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The omega files. Short stories
by Jennifer Bassett
(Adapted book. Beginner level)

EDI: European Department of Intelligence

There were two of them. Hawker and Jude. They had no other names. Just Hawker and Jude. They were young, fast, and clever. They worked for EDI, in the European Government.

You know about the Americans' CIA and the Russians' KGB? Well, this was EDI - the European Department of Intelligence. Big secrets. Very strange secrets. The secrets of the Omega Files. They don't get into the newspapers, and most people never hear about them. Most people don't know anything about EDI.

In the early years Hawker and Jude travelled a lot. Brussels, Strasbourg, Rome, Delhi, Washington ... North Africa, South America, Australia ... No home, no family, just work. They worked for the top man in the Brussels office of EDI, and only for him. He was called Aria. Nobody knew his real name, or much about him. Some said he was Latvian; others said he was from another planet. He always gave the hard jobs to Hawker and Jude. The jobs with questions, but not many answers. The Omega Files.

When I met them, many years later. Hawker and Jude were about seventy years old. They lived very quietly, in a little white house on a Greek island. They went walking, swimming, fishing; they sat in the sun, and slept a lot.

At first, they didn't want to talk about their work.

'We can't,' said Jude. 'Our work was secret. It's all in the government files, and nobody can read them.'

'After thirty years,' I said, 'people can read all secret government files.'

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'Not these files,' Hawker said. 'It's a hundred years before people can read the EDI files.'

I looked at them. 'But I don't need to read the files,' I said. 'I can get the stories from you.'

* * *

And I did. Here are some of them ...

Omega File 349: London, England

'There's a young man in London called Johnny Cook,' Aria said. 'He's about eighteen. He doesn't have a home, but he goes clubbing nearly every night. Those all-night dance clubs for young people. Here's a photograph of him.'

He put the photograph on the table, and Jude and Hawker looked at it.

'And?' Hawker said.

'He wants to sell a story to a newspaper,' Aria said. 'Some story about a drug company. Find him. Talk to him. What's his story? I want to know.'

Jude and Hawker took an afternoon plane from Brussels to London, and then went to a hotel.

'What are you going to wear tonight?' said Jude. 'Not those old jeans, please!'

'What's wrong with them?' Hawker said. 'We're going clubbing, not out to dinner at the Ritz Hotel.'

'Well, wear a different shirt, then. That one's dirty.'

'You can wash it for me,' Hawker said.

'Get lost!' said Jude.

They had dinner, watched television for an hour or two, and then went out. It was a warm night, with a little rain now and then.

'London weather,' said Hawker.

They found a taxi with a young driver, and got in.

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‘Where to?’ said the driver.

‘We want to go clubbing,’ Jude said. ‘Where’s the best place this week? Do you know?’

‘Bruno’s,’ the driver said. ‘Or Garcia’s, down by the river. Everybody’s going there this week.’

‘OK, let’s go!’ said Hawker.

They went to Garcia’s first, then moved on to Bruno’s. They found Johnny Cook in a third club, called Monty’s. It was two o’clock in the morning.

‘That’s him, all right,’ Hawker said. ‘Look at his ear.’ Johnny Cook was tall and thin, with long yellow hair and two black earrings in his left ear.

‘Johnny! Johnny Cook!’ shouted Jude suddenly. She ran and put her arms round Johnny Cook’s neck. ‘Hi, Johnny! You remember me - Jude. We met last week, at Garcia’s. You remember? Oh, this is my friend Hawker.’

‘Hi, Johnny. Good to meet you,’ said Hawker.

‘Hi,’ said Johnny Cook. He looked at Jude. ‘Did we meet at Garcia’s?’

‘Of course we did,’ laughed Jude. ‘I was with Sara and Patti and the others, remember?’

‘Oh. Yeah,’ said Johnny. ‘I remember.’ He looked around. ‘Are they here tonight?’

‘No, it’s just me and Hawker tonight,’ said Jude. ‘Come on, let’s dance.’

They danced for two hours. Then they left with about ten other people, and went across the river to a new club.

The music there was louder and the dancing was very fast. After two more hours of dancing, Hawker was hot, tired, and thirsty.

‘I’m getting old,’ he said to Jude. ‘Don’t these people ever go to bed?’

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‘You’re only twenty-five!’ said Jude. ‘That’s not old. And you can’t stop yet. He’s getting very friendly now, and we can take him to breakfast soon.’

At seven o’clock the club closed, and Jude and Hawker took Johnny back to their hotel. Jude picked up the phone and asked for three big breakfasts in the room.

Hawker took his shoes off. ‘Ah, that’s better,’ he said. He looked at Johnny. ‘How often do you go clubbing, Johnny? And what do you do in the daytime?’

‘Not a lot. Sleep, usually. I go clubbing most nights.’

‘Where do you live?’ Hawker asked.

‘On the streets,’ said Johnny. ‘When I’m rich, I’m going to get a boat and live on that.’

‘Rich?’ Jude said. ‘Oh yes, we all want to be rich!’

‘But I am going to be rich,’ Johnny said. ‘I’ve got a good story, see?’ He laughed. ‘I’m going to sell it. A newspaper wants to give me 100,000 Euros for it. They gave me 1,000 last month, and I’m going to get the other 99,000 very soon.’

‘Great!’ said Jude. ‘So what’s the story then, Johnny? Have some more coffee, and tell us all about it.’

‘Well, you know the Tyler Drug Company?’ Johnny began. ‘They make drugs and medicines.’

‘Yes,’ Hawker said. ‘It’s a very big European company. They’ve got offices in all the big cities.’

‘Yeah, that’s right,’ Johnny said. ‘Well, they’re taking young people off the streets, and using them for tests.’

Jude laughed. ‘Nobody’s going to believe that!’ she said. ‘Drug companies use animals, not people, for their tests. Some new drugs can be very dangerous at first. Nobody wants people to die from a new medicine!’

‘It’s true!’ Johnny said angrily. ‘Think about it. All those young homeless people in London. They sleep every night along the Strand,

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and other streets. Nobody wants to know them, nobody asks questions about them. They've got no home, no family, nothing.'

'But they've got legs,' Hawker said. 'They can run away.'

'You don't understand,' said Johnny. 'Listen. I know, because I was there! I live on the streets, right? And late one night, along the Strand, they came and took me and some other people - a boy and two girls. They wanted to help us, they said. Hot food, nice beds, new clothes - everything! They took us to this big house-'

'Where?' said Hawker.

'I'm not saying where,' said Johnny.

'And what happened?' asked Jude.

'They gave us food, and new clothes, and beds to sleep in, all right. But we couldn't get out of the house, and men in white coats watched us all the time. And they put drugs in our food.'

'How do you know that?' Hawker asked.

'I felt ill. My eyes went strange, and I couldn't see very well. And one of the girls - she got very ill one night. She screamed and screamed, and the men in white coats came. I was in the next room and I listened through the wall. "This is very strange," one of the men said. "She had 20 grams of Coplas in her dinner tonight. Was that too much, do you think?" "I don't know," said a second man. "We don't want to kill her. Let's try 20 grams again tomorrow, on this girl and on one of the boys. We can't stop this test now. We must get answers quickly." After that, they talked more quietly, and I couldn't hear. But I didn't eat any more food in that house, and the next night I got into an office downstairs and took some papers. Then I broke out of the house and ran away fast.'

'What papers?' said Hawker.

'Papers with Tyler Drug Company's name on them.'

'And where are those papers now?' asked Jude.

'That's my secret,' Johnny said. 'When the newspaper gives me the money, I'm going to tell them. But I'm not going to tell you.'

* * *

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The next day Jude and Hawker flew back to Brussels and went to Aria's office. Aria listened to Johnny Cook's story, but he didn't say anything.

'So, what do we do now?' Jude said. 'Do we look for this big house and-'

Aria picked up his telephone. 'Come back in an hour,' he said. 'Get a coffee or something.'

An hour and three coffees later they went back.

'OK,' said Aria. 'You can forget all about this. Cook's story isn't true.'

Jude stared at him. 'Who told you that?' she said.

'I want to talk to Johnny Cook again,' Hawker said.

'You can't,' said Aria. 'He's dead.'

Hawker looked at Jude, and then back at Aria. 'He was alive yesterday,' said Hawker.

'Well, he isn't alive today. He came out of a club at three o'clock this morning and fell in the river Thames. When they got him out, he was dead.'

'But-' Jude began.

'Forget it, Jude. The file is closed.'

* * *

'And was that the end of it?' I asked, when Jude and Hawker finished telling the story.

'Yes,' said Hawker. 'Aria never spoke about it again.'

'And did you believe Johnny's story about the drug company?' I asked.

'Before a company can sell a new medicine to people,' said Hawker, 'there are years and years of tests. They do the tests on animals, of course. But they learn much more quickly from tests on people. There are lots of drug companies, and every company wants to be the first with a new medicine.'

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'About five years later,' Jude said, 'the Tyler Drug Company began to sell a new drug, called Coplastin. It was a medicine to stop some kinds of cancer, and it worked. Everybody wanted it. The company made a lot of money - and so the government got a lot of money from the company in taxes. Governments like rich companies and big, fat taxes. They're not very interested in homeless young people sleeping on the streets.'

'So Johnny Cook's story was true,' I said. 'And he didn't fall into the river - somebody pushed him.'

'Of course they pushed him,' said Jude. 'Dead men can't talk, can they?'

Omega File 451: Loch Ness, Scotland

'I want you to take the next plane to Scotland,' said Aria. 'Then get up to Loch Ness.'

'Oh, great,' said Hawker. 'Are we looking for the Loch Ness monster - old Nessie?'

Jude laughed.

'Don't laugh,' said Aria. 'You are looking for a monster.'

'Oh, come on, Aria,' Jude said. 'You don't mean that.'

'This photo came by email from Edinburgh,' said Aria. 'Look ...' He turned to his computer and opened a file. 'It's a night-time photo and not very good.'

Hawker and Jude stared at the photo on the computer screen. They could see water, and something big and grey, half in and half out of the water.

'It's got arms and a head,' said Hawker. 'But what is it?'

'It kills sheep, cats, and dogs,' Aria said. 'And perhaps small children next. People in Fort Augustus are screaming at London, and London is screaming at us. Go and find it.'

'What do we do with it when we find it?' asked Jude.

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‘Kill it,’ said Aria. ‘Before it kills you.’

Hawker and Jude waited for a minute, but Aria turned away and began to read his emails.

‘Are you telling us everything, Aria?’ asked Hawker. ‘Of course.’ Aria put his hands on the table. There were only two fingers on his left hand. ‘I always tell you everything. You know that.’

‘Huh!’ said Jude.

* * *

They took a plane to Inverness, then drove along the side of Loch Ness to Fort Augustus. It was a grey November day - grey sky, grey water, grey hills.

Hawker looked across the loch. ‘It’s easy to believe in monsters here,’ he said. ‘Loch Ness is about 200 metres deep. The third deepest lake in Europe. Did you know that? A hundred monsters could live down there.’

‘How are we going to find this thing?’ asked Jude. ‘Talk to people in Fort Augustus first,’ Hawker said. ‘Then take it from there.’

They talked to people in their hotel, and to people in the streets in Fort Augustus. Everybody had a lot to say.

‘It killed Mrs Fraser’s dog,’ said one woman. ‘She has a house down by the water. The monster came into her garden one night. Her little dog went to look, and the monster killed him - just like that.’

‘Killed six of my brother’s sheep,’ said a man called Dugald. ‘He’s very angry about it.’

‘Can we meet your brother?’ asked Jude. ‘Ask him some questions?’

Dugald’s brother, Archie, lived at Invermoriston, about nine kilometres up the loch. He was a big man, with black hair and blue eyes. He was not very friendly at first.

‘Who are you?’ he asked. ‘Are you army people?’

‘No,’ said Hawker. ‘Why do you ask that?’

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‘There’s an army laboratory in the hills above the loch. Lots of strange people there. And lots of boats on the loch at night. Coming and going.’

‘Mmm. Interesting,’ said Jude. ‘But tell us about the Loch Ness monster and your dead sheep.’

‘It wasn’t Nessie. Nessie doesn’t kill sheep,’ Archie said. ‘This ... thing ... broke their necks.’

‘Did you see it?’ asked Hawker.

‘Well, I saw something big, but it moved very fast. It was back in the loch in seconds. And it was nearly dark.’

‘Right,’ said Hawker. ‘Now, we’d like to look at your dead sheep, please. And then we need a boat. Where can we get a fast boat, Archie?’

‘What do you want a boat for?’

‘We’re going to catch this thing,’ said Jude, ‘and stop it killing your sheep.’

For the next four days Hawker and Jude went up and down Loch Ness in Archie Campbell’s boat. They talked to everybody around the loch. ‘When you see this monster, please ring us. Any time. Day or night. Our mobile phones are always turned on.’

They slept a little in the day, and were out most of the night in the boat, with their guns, cameras, mobile phones, a big flashlight, and litres of hot coffee. Once they thought they saw the monster just north of Invermoriston. Another night a call came from a little place called Foyers. They got there at six in the morning. It was dark and cold, and everything was very quiet. They sat in the boat, looking up and down the loch.

‘Look,’ whispered Hawker. ‘Down there, by the trees.’

Fifty metres away there were some tall trees by the side of the loch. There were some sheep under the trees - and something big and dark. Suddenly the sheep began to run.

‘Start the engine,’ said Hawker. ‘Let’s get down there.’

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When they got to the trees, they found five sheep with broken necks, but no monster.

‘It just kills, and goes away again,’ said Jude. ‘Horrible.’

The next night they were near Urquhart Castle when they saw two other boats. It was three in the morning.

‘Those boats again!’ said Hawker. ‘We heard their engines last night. And the night before. Who are they? Let’s go and see.’

Quietly, their boat moved nearer. There were four men in each boat - men in grey, young men with hard faces. They watched Hawker and Jude, and said nothing.

‘Hullo,’ said Jude, with a friendly smile. ‘Who are you?’

A tall man in the nearest boat answered. ‘Army,’ he said. ‘Who are you? What are you doing out here at this time of night?’

‘We’re visitors,’ said Jude. ‘Looking for Nessie, of course. What are you doing?’

‘There’s no monster in this loch,’ said the tall man. ‘Go back to your hotel and go to bed.’ The two army boats moved away, down the loch.

‘Nice,’ said Hawker. ‘Very friendly.’

Aria phoned them every morning. ‘Get on with it,’ he said. ‘Before this thing kills someone.’

‘We can’t get near it,’ Jude told him. ‘This loch is thirty-six kilometres long and two kilometres across. There are only two of us, and we’re not getting any sleep.’

‘You can sleep later,’ said Aria. ‘Just catch this thing.’

‘We met some army people last night,’ Jude said. ‘What are they doing here? What do they do at their laboratory?’

The phone went quiet. Then, ‘What laboratory?’

‘The army laboratory in the hills above Loch Ness.’ The phone went dead. ‘Well, well,’ Jude said to Hawker. ‘He doesn’t know. Or he’s not telling.’

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The monster came out of the loch and killed sheep nearly every night. Everybody around the loch wanted to help Hawker and Jude, and their mobile phones never stopped ringing. A lot of people thought the monster was Nessie, but Archie knew it wasn't.

'Nessie never killed anything in fifteen hundred years,' he said. 'This is something different, and it's going to start killing people soon. Look, you need some sheep.'

'Sheep?' said Hawker. 'Do you mean sleep?' He was very tired after ten nights on the loch.

'Of course!' said Jude. 'Clever Archie. Can you get us some old sheep then? Or perhaps we can use Hawker. He's nearly an old sheep by now.'

'Oh, shut up,' said Hawker.

They found a good place between Invermoriston and Urquhart Castle with some trees by the water, and took their six old sheep there. For three nights they watched, but no monster came. The men in grey were out every night too. They were never far away from Hawker and Jude, but never came to speak to them.

On the fourth night Hawker and Jude arrived at their sheep place later than usual. It was a warm, rainy night - soft Scottish rain that never stops.

When they turned the engine off, everything was quiet - just the rain whispering on the loch. Hawker got out of the boat and stood with the flashlight, watching and listening. Jude sat in the boat, with her gun in her hand.

'Where are the men in grey?' whispered Hawker.

'Don't know,' Jude whispered back. 'Behind us, I think.'

Then everything happened at once. There was a sudden noise of boats' engines behind them, and at the same time something moved in the water in front of them. A head and two long arms came out of the water.

'Light!' shouted Jude. 'Quick!'

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Hawker turned on the flashlight, and at once the monster stood up and ran at Hawker through the water, its long arms going for Hawker's head.

'Get down, Hawker!' screamed Jude. In a second Hawker was under the water, and then came the sound of Jude's gun - once, twice, and then a third time.

When the monster stopped moving, Hawker and Jude went to look at it. It was a greeny-black colour, bigger than a man, and with very long arms and legs. It had a small head on a long neck. It was a strange, horrible thing.

A minute later, the men in grey arrived in their two boats. They got out and came to look at the dead monster.

'Oh dear,' the tall man said. 'Poor old Nessie.'

'That', said Hawker, 'is not Nessie. So what is it?'

'Visitors, aren't you?' said the tall man. 'Where from?'

Hawker and Jude stared at him and said nothing. Then Jude took something out of her pocket and held it up, in front of the tall man's eyes.

He looked at it. 'Oh,' he said. 'I see. EDI. Don't see many of those. OK, what do you want to know?'

'What - is - that - thing}' said Jude.

The tall man looked unhappy. 'It is, or it was, one of the army's new fighters. It got away from our laboratory, and we just couldn't catch it.'

'But it was alive ... a - a living thing,' said Hawker. 'You can make a lot of living things in a laboratory these days,' said the tall man. 'Genetic engineering is getting very clever. This fighter can run all night, live under water, see in the dark. But it's new. We haven't got it right yet.'

'And it's programmed to kill anything, is it?' said Jude. 'No, no,' the tall man said quickly. 'Not this one. This one just kills small animals with four legs - sheep, dogs, cats, things like that.'

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'Well,' said Jude, 'that is nice to know.'

'And where are the other monsters?' asked Hawker. 'For killing men, women, and children - things like that.' The tall man smiled. 'Can't answer that, I'm afraid. Talk to your people in Brussels. Well, we must get back. Lots to do, you know. Thanks for your help. Bye.'

The men in grey put their dead monster in one of the boats and went away up the loch into the dark and the rain.

* * *

'And what did Aria say about it all?' I asked.

'He was so angry!' Hawker said. 'He went crazy! He didn't know about the monsters, you see. Or the laboratory. The army didn't tell anyone in Brussels.'

'And Aria liked to know everyone's secrets,' said Jude.

'Did the army make any more monsters?' I asked.

'Not in Scotland,' said Hawker. The British army closed their laboratory after that. The Americans and the French made some monsters years later. They were smaller, like big cats, but with eight legs.'

'Where are they now?' I said. 'You don't hear anything about them.'

'Of course not,' said Jude. 'People don't want to hear about monsters.'

'They're in Antarctica. Or in a place deep under the ground,' said Hawker. 'Nice and secret. Just waiting for the next war.'

'And so there isn't a Loch Ness monster, and never was one,' I said.

'Nessie?' said Jude. She looked me in the eyes and did not smile. 'Of course there's a Loch Ness monster. She's a blue-grey colour, has a small head, a very long neck, and is about fifteen metres long ... Go and look at all the photos of her on the Internet.'

Omega File 522: Galapagos, Ecuador

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‘Got your sun hats?’ said Aria.

‘Why?’ asked Jude. ‘Where are we going now?’

‘South America,’ Aria said.

‘Big place,’ said Jude. ‘How about Chile? I like Chile.’

‘No, it’s Ecuador. You’re going to the Galapagos Islands, a thousand kilometres out in the Pacific Ocean.’

‘Oh, right,’ Hawker said. ‘Are you going to tell us why?’

Aria looked unhappy. ‘There’s something strange going on. EDI is getting emails every day from the Galapagos. They’re all about Isabela Island and they all say things like this.’ He gave Hawker and Jude a piece of paper.

*****IMPORTANT NEWS* * * IMPORT ANT NEWS*****

A new time is coming for our planet.

The first visitors are now on Isabela Island, Galapagos.

Don’t fight them. Don’t be afraid of them. Be friendly.

Tell your government now.

Hawker and Jude looked at Aria, and then laughed. ‘There are a lot of crazy people out there on the Internet,’ said Jude. ‘You don’t believe this one - do you?’

‘Perhaps it’s crazy, and perhaps it’s not,’ said Aria. ‘But when we email back with questions, they don’t answer. The Americans are watching the island by satellite, but they don’t want to tell us why. There are two Australian ships going there. The Mexicans are getting very excited, and the Ecuadorians are saying nothing ... Something is happening on Isabela. What is it? We want to know.’

* * *

From Brussels to the Galapagos is a long way. Hawker and Jude took a plane to Cuba, a second plane to Ecuador, then a third plane out

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to Baltra Island, in the Galapagos. When they got out of the plane, a wall of hot air hit them.

‘Whew,’ said Hawker. He put on his sun hat quickly. They went across to Santa Cruz Island and down to Puerto Ayora. There they found a boat, the Sea-Lion, to take them to Isabela, about 90 kilometres away. At first, the boatman, Gonzalo, did not want to take them.

‘My boat can take ten people,’ he said. ‘It’s a very good boat, but very expensive for only two people.’

Jude smiled at him. ‘Not for two rich people.’

‘Rich?’ said Hawker. ‘It’s not our money - ouch!’

Jude hit him hard on the arm. ‘We’re on holiday,’ she told Gonzalo. ‘We want to see the giant tortoises on Isabela.’ She looked at Hawker. ‘Don’t we?’

‘Er, yes. That’s right,’ said Hawker quickly. ‘We’re very interested in the giant tortoises.’

On the way to Isabela Island Jude read a book about the Galapagos, and Hawker watched the sea. ‘Isabela is a very young island,’ Jude told him. ‘And it has - listen to this! - six volcanoes. One erupted only two years ago.’

‘Oh, that’s great!’ said Hawker. ‘Crazy emails, strange visitors in the middle of the Pacific, and now erupting volcanoes! Thank you, Aria!’

Not many people lived on Isabela, and Puerto Villamil was usually a sleepy place. But when the Sea-Lion arrived, there were about fifty people down by the sea. There were two small boats, and on them Hawker and Jude could see chairs and tables, beds, boxes and bags, and a bicycle.

Gonzalo called out in Spanish to the people on the boats, then turned to Hawker and Jude. ‘Lots of people are leaving Isabela,’ he said. ‘They are afraid.’

‘Afraid of what?’ asked Jude. ‘Go and talk to them, Hawker. Your Spanish is better than mine.’

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Hawker came back half an hour later. 'You're not going to believe this,' he told Jude. 'The people here say there's a spaceship on Isabela. It came down ten days ago, right down inside Volcano Alcedo. And it's still there.'

'How do they know that?' said Jude.

'There's an Australian, Dr Jim Miller, up on Alcedo. He works here, studying giant tortoises. He saw the spaceship, and now he's waiting for the visitors to come out.'

'So the "visitors" in those emails are extraterrestrials. ETs. Little green men from another planet. Oh dear,' said Jude. 'Can we go home now, Hawker?'

Hawker laughed. 'No, we can't. We climb Volcano Alcedo,' he said. 'Talk to Dr Miller. Say hello to the ETs.'

'Oh dear,' Jude said again. 'I was afraid of that.'

Gonzalo took them in the Sea-Lion up to Shipton Cove. There, very early the next morning, Hawker and Jude began their climb up the volcano.

'There is a path,' Gonzalo told them, 'but it is five hours to the top and hard climbing. And very, very hot. You must carry water - two litres for one person for one day. You must sleep at the top and come down tomorrow - but not when the sun is high in the sky. And be careful, please!'

'Careful of the spaceship visitors, you mean?' said Jude.

'I don't know about spaceships,' smiled Gonzalo, 'but Volcano Alcedo is always a little excited - she is always doing something new.'

It was a very hard climb. After two hours, they stopped under some trees. They drank some water and looked out over the blue sea. The black volcanic rocks under their feet were hot from the sun.

'It's so beautiful here,' said Jude.

'Mmm. Yes and no,' said Hawker. Then, 'Hey, Jude! Look! That animal, over there by that rock. What - is - it?'

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‘Oh, wow!’ whispered Jude. ‘It’s an iguana - a Galapagos iguana. Isn’t he wonderful?’

The iguana stared at them with its hot orange eyes, and did not move. Its body was about a metre long, and an orange-yellow colour.

‘It looks about a thousand years old,’ said Hawker. ‘A very strange animal.’

‘Everything about this island is strange,’ said Jude. They climbed and climbed, and the sun got hotter and hotter. After three more hours they came to the top, and looked down into the great crater of Alcedo, two hundred metres deep and seven kilometres across. To the north and the south they could see more volcanoes, and across the sea to the west the island of Fernandina - but they could not see Dr Miller or his camp.

‘We need to go round the crater to the south,’ said Hawker. ‘It’s another two hours’ walk, the villagers said.’

It was hard walking over the black lava rock, and once Hawker nearly fell. Jude caught his arm.

‘Don’t break a leg here,’ she said. ‘I don’t want to carry you back down to the boat.’

‘Why not?’ said Hawker. ‘I carried you home once.’

‘We weren’t on top of a volcano then,’ said Jude.

At last they saw Dr Miller’s camp, and ten minutes later they arrived. Dr Miller was short, very brown, and angry.

‘Go away!’ he shouted. ‘You’re Americans, aren’t you?’

‘No, we aren’t,’ said Hawker. ‘We’re European. How do you do, Dr Miller?’

‘What are you doing here?’ he said angrily.

‘We’d like to talk to you,’ said Jude quietly. ‘About the spaceship down in the crater. Why are you so angry?’

‘Because nobody listens to me!’ said Dr Miller. ‘Nobody believes me! The Americans say, “Oh, crazy man!”. The Australian government says, “Get some sleep!” What can I do? Something very important is happening on this planet, and nobody is listening!’

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‘Well, we’re here now, and we’re listening,’ Jude said. Dr Miller looked at them. ‘Who do you work for?’

‘Europe,’ said Hawker. ‘Europe is very interested in this spaceship. Please tell us about it.’

‘Ah, the emails did get through, then,’ said Dr Miller. ‘Who did the emails come from?’ asked Hawker. ‘Ecuadorian friends,’ said Dr Miller. ‘Over on Santa Cruz. Look, I’ve got some beer here. You want one?’ They sat on the black lava rocks under the hot sun, and drank hot beer. Below them clouds of smoke and steam moved this way and that way across the crater. And was there, under those clouds, a spaceship from another planet?

‘Sometimes I think I can see it down there,’ said Jim Miller, ‘but mostly I can’t. It’s a great white thing, and long legs came out of it when it came down.’

‘But why here, Jim?’ said Jude. ‘Why into a volcano?’

‘Who knows?’ said Jim. ‘Perhaps they like hot places. Perhaps they need something from the hot lava.’

‘And why are you angry with the Americans, Jim?’ Hawker asked. ‘I know their beer’s no good, but ...’

‘They watched this spaceship on their satellite. I know they did. They know it’s here, but they don’t want the world to know. They don’t want people like you and me to meet any extraterrestrial-visitors. Oh no! They want it all to be a big secret. Then they can be top dog.’

Just then there was a sudden noise, a boom deep below the ground. ‘What ... what was that, Jim?’ asked Jude.

‘Oh, Alcedo does that all the time,’ said Jim. ‘Then hot water comes up, and steam, dust - sometimes a little lava, but not much. That’s why there are always clouds in the crater. You can never see anything down there.’

‘Can we climb down into the crater?’ asked Hawker. ‘Are you crazy? It’s dangerous down there!’ Jim said. All evening Hawker and Jude stared down into the crater, but they could see nothing through the

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clouds of steam and dust. Just before the sun went down, Hawker saw something near the top of the crater and shouted to Jude, but it was only two of the giant tortoises. They came slowly past the camp and went away down the other side of the volcano. Later, four more came past, going the same way, moving slowly and quietly over the black rocks.

‘They’re very strange animals!’ said Jude.

Hawker and Jude did not sleep much. The rocks were hard, and below them they heard again and again the deep boom of the volcano. Late in the night they turned their radio on. It was very noisy, but through the noise they could hear a voice from Santa Cruz. Hawker listened hard.

‘They’re talking about Volcano Alcedo!’ he said. ‘They think it’s going to erupt in the next twenty-four hours!’ Jude sat up. ‘Oh no! We’re seven hours away from the boat. Let’s get moving! Go and call Jim.’

But Jim Miller did not believe Santa Cruz radio. ‘It’s the Americans again,’ he said. ‘They want us all to go away.’

‘Please come with us, Jim,’ said Jude. ‘Please. You can come back in a day or two.’

‘You two go,’ said Jim, ‘but I’m staying right here, and watching that spaceship.’

It was a hard climb down. When they got to the sea, they saw Gonzalo with the little boat. ‘Hurry!’ he shouted. ‘Did you hear on the radio? Alcedo’s going to erupt!’

Quickly, they went out to the Sea-Lion and climbed up onto the boat. ‘Go! Go! Go!’ Gonzalo shouted to his men, and before long the Sea-Lion was a kilometre out at sea.

Two hours later Volcano Alcedo erupted. There was a sudden great bang! - and then clouds of dust flew up into the sky. Red-hot lava came out of the volcano’s sides and ran down to the sea. The noise did not stop, and with every bang, rocks flew hundreds of metres up into the

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sky, then fell slowly back down to the ground. For hours the night sky was filled with great flowers of red and orange light.

It was a beautiful, and a terrifying thing to watch.

* * *

'What happened to Dr Miller?' I asked.

'Poor Jim went to the great spaceship in the sky,' Jude said. 'Five hundred metres of red-hot lava fell on top of him.'

'And was there a spaceship in the volcano?'

'No,' said Jude.

'Yes,' said Hawker.

He looked at Jude, and they laughed. Then Jude looked at me. 'What do you want to believe?' she asked. 'They weren't very clever extraterrestrials, were they? - sitting there in their spaceship in an erupting volcano!'

Hawker smiled. 'Ah, but perhaps the spaceship left just before the volcano erupted. Gonzalo and I saw something in the clouds of dust - a white light, moving very fast, faster than the dust. It went up very high.'

'Well, I didn't see anything,' said Jude. 'And that's because there wasn't anything in that volcano!'

Hawker looked up into the blue Greek sky. 'How do we know?' he said slowly. 'One day someone, or something, is going to visit us from out there. Perhaps that was the first visit, all those years ago in the Galapagos. Who knows?'

- THE END -

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