.”

“Then why not make it the right size for my father?”

said Mala. "He's a very tall man. He'll get a bad back walking along here. And anyway," she added, "he's writing a book, remember? He needs to be up at the surface where he can see things to describe. There's nothing down here for him to write about except giant rats and spiders and gloomy tunnels."

They all sat and thought in silence. She had made a good point.

"Speaking of books," said Amanda, "did you say this Percival Crow was born in Peculiarshire?"

"That's what my uncle and aunt said," Peter replied. "He lived round here as a boy. I assume that's how he came to suggest the vale to your father for his next expedition."

"That's what he told me too," Mala agreed.

"In that case," said Amanda, "he would know that any book about the vale, any accurate book, would be banned from general sale because outsiders aren't supposed to know all about the vale. Only the locals here in Peculiarshire would be allowed to read it. So Crow's idea

about bringing your father here to rebuild his career as a bestseller doesn't make sense."

"Wow," said Peter, "you're right! So what on earth?"

"I don't think whatever's happening here is really about the expedition at all," said Amanda. "That's just a front for something else, something that's probably nothing to do with Mala's father. Something that's all about Percival Crow."

Mala sat looking at Amanda in new respect, though also in surprise.

"I think you're right," she said. "How clever."

"But what could it be?" asked Peter.

"My uncle has never really got on with my father," said Mala. "They always used to fall out, so I was quite surprised when my uncle seemed to be doing something to help him. But if that wasn't really what was happening at all, it makes perfect sense. I was looking at my father's diary just now and there's nothing about the tunnel or anything planned for last night. There's nothing about the meeting my uncle said my father had to go to either. So I

still think my father knew nothing about the tunnel. He just heard the commotion and came down here to see what was going on. If he was running one way and the Australovians were fleeing the other, there can't have been very much room. You can see how his diary might have got knocked to the floor. But the question is, what happened next and where is my father now?"

She stared into space as though looking there for the answer.

"And after all that happened last night," said Amanda, "the other question that comes to mind is, why's it so ordinary down here now?"

"Ordinary?" asked Peter.

"I mean, not strange."

Peter and Mala blinked.

"There are giant spiders and rats," said Mala. "Those are strange enough."

"But there's nothing else," said Amanda. "I mean this part of the tunnel is so not strange it's positively boring. There aren't even any heeble-greebs, as Peter no doubt

thoroughly assessed before inviting us to sit down here for a picnic." She paused to glare pointedly at Peter, who coloured up, having done no such thing. "We know from Percival Crow and the Australovians that the whole place was positively oozing with strangeness last night. So where's it all gone?"

Peter and Mala had no idea. They stared at Amanda, waiting to hear more, but she just stood up and started packing away the remains of the food, looking pleased with herself.

"What do you really think is happening, Amanda?" asked Mala.

Amanda didn't seem to be in the mood to say. "I've got some ideas," she said, "but it's a bit early to talk about them yet. Come on. We ought to get going."

As Peter helped with the cleaning up, Mala whispered so that only he could hear.

"Amanda likes to show off about how much she knows, doesn't she? At the same time as keeping the rest of us baffled."

“Yes, she does like to show off a bit,” Peter admitted, “but she knows a lot about the vale. We’re lucky to have her with us.”

“Hmm,” said Mala. “I suppose so.”

She picked up her bag and slung it rather forcefully over her shoulder, then went across to Amanda. “Can I carry anything for you?” she asked.

“No, thank you,” said Amanda rather suspiciously.

“Okay,” said Mala, “I just thought your head might get a bit heavy with all those ideas going round in it all the time. You can always share them with us, you know.”

She turned to look at Peter.

“Are we ready to go then?” she called out breezily. “Last one’s a tortoise!” And she strode off along the tunnel.

24

Crossroads

“We could play I Spy,” Mala said as they walked along. “I’ll go first. I spy with my little eye, something beginning with T.”

“Tunnel,” said Amanda grumpily.

“Oh, you’re too good at this,” said Mala. “Perhaps we should tell each other jokes instead. Here’s a good one. What do you call an undercover apple?”

“How should I know?” said Amanda.

“A banana,” said Mala. “I made that one up myself. Peter will explain it to you.”

“No, I won’t,” said Peter. “It’s a silly joke.”

“But aren’t you starting to find it funny?” asked Mala. “Not even a little bit? It could be a peach or an apricot of

course—any type of fruit that isn't an apple—but for some reason it's only funny if you say banana."

"It's not very funny even if you do say banana," Peter insisted.

"It's an awful lot worse if you don't," said Mala. "Trust me."

"Look," said Amanda, pointing into the distance. "There's some kind of crossroads ahead."

There was indeed.

A short distance ahead, the way diverged along four separate tunnels, each leading at a different angle out of a central larger space where the remains of a camp could be seen. There were upturned chairs, shattered pots, and playing cards scattered across the floor. From the size of the chairs, there had been Australovians here, and they'd left in a hurry.

"It looks like some kind of base," said Peter. "But what were they doing here?"

"Digging tunnels by the look of it," said Amanda.

"But why dig so many?" asked Mala. "And which one

do we take?"

"Let me think," said Amanda. She took the torch and went up to each in turn. "Hmm," she said eventually. "I think we should try this one." She pointed to the one on the left. "Come on," she said, leading the way.

Mala looked at Peter who shrugged and followed.

"What do you think we will find?" he asked as they set off along the tunnel.

"Nothing," Amanda replied, "but we need to check I'm right about that."

Sure enough, a short way along, the tunnel ended in a blank wall of earth.

"Ta da," said Amanda. "Just as I thought."

"Very clever," said Mala, "but why should they dig a tunnel that doesn't go anywhere?"

"The same reason they dug all the others," Amanda replied. "To find what they were looking for. And I think they found more of it than they bargained for."

Mala gave a sigh. "It would be nice if just occasionally you made some kind of sense when you spoke," she said.

“She’s talking about strangeness, I think,” said Peter. “We know they encountered more of that than they knew what to do with.”

“But why should they be looking for strangeness?”

“A good question,” Amanda replied, “but why ever it was, they kept on missing it. It must have been very annoying to come so close and not be able to find it. To dig so many tunnels and draw a blank.”

“But we must be under the vale by now,” Peter observed. “Isn’t it full of strangeness all over?”

“Yes, but there are hotspots. Underground bands of strangeness, a bit like deposits of rock or underground water. Come on, let’s go back to the crossroads.”

“Mr. Crow told Uncle Bob they had hit a band of strangeness in the hole they dug for the swimming pool,” Peter remembered. “That was why they wanted to borrow the angulator.”

“Yes,” said Amanda, “except now we know the hole wasn’t really for a swimming pool at all. It was for this tunnel. And they didn’t want to avoid strangeness, they

were looking for it. That’s what I think, anyway. Why else would they dig so many tunnels? And was it just coincidence that the day they got the angulator was the same day they hit their so-called ‘outbreak of strangeness’? Once they had that device, they knew which direction to dig in.”

“Hmm,” said Peter. “That makes sense. But I still don’t understand why they wanted strangeness. It’s such a dangerous thing. As they found out.”

“Perhaps we’ll get a chance to ask,” said Amanda, “if we find the right tunnel.”

They were back at the crossroads now.

“So which shall we try next?” asked Mala. “Is there another favourite dead end you’re hoping to show us?”

“No,” said Amanda. “Let’s try this one here.” She pointed to the second of the three remaining tunnels. “I think this is the one they dug last night, the one that connected with strangeness.”

Mala looked suddenly worried. “Is it safe?” she asked.

“No, of course not,” Amanda replied. “If you want to

stay safe, go home.”

Mala looked annoyed. “If I thought that way, I’d have stayed at home in the first place,” she said. “But someone had to save you from those giant spiders.”

Amanda drew a great breath to reply but Peter got there first.

“Why do you think this tunnel’s the right one?” he asked. “They all look the same to me.”

“They may all look the same,” said Amanda, “but they don’t all sound the same. Can you hear it?”

They all stood and listened. Quietly, along Amanda’s chosen tunnel, came the sound of drilling and the sawing of wood.

“Get ready for action,” Amanda told them. “Have your splodger and voice grenades ready, and anything else you have that might be useful in battle.”

“You’re the only one with any splodger left,” Peter reminded her, “and I’ve already used up most of the voice grenades.”

“What about you?” Amanda asked Mala. “Have you

got anything to use as a weapon?”

“Er, a bottle of ketchup,” she said, “and half a lemon.”

“You’d better take this as well then,” said Amanda, reaching into her bag and handing her the book on the Vale of Strange.

Mala looked at the cover. “What?” she said. “To look things up in, you mean?”

“You could try that,” said Amanda, “but there probably won’t be time. I was thinking more of dropping it on their heads.”

“Whose heads?” Mala asked. But Amanda was already leading the way along the new section of tunnel.

25

The Puddle of Strangeness

They hadn't gone far before Amanda stopped and pointed ahead.

"Look," she said. "Strangeness!"

They could see it a short way in front of them. The light of the torch was reflected back by dozens of tiny floating mirrors, while strange black birds with bulging blue eyes, and giant sparkling red dragonflies flew between them. Along the walls, doors swung open, revealing a series of chiming clocks from which appeared an endless stream of multi-coloured frogs. "Ga-bleek," they croaked as they hopped away and disappeared in wild explosions of smoke.

"Wow," said Mala. "This really is very strange. Do all

these things have names? Are some of them bogeys?"

"No," said Amanda. "Bogeys are much bigger. These things may have names – I'd have to check in the guidebook – but they may just be things that appear once and you never see them again."

"That's a shame," said Mala. "Those hopping things are cute."

"Don't forget they may also be dangerous," said Peter. "It may be best to stay where we are for now till we've had the chance to research these things in the book."

"On the other hand," said Amanda, "we've got a full bottle of splodger. That's probably all we need."

"It's also our last bottle of splodger," Peter reminded her. "We're almost out of weapons and we've only just started."

But for once, Amanda and Mala were in agreement.

"We'll never find my father if we turn and run at the first sight of strangeness," Mala said. "And don't forget, if we go back, we'll have to get past those giant spiders again."

“I’m not saying we should go back,” said Peter, “just take our time to— What are those?”

Amanda had reached into her bag and was bringing out what seemed to be pieces of mesh.

“My father used to keep bees,” she explained, “but one day they swarmed and attacked my mother who strongly suggested he should get a new hobby. That was when he went out and bought the geese. But anyway, I found these masks that he used to use for the bees. They should guard against getting pecked in the eye by those strange birds and also against whatever those dragonflies do to annoy humans. Not sure about the frogs but they shouldn’t be too much trouble. We’ve all got our sturdy boots on.”

She passed round the masks and they put them on. It wasn’t a moment too soon.

With a *whoosh* the strangeness came rushing towards them along the tunnel like an incoming wave on a beach. Suddenly there were birds and dragonflies all around. Peter felt the strangeness against his skin like an icy, tingling wind. He struggled to get his breath and found

himself waving his arms about to keep the creatures from getting too close. He faintly heard Amanda’s voice as though through a high wind.

“Come on, let’s get going!” she called. “The quicker we go, the sooner we get through this.”

He peered through the storm of flying things to see her charging off down the tunnel. Mala, meanwhile, stood in one spot, waving her arms and demanding loudly to be taken home.

“Come on!” Peter grabbed her hand and pulled her with him along the tunnel. As they ran, the occasional creature impacted against the masks they wore. It was like swimming through cold soup with chunky bits.

Peter thought he heard screaming, but he wasn’t sure if it was Mala or part of the strangeness, and all the time the clocks were chiming and frogs were jumping against their legs with faint croaks of “Ga-bleek.”

And then it changed again.

There was another *whoosh*, and suddenly the tide had turned and the strangeness was rushing past them again,

receding along the tunnel ahead, pulling the birds and dragonflies, frogs and clocks along as it went. The icy tingling disappeared, replaced with a warmer, stronger wind which Peter felt pulling him forward in the wake of the strangeness. He lost hold of Mala's hand and then lost his footing as well. But he didn't fall and hit the ground. So strong was the wind, he was carried along in mid-air like an autumn leaf. He was vaguely aware of the girls nearby, being blown along beside him, but other than that all he could see were the walls of the tunnel rushing past as he lay on a cushion of wind.

And then it all came to an end with a loud *chunk*.

Peter became aware that he was pushed up against something soft. Then something else, both soft and hard, dealt him a blow in the back.

"Human children," something announced, "they block machine."

"Switch off motor," came another voice. "Is all vacuumed up anyway. Whole puddle of strangeness cleared away. Only human children remain. Could be part

of strangeness themselves or misplaced tourists. See what they say for themselves."

A whooshing noise, which the wind had hidden, now fell away altogether and Peter tumbled to the floor. Looking round, he realised that he had been sandwiched between Mala and Amanda, all pushed up against the end of a long tube. The girls were lying there beside him now, not looking badly harmed but rubbing their bruises. Mala was going 'ouch,' a lot. Amanda just looked cross.

Peter thought he recognised one of the voices they had heard. He looked up to see a creature with spindly arms and legs and a great mop of unruly hair peering down at him. It was holding the hose of a massive vacuum cleaner with a sign on the side which read, **Property Kings Cross Station – Do Not Remove.**

It was a lifkin.

"You like barter head protector?" it asked.