

Peter Saul and Mary Ltd

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For Miriam,
who is still surprised

The characters in this book are entirely imaginary. If you've ever worked in an office you've probably met most of them.

Peter Saul and Mary Ltd is an entirely imaginary business too. In this UK edition it is also an obviously British company using British corporate vocabulary. For non-British readers it is probably worth noting that 'Ltd' is the UK equivalent of the American 'Inc' but specifically denotes a company whose stock is not traded on a public exchange. The officers of a UK company are Directors and hold Board meetings to formally manage the company. Mary is Finance Director in this novel; in an American edition she would become Vice President of Finance or Chief Financial Officer.

Chapter 1

Mary walked into the boardroom. In her immaculate business outfit, cut just tightly enough to hint at the figure beneath it, she looked every inch the modern female executive. She was in her early thirties, and her crisp workplace efficiency was tempered occasionally by just a hint of femininity. In the office anyway. Outside the office... well, that was another matter entirely.

She was in a good mood, for this promised to be an excellent board-meeting. Profits were up, market-share was up. The others had not arrived yet, so she sat down, sorted out her papers, and then eyed up the contents of the picture-frames hanging on the panelling of the boardroom walls.

“Peter, Saul and Mary Ltd - Soulbrokers,” said one. “Our Mission: to become the leading supplier of souls to the soul-refining industry by the end of the second millennium.”

Three other frames contained portraits. “Mary Magdalene, Finance Director” read the inscription beneath the first. Her dark eyes looked back out at herself. A second offered “Peter Fisher, Operations Director” and showed a large round man, smiling but with disapproving eyebrows. As she turned to consider “Saul Tarsus, Marketing Director” the man himself stepped into the room.

“Morning Mary darling,” said Saul. Saul was tall, thin and elegantly clothed. “Insouciant” was his word for his particular style of dressing. “Camp” was nearer the mark, thought Mary to herself as usual. Saul favoured cravats in place of the more usual tie, and today’s was a particularly luminous pink.

“8:59am and 50 seconds, 51, 52...” intoned Saul. “At the third stroke, Peter will be here, *precisely*” and indeed, here was Peter, exactly on time as usual. He was followed by a small bearded man, dressed in a curiously old fashioned manner.

“Come on Moses, come on, you’re late. Morning all,” boomed Peter. “OK whose turn is to chair this one. Not mine I did it last time.”

“Mine, Peter, remember” said Mary. “I sent out the agenda, *if* you recall. OK, item number one, tablets of the last meeting. Any points?”

“Yes,” said Peter. “I really must insist that the tablets are issued within forty days and forty nights of the previous meeting. It’s simply unacceptable for it to be three or four months.”

“OK, OK. Moses, please try and be more prompt with the tablets of the meetings will you?”

“I expect to see it recorded formally on the tablets,” said Peter firmly. Moses nodded, head down, and scratched a note. “Company Secretary to issue all tablets within 40 days and 40 nights of board meetings” reinforced Peter. Moses nodded again, while the others winced perceptibly.

“I think we’ve got the point, Saint,” muttered Saul. “OK item two, financial report” interjected Mary hastily. “Basically things are pretty good. Profits for the generation stand at over twenty-five million Credos and...”

“I do hate these new Credo things,” interrupted Peter. “What was wrong with the good old Sestertii, I want to know?”

“Peter, you say that every time I present the figures. Since the government took us into the new single currency, it’s Credos, OK? 7.5382 Sestertii to the Credo. It’s really not that difficult is it?” said Mary, trying to be patient.

“I think the currency is rather beside the point actually,” said Saul, breaking in.

“What *is* the point then, if it isn’t that we’re doing really well?” asked Mary.

“Yes yes, we’re doing really well now, darling. But just look ahead a little. Why are we doing well now?”

“The Black Death,” said Peter.

“Exactly” said Saul. “Fantastic for business right now. Almost more souls than we can conveniently handle. But what about next generation? Since half the population of our dominant sectors will be dead, they won’t be breeding the next generation of souls, will they? There will be a lot less people, so there will be a lot fewer people to die. At least in areas where we have the main market share. Other parts of the globe will be doing fine apparently. But not us stuck in Europe, oh no. We’re going to have a big problem sooner than you think.”

“Actually, there are more souls than I can conveniently handle at the moment,” admitted Peter. “We’re having to take on temporary reaper-calls-centre staff. Anyway, Saul, you’re right. We’ve got a problem. What are you going to do about it? How about another direct mail campaign? The last one you did went OK, I seem to remember.”

“Oh come off it, Saint darling,” replied Saul. “That sort of thing went out with the dark ages. Letters to the Corinthians might have been fine in the classical first century, but I can hardly see ‘Letter to the Londoners’ or ‘Letter to the Frankfurters’ being a success in the mediaeval age. Most of them can’t read, for one thing. No, I thought maybe a schism would be a good thing to go for.”

“A schism?” asked Mary. “I though they were rather old-fashioned too?”

“No, no, this is the perfect moment for a schism, don’t you see? As soon as they divide like that, each side has to prove it’s best by going off and winning new converts for the faith. Just what we need in the forthcoming depressed market. Always works, and never goes out of fashion. And we’ve not had one for nearly four hundred years, so there’s no danger of customer concept fatigue.”

“So then Peter, will you organise it?” said Mary. “Saul, you’ll provide the theological basis as usual I take it.”

“Yes, yes” boomed Peter. “Leave it to me, I know just how to run a schism. I don’t think you need bother yourself much, Saul. I can create a basis myself for something as simple as a schism.”

“OK, Moses, take to the tablets that Peter will organise a schism and report back to the next meeting” said Mary. “Now, item two, forthcoming investors’ meeting.”

“Who’s coming to this one?” asked Peter.

“Mrs Carpenter as usual...” began Mary. Saul groaned softly. “And the Pantheon Fund Manager’s Alliance are sending a representative.”

“Who?” persisted Peter.

“The guy with the footwear problem, you know, what’s his name?” replied Mary.

“Mercury you mean?”

“He’s just a messenger” said Saul. “They always send him to break bad news to us. It’s not a good sign, probably means they’ve spotted the coming trends too.”

“Anyone from the soul-refiners?” asked Peter.

“Well, Beelzebub, the chairman of Hell Refining, said he might drop in.”

“He just sits in the corner and smokes all the time” said Peter.

“It is pretty hot in the soul-refineries Saint. He just doesn’t have time to cool off. Anyway, it’s not certain he’ll turn up. After all profits are up, he’s getting a good return on his investment, as well as plenty of supplies to his refineries. You know what he’s like, only puts in an appearance when things are bad,” said Mary.

“Depends if he can see the evil times ahead. Any of the other refiners?”

“Not heard. Anyhow, I’m planning to simply report to them that profits are up, we’re going to pay out an excellent dividend, so they’re all getting great returns on their money.”

“What if they ask questions about future trends?” demanded Saul.

“Well, Peter’s schism should be well underway by then. He can deal with them. Can’t you Peter?” said Mary.

“Oh absolutely. Just leave it to me,” answered Peter.

The meeting continued on...

...“And that’s about it. Good meeting I thought” concluded Mary. “Just before we break up, I thought I’d mention I’ll be introducing my new financial controller to you tomorrow. I’ll bring him round to your offices.”

“What’s his name again?” asked Peter.

“Croesus. He was financial controller at Olympus Souls, until they closed down, and then he’s done a spell as FD with Four Horsemen. Of course they’re a pretty small outfit. Anyway you’ll meet him tomorrow, as I said. OK, meeting closed.”

Moses tidied up his tablets and left quickly. Peter, the keys clipped to his belt jangling noisily, left behind him promising to get right on with the schism.

“Mary, dear, do you think Peter really knows how to do a schism? You know what he’s like. Charges at things like a lion at a christian.”

“Well, we’ll see won’t we? Honestly, he was so rude to Moses at the start of the meeting. He’s getting so insufferable I’d quite like to see him mess up the schism, even if it is bad for business. He needs taking down a peg” replied Mary

“Deflating, you mean” retorted Saul waspishly as he left the room.

Chapter 2

“Good morning Ms Magdalene” said the smart young man at the door of her office. He had a soft New England accent.

“Good morning Croesus and welcome to Peter, Saul and Mary! There’s really no need to call me Ms Magdalene, we’re very informal here, Mary will do just fine.”

“OK, good morning Mary then!”

“Lovely. Look, I thought we’d start with ‘the tour’, show you around, meet Peter and Saul, understand the organisation. How does that sound?” asked Mary.

“Just great Ms Magd...err, yes great. Lead on”.

“OK, we’ll start upstairs in Operations. Follow me. Peter Fisher is Director of Operations. Everyone calls him ‘Saint’, you’ll see why after you’ve dealt with him for a bit. And we call his floor ‘heaven’, although only behind his back of course. It’s mostly a big call centre, hell to work in.” Mary headed out of her office and up the stairway to heaven.

They went in. The floor was almost entirely open plan, filled with endless rows of desks. Each desk contained a computer terminal and a telephone, and seated behind it was a generally bored looking operative. They listened into a call as they passed.

“Peter Saul and Mary Ltd Ann speaking how may I help youuuuu?” said the operator in one breath. “You’ve died and you want your soul taken off your hands right away? Fine, just give me the name, house number and postcode... You’re in Spain, OK just the address will do then... No problem Senor Felipe, a soulminer will be out to you right away... Oh less than ten minutes usually... Yes, yes straight to heaven, we’ve logged your details, the database says you’ve

been more than good enough to qualify fine for a place ...Our pleasure, thank you for choosing christianity, goodbye”.

“They do that all day and all night. Boring as hell. Anyway, here’s Peter’s office, let’s go in” said Mary.

“What would happen if they ever imagined there’s no heaven?”

“It’s easy if they try” answered Mary. “But it hasn’t occurred to any of them yet, thankfully.”

“No hell below them?” persisted Croesus.

“Above us only sky. And three bedrooms. Will you stop trying to flog me a ground floor apartment with two rooms and find me a proper holiday home?” said Peter crossly into his mobile as they entered. “Excuse me. Morning Mary, and you must be Croesus. Welcome to Operations” he continued putting the phone down on his immaculately tidy desk. “Sorry, having a spot of difficulty trying to find a holiday home now the third child’s come along. Never enough bedrooms in these country cottages. And they always seem to offer us ground floor apartments, when I can’t stand having anyone above me.”

“Too right” said Mary. Peter glanced at her sharply.

“Right, Croesus this is Operations, where it all happens” began Peter enthusiastically. “Split into four departments. First we have the reaper-calls-centre which you’ve just come through. Guy dies, his (or her) body puts a call through to get rid of the soul before the body can participate in any kind of death rites. Reaper-calls-centre operator gets the details, and the job is automatically passed down to the next department. Come with me.” Peter headed on down to the far end of the floor, where the telephone activity was less hectic and the desks more widely spaced.

“Not much to see here, just a few managers, most of the staff are out on the job. Anyway, this is Soulmining, the heart of Operations. Soulminer goes out, traps the soul, and brings it back to Logistics. Finally he calls into the reaper-

centre again to confirm the collection. Hi Guys, say hello to Croesus, our new financial controller!” boomed Peter to the small group of staff. When they had finished exchanging introductions, Peter headed on again through a door and down a flight of steps. For such a fat man, he can move surprisingly quickly, thought Mary.

They stopped briefly in another office on the ground floor. “Special Operations on Earth” announced Peter. “Busy planning the implementation of this schism right now of course” as an aside to Mary. “By the way, you don’t know if Saul has the files from when he did that orthodox one do you?” They headed out.

“Finally Logistics, which is in that building over there” Peter declaimed, with a broad sweep of his hand. “On you come.” They headed over to a rather small building. “A lot of security needed of course. Souls are trapped in gem-crystals for shipment. All rather valuable”. He pressed his palm to a scanner, took a key from the bunch clipped to his belt, and inserted it into a small lock. The doors opened silently. Inside were rows of shelving, packed with small coloured gemstones. “We stone code them, and then ship them in bulk to the soul-refiners. Sapphire: died young – refines into higher grade Essoul you know; emerald: pretty nasty, probably not suitable for recycling, refining-only grade; diamond: was famous or suchlike, quite often their souls get employment at the refiners instead of being refined, that’s how I started incidentally; ruby: died in war so the soul is pretty low-grade, we mostly flog them to the Valhalla refinery, they specialise in low-grade souls; garnet: standard class, and so on.” Peter boomed on, apparently without needing to draw breath. “And there you have it. Operations. The heart of the soul business. I organised it all of course. We win awards for most efficient soulbroking operations department most centuries.”

“Very impressive” said Croesus. “It’s all much more advanced than we had at Olympus.”

“Thanks Peter, it all looks great as usual,” said Mary. “We’ll go see Saul’s team now. Good luck with the holiday home. This way Croesus, back to the main building. Let’s take the road to Damascus” she continued, leading the way back.

“Saul is Marketing Director, as you know” said Mary as they headed for the first floor. “He does...,” well perhaps he should tell you himself. They went in, and over to an office decorated with frescoes.

“Hi Saul, meet Croesus!”

“Croesus, how delightful to have you with us darling” exclaimed Saul, considering Croesus from head to toe. His gaze lingered a fraction too long before he continued “and welcome to Marketing”. Saul’s cravat today was lilac, to match his spats. They clashed rather badly with the fresco on the back wall.

“Tell him what you do Saul” prompted Mary.

“Ah, she thinks we’re just airy-fairies in here, don’t you Mary? Thinks we do nothing really. Not grounded in reality like you nice boys”, he paused meaningfully, “and girls in Finance”.

“Come on Saul, do get to the point.”

“I was” pouted Saul. “Oh OK, I’ve got three teams. Firstly there’s D&T, that’s Doctrine and Theology. Pretty standard stuff, I guess you had the same kind of thing at Olympus.”

“Oh yes, although the doctrines at Olympus were nowhere near as sexy as here” answered Croesus, looking Saul firmly in the eye.

“Really? Oh come, come, you flatter us. Anyway, we were developing this schism, but Peter seems to have hijacked it all for himself,” said Saul. “Then there’s Research. We try to find new concepts the punters will like. We’re working on one now to stop them moaning when Peter can’t process them fast enough. You might have heard we’ve got a capacity problem at the moment.

I'm having to send my lads and lasses over to Peter's to learn about his problems."

"Sounds like purgatory" said Mary.

"Yes, that's what we thought," said Saul. "Anyway, lastly there's Technology. We study possible technologies to introduce to the punters which might help us win market share. We're looking at two at the moment."

"What are they?" asked Croesus.

"Not sure I should tell you darling" said Saul. "But since you seem to be such a nice chap, I'll risk it. We're considering Printing and Ocean-Going Sailing. Printing might help us spread the word. The trouble is it might help everyone else spread their words too. OGS is so we can get the punters out winning converts in new lands, amongst the heathens. It's a bit double edged as well, though. What if the heathens sail back and convert our guys? Anyway, we're looking into it."

Peter loomed suddenly in the doorway. "Hi Saul, have you got the files from when you did the orthodox schism?"

"What files? It was all improvisation darling. Ninety percent inspiration and a mere ten percent perspiration. Pure Marketing. And we didn't write any of it down, since you ask."

"How can we run a professional business like this? I really don't think it's acceptable. Mary, can we have this on the agenda at the next Board meeting?" huffed Peter.

"Oh Saint, you're so judgmental" answered Mary sadly.

"Are you coming for a drink tonight Mary?" asked Saul, changing the subject hastily.

"No I can't. Got to leave early."

"Date?" enquired Peter.

“Yes” answered Mary tersely. “I think this guy could be the one.”

“Oh come on” said Saul. “You’ve had so many men before.”

“In very many ways” chipped in Peter. Mary flushed angrily.

“He’s just one more!” teased Saul. “Do we know him?”

“Maybe” answered Mary.

“She’s not telling” cried Saul. “Must be serious. And at your age too!”

“How about you Croesus, you joining us for a drink later?” asked Peter hurriedly, eyeing Mary’s expression.

Croesus hesitated.

“Oh go on” urged Saul, giggling. “We might learn something.”

“Come on Croesus,” said Mary. “Let’s go look at Finance and leave these two bickering about the filing. See you guys!” They headed back to the Finance Department.

“This is Midas, he’s Head of Treasury. Be careful how you shake his hand.” Croesus extended his hand gingerly, but nothing too dramatic seemed to happen as Midas took it. “Must be losing your touch Midas,” observed Mary. “Anyway this is the credit department”

“Credit?” asked Croesus.

“Yes. Somebody wants to mortgage his soul, Credit arrange it for him. Peter keeps wanting to move it into Operations, we’ve had endless battles over it. Here’s Aesop who manages it. He can spot someone who really wants to sell his soul from a spinner of fake fables at 50 paces. Real talent for undertaking underwriting, our Aesop here.”

“And here’s your team Croesus” finished Mary. I’ll leave them to you for now, and catch you again later. “Good luck”.

Chapter 3

Mary sat at a corner table for two in the rather chic restaurant that, curiously enough (she smiled slightly to herself), was just a stone's throw from her elegant apartment. Her dress had been chosen to set off the colour of her eyes and the black shininess of her long hair to perfection. Or so the shop assistant had attempted to flatter her into buying it. Actually, it had been chosen to display the maximum of cleavage to her dinner guest without obviously being indecent. She looked, in her own opinion, ravishing, which was consistent with her plans for how the evening would end.

Her date was a handsome man of vaguely south-asian appearance. He was talking, as he seemed to have done slightly too much this evening, about his business. Not that he didn't deserve to of course. Where Peter Saul and Mary was largely set up with other peoples' money, Gautama had created his brokers single-handedly starting with just a modest legacy from his father. He owned the lot himself. And being based around the huge Asian markets, it was a major player.

"So you see Mary," he was saying, "you really should be looking to move over to recycling. It's so much more profitable, and much more environmentally friendly. None of that nasty nuclear-chemistry-set business at the refineries. One day there's going to be a big disaster at one of the plants, and then where will we all be? Why don't you talk to your marketing guy about it?"

"I don't know, Gautama, I really can't see Saul being able to work reincarnation in with our current doctrines right now. It'll have to be a long term project."

The evening was not going completely as she had planned. Gautama had chosen the vegetarian options with every course, and was now picking fastidiously at his mango sorbet as they talked. Still, he was a very attractive

man, even leaving aside all incidental thoughts of his enormous fortune. Just not very... red-blooded.

“I’ll talk to him. Anyway, tell me more about yourself Gautama. What do you get up to when you’re not working?” She leaned forwards a little, aiming to improve his view.

“Meditation mostly, Mary. I like to contemplate the circle of life and seek inner harmony.”

“Oh. I see. Nothing more... exciting? A gorgeous guy like you must be very successful with the girls?”

Gautama finished his sorbet, apparently pondering how to answer this. Just in time, a waiter appeared at their table. “Would you like coffee madam, coffee sir?”

“I don’t drink stimulants,” replied Gautama, “although if you have any herbal teas I might have one.”

“Just the bill please,” said Mary. “I thought maybe we could have coffee at my place, Gautama. It’s only a couple of minutes away.”

“Oh, well, er no, I really have a very early start in the morning.” He looked at his watch. “I’ll get the check. And I’ve arranged a car to take you home.”

“That’s fine, I can walk from here” she answered rather coldly. Then she collected herself. He was really very attractive. And rich. “I’ll speak to Saul about the reincarnation. Maybe we could have dinner again and discuss it. Why don’t you choose somewhere?” Maybe he’d be less uptight on his home territory, she thought.

“Yes yes, Mary I’d like that. Thank you for a great evening. Excuse me waiter, my car’s not due for about 10 minutes, is there somewhere quiet I could sit and meditate briefly?”

Mary bade him goodnight, and left.

Chapter 4

They were assembling in the board-room for the investors meeting. Peter and Mary were just sitting down when Saul appeared. Today he had chosen a purple cravat, to match the colour of the huge black-eye he had acquired over the weekend. Mary raised an eyebrow.

“Went over to the festival in Tennessee for a couple of days” explained Saul.

“He met a bar-room queen in Memphis” amplified Peter.

“Spilt my G&T all over him actually,” added Saul.

“So you met a gin-soaked bar-room queen in Memphis?” confirmed Mary. Saul nodded. “And tried to take him upstairs for a ride?” she persisted. Saul nodded again ruefully.

“He had to heave him right across his shoulder,” said Peter.

“Yes, slung me out and gave me this enormous bruise to go with it. I just can’t seem to drink it off my mind. Hung-over as hell darlings. Never try to pull a bouncer,” concluded Saul sagely. “Virginia darling, good morning!” This to a prim, middle-aged woman, dressed in a blue twinset, who had appeared in the doorway escorted by Moses.

“That’s Mrs Carpenter to you, Saul” she snapped back.

“Yes Mrs Carpenter. Of course Mrs Carpenter. Do have a seat” finished Saul silkily, heading round with an oversolicitous manner to pull back a chair. “Is Mr Carpenter not joining us?”

“No, Joseph is busy today. How did you get that bruise? Been messing around trying to love the wrong neighbours again?” she asked sarcastically. Saul muttered something inaudible. He was saved from finding a more coherent response by the entry of a youngish man with shoulder length pale blond hair,

clad in a startling white tuxedo. The overall effect was rather spoiled by his sandals.

“Good morning Mercury” boomed Peter. “What brings you here today?”

“Just a flying visit Peter. Morning Saul, morning Mary, morning Mrs C. The boys wanted me to come over and get the story about this rather worrying trend you have at the moment. We can discuss it in the meeting. Is anyone else coming?” There was something faintly Italian about his accent.

“Just Beelzebub, we think Merc,” answered Mary.

As if conjured up by the mention of his name, a cloud of expensive cigar smoke, followed by Beelzebub, chairman of Hell soul-refineries, made its way into the room. Beelzebub was a large man, fatter looking even than Peter, although with Beelzebub Mary had a sneaking suspicion it was all muscle. One day I’ll find out personally, she promised herself, especially if things don’t start going better with Gautama. He wore a check shirt, slightly baggy jeans, large cowboy boots with particularly outsize spurs curiously moulded into the leather of the heels, and a huge Stetson hat, which he never removed. It seemed to float just fractionally higher than his head.

“Howdee. Nice t’see y’all!”

“Morning Bubba” chorused Peter, Saul and Mary.

They all sat down, and the meeting began. It was Peter’s turn to take the chair.

“Every one got a copy of the agenda from Moses?” he asked. They all nodded. As Company Secretary it was Moses’ job to prepare the agendas for the Investors Meetings. As usual with his agendas, there were ten points.

“Point one, everyone happy with the tablets from the last meeting?” There were nods around the table. Moses etched a note.

“Point two, current financial returns. Mary, would you take the floor please?” said Peter. He’s at his most pompous in these things, thought Mary. Always sucking up to Mercury and Beelzebub in particular, try to play the big-businessman with them.

“Well, we’ll be paying an exceptionally good dividend to investors this generation...” she began.

“That’s just the point though, isn’t it?” interrupted Mercury. “The boys asked me to pass on the message that we’re worried. It’s all very well producing exceptional results from the Black Death, but what about future returns?”

“I’m sure they’ll be fine” boomed Peter.

“Is there any evidence that the Black Death was paid for by Sonny & Shia?” asked Mrs Carpenter suddenly.

“You mean, to depopulate Europe so they can move in on the territory?” asked Saul. “No, no, we’ve found no evidence at all.”

“You mean you haven’t looked, Saul, don’t you?” demanded Mrs Carpenter.

“I’ve got a new guy just joined us from Four Horsemen” said Mary brightly. “I could ask him if he knows anything about it.”

“Action to Mary for the minutes please, Moses” said Peter plummily.

“It looks to us at Pantheon Alliance that the fall of Constantinople can only be a matter of time now. In fact, this depopulation you’ve had can only accelerate the process,” said Mercury.

“Yes, yes” said Peter. “All taken care of. We’ve been expecting it for some generations you know.”

“Of course I know,” snapped Mercury. “What I don’t know is what you’re going to do about it. Sonny & Shia will be moving in on your territory before you know it.”

“We are kicking them out of Spain quite well at the moment, Merc” said Saul.

“Only after they kicked their way in in the first place. Which you should have stopped, shouldn’t you Saul?”

“I’m organising a schism” said Peter proudly.

“Oh for heaven’s sake,” cut in Mrs Carpenter. “I’ll bet that’s one of your ideas, isn’t it Saul?”

Mercury continued as if he hadn’t heard. “The boys think it might be time to cash-in. Sell up. You know, like we did at Olympus when it became obvious the punters were going to lose interest in our product. Close it down and sell it while it’ll still fetch a good price. We’ve had a lot of interest in buying this company from Gautama. Jupiter sounded him out at that conference.” Mary sat very still.

“I think it might be a bit premature, Mercury.” This from Mrs Carpenter. “What we need,” she added acidly “is some updated doctrine. That’s your section isn’t it Saul?”

“Well right now, Peter’s doing this schism” replied Saul. “And in any case, I’m not sure the Sonny & Shia stuff is really right for the more urbanized European customer segment. It’s hard enough to get them to pray once on a Sunday, without demanding that they do it five times a day. I don’t think they’ll be able to expand into our territories.”

“Didn’t stop them in Spain,” observed Mercury.

“A schism, Peter?” enquired Beelzebub.

“Yes, yes” said Peter enthusiastically. “We’re just drawing up the full implementation plans right now. Due for delivery within half a generation.”

“Who’s doing the theological basis?”

“Oh Peter is, aren’t you darling?” replied Saul.

“Peter?” asked Beelzebub with sudden interest. “That sounds very good for business.” Saul and Mary eyed him suspiciously. Whose business, wondered Mary.

“Oh I’m sure it’ll be terrific, absolutely splendid” gushed Peter. “Maybe you could be a sponsor, Bubba?”

“I’d like that,” replied Beelzebub. “I think,” he suggested to Mercury, “that we should let Peter try his schism before we look at our strategic options.”

“I’ll take your views back to the boys,” said Mercury. “But I think I have to warn you we’re very concerned. We’d like it tabled formally for a full meeting of all investors. Moses, if you’d be so kind to arrange one as soon as Peter’s schism has reported some preliminary results?”

Saul and Mary looked at each other glumly. A full investors meeting, thought Mary? Close the company? And only Peter’s schism to save the day?

“OK, item three, political donations. Mercury, this is your point I think?”

“Yes thank you Peter. As you know, it looks like we’re in for a change of government. The Philosophers Party is getting increasingly unpopular, the next election is due soon, and it looks pretty likely the Divine Right will form the next Government of the Great Planes.”

“Can’t disagree with you there, Merc” said Beelzebub. “The Deified Augustus’ll make a great PM of course, he can really organise things, but in other ways it’s a real shame. Nietzsche as Minister for Labour is doing such a great job on the Unions. Not had a peep from them for generations.” Ah yes, thought Mary dreamily. The divine Augustus. Bound to win, got the female vote wrapped up. Pity about that poisonous wife of his.

“What’s the Shade Minister for Labour called? I can never remember,” asked Peter.

“Charles Stuart,” said Mary.

“I’m worried he’ll just run around like a headless chicken as soon as the going gets tough,” said Beelzebub.

“Anyway,” resumed Mercury. “We think we should make small donation, make sure we get in on the ground floor, guarantee our access to the Ministers and the PM if we need it.”

“All in favour?” asked Peter, looking around. “Good. Another point for the tablets please, Moses.”

“OK point 4,…”

Chapter 5

After the meeting was over, Saul and Mary stayed behind in the boardroom.

“I didn’t like that at all Mary darling” said Saul. “Sell us off while the going’s good? Not what I wanted to hear.”

“No. Our destiny in Peter’s hands. I just don’t trust his judgment.”

“Why did we let him do this schism thing?”

“Seemed a good idea at the time to take him down a peg. Can’t you sort out a reserve plan or something Saul?”

“Well, as it happens, I’m doing just that.”

“I knew I could rely on you Saul.”

“We’ve found this chap Martin Luther,” said Saul slowly. “He seems like the just the right kind of material for us.”

“You’re going to get him to see the light?”

“No, no, don’t be naïve darling, you need to be a lot more subtle these days. No, he’s working on these Theses. He’s got about seven of them so far. Every now and again, one of my guys comes to him in a dream and gives him the idea for another. We can keep him in play until he’s needed that way. Of course we’ve had to give him the UHT treatment.”

Mary looked baffled. “UHT?”

“We’ve made him longlife. It could easily be a century or more before we’re ready to go with him, and he won’t be much use by then without some help on the side. It depends how long it takes to sort out the whatever mess Peter’s leaves us. At the right moment we just need to come to him in another dream at the right moment, and tell him to nail his colours to the door.”

“Don’t you mean the mast?”

“No, no. Yes, of course, we’re working on ocean-going sailing, like I told you when you brought that dishy boy Croesus round. But this time, he’s going to nail them to the door. Just you wait and see,” promised Saul.

“You leave my Croesus alone Saul,” warned Mary.

“Yes darling. Now then, tell me about your date with Gautama. Not consorting with the enemy are we?”

“I’ve a good mind to match your eyes up Saul,” said Mary. “How do you know about that?”

“Cocktail waiter in that restaurant is a ahhh... friend of mine,” replied Saul. “Anyway,” he persisted, “it’s got nothing to do with that threat from Mercury has it? You’re not working on selling us to Gautama are you?” He looked at her keenly.

“Nothing was further from my mind,” said Mary. “It was a date, not a business meeting.” Mind you, she thought, it was pretty hard to tell the difference. “You know that restaurant is just around the corner from my flat, don’t you Saul dear?”

“I just wondered,” said Saul. “I’ve heard Gautama’s a pretty tough date. Coffee in the flat and a night of wild passion at your place was it?” he asked sarcastically.

“Well... no,” admitted Mary.

“Thought so. You be careful Mary. Gautama thinks about business and only business. What did he talk about?”

“Recycling and the environment mostly. He wants us to go in for recycling.”

“Reincarnation?! Don’t be ridiculous. It’ll never catch on here, not if I work on it for a thousand years. We looked at it when we first set up the doctrines, and there was just no way. It’s just not compatible with resurrection. We can hardly get the punters to swallow that stuff about dying to atone for their sins if

they think he's going to come back as a rabbit or a traffic warden or something. You're sure he didn't mention our finances at all?"

"Look Saul, it was a date, OK?"

"OK darling, just wanted to be sure. I believe you, don't worry. Are you going to check our whether Sonny & Shia got Four Horsemen to do the Black Death, by the way. Ask your nice new chappie?"

"Yes, I'll see if I can find out. Look, please don't mention my date to Saint will you. You know what he's like," pleaded Mary.

"Don't worry. I certainly don't want to put that idea in Peter's head. Before you know it, he'll be giving away our business plan to Gautama in exchange for some vague promise of a seat on his board. You know he's always thought he could do better than this, be a big man at a larger outfit, don't you?"

"At the rate he's growing at the moment, he's going to be a very big man indeed, and he'll certainly need several larger outfits" replied Mary.

"It's stress. Always makes him put weight on. It's the embarrassment of being wrong with operational forecasts, being understaffed for the Black Death. You know how he feels a fool when he's caught out like that," said Saul.

"Let's hope it doesn't make him try anything stupid with this schism" said Mary.

"Hmmm. Anatomy-crossed. Just before you go, darling, remind me how the shareholdings are divided, if it ever comes to a vote on Mercury's plan to close us," said Saul carefully.

"Well, you, me, and Saint have ten percent each, as you know. And Mr and Mrs Carpenter got half their son's share each when ..."

"...when he reached a special level of refinement, you mean" said Saul.

"Exactly. So they've got five percent each, but Joseph'll never disagree with Virginia, so really it's ten percent with her. The refiners have fifteen percent, but

they all seem to vote with Beelzebub. And Pantheon Alliance have the remaining forty-five percent. So all it takes is either Beelzebub or Mrs Carpenter to vote with Pantheon, and they have a majority.”

“Or Peter?” asked Saul carefully.

“You don’t think?” asked Mary, wide-eyed.

“Depends, darling. Depends how much of a balls he makes of this schism, and whether or not Gautama gets at him.”

“Look, best of luck with the Luther scheme, Saul. I think we’re going to need it. I’m off now to grill Croesus about the Black Death. See you soon!”
Mary left the boardroom. Saul followed her more slowly, deep in thought.

Chapter 6

It was Peter's turn to chair the Board meeting. He was already there, drumming his fingers impatiently, when Saul and Mary headed into the room. Moses was hanging around outside toying with his gold-rimmed pince nez, waiting for them. Clearly he didn't fancy being treated to Peter's undivided attention.

"Morning, morning!" boomed Peter cheerfully.

"Hi Saint. How's the holiday home going?" asked Mary.

"Great thanks. Look at this photo. We completed yesterday." He skimmed a picture across the table.

Saul picked it up. "Paradise Villa" he read. "Where is it?"

"Florida Keys. We got the keys this morning." He flourished the bunch at his belt, and waved a large golden one.

"We're starting the day by looking at the keys to Paradise? Should be a great meeting darlings!" cried Saul.

"Thank you Saul. OK, let's get to it," said Peter. "First item, tablets of the last meeting. I'd like it formally recorded that Moses is to be congratulated on getting them out within two weeks of the meeting. Moses, etch it down man, etch it down."

Patronising git, thought Mary, trying not to look at Peter.

"Item two: this meeting to formally insist that all special operations and other earthly actions are properly documented and recorded, to Great Planes Standard GPS5750. We simply cannot operate like we did with the orthodox schism any more. This isn't some two-soul outfit." He sat back, and folded his arms.

“With respect Saint,” said Saul acidly, “this is a still a small operation. We simply don’t have the resources to comply with GPS5750. Maybe you do in Operations, but we certainly don’t in Marketing.”

Mary could see this going on for some time. She decided to step in. “I tell you what, I’ll ask my new guy Croesus to carry out an investigation into the possibility of us qualifying for GPS5750. He’s pretty good on this formal stuff.”

“OK,” said Peter shortly. “Take it to the minutes Moses, formal investigation into GPS5750, to report back at the next meeting.”

“It might take a while Saint,” said Mary. “Maybe we could just ask him to present when it’s ready?” Which will take several centuries, she thought to herself. “I’ll make sure it’s on his priority list.”

“Alright Mary, have it your way. Moses, if you please. But I still think it’s time we built the infrastructure for growth.” Peters arms, still folded, rose higher up his padded chest.

“Well, maybe we could move on to talk about growth, since it’s on the agenda anyway,” said Mary. “Croesus is hot on demographics, did it in soul-accounting school, studied under Soulon, one of the real authorities.”

“Oh yes, I remember him, he’s on the marketing syllabus too,” said Saul. “Count no man happy until he is dead” he declaimed theatrically.

“No, Saul, this is accountancy. We’re trained to take a pessimistic view. ‘Count no man until he is dead’. We don’t bother too much about the ‘happy’ bit. Anyway, Croesus has done these projections, counting just how many will be dead by next generation.” She handed around some slides.

“Turnover projected down by 35-50% within a generation!” exclaimed Peter. “This just can’t be true. We’re swimming in souls at the moment. We really can’t cope with the turnover.”

“Ah well, we can help you there,” said Saul. “You know I sent some guys down to study your problems Saint?”

“Nothing we can’t manage if I could bring some more staff in” said Peter huffily.

“Yes, of course you could, of course you could, but in the meantime, we’ve managed to get the punters to go for the idea that their souls have to sit in a kind of sorting office before they’re moved on to heaven. We’re calling it Purgatory.”

“Brilliant, Saul!” exclaimed Mary.

“Ah but, you see darling, it gets better. We’ve managed to persuade them that if they pay for it, they can be sent express class. Otherwise, they just have to wait for processing as usual. We’re calling it the Doctrine of Indulgences. The punters seem to love it, and you just won’t believe how much extra revenue it brought in during the pilot project. An awful lot of them seem keen to pay for faster shipment.”

“OK, Saul, I have to admit that’s pretty good,” conceded Peter.

“Do I have your permission to roll it out to all countries then?”

“Of course Saul. Moses, to the tablets, please!” boomed Peter.

“Otherwise, the finances are still fabulous,” said Mary.

“For now,” said Saul. “But thirty-five to fifty percent down by next generation? It’s going to be bloody. Better start praying for this schism.”

“Next agenda item, then, “ said Peter. “Progress on the schism.” He sat back, looking pleased with himself. “Moses, did you distribute the reporting pack?”

“Yes, Saint, we’ve all seen it. Lots of charts and figures. Lovely. I *particularly* liked the appendix on GPS5750 compliance you’ve included. There’s just one thing, Peter dear...” said Mary

“Yes Mary?”

“It doesn’t actually tell us what you’re doing, does it?” interjected Saul.

“So maybe you could just summarise that for us verbally now?” put in Mary sweetly, seeing Peter start to bridle in response to Saul.

Peter recovered his enthusiasm. “Well,” he began bullishly, “it’s going great. The standard schisms operating procedure (GPS9988) mandates a division of doctrinal leadership as the key pre-requisite for a successful schism. So we’ve set up an Antipope in this place Avignon.”

Saul’s normally sallow complexion paled further. His whitening face contrasted with his thinning red-tinted hair, and today’s brown cravat. He looked like a Neapolitan ice-cream. “Using what theological basis?” he asked quietly. Mary steeled herself for the answer.

“Disagreements over Poverty,” replied Peter. Still wrapped up in his project plan, he failed to pick up the acute distress signals emanating from Mary and Saul. Even Moses looked more interested than usual.

“You... you... you *plonker* Peter” spluttered Saul.

“I really don’t think that’s appropriate language for a board meeting. Moses please could you add an item for the next agenda regarding a formal code of conduct? Saul, would you care to explain yourself in more professional terms?” demanded Peter coldly.

Mary decided to step in quickly. “Don’t you see Saint? With a basis like that, all they’ll do is fight each other. Have witch-hunts. Ravage the countryside. I bet the Holy Roman Emperor is already marching his armies around isn’t he?”

Peter nodded. “And the King of France. So what?”

Saul stepped in. “So they’ll just end up depopulating even more of Europe. It’ll just exacerbate the effects of the Black Death. Yes, great, you’ll get us another short term boost, although I don’t know what sort of price we’ll get for

soldiers' souls in bulk right now. Or for the souls of ravaged peasants or burnt witches either, for that matter.”

“But you’re just going to make the long term trend worse. I’ll get Croesus to do some flash figures. Saul, you need to do something. Didn’t you have an idea?” said Mary.

Saul sulked. “Yes, but with an antipope marauding around, the pitch has been rather badly queered.”

“You should know,” said Peter rudely. “What is it anyway?”

“I’ve got this chap Martin Luther all primed and ready to go with a reformation. The trouble is, he wants to abolish the Indulgences we’ve just got going so nicely, and mess up the Purgatory process.”

“I thought you said you were giving him his ideas in dreams?” put in Mary. “Couldn’t you have avoided those two?”

“Yes, yes, but sometimes he thinks of things by himself. We can’t stop that happening can we?” snapped Saul impatiently.

“Maybe we could keep him on hold for now. Give my schism a bit more time. Wait for Croesus to produce the flash forecasts. I’m sure it’ll be much more positive than you make out,” suggested Peter. “Could you UHT him?”

“We’ve already made him longlife. Just in case,” added Saul pointedly.

“Let’s go with that,” said Mary, glad to find a way to buy a bit of time to work out just how much damage Peter had inflicted on them. “Moses, could you take that to the tablets please. Now, any other business?”

“Ah well, er, yes, there is,” said Peter, suddenly sheepish. “I wondered if you’d mind accompanying me to the meeting with the unions this afternoon Mary?”

“Scared of that Winter woman, Saint?” asked Saul mischievously.

“You mean the new General Secretary of the Soulminers Organisation of Unionised Labour?” asked Mary.

“S.O.U.L.” clarified Peter. “I used to get on so well with the previous guy, we were at disciples school together. But he’s been ousted by this militant monster Winter woman.”

“She calls herself the Queen of SOUL,” observed Saul.

I thought maybe you could give me a bit of support, Mary. Bring a feminine touch to the meeting?” pleaded Peter.

Mary looked irritated. “If I must. What’s she like anyway?”

“Don’t you watch the news?” said Saul. “She’s a rebel, you may not like her looks or her style.”

“The boys in her group they just want to drag her way down” said Peter. “But the majority of soulminers are women these days. She easily won the nomination to General Secretary.”

“If she comes your way, she’ll make you surrender” warned Saul.

“Not me she won’t,” said Peter firmly.

“I’m not so sure Saint,” said Saul. “What she wants is what you’ve got.” Peter looked alarmed.

“Fine Peter, I’ll come along,” said Mary crisply, deciding it would be better to close the discussion. Anyway, she was quite interested to meet a woman who could have Peter quaking quite so obviously in his boots.

Chapter 7

The meeting that afternoon with the new General Secretary was a short, sharp shock, for Peter anyway.

He hovered nervously in the board-room, jangling his keys, waiting for the arrival of the new Queen of SOUL. Mary watched him interestedly. She'd never seen him quite so keyed up.

A tall, glossy woman of African extraction was shown into the room.

"Good morning Ms Winter" began Peter effusively. "And do let me introduce you to our FD, Mary Magdalene."

"Well hello sister," said the woman in a piercing voice to Mary. She smiled widely showing a lot of white teeth. "Sisters are doin' it for themselves!" she shouted at Peter. He flinched.

"Er, do have a seat Ms Winter," he said. "Now what can we do for you?"

"Everybody gotta stop, look and listen!" she shouted.

"Yes, OK, well we're listening to you," said Peter patiently. He's going to need the patience of a saint for this meeting, thought Mary to herself.

"OK, I'll get to it. Pay, that's what we're talking about bro'."

"Well, er, the standard generational rises are always ahead of inflation and..." started Peter.

"SOUL is mostly sisters, these days, bro'" shouted the Queen over him. "And sisters' pay is fallin' behind their menfolks. Well behind. So cut out the 'standard generational rises' stuff and start talkin' turkey, bro'."

"Well, I really don't think..."

"I gotta mandate from maah members" shouted the Queen. "Right now they're telling me they can't survive. At first they were afraid, they were

petrified. But now they've got me, fighting for their side. I've spent so many nights thinking how you're doing us wrong. We're growing strong, we're learning how to carry on."

"What sort of figures did you have in mind, er, sister?" asked Mary.

"45% percent across the board this generation, and a further 55% percent next" answered the Queen immediately, dropping the home-girl accent to reinforce the point. Mary shuddered inwardly. "Plus 20 credos per soul trapped instead of the current 15."

"We just don't have that kind of money," began Peter.

The Queen was back at full volume. "I got all my life to live, you got all your cash to give!"

"We won't survive," cried Peter. "It'll be a miracle if we can afford more than 5%. Business is not good."

"I believe in miracles!" shouted the Queen. She seemed to switch voices at the touch of a button. She got up and walked around the table. "You sexy thing" she finished, prodding Peter in the chest with her finger. "Anyway, aren't you making record profits at the moment?" She was putting on her coat. Clearly she felt she'd made her point, and the meeting had no need to last much longer.

"Go on now, go walk out the door" suggested Peter. He was clearly badly rattled. "Just turn around now, 'cause you're not welcome any more."

"You think I'd crumble? You think I'd lay down and die?" shouted the Queen at him. "Oh no not I. Maah members are one hundred percent behind me on this. Maybe not straight away, but once the new government's in place, you'll have to give in. Just you wait and see. No soulminers means no business. We'll strike."

She finished putting on her coat, and marched out. "Good day to you, sister!" she called cheerfully to Mary as she passed.

Peter was sitting with his head in his hands. “It took all the strength I had, not to fall apart,” he muttered to himself.

“I’m not looking forward to it all if/when Charles Stuart becomes Minister for Labour” said Mary. “If he does just run around like a headless chicken, we’re in for real trouble with that woman.”

Chapter 8

Mary was on another date with Gautama. It was not going much better than the previous one. Gautama had chosen a Japanese place. Which was all very well, thought Mary, but then what's the point of Japanese food if you don't eat fish? He'd picked his way fastidiously through seaweed, tofu and soya. Although he hadn't exactly objected when Mary selected the sashimi, she wasn't entirely sure he'd approved. On the other hand, although he had confined himself to drinking mango juice, he seemed happy to ply her with sake. If it hadn't seemed improbable, she'd have thought he was trying to get her drunk.

He was *still* talking business. "I met Jupiter at a conference recently," he said. Mary concentrated her attention, as far as she still could.

"I'm really not at all sure about Pantheon Alliance, you know Mary," he said. "I think they're mixed up in some very strange business."

"Such as?"

"Well, there are rumours about smuggling," he continued.

"Smuggling?"

"Yes Mary, and drugs. I think Pantheon might just be a big money laundering front you know." Mary tried to consider the implications of this, but decided to save it for tomorrow when her thought processes might be clearer. She leaned forward. Although her outfit was perhaps just a little more demure than last time, very few men could have prevented their gaze from straying just momentarily. Gautama, however, coped admirably with the challenge.

"Tell me more, Gautama," she said, attempting 'huskily' for effect.

"Well, it's only rumours really. But I thought you might be interested. Not sure I'd want to be in bed with a shareholder mixed up in that sort of thing."

I'm not sure you'd want to be in bed with anyone, thought Mary sourly.

“How’s Paul, Saul and Mary doing anyway? If Pantheon ever decide to sell any of their stake... how much have they got, by the way?” he asked silkily.

Mary decided to avoid the question. “Oh, quite a decent holding.”

“Anyway, if they ever did decide to sell, I might be interested in buying you see. So I wondered if you could tell me a little about how you’re doing just at the moment?”

“Pretty well actually Gautama,” she replied.

“Do you have any numbers?”

“Well now Gautama,” she said, leaning forwards just a little further. “I wouldn’t want to discuss the figures somewhere quite so... public. Maybe we could find somewhere a little more intimate. How about your place?”

“Oh, well, er no, I really have a very early start in the morning.” He looked at his watch. “I’ll get the check. And I’ve arranged a car to take you home.”

Snap, thought Mary sadly. Maybe he’s really not my type after all. It’s such a pity when he’s so charming and good looking. And rich. Perhaps I’ll keep my promise to myself about Beelzebub.

“That’s wonderful Gautama,” she said. “Thank you for a lovely evening.”

Chapter 9

Saul was heading up the stairway to heaven. His slightly stooped shoulders seemed particularly hunched this morning. Mary appeared suddenly at the top, and began to descend rapidly. Saul glanced at the folder under her arm. It was clear from the high-quality printing and large label that it was Croesus' work. He nodded at it. "Bad?" he asked.

"Bad," confirmed Mary. "He's just sitting in his office with the door closed."

"That the flash demographic projection for the schism you got there, darling?"

"Yep."

"Bad?"

"Bad," confirmed Mary again. She headed on down the staircase.

Saul continued up to Peter's office, knocked quietly, and entered without waiting for an answer. A copy of Croesus' report was open on the desk. Peter was staring whitely at a graph.

"How's it going, Saint?" began Saul.

"Yesterday, all my troubles seemed so far away," answered Peter.

"Now you need a place to hide away?" asked Saul sympathetically. Peter nodded ruefully. "How did you get on with the Winter woman?"

"Why she had to go, I don't know, she wouldn't say. I said something wrong..." began Peter. "Actually that's rubbish. The only thing I said wrong was that we couldn't afford her ridiculous wage demands. And we can't especially... especially now I've read the demographic projections," he finished lamely, gesturing half-heartedly at the papers on the desk.

“Now look Peter, I’m sorry I was so rude in the board meeting last week,” said Saul. “It’s just... well anyway, I’ve been thinking, and maybe it’s not so bad after all.” Peter looked up at him.

“If you could just get your antipopes back in the box where they belong reasonably quickly...,” Peter nodded hopefully, “...then maybe I can use them constructively for my reformation idea. You see, I could get my Luther chappie to say how the arising of antipopes illustrates the moral bankruptcy of the papacy and throws the need for reform into a clear light. Or something like that anyway.”

“I tell you what, Saint,” continued Saul, “you can take the credit for it in the board meeting if you like.” Peter brightened. “You know Mrs Carpenter never gives me the credit for anything anyway. You could say you thought my reformation idea needed strengthening so you did your schism to lay the groundwork. How about that?”

“Thanks Saul,” said Peter bluffly. “I apologise for mucking up the schism,” he volunteered suddenly.

“That’s OK Peter. Maybe you’ll let me do the doctrine next time? It is my field of expertise after all. We should all play to our strengths in a team,” said Saul pointedly. Keen as he was on smoothing over any tension, there was no way he was going to let the opportunity pass to get Peter back off his territory.

As Peter opened his mouth to answer, Saul changed the subject. It was so unusual for Peter to betray even a hint of humility that Saul fell sure he had taken the point. There was no need to rub it in. “Are you coming to the election-night ball?”

“You mean the one at the Soulbrokers Guild-Hall?”

“Yes. The Four Horsemen are playing. Pestilence has the voice of an angel. I was at college with her, she had her own band there. I always thought she could have made it professionally. Then she met War, and he was keen on the

business idea, and she went along with that instead of sticking with the singing. Mind you they've made a killing."

"Especially since they teamed up with the other two," added Peter.

"Yes," said Saul. "It's just given them that extra cutting edge in the market. I mean, they did OK as Two Horsemen, but adding Death and Famine has given them a range of concepts to offer that the competition just can't match. Famine's such a sweet girl too, you wouldn't think she was tough enough for that business. Anyway," he continued, "it promises to be a great party. Most of the soulbrokers are coming, I've heard, and quite a few others connected with the industry."

Peter didn't look completely convinced. "Well, you know, Saul, I'm not that much of a party-animal myself and my wife doesn't like..."

"...Lots of chances to network. The big boys are all expected. You know, Gautama'll be there, I've heard Jupiter and Saturn are thinking of dropping in, Beelzebub and Hades are both coming from the refiners" interrupted Saul, meaningfully.

"You know, maybe I will just put in a brief appearance after all, Saul," said Peter.

What I have to do in the name of being a team-player, though Saul, as he bade Peter goodbye and headed back to his own offices. The reformation needed urgent work if it was to be credible by the time the full investors meeting was due.

Chapter 10

Mary was late for the ball. She'd had to stay behind in the office to finish the finances for the All Investors Meeting before hurrying home to get changed and make her way to the Soulbrokers Guild-Hall.

Before she left, she'd watched the results on TV. As expected, the Divine Right had won easily. Augustus had appeared on the steps of Number 666 to announce his first ministerial appointments. He had only become leader a few months earlier, after a couple of the previous leadership had died suddenly following a dinner party. Livia, his wife, smiled at his shoulder.

As Augustus was confirming that Rasputin would get the Home Office, while Scheherazade would become Foreign Minister, Mary had switched off the television and left.

Now as she stepped through the Guild-Hall doors into the main room, she was hit by a wall of smoke and noise. Saul, perched on a bar-stool with his usual Pink Margarita, spotted her and beckoned her over. As she made her way through the crush, she could see him flirting with the barmen, at least one of whom looked quite familiar.

"Evening darling, been working late? You're right on cue, it's just warming up," he said, as she sat down on an adjacent stool. "What are you having?"

"Usual please Saul. So who's here?"

"Look for yourself sweetheart. You've met the band I take it?"

"The Four Horsemen? I knew Famine at school actually, she was really sweet."

"And the guy talking to Moses is one of Jacob's boys. I can never tell them apart, but I think that's Zebulon. Jacob's around somewhere too, oh yes, look over there, passing a request to the band," pointed Saul. Jacob & Sons had

agents all over the hemisphere, and were respected as one of the few early firms to have kept up with the times.

“This song was requested by Jacob,” announced Pestilence over the microphone as, to wild cheering from a corner apparently filled with identical looking young men, the band broke into the opening chords of Walk Like An Egyptian.

Moses, Zebulon (if it was him), Jacob and at least a couple – it was hard to count - of his other sons headed for the dance floor. A group of dancing girls, all sporting rather ridiculous hen-night style horns and tails made some room for them. “Beelzebub’s lot are sponsoring the party,” observed Saul. “The girls are from his corporate hospitality section.” Indeed looking round, Mary could see the symbols of Hell adorning the walls and doors.

“Is Peter here?” asked Mary.

“See for yourself,” said Saul, pointing to the dance floor. “Oh god darlings, just look at him.” Peter, clearly already rather the worse for wear, was attempting to join in walking like an Egyptian. Moses eyed him sourly as Peter went the wrong way and trod on his toes.

“Didn’t the Egyptians have some sort of hippopotamus god?” asked Mary.

“Catty, sweetheart, catty,” said Saul. He had half an eye on a large television screen behind the bar. “What’s he saying Bacchus?” he asked the nearest barman and pointed at Rasputin whose head now filled the screen.

“He says he’s going to appoint a new Drugs Czar, guv” answered Bacchus. “Part of their crackdown on the moral decay of society, so this Rasputin geezer says.”

“Let’s hope he doesn’t visit the gents loo here tonight then,” said Saul.

“Who are those two over there, talking to Gautama?” asked Mary.

“Oh come on, you must recognise Jupiter and Saturn, surely?”

Mary peered more carefully through the smoke. “Oh yes, never seen them in DJs, that’s why.” She studied Gautama. He was drinking mango-flavoured sparkling water from a small glass. She sighed. Maybe he’s really not my type.

“I wonder what he’s discussing with Jupiter and Saturn? From what I’ve seen of him, he only ever talks shop,” she voiced her thoughts aloud.

“Oh yes, how did the second date go?” asked Saul innocently.

She gave him a sour look. “Tell you tomorrow.”

The band was finishing a number, when suddenly there was a loud groan throughout the room.

“What’s that about?” asked Mary.

Saul was studying the television screen again. “They’ve just confirmed Charles Stuart as Minister for Labour” said Saul glumly. “Surely it’s too early for Augustus to have lost his head like that?”

“I’d heard a rumour that Augustus’ wife was having a bit of a fling with Charles actually,” said Mary. “Maybe that’s how he got the job?”

“Charles and Livia? Is that so?” commented Saul. “I’d watch out if I was him. She’s poison, that dame.”

A short while later, Pestilence suddenly began to sing: “I’m the devil in disguise, I’ll tell you no lies, I’m playing in a rock’n’roll band.” There were cheers from the floor. They’d all been before to parties sponsored by Hell Refineries, and knew what was coming next. Sure enough, as the Four Horseman hit the opening chords of Bat out of Hell, in swaggered Beelzebub from a side door, still in the Stetson hat and cowboy boots, but with the check shirt and jeans replaced by a glittering blue costume.

“At least the old devil can actually sing,” observed Saul. “Peter tried this trick at the reaper-calls-centre Christmas do, and it was excruciating by all accounts.”

Beelzebub belted out his party number: “Like a bat out of hell, I’ll be gone when the morning comes,” and as the final chords died away, and they all dutifully applauded, held up his hands for silence.

“Actually, I hope we’ll all be still right here when the morning comes,” he grinned. “Anyhows. G’day y’all. Y’all having a good time?” he asked rhetorically. “I’d like to say thank you to The Four Horsemen for putting on such a great show for y’all here tonight.”

Death stepped up to introduce the band, his reaper earrings glittering in the spotlight. “Let’s hear it for Pestilence on keyboards and vocals, War on drums, Famine on Bass...” cheers greeted each name, “And me, Death, on lead-guitar.”

As the clapping ended, Beelzebub resumed. “Just now, I’d like to say a coupla more serious words. Don’t worry y’all, I’ll keep it short.” He smiled good humouredly. “Y’all saw the new Minister for Labour, didn’t ya?” Groans from the floor. “Well, ah think there’s gonna be some trouble there. Mighty big trouble if we don’t watch out. Y’all know there could be a soulminers strike, and that there Charles is just gonna bury his head in the sand if it happens. Something real serious, not like that little accident in England last century.” There were some ironic jeers, and Peter waved half-heartedly in acknowledgement.

A hundred years or so ago, Peter had tried to impose new working practices on the soulminers (‘improved end-to-end documentation’ was his stated ambition), starting with a pilot project in England. The soulminers had denounced it as ‘a load of management Bull’ and gone to the High Court to obtain an interdiction against it. The local population had been forced to be born, get married or die only in church porches. Quite often their bodies had become disillusioned, and hadn’t bothered calling in until long after death, by which time their souls were almost unrefinable. The price paid by the refiners for English souls had dropped through the floor, and Peter, Saul and Mary Ltd

had suffered an unpleasant cashflow crisis. They'd had to borrow a lot of money at extortionate rates of interest from their bankers, Cayman & Swiss, to tide them over.

"I said if it happens, but maybe I should say *when* it happens," continued Beelzebub. "And when it does happen, I gotta tell y'all now, we gotta stick together, all of us here in the souls business, brokers, refiners, recyclers, everyone here. All for one and one for all. No selling out to the soulminers!" There were cheers.

"OK, that's all folks! On with the party" cried Beelzebub, and went into his other regular number. "Coooooome on, come on!" he cried suddenly. Everyone stood up and began to punch the air and stamp. "Do you wanna be in mah gang, mah gang, mah gang?" he leered. "Oh yeah," they all cried dutifully. After all, Beelzebub was paying for all this, and there was no shortage of drink or Hell refineries corporate hospitality dancing girls. Even Gautama could be seen tapping the floor half-heartedly with his foot.

Freed from the need to perform Beelzebub tribute songs, the Four Horsemen could now get on with their trademark blues. As Beelzebub headed back to the changing rooms, Pestilence began to belt out *Your Can Leave Your Hat On*, with grin in the direction of Beelzebub. He waved in acknowledgement at the door before disappearing. Saul returned to watching the television. Scheherezade was on the screen. "And this government will implement a major crackdown on smuggling," she was saying.

"Smuggling?" asked Mary. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Jupiter, who was also apparently listening to the TV, stand up suddenly, dialing his on his mobile while striding out in search of somewhere quieter to make his call.

"Yes, darling, apparently there's been a huge increase in stuff being taken off the Earth, shipped through the Ether, and brought here to the Great Planes. It's not ecologically sound and the Divine Right made a manifesto promise to put an end to it," said Saul.

Scheherazade was continuing, “Maximum penalties for smuggling will be increased from a thousand and one nights to two aeons imprisonment in a pentagram. Over six-hundred new border officers will be recruited to patrol the Ether...”

Mary wasn't listening. A tall blond man, immaculate in his white dinner suit, was approaching. He had the perma-tan of one rich enough to spend his whole year in resort climates, and surfers' hair. He was really very good looking. “Good evening Mary,” he said, in an indefinable accent, faintly mediterranean. “You're looking stunning tonight. Like to dance?”

“Love to, Apollo” she said, getting up. This was more like it. She led him ostentatiously past the table where Gautama was sitting talking intently with Saturn. Occasionally one or the other would scribble another figure on the sheet of paper between them. Gautama looked up briefly, before returning to his numbers. Mary and Apollo headed on to the dance-floor, and made for the end furthest from Peter, who was still dancing manically. Safety first, thought Mary, watching Mercury wince as Peter's foot landed on one of his sandals.

Saul smiled benignly at them. Apollo was managing director of Worldwide Sunworshippers Inc. He had successfully diversified them out of soulbroking and into holiday homes. The holiday-homes division was said to contribute most of their profits these days. In fact, Peter's new villa was a Sunworshippers development.

A thin, middle-aged man in an unusual green suit headed up to the bar and sat down on a neighbouring stool. He smiled at Saul, revealing a lot of well-cared for teeth. “Señor Saul, what news on the Rialto?” he asked.

“Pretty good right now, Croc,” answered Saul, as he motioned the barman to get the man a drink. “Did you see Livia grinning behind Augustus on the news?”

Charles ‘Croc’ Cayman, joint managing partner of the Swiss & Cayman Bank, shuddered. “I’m glad I’m not married to her,” he observed. “I’d be scared to turn over in bed. Is this a dagger I feel behind me?”

“Mmmmmm. I wonder if she cooks the dinners in their household?”

“Augustus must be doing something right, since he’s apparently still alive.”

“Behind every great man...” intoned Saul.

As the night wore on, Saul saw Mary dancing frequently with Apollo. Beelzebub kept trying to get a look in too. At some point, she returned briefly to talk to Saul.

“You’re getting a lot of action, Mary?” asked Saul with a knowing look.

“Ah, that Apollo, just divine...” breathed Mary.

“And Beelzebub? He looks pretty drunk.”

“Beelzebub has a terrible desire for me,” answered Mary.

“He will not let you go?”

“He will not let me go, go, go...”

“Mamma mia, mamma mia” said Saul. “I should stick with that nice guy Apollo then darling.”

“I’m trying to!” squeaked Mary. Beelzebub was headed their way.

“Houston, we have a problem,” noted Saul. Mary was looking round for an escape route when Apollo reappeared in the nick of time, and bore her away back to the dance floor. Saul wondered if Beelzebub would bore him in place about the new Minister of Labour, but he turned and headed back to the dance floor. He was soon busy with Shia. Sonny looked on irritated from a side table, clutching a glass of orange juice. Peter appeared to be occupied with a Hell Refineries corporate hospitality girl.

Saul watched with amusement, wondering what Peter's wife, of whom Peter appeared to be terrified, would say if she could see him. He was just turning to order another drink as Pestilence started on I Am Sailing. "Cross the water, cross the sea..." she sang. Of course, thought Saul suddenly. His eyes narrowed as he thought it through. Perfect! I'll get the Ocean Going Sailing project launched urgently in the morning.

Chapter 11

Next day, Mary was sitting in her office, attempting to focus through her hangover on the latest cashflow forecasts from Midas when Saul walked slowly in.

“Saul, hi, you look like I feel,” said Mary.

“Probably better that way around darling,” said Saul. “Is Peter in?”

“No, he rang to take a day’s holiday. I tried to get him to just say he was sick, but you know what he’s like.”

“I can’t quite muster the energy to disapprove this morning. Anyway, I thought you’d’ve been off somewhere with Apollo?” said Saul.

“On a first date? Really Saul!” Mary feigned shock. Saul raised a disbelieving eyebrow. “Well it was rather late,” conceded Mary, “anyway, we’ve arranged to go out next Friday.”

“I thought you were meant to be seeing Gautama again then?”

“After the last one? You have to be kidding. You were right, he really only does think about one thing. And it’s not the right thing. Just business all the time,” said Mary. “Actually now I come to think about it...”

“Well?” said Saul.

“In amongst telling me how much money *he* was making, and trying to find out how much money *we* aren’t making, he had some rather odd gossip about Pantheon. I wouldn’t give it much credit, except...”

“Except?”

“Well, you remember Scheherazade coming on the telly to talk about cracking down on smuggling? Just as she finished, I saw Jupiter leave suddenly talking into his mobile,” said Mary.

“So what? He’s Italian, they talk all the time, darling.”

“So... Gautama said that Pantheon were mixed up in smuggling.”

“Smuggling? They’re an investment fund alliance,” said Saul sceptically.

“Gautama mentioned drugs too. In fact, he seemed to think the Pantheon fund thing was just for money-laundering. Didn’t the new government say something about drugs as well. I don’t remember too clearly,” grinned Mary.

“Rasputin appointed a new drugs Czar. I’d have said you were putting two and two together and getting twenty-two, not very Finance Director-like at all, if it wasn’t for the fact that it was Gautama who put the ideas into your head. He always knows what’s happening. How very strange...” finished Saul.

“I wonder if we need to worry about it?” said Mary. “After all, we’ve got this bloody All Investors Meeting coming up, at Pantheon’s request too.”

“I honestly can’t see a connection, darling,” answered Saul, after some thought. “While I’m not that keen on being 45% owned by a money-laundering organisation, I don’t see it makes much difference to us. If it’s true, which personally I still can’t quite see.”

“Let’s hope you’re right. Anyway, what are you in for so bright and early? I really didn’t expect to see you in the office today at all.”

“I had an idea last night,” admitted Saul. “I’ve put the Ocean Going Sailing project into high gear. One of my chappies has been despatched to teach the natives about long distance navigation even as we speak.”

“How does that help us?” asked Mary.

“Wait and see, darling, wait and see. Don’t spoil the surprise now, and anyway it might not happen. Give it another generation will you, then ask me again. Right now, I’m off home for about a week’s sleep. See you tomorrow!”

Chapter 12

It was the day of the All Investors Meeting. Peter, Saul and Mary waited nervously in the board-room for the other investors. Moses sat at the far end of the table, fidgeting with his tablets. They all knew it was likely to be a difficult meeting, and if it went really badly, they could end up being sold off or needing new investors. Mary pictured Gautama sitting there, telling her what to do. It was not a happy speculation.

Beelzebub appeared, brandishing his cigar assertively. “G’day y’all!” he cried, before taking a seat and studying his papers with surprising focus.

“Morning Bubba,” they replied. “Great party by the way!” added Saul. Beelzebub waved his cigar in acknowledgement before returning to the figures in front of him. Mary recognised Croesus’ demographic projections.

“Good morning Mrs Carpenter!” piped Saul, as she entered. To their surprise, her husband followed her into the room. Middle-aged at best, thin and rather short-sighted, Joseph Carpenter greeted them all carefully. “Good morning Ms Magdalene, good morning Mr Fisher, good morning Mr Tarsus,” he said in a reedy baritone. His large hands were heavily callused, and together with his shoulder length hair, were out of keeping with his formal pin-stripes. He wore a green hat.

“Good morning, Sir,” cried Peter, ushering him into a seat. Meanwhile Saul danced attendance on Mrs Carpenter, who glowered bluely at him. Today the twinset was matched by a blue rinse.

“Just the guys from Pantheon now, that’s right Moses isn’t it?” asked Mary. Moses nodded agreement.

“They’re a tad late,” said Peter. “Better wait for them of course.”

After a couple of rather tense minutes, Mercury appeared in the doorway. He had discarded the white tuxedo for a dark suit. The sandals remained in place. “The boys are just coming. Had a bit of urgent business to attend to on the way.”

As he spoke, Jupiter and Saturn appeared in the doorway. Jupiter was perhaps forty years old, broad shouldered, swarthy and heavy jowled. Saturn might have been in his fifties, his hair silvering. They were dressed in identical black suits, with a strong hint of the thirties about the cut. They took their seats, Saturn seated as always to Jupiter’s right, with his chair eased back from the table. They muttered quietly to each other in Italian as Mary brought the meeting to order. It was her turn in the chair.

“All set?” she asked nervously, before collecting herself, and beginning. “OK, item one, tablets of the last meeting. Any points? No, fine,” she looked around, “item two then, future financial projections. Mercury, this was your point, maybe you’d like to lead us into it?” She smiled hopefully at Mercury, who glanced briefly at Jupiter, received a nod in return, and began to speak.

“Well, now, we’ve been studying the projections you put together for us Mary,” he started, his Italian accent stronger than usual. “And we don’t like the look of them at all. As I said in the last meeting, it reminds us of the situation at Pantheon. We sold out there while the price was still good, and we think we should do the same here.”

“Perhaps we could hear what you propose to turn the situation round” cut in Mrs Carpenter. “Peter you had a plan as I recall.”

“Yes, indeed,” said Peter enthusiastically. “I’m going for a multiphase doctrinal splitting initiative, initially based around a GPS9988-schism, but then extending in phase two to reformation and in phase three to counter-reformation.”

“You mean you’re just doing an extended schism?” asked Saturn sceptically.

“How’s it going so far?” asked Beelzebub before Peter could answer.

“Well, in phase one I set up an antipope,” said Peter. Beelzebub’s eyebrows disappeared into his Stetson.

“That your idea was it Saul?” asked Mrs Carpenter sarcastically.

“But that was just to lay the groundwork,” continued Peter hurriedly. He glanced briefly at some notes in front of him. “I’m going to say that the arising of antipopes illustrates the moral bankruptcy of the papacy and throws the need for reform into a clear light.”

Mary, who was resisting the urge to hide under her chair, glanced at Saul. He winked back. “My idea,” he mouthed silently, noting approvingly that Peter must have written it all down after their chat. Maybe he’s got some sense after all, he thought.

“Very good Peter,” said Mrs Carpenter approvingly.

“And where does all this lead?” demanded Mercury.

“Er, well...” Peter floundered. Saul decided to step in quickly.

“The reformation will fuel the drive for competitive expansion. To explore strange New Worlds, to boldly go where no man has gone before,” he declared. “Well European man anyway. We’re following it up with the introduction of Ocean Going Sailing and a papal bull urging the conquest of new lands and souls for the faith.”

Saturn looked alarmed, and began to whisper urgently in Jupiter’s ear.

“What wood are you using for the ocean going boats?” asked Joseph with sudden interest. Mrs Carpenter looked poised to quell him, so once more Saul hastened to speak.

“Well maybe you could recommend a type? It’s your area of expertise isn’t it? After all, that’s one of the roles of an investor, to bring valuable outside expertise to the table,” he said smoothly. Mrs Carpenter closed her mouth again.

“What part of Europe are you building the boats in?” asked Joseph.

“Portugal,” answered Saul. And Spain later, he thought, but taking a look at Saturn still whispering to Jupiter, he decided to keep that to himself.

“Oh, oak then, definitely. There’s good quality in Portugal.”

“Well thank you Joseph, we’ll certainly take your advice,” said Saul smoothly.

Saturn spoke up suddenly. “Where are you planning to get them to sail to?” he demanded.

Saul decided to let Saturn commit himself first. “Well, the main possibilities are go head for the Americas, or try round Africa and see what we can pick up in the East.”

“The East’s mostly Gautama’s territories isn’t it?” said Mrs Carpenter. “I think you’ll have difficulty moving in there, Saul.”

“We suggest East,” said Jupiter firmly, before Saul could answer.

“The Americas do...” he glanced at Jupiter ...”at first glance seem to offer the superior opportunity, Mrs C...” he looked again at Jupiter, whose frown was deepening “... but on the other hand there is a much greater population base in the East,” he finished.

“East,” said Jupiter with some finality. I wonder why he’s so concerned to stop us heading west, thought Saul.

Mary decided she had a job to do as chairman. “Fine, let’s take to the tablets that Ocean Going Sailing will be, er, launched, using oak ships, and initially heading East. Everybody OK with that?” They all nodded.

“However,” said Mercury heavily. “However, that still doesn’t answer the main question. We’re here to discuss closing down. We’d like to vote on it.”

Beelzebub spoke. “It still looks pretty good to me, Merc.” He gestured at the Mary’s financial reporting. “I kinda feel closing down could be a little premature. The plans sound OK. I know the demographic projections look bad,

but it isn't quite comparable with what happened at Pantheon is it? The customers haven't lost faith in the concept have they?"

"With Constantinople about to fall, and Sonny and Shia still active in Spain? The boys feel it's just a matter of time. We should dump it before the market spots the trend."

"Well I think we should give it a bit longer," said Beelzebub. "I propose we give this outfit until say..."

"1600?" suggested Saul.

"1500," countered Mercury.

"How about we compromise on 1550?" said Saul.

"OK, Saul, you got it. 1550AD," said Beelzebub.

Mary moved in quickly. "OK, the proposal is to continue operations until 1550AD and review the situation at that point."

"With the intention of a quick sale or closure if the downward trend is continuing," said Mercury firmly.

"With that intention," said Mary. "In favour?" She looked around the table. "That's myself, Saul, Peter?" Peter nodded. "Mr and Mrs Carpenter?"

After a brief pause, Mrs Carpenter spoke. "In favour. But you watch it Saul. If you mess it up, I won't forgive you."

After Mrs Carpenter had spoken, Joseph's response was automatic. "In favour," he said shakily.

"And I'm in favour too," said Beelzebub.

"That's fifty-five percent in favour," said Mary, unsure whether to be relieved that the vote was in their favour or to panic about the 1550AD deadline. "We need the Pantheon vote for the record."

Saturn whispered briefly to Jupiter. “Abstention,” said Jupiter shortly. Moses etched a note.

“Good. Item number three, possible soulminers union militancy,” announced Mary. “Bubba, your point I think.”

“Well, y’all, like I said at the party, there’s gonna be trouble sooner or later,” said Beelzebub. “With that spineless idiot Charles at the labour ministry, I’m guessing sooner. What plans ya got?”

“Well, we’re smoothing out our soulflow using Saul’s new purgatory concept,” answered Mary.

“Saul’s concept?” demanded Mrs Carpenter.

Peter decided he ought to return the favour to Saul. “It runs like this, Mrs C,” he began, and continued with a detailed explanation of the operational management of purgatory. As usual with matters of internal operational detail, he was excellent.

“Wonderful, Peter, it sounds very well organised,” said Mrs Carpenter.

“The idea is, it gives us some reserves so we can stand a short disruption by the unions,” added Mary, carefully omitting that it was really an emergency measure to deal with the sudden under-capacity in Peter’s department.

“How about a long disruption?” asked Mercury. “Have you met the Winter woman yet?”

“Well, er, yes,” said Peter. “We did have a formal meeting. She outlined the union’s wage demands. Quite impossible of course. I told her so.”

“The Queen of SOUL,” chuckled Beelzebub sardonically. “You mean she ate you for breakfast Peter?”

“Mary was there too,” squeaked Peter.

“Oh thanks very much Peter,” said Mary. “Yes I was there. Not that I managed to squeeze a word in. She does seem a bit fierce, doesn’t she? Have you met her then Bubba?”

“No thank goodness,” answered Beelzebub. “But I’ve heard the rumours, same as everyone else. Like I said at my party, we gotta stick together when it happens. I got just as much to lose as you do if there’s no souls coming in to my refineries. Costs me a fortune whenever Hell freezes over. Meantime, you get on to your bankers, make sure you’ve got a facility in place.”

“I’ll call Croc Cayman this afternoon,” promised Mary.

Chapter 13

After the meeting was over, Peter, Saul and Mary stayed in the board room. Peter and Mary looked shaken.

“1550AD,” Peter kept repeating to himself.

“How in heaven’s name are we going to turn it all around by 1550?” asked Mary.

Saul appeared rather more confident. “Relax darlings, it’ll all come right. Have a little faith.”

“In what?”

“In Ocean Going Sailing and expansion into new territories, darling.”

“I wonder why the Pantheon guys were so dead against you sending the punters off to the west?” wondered Mary.

“I don’t know. I’ll try to find out. In the meantime, we’ve a reformation to sort out. We can decide whether to head east or west later.”

“You mean go directly against an All Investors Meeting instruction?” asked Peter, aghast. “We can’t do that.”

“Well, we’ll see, won’t we. It’s not ready yet, I’ve got to go off and get them working on the oak idea. Joseph really does know about wood you know, it would be silly to disregard his advice.”

“We really cannot go against a Meeting instruction,” insisted Peter again. “I’ll put it on the next board agenda.”

“If you must,” said Saul. “Anyway, we’ve all got work to do. Come along Saint, we need to check out how reunifying the papacy is going. Mary, you have a banker to call, I believe, if you can make a little time on your phone without Apollo on the other end of it.

Mary looked dreamy. “You’re just hanging on the telephone?” suggested Peter.

“He can call me, call me anytime,” said Mary.

“Going better than with Gautama then?”

“He just had a heart of glass,” said Mary.

Chapter 14

Peter had returned from the ministry of Labour. The minister, Charles Stuart, had organised a meeting with leaders of the soulbroking industry to discuss the Soulminers Organisation of Unionised Labour's wage demands, and the threats from the Queen of SOUL to back it them with strike action.

"How did you get on?" asked Mary.

"Well, he was a bit too cavalier about it for my liking," answered Peter. "He seemed to think it was all just a quarrel about 'shit money' as he put it so elegantly. However, he did promise that the Divine Right would take a stand."

"What happens next?" asked Saul.

"He was going to meet with the Winter woman this afternoon. We might as well watch the news, she's bound to be on, even if he isn't."

Mary switched on the television and found a news channel.

"The Soulminers Union has announced that it will come out in a Planes-wide strike over pay..." began the newsreader.

"It went well then evidently," observed Saul dryly.

The television switched to the soulminers leader. "We're coming out," she began. "We want the world to know, got to let it show, we're coming out." Peter watched horrified as the Queen continued. "There's a new us coming out, and we just have to live, and you gotta give, we're completely positive."

"What do we do now?" he asked rhetorically.

"Shhhh," said Mary. "Let's see her finish."

"Somehow, we'll have to make them just understand. We've got it well in hand, and oh how we've planned," continued the Queen.

An interviewer asked about her meeting with Charles Stuart. "I think this time around, we are going to do it like he never knew it," she replied.

"The minister was unavailable for comment," continued the newsreader.

"He's burying his head in the sand already?" asked Saul incredulously.

The phone rang. "It's Beelzebub," said Mary answering it. "He wants to know if we've seen the news, and how we're planning to respond."

"Well Bubba, we're having an emergency board meeting tomorrow morning to assess the situation, and we'll get right back to you... Yes, yes, I agree, we're all in this together, just like you said... Yes, we'll get you the current stock position in purgatory... yes, and you. Keep the home fires burning Bubba!" she finished, putting the phone back.

The newsreader was continuing. "Today's other news. The Foreign Minister, Scheherezade, announced today that there had been a large number of arrests of suspected smugglers through the Ether."

Scheherezade appeared on the screen. "This is a story which is just beginning," she declared. "The tale of arrests has risen this afternoon to over fifty. Our novel approach is clearly working."

"Scheherezade has promised that the all their stories will be released to the press as soon as the suspects have undergone questioning," resumed the newsreader. Peter switched off the television.

"I gather we're having an emergency board meeting tomorrow then," said Saul.

"Good call, Mary," said Peter. "Saul, your turn to chair I think?"

Chapter 15

That afternoon, Mary and Peter were in the middle of a routine meeting to discuss the financial modelling of the purgatory process when Peter looked suddenly at his watch.

“Mary, do you think we could finish this later this week?”

“Of course Peter. Rushing home to see the wife and kids for once?” Mary knew Peter was devoted to his children, and probably frightened of his wife, and had been working late in the office a little too often recently.

“No, unfortunately. No, I got a call from Shia. She’s asked if I could go over to their offices and talk about this strike.”

“Sounds interesting. Let me know how you get on then,” said Mary, as Peter tidied away his papers and headed for the door. She watched through her windows as Peter appeared in the car-park, headed over to his large black executive saloon, and drove away. I wonder how he affords those new cars every year, thought Mary idly to herself. She and Saul believed Peter to live at the limit of his available credit at any moment, but of course they could hardly ask. The executive car was symptomatic. To Peter it represented his aspiration to be seen as major player in the business world.

After a tedious journey, Peter pulled up at the offices of Sonny and Shia Ltd. He presented himself at reception, where it was clear he was expected. An elaborately uniformed man approached him.

“Mr Peter Fisher?” Peter nodded. “Madame Shia is expecting you in her private wing. My name is Abdul, I am one of her personal mamelukes. Please to follow me.”

They took a lift to the top floor, and Abdul led the way along decorated passageways, and through numerous archways, until he stopped and knocked

softly on a padded door. It was opened by a young woman, clad in a long flowing skirt. She was bare to the waist, save for a tassled, silken breast-scarf, knotted in a bow at the breastbone.

“Please come with me,” she said, and led Peter through a hallway. Abdul did not follow. From behind, Peter had the chance to study her unobserved. She was really extremely attractive, the curve of her bare back flowing sinuously down to the long skirt which hung low on her full hips. “I am Salima. On behalf on Madame Shia I welcome you to Sonny and Shia Limited.” She led the way through another arch, and into a large room, whose floors and walls were covered in thick Persian rugs. Large cushions were scattered around, and on one of these, at the far end of the room, reclined Shia, elaborately berobed, and wearing a formal headscarf.

“Mr Fisher, how kind of you to visit us. Please, make yourself comfortable.” She clapped her hands. Another young woman, dressed identically to Salima appeared. “Fatmeh, cushions for Mr Fisher,” commanded Shia.

Peter lowered himself awkwardly to the floor, and attempted to sit cross-legged on his cushions. His fatness made it a complex manoeuvre. He winced slightly as he landed a little too hard on a cushion, and rubbed an over-stretched knee.

“Oh, you are stiff from your drive?”

“Well...” began Peter, but Shia forestalled him by clapping her hands once more. “Mr Fisher has driven far, Salima,” she said as the beautiful girl approached in response. “He is of course stiff from the journey.” Immediately, Salima knelt down behind Peter and began to knead his shoulders. Peter stiffened, and then began to relax. Salima clearly knew her business, and it began to feel rather good.

“This strike affair, terrible is it not?” began Shia. They talked around the subject without reaching any conclusions for some time. Salima began to work

her way down Peter's back. He struggled to concentrate on what Shia was saying, especially as Fatmeh who, now he had a chance to study her too he could see was even more attractive than Salima, kept distracting him with dainty pastries and sweets proffered on silver trays.

"So," finished Shia. "It seems we must watch the strike together. However, that is not all I wanted to discuss, Mr Fisher." Peter focussed hastily.

"It seems Constantinople must fall to our forces," she began. "It is inevitable. But El Hajj Sonny and I, we thought perhaps we could expedite matters. You accept of course that it is inevitable?" Peter nodded.

"Perhaps we could arrange its capture between us, very soon, in exchange for a small payment to your company?" suggested Shia. She clapped her hands again. Fatmeh appeared with a bottle of wine and a glass. "Of course you must need a drink. How forgetful of me. This is Tokaj, it is from Hungary. We are very interested in Hungary."

"How small a payment?" asked Peter.

"Oh really a very small payment. Of course, such a decision, such an important decision, needs a little reflection to make. Reflection is best when you are relaxed, do you not think?" Shia signalled with her hand Salima, who moved her attentions up to his neck. Her delicate fingers began to stroke the skin above his collar. He felt her edge closer until her knees were digging into his buttocks spreading over the edge of the cushion.

"Oh yes," said Peter weakly.

"Salima and Fatmeh will help you to relax a little. Then you can reflect, and perhaps we can make a deal. So?" finished Shia. She rose suddenly, and disappeared through a door, closing it behind her.

Fatmeh, in front of him, tugged at the scarf around her breasts and it opened and dropped to the floor. She began to shimmy out of the long skirt. Salima stopped stroking his neck, reached for his hand, and put one of the ends of her

breast-scarf into it, smiling encouragingly. As he turned to look, dragging his eyes reluctantly from Fatmeh, she motioned him to pull open the bow. He hesitated. He had been married almost twenty years, and never once strayed. But after the third child was born, his wife was tired all the time, and she never seemed to have the energy for... Salima pulled back slightly. He felt the tug from the scarf in his hands. To let go, or to grip tighter? He glanced at Fatmeh who was stepping out of her last item of clothing. He gripped tighter, and pulled...

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Rather later, fully dressed again, he was trying to slip out without meeting Shia again, but she appeared suddenly from a side room.

“So, are you relaxed? Have you had a good chance to reflect?”

“You must call Mary, our FD, and agree a price,” mumbled Peter, reaching for the door.

Shia nodded, pulled briefly on a small rope, and the door was opened immediately by Abdul, who had apparently stood guard at the door.

“So, until next time, Mr Fisher. We are really most interested in Hungary. Perhaps you would like to relax here again and discuss it?”

“Perhaps,” muttered Peter, and headed hastily down the corridor.

Chapter 16

“So,” began Saul. “Item One: For The Money. Mary, how’s the great grey green greasy Limpopo of finance?”

“Full of Croc. And Croc Cayman’s full of...”

“...himself?” finished Saul.

“Amongst other things, yes,” answered Mary. “Anyway, I called him like Beelzebub suggested, to discuss an emergency credit facility if we need it.”

“*When* we need it, I suspect Mary,” put in Peter lugubriously.

“Let’s just hope it’s *if*. We discussed interest rates. He asked me to suggest a figure, so I proposed our usual rate plus two percent. It seemed reasonable enough to me. Anyway, he said ‘call that an interest rate? *This* is an interest rate, Mary’ and came back with usual plus fifteen percent.”

“Fifteen?” screeched Peter and Saul together.

“Fifteen. So I suggested he should bring it down in exchange for stronger forfeit clauses. And he said that rate was already ‘down’, and that was assuming the forfeit to be...” Mary stretched her mouth into a passable imitation of Charles Cayman’s tooth-filled smile. “Let the forfeit be nominated for an equal part of your fair shareholdings, to be cut off and taken in what part of your stock pleaseth me.”

“Go on,” said Saul, faintly.

“How much?” asked Peter.

“An equal part, Peter. That means half,” cut in Saul acidly.

“Thank you Saul, yes half our stock if we default on a payment. So I said he was being totally unreasonable, and we’d find another banker. He just laughed.” Mary made her Cayman face again. “‘Hath not a Croc eyes, hath not a Croc

ears, doth not a Croc watch the news on the television?’ he said. ‘You don’t stand a chance of getting support from any other bank, not with the new government and the strike and that hopeless fool Charles Stuart in charge of labour relations. Take it or leave it Mary.’”

“So which did you do?” asked Saul.

“I said I’d call him back on Monday,” answered Mary, “after we’ve had time to discuss it. He just laughed. ‘I’ll set the facility up anyway, and wait for your call then’ he said. He knows we haven’t much choice. And he’s right, no other bank’ll touch us with a ten foot crucifix.”

“Bastard” said Peter, with some feeling.

“I really don’t think that kind of language is appropriate in a formal Board meeting, Peter,” said Saul with a grin. “Moses, put an item on the next age...”

“Shut up Saul,” said Mary forcefully.

“Sorry, anyway, what do we think? Do we go with it or not?” said Saul.

“Doesn’t seem like we have any choice, if I understand your figures Mary?” asked Peter.

“I think you’re right. We have to have the emergency facility in place, unless you think the strike’ll be over quickly”

“You met the Winter woman too. And you heard about the meeting. Even if this one’s over quickly there’ll be another, and another. We’re going to need the all the credit we can get I’m afraid,” said Peter.

“So, Mary, you’ll set it up then. We’ll just have to try not to use it,” concluded Saul. Mary nodded reluctantly.

“OK, moving on, item Two: For The Show. Peter, how’s it going?” Saul began the next agenda point.

“Well, we’ve got the antipopes back in the bag. Some bloke called Martin the Fifth is now in charge of the whole shebang,” started Peter. “Where are you up to with preparations for the reformation Saul?”

“Well, we’ve got this chappie Luther up to eighty-seven theses at the moment. It’s pretty well ready to go. My guys said he seems to have set his heart on reaching a hundred, and we don’t like to give him the ideas too often, so it could be about a few years yet I suppose.”

“Could you hurry it up a bit?”

“Maybe. Perhaps if we give him a few more quickly and then suggest to him that ninety-odd would do just fine.”

“Then what?” asked Peter.

“Then we take him out of UHT, run the substitution, get him to nail them to the door and start the fun and games.”

“Substitution?” asked Mary.

“Yes,” said Saul. “If you do a longlife job on someone, then naturally you’re planning to make them rather visible later on.”

“So people will tend to get rather interested in their background, place of birth, parents and so on,” said Peter. “So it’s normal after UHT-ing someone to find a kind of doppelganger, someone with the same name and a plausibly similar childhood.”

“Who you then eliminate and put your longlife guy in his place, once they’re about the same physical age. Can’t have the punters noticing someone apparently living to be 150 years old, can we darling?”

“Sounds like a job for my Special Operations on Earth team,” proposed Peter. Mary winced.

“Absolutely Peter,” said Saul. Mary looked surprised. “We need a big fuss, lots of noise, plenty of papal bull in response, just your kind of thing.”

continued Saul as Mary nodded her understanding. “Especially since you’ve got the contacts in the papacy at the moment,” he added pointedly.

“We’ll get right on to it as soon as you’ve got the Luther guy set up then. I’ll wait for you to send the papers over. Er, there is some documentation this time, Saul, isn’t there?”

“Oh yes of course Saint. Difficult to keep track of where you are on dozens of theses without a few records. I’ll get them up to you.”

“OK, then, item Three: To Get Ready. Ocean going sailing update,” said Saul. “Right then darlings, we’ve followed up on Joseph’s oak idea, seems to be excellent, must drop him a thank you. We’ve got the Portuguese on with something called a Caravel, lovely new kind of boat, and all ready to sail the ocean blue. So now, the 64-verse question, which way? East or West?”

“What are the arguments Saul?” asked Mary quickly, seeing Peter beginning to huff.

“Well, West is riskier, it’ll take them longer to work out how to sail all that way across the Atlantic. And when they eventually get there, the population’s less, so fewer prospective converts. On the other hand, they’re still on old fashioned religions, you know, animism, sun-worship, pantheism, idols, that kind of thing. And technically they’re pretty backwards so they ought to be pretty easy game for our lot once they get there.”

“And Jupiter explicitly banned us from heading that way,” puffed Peter.

“East, on the other hand,” continued Saul, ignoring him, “will be easier to reach, loads of potential converts. But, and it seems a pretty big but to me, it’s straight into Gautama’s territory, and I’m really not sure we’re in a strong enough position to take him on. In fact, I’m not sure we’ll ever be that strong. Of course, if we could get even further there’s China and Japan where we might do better conversion-wise. But I don’t see how we can get enough of ours guys

out that way to deal with the military side of things. There's too many of them, and too many miles of sea for us."

"And the All Investors Meeting insisted that we go East," said Peter. "We simply cannot ignore the Meeting. There's no option, we have to go East."

"How about..." began Mary, expecting to have to find a compromise.

"Of course, you're absolutely right Peter," said Saul before she could get any further. "East it is then. We'll get right on to it." Peter looked satisfied, while Mary stared at Saul bemused.

"Good that's it then. Meeting over, so Go Cats Go!" chanted Saul. Peter headed out quickly. Saul was departing with surprising speed too, but Mary moved fast enough to block him in the doorway.

"Saul, you are well, aren't you? That's twice you gave in to Saint on important points in that meeting."

"Relax Mary darling," said Saul. "Look," he said lowering his voice. "West is obviously a lot better prospect. So I'm going to set that up anyway, but it really will take a lot longer. Meantime Peter needs distracting doesn't he, so he doesn't fuss about the odd westbound boat? Sorting out the reformation hubbub should keep him lovely and busy, especially while he's dealing with SOUL and the strike. Have a little faith, Mary, have a little faith."

"OK, Saul, OK, you do know what you're doing, I give in. Good luck."

Saul grinned. Thank goodness she didn't notice the slip about the sun-worship, he thought to himself. "How's it going with Apollo?" he asked aloud. Mary grinned back.

"Tell you on Monday," she answered, and headed out.

Chapter 17

Mary sat happily in the restaurant around the corner from her flat. Things were going rather better than last time. She beamed at a waiter, remembering him from the election night party, and he began to head towards her table.

Opposite her, Apollo was telling her about his place in the Greek hills. "It's just near Delphi, with fantastic views over the plains and down to the sea. You'd love it there Mary, you really would. Maybe you could come stay there for a while? After everything you've been telling me you've been up to recently, it sounds like a break would be good for you."

A break certainly would be good, she thought. But not tonight, oh no. "Sounds fantastic, Apollo, I'd love to visit it" she said. It had altogether been a much happier experience than her date here with Gautama. Apollo had managed to listen to her at least some of the time, and not talk about business all the while either. They'd talked about what food they liked, and where they'd been on holiday. Apollo, in fact, had been everywhere on holiday, and made a very successful business out of it too. It seemed there were Sunworshippers places on every continent, and in every desirable place you could think of. But he hadn't gone on and on and on about it like Gautama.

The waiter arrived at their table. "Coffee Madam, coffee Sir?" he enquired. Apollo looked at her. "Maybe we could have coffee in my flat?" she suggested. "It's just round the corner."

"Is it? I didn't know you lived round here Mary," said Apollo innocently. "Coffee at your place would be great."

Mary turned to the waiter, who watched smiling. "Just the bill then?" he asked.

Mary looked at Apollo. "Just the bill," she said firmly.

Chapter 18

“How’d it go with Apollo on Friday evening then, Mary?” asked Saul over coffee in his office on Monday morning.

“He left on Sunday afternoon,” answered Mary with a smile.

“As good as that?”

“Better. He’s.... Well anyway, do you know, he asked me over dinner how I got started working with you. So I said to him I’d joined up with you because you were the only guy recruiting at the time who was more interested in my finance skills than in my body.”

“I hope that doesn’t apply to Apollo too,” observed Saul with a twitch of his eyebrows.

“Not on the evidence of this weekend. I think he likes me as a person though, the body’s kind of a plus... Anyway, that’s not the point, Saul, that’s not why I’m telling you. It was true though wasn’t it? You chose me as a business partner because you thought I’d be good at business didn’t you.” It was a statement, not a question.

“There’s nothing wrong with your body, darling,” said Saul. “But as you knew perfectly well at the time, it just happens to have the wrong bits attached to it for my tastes.”

“Yes I know. But what I wanted to say was, well, it’s been great, hasn’t it, our partnership. I know Peter’s a pain sometimes, but he does know how to organise operations. And we get on most of the time. And I’ve enjoyed almost every minute of it.”

“Me too, darling, me too.”

“And we’ve been successful too, haven’t we?”

“We have Mary, we have. Where is this leading to?”

“So I damned if I’ve going to have it mucked up by Jupiter and his mates, that’s where it’s going. I just wanted to say that. I really want Peter Saul and Mary to carry on and on.”

“Has all this been prompted by long-terms personal plans involving Apollo, by any chance Mary?”

“You always know, don’t you Saul? I think you can read Saint and me like open books.” Saul began to demur, but Mary continued doggedly, “yes it has really, plus the mess we seem to be in at the moment. I just want you to know I’m in it for the long-term, for the future. I won’t chicken out now the going’s got a bit tough, even if things keep going well with Apollo. I just wanted you to know that Saul.”

“Thanks Mary darling, I really appreciate you telling me.” He walked over and put an arm briefly round Mary’s shoulders. “I did wonder, you know, just for a moment when you went out with Gautama...”

“Oh Saul, I’m sorry...”

“Never mind,” Saul decided it was time to move the conversation on. “When’s Saint due back from that meeting at the ministry?”

In answer there was the jangling sound of a bunch of keys from the corridor. “Here he is now I think.” Peter peered in, and then entered without knocking.

“Hi Saint, how did it go?”

“Tell me why I don’t like Mondays,” answered Peter. “First of all, the Winter woman spoke. She said ‘the soulminers job inside my head is switched to overload, so nobody’s gonna go to work today, I’m gonna make them stay at home. And Charlie doesn’t understand it...’”

“So what did Charles say to that then?” asked Saul.

“I always thought you were good in SOUL, and I can see no reasons, cos there are no reasons’ was his response”, continued Peter. “So then Sonny – he

was there representing Sonny and Shia – looked straight at Charles Stuart and asked him ‘what reason do you need to be so...’” Peter paused.

“Spineless?” tried Saul.

“Headless?” suggested Mary.

“Charles stepped in at that point. ‘I am the Minister, representative of the People’ he said. ‘Sorry,’ Sonny muttered, rather pathetically I thought, and Charles continued ‘Never make a defence of apology before you be accused. Be that as it may’ he continued. ‘This government has decided that, although it does not accept the reasons for this strike by the Soulminers Organisation of Unionised Labour, in the interests of the continued Essoul supply to the Great Planes, we should concede to their demands.’”

“What??” shrieked Saul and Mary together. “All of them?” pursued Mary.

“All of them,” answered Peter flatly. “We’d obviously just been summoned to be told that our labour costs are going to double overnight, tough luck, off you go guys, keep supplying the souls. Of course there was uproar, but Charles just said ‘thank you, ladies and gentlemen’ and walked out. The Winter woman sat there with a huge smile – it reminded me of Croc Cayman actually – and we all filed out.”

“So now we need to work out how we’re going to pay the extra wages?” said Mary.

“It’s a cash trap, Mary, and we’ve been caught.”

At that moment, the phone rang. Mary picked it up. “It’s for you, Saul, Croesus answered the call, he says he’s not allowed to say who it is but you’d better take it.” They all looked mystified, as Saul hurried to take the receiver.

“Saul Tarsus speaking.... Hello, yes?” in a very surprised voice. “Thursday evening 7pm, go in via the rear entrance, try and make sure no one who might recognise me sees me, OK got it. I’ll be there of course. Goodbye.”

“Well?” said Peter.

“I’m summoned to a secret dinner with Livia, it seems.”

“I wonder if it’s connected with this morning’s events at the ministry,” wondered Mary.

“Let’s hope so. Have to wait and see, won’t we?” said Saul.

“Livia?” said Peter. “Careful what you eat and drink then. People have been known to have acute digestive problems after meals with Livia.”

“I haven’t forgotten,” said Saul. “But I can’t exactly refuse can I?”

“Look after yourself, Saul,” said Mary. She turned to Peter. “By the way, I had a call from Shia...” she began.

Peter went very white and sat down suddenly. “Oh yes?” he said, trying to sound innocent.

“How did your chat with her about the strike go, by the way?” asked Mary. “Doesn’t seem to have made much difference to the outcome.”

“No, no, she didn’t have much to say,” said Peter, remembering. A vision of himself pulling the scarf from Salima’s oh-so-perfect breasts rose unbidden into his mind. He could feel himself colouring. “Really she wanted to talk about Constantinople. She was offering to...”

“Buy it? Why didn’t you tell me before?”

“Er...” mumbled Peter. He could see Fatmeh dropping the last of her clothing to the floor and reaching to unbutton his shirt and unclip the keys from his belt.

“Well not to worry,” continued Mary briskly. “Although I must admit I was a bit surprised, I agreed with her that, since it was bound to fall anyway, we’d just stage a bit of a resistance for show, but otherwise she could have it.”

“How much did you get for it?” asked Saul. He was watching Peter carefully as he spoke.

“Oh a very good...” Mary changed her mind “...a quite good price. Half a million credos.” She stared pointedly at Saul, who noticed and stifled his objections: only half a million? “Don’t you think that’s a good price Peter?”

“Oh yes Mary, absolutely. Very well done, brilliant negotiation,” said Peter firmly.

“Then she asked about Hungary. Of course I told her absolutely no way.”

A strange series of emotions seemed to cross Peter’s face rapidly: hope, relief, disappointment, before he pulled himself quickly together and said firmly “Of course not. Constantinople’s one thing, it was just a matter of time, but we can hardly have them at the gates of Vienna can we?”

He was getting up, and making hurriedly for the door. “No I think you did a great deal, anyway must get back to the grindstone, lots to catch up with,” he said, and rushed out.

“What’s up with him?” asked Mary as the door closed rather too firmly.

“Did you say he visited Shia?” asked Saul thoughtfully.

“So?”

“So, there are interesting stories about, how shall I put it, her ‘companions in her harem’ and what can happen to the unsuspecting visitor,” said Saul.

“Peter?! Surely not? He’s so straitlaced,” said Mary. “On the other hand, he did behave awfully oddly just now.”

“Shall we ask him?” said Saul mischievously.

“I don’t *really* think that’s the best idea you’ve ever had, Saul,” said Mary. “Anyway,” she continued, “about Constantinople...”

“Couldn’t you have done a bit better than half a million credos?” asked Saul.

“It must be worth at least twice that.”

“Of course it is. Actually I got a million and a half.”

“Fantastic! But why didn’t you say so just now?”

“Well, I thought you might need a little, er, fund to help the westbound boats along without Peter spotting it in the financial reports,” said Mary, a little shyly. After all, she had spent years being trained not to cook the books.

“Mary!” said Saul admiringly.

Chapter 19

Augustus and Livia's official country residence was a large, Elizabethan mansion located on a windy hilltop. According to rumour it was so old that the windows and doorways were all slightly askew, and did a poor job of keeping the wind out. It was known to the press and public as Draughts.

As Saul parked his small yellow sports car, he was surprised to see Beelzebub emerging from a rather battered old Landrover. Better the devil you know, I suppose, thought Saul as he headed over to greet him.

“Hi Bubba, is this just a coincidence?”

“How're ya doing Saul? No of course it ain't. You're here on my suggestion Saul. Livia wants to talk to you about an idea of yours. I told her about it at some official 'refiners and energy producers dinner' thing I had to go to the other week,” he said, rather opaquely.

A uniformed policeman approached, checked their ID, and showed them into the mansion through a discreet door. Livia was there to greet them. Exquisite and petite, tastefully dressed, over-bejewelled, were Saul's first impressions. She had the rare gift of being able to remain quiet and still, contemplating the person in front of her, without giving offence.

Finally she spoke. Her voice was soft and damped, and seemed to leave a small silent hiatus after each utterance. “Beelzebub, nice to see you again, thank you for suggesting this meeting.” Another lengthy pause while she studied Saul again. “And you must be Saul Tarsus. I've heard a lot about you. Thank you for agreeing to come here at such short notice. Welcome to Draughts.” She smiled slightly.

A side-door opened, and another woman entered. “Scheherezade, this is Beelzebub from Hell Refineries, and Saul Tarsus from Peter Saul and Mary, the soulbrokers,” said Livia, making introductions.

“Livia *and* the Foreign Secretary?” thought Saul to himself. “What have I done that merits this all of a sudden?”

They made small talk briefly before Livia led them through to a small, elegant, dining room. Its elegance was rather spoiled by the electric heaters in each corner, which just about kept the temperature bearable.

As the starter arrived, Scheherezade turned to Saul. “Pantheon Fund Managers Alliance is one of your biggest shareholders, I believe?”

“You’re very well informed.”

Scheherezade smiled slightly. “Well briefed, perhaps” she murmured.

“Well yes they are. When we first got started, we needed investors, and they’d just sold Olympus Souls and had the money.”

“How well do you know their executives, Mr Tarsus?”

“Please call me Saul. Jupiter and Saturn you mean?”

“And their Public Relations manager. The one with the sandals?” continued Scheherezade.

“Mercury. I hardly know them at all, other than professionally. I mean, they come to our AGM, and occasionally to other special meetings, but otherwise, they tend to keep themselves to themselves, as long as we’re making decent returns for them,” replied Saul, wondering where the questions were leading.

“I see. Perhaps you saw on the news that my new border patrols have arrested a number of smugglers?”

“Yes, yes I did. What were they smuggling?”

“They’ve begun to tell us their stories. They were smuggling Ginseng as it happens, Saul. As you no doubt know, it’s one of several, err... ‘herbal substances’ which don’t grow here on the Great Planes and can only be imported from Earth. Perhaps you know of some of the others?” Scheherezade’s voice had a lilting, hypnotic quality.

Drugs, thought Saul. But where's the connection...

"They claim they are 'employees' of Pantheon. Or perhaps I should say more accurately that they claim allegiance to Jupiter."

So it *is* true, thought Saul. That story Mary had from Gautama wasn't just a rumour after all. I haven't been asked here because of that, surely, thought Saul, beginning to panic at the stories about Livia's cooking. He kept his face blank while he thought for a few moments.

"That's interesting," he said carefully.

"Isn't it just" said Livia. "You don't seem very surprised Mr Tarsus?"

"Actually," he said slowly, "it isn't the first time I've heard the rumour. Someone else said the same thing to me a few weeks back, just around the time of the election."

"I think it might be a good idea if you start looking for a different investor," said Livia flatly. Saul was considering how to reply to this when Livia continued, "But that isn't the reason we asked you to dinner. Tell us about your Purgatory idea. Beelzebub here mentioned it to me last week, and it sounds very interesting."

Saul glanced at Beelzebub, who nodded encouragingly. "Stroke of genius, Saul, and I told Livia so at the time. Come on Saul, talk to the lady."

Saul explained the workings of purgatory. They were particularly interested in the stockpiling and temporary soul-holding aspects, and plied him with quite detailed questions. "Peter Fisher, our Operations Director, could explain the workings to you better, I'm sure," finished Saul.

"Oh no, I think we've got the picture very well thank you Mr Tarsus," said Livia. She glanced at the clock, and then meaningfully at Scheherazade, who nodded in return. "If you'll excuse me for a few minutes, I have to make a telephone call."

As Livia left the room, Scheherezade appeared to relax and began to tell them what seemed to be gossip. Saul wasn't so sure. He'd noticed the exchange of looks between the two women.

“Charles Stuart's going to get the chop. Livia's gone off him, so I've heard. Leaving aside the fact that he made a kingsized mess of the soulminers strike business, and Augustus is hopping.”

“That's gotta be good news,” said Beelzebub.

“Livia's new squeeze is supposed to be Rasputin,” continued Scheherezade, her deep brown eyes the picture of innocence. “Just a rumour of course. You saw the announcement about his new drugs czar I presume. The crackdown is going to get serious with Livia backing him too. I should expect a speech or two by Augustus pretty soon.”

“You don't say?” put in Beelzebub encouragingly.

“Good idea. Do go on” put in Saul. He and Beelzebub exchanged looks. Scheherezade talking off the record about the inner workings of the government? This was gold-dust, and they both knew it.

“We're choosing a new minister at the moment,” said Scheherezade. “We want someone who'll take a somewhat ‘firmer,’” she framed the word, “line with the soulminers and their leader.”

At that moment, Livia returned, and Scheherezade seemed to focus again. Is it just an act, wondered Saul, an excuse to tell us a few things we need to know without it appearing to come from Livia?

“The refinery inspections are fixed up, Beelzebub, you'll get the tax rebates we agreed,” she said cryptically. Beelzebub just nodded. Saul tried not to look baffled.

“So, Mr Tarsus,” said Livia, smiling at him. Saul just waited.

“The Soulminers’ strike was very worrying for Augustus, very worrying indeed,” she began. “He does not intend that it should be repeated with the government in such a weak position to fight it. We would like to see you build up the stocks in your Purgatory to a level where they represent many months normal flow to the refineries.”

“I see,” said Saul non-committally.

“To help you, we have arranged that some of Beelzebub’s refineries that would normally take their supplies from Peter, Saul and Mary, will be closed down for ‘safety inspections’. Beelzebub will have to purchase fewer souls from you, and your stocks will presumably increase,” said Livia. It was not a question, but Saul nodded in response.

“Of course this will not be good for your cashflow, or your profits in the short term,” said Livia in the same even tone.

“No it won’t,” agreed Saul, trying to keep his voice as expressionless as Livia’s.

“Officially of course, there is nothing we can do about that. Unofficially, however, here is my private telephone number, and here is Scheherezade’s in case you cannot reach me.” Livia placed a small card on the table in front of Saul. “Should you request some assistance in the future, you can be sure that you will receive a helpful response.”

“Take it Saul,” said Beelzebub. It was almost an order.

“Do we have a deal, Mr Tarsus?” asked Livia, looking Saul in the eye.

Saul considered for a moment, remembering the alarming reputation of Livia’s dinners.

“I should like your answer before the dessert course arrives, Saul” smiled Livia.

“Of course, Livia. We have a deal. We’d like to see the Soulminers Union humbled even more than you would,” said Saul firmly. What choice did he have anyway? He picked up the card, and put it carefully into his wallet.

“That’s marvellous. Ah, here’s pudding. Oh dear, what is the matter with these grapes, they really don’t look healthy at all. I wouldn’t try them if I were you. I’ll have them removed immediately.” Livia gestured to a servant.

“Sorbet, Saul?” asked Scheherezade.

“Sorbet would be lovely,” said Saul faintly.

Chapter 20

“So then they agreed that I would have to tell you two what was going on.” They were gathered in Peter’s office, where Saul was filling in Mary and Peter on his evening at Draughts. “But they asked me to make it extremely clear that it’s to go no further, darlings. Livia said something about the grapes of wrath, and waved her arm in the direction of that poisonous bunch she’d had removed before I could tuck in.”

Mary was agog. She shuddered a little at the thought of being mixed up in business of this kind. “Did they say what kind of help we might expect in return in the future?”

“No darling. Just to call if we get really stuck.”

“We’re going to be really stuck pretty quickly at the current rate of progress. Double the wages, halve the sales, it’s not exactly a recipe for success in business.”

Peter wasn’t concentrating properly. He’d had a dreadful thought on the way in this morning. What if Shia’d had a video camera in the room? Any moment she might call him with some kind of blackmail demand. How could he explain it to his wife? What if the pictures leaked? He’d look ridiculous. He’d be ruined.

The phone rang suddenly, interrupting Peter’s fretting. He sat down heavily, and picked it up with unsteady hands.

“Hello?...It’s for you,” he said, his voice lowering two octaves as he handed it to Mary. “Gautama.”

Ignoring Saul’s “oh ho” eyebrows, Mary took the phone. “Hi Gautama,” she began warmly.

During the opening small-talk, Peter’s thoughts began to drift again. Maybe Shia hadn’t videoed him after all? Maybe he was OK? But what about next

time? Next time? Of course there wouldn't be a next time. Peter sat with his arms folded. As he remembered the moment when, kneeling astride him, Fatmeh had clenched her internal muscles, he unconsciously tightened his biceps. If only there could be a next time. There had to be a next time. But how could he possibly manage that? Could he get in touch with Fatmeh and Salima without Shia knowing? How could he conceal it from his wife? His thoughts were brought back to reality by Mary reaching across him to replace the handset.

"I take it that wasn't much of a lovers chat then darling?" said Saul. Mary was flushed and angry looking. Peter was failing in his attempts to recall any of the conversation when fortunately for him Mary recapped it tersely.

"Gautama said to say he's noticed the caravels have reached the Cape of Good Hope, and strongly suggests they don't round it."

Saul sighed. "No surprise there then darlings. Some lovely chappie called Bartolemeu er... Dias that was it, got there a little while back. Gautama's even more on the ball than I thought if he's spotted young Bartolemeu already."

"What are we going to do about it?" put in Peter, anxious to appear focussed on events and not on the inside of his head.

"As you stressed so eloquently in the last board meeting," replied Saul with more than a hint of acidity, "we're disbarred by the All Investors Meeting from going the other way. So, we'll just have to sail on and hope for the best, won't we?"

"Fine. Let's review it in the next board meeting, shall we?" said Mary, a little wearily. She was beginning to tire of her role as peacemaker.

She and Saul stood up and headed out and back down the stairway to heaven. "How's the westbound sailing going?" she asked quietly once they were safely out of earshot.

“All primed and ready to go. Some guy called Colon or Columbus or something like that. He’s sitting around at the court of the Queen of Spain at the moment, trying to get a grant. I think I’ll just go and arrange it.”

“Good luck!” called Mary after him as Saul hurried off.

Chapter 21

Mary was working on the month-end figures, when Moses appeared outside her office, and knocked rather tentatively.

“Come in,” shouted Mary without looking up. Moses shuffled in, holding a sheet of paper close to his chest. Mary looked up, read Moses’ expression, and held out her hand.

“This looks ominous,” she said, as Moses handed over the paper.

“Just a formality, I think, Ms Magdalene,” he replied. They’d never been able to get Moses on to first name terms. He remained an official of the old school, but he was very efficient at his job nonetheless. “As Company Secretary, of course I must reply to this letter, and I’d appreciate an outline response from you.”

Mary glanced at the letter. It was a formal request from Pantheon Alliance for a shareholders’ project report, specifically on the progress of Ocean Going Sailing. Mary paled slightly, before saying firmly to Moses, “I think I need to discuss this briefly with Saul first. I’ll get back to you later on today. Thank you Moses.” It was a dismissal and Moses shuffled back out again, closing the door behind him.

As soon as it had clicked shut, Mary was on the phone to Saul. “Are you free, Saul? We’ve got a bit of a problem I think. Can I pop up? You’ll come down? Great, see you in a minute.”

Saul appeared moments later. “A teensy problem? Tell me all about it Mary dear.” Mary passed him the letter. “Hmmm, things are moving a bit quickly for my taste darling. Anyway, I think it’s pretty obvious what to do. We just reply officially, mentioning Bartolemeu Dias reaching the Cape, outlining the next objective of getting a ship all the way to India, and leave it at that.”

“It’s a bit economical with the truth, isn’t it?” observed Mary.

“Given that even Saint doesn’t know about the Spanish and their westbound ambitions, we can hardly tell Jupiter and Saturn, can we?”

“Fair point, I suppose Saul. When are we going to tell Peter anyway? I’m getting just a bit tired of calming him down.”

“When there’s something to actually say,” replied Saul rather morosely.

“What do you mean? I thought your Columbus chap was already to go?”

“I still can’t get him a grant. Ferdinand and Isabella are all tied up with the Reconquista. It’s taking them bloody *ages* to recapture Granada, and they just don’t seem interested in this boating trip at all.”

“How about if we bought Andalucia back off Sonny and Shia?” suggested Mary.

“It’s an idea,” said Saul, brightening. “Can we afford it?”

“We’ll just have to use the money we made from the sale of Constantinople I suppose. Peter still doesn’t know about the other million credos I got for it. Come to think of it, since he’s got the contacts with Shia, maybe he could negotiate the sale. I’m sure he could keep the price under the million mark.”

“Send Saint back to Shia? That should be entertaining,” replied Saul.

Mary looked intrigued. “Why? What’s really up with Peter and Shia?” she asked. “Anyway, shall we call him and ask him to sort it?”

“No, no,” interjected Saul hastily. “Let me have a private chat with him. Otherwise how are you going to explain why we’re so interested in a quick purchase of Andalucia?”

“How are *you* going to?” asked Mary. It was obvious that Saul was up to something.

“Just leave it with me Mary love,” answered Saul.

Mary considered pursuing it further, but decided against it. She'd probably just end up umpiring another Saint versus Saul rematch. Anyway, Saul seemed pretty certain, so she might as well let him get on with it.

“OK, Saul, I'll trust you again. Just don't stir Peter up OK? He seems really edgy at the moment. I'll get Moses back in and sort out that letter to Jupiter.” She reached for the phone, as Saul rose and headed out with a wave. He stopped suddenly, having thought of something.

“Mary, do you mind if I tell Saint it was your idea to buy Andalusia?”

“As long as you handle it when he finds out about Columbus, and more specifically that we've been concealing it from him.”

“You've got a deal,” called Saul, heading out again.

Mary stared after him, wondering what on earth he was up to. The phone was answered and she dictated the gist of a letter to Pantheon back to Moses, while continuing with half her mind to try to fathom Saul's rather strange insinuations about Peter and Shia. It seemed bizarre. Surely there couldn't be anything going on between them? Shia was several years older than Peter for a start. Anyway, he was so straitlaced, and apparently devoted to his family, even that dragon of a wife of his.

Giving the matter up, she returned to her spreadsheets.

Chapter 22

Peter sat at his desk, staring gloomily at several pages of charts describing their stockholdings of souls at various stages in purgatory. The sheets of paper, covered in coloured graphs – excellent documents, he had to admit, Croesus’ work again – were neatly tessellated in a perfect rectangle across the otherwise empty desktop.

Peter was having trouble concentrating again. His mind kept drifting back to Salima and Fatmeh. How could he find them again, without being traced? How much would they cost? How could he keep it secret (especially from his wife?).

I liked to think I was immune to the stuff, he thought to himself. But it’s closer to the truth to say I can’t get enough. Gonna have to face it, I’m addicted to...

“Might as well face it,” said Saul’s voice suddenly in the doorway. Peter jumped.

“Hi Saint, sorry I startled you,” began Saul. “Your lights were on.”

But I’m not home, thought Peter. My mind is not my own. My heart sweats, my teeth grind. He pictured Salima again. Another kiss and she’ll be mine... Saul’s voice returned him urgently to the present.

“You don’t look good Saint. I thought I should drop by and see how you were. I know the finances aren’t too great at the moment, but it’s not that bad yet, surely?”

“I can’t sleep, I can’t eat, there’s no doubt, we’re in deep,” answered Peter.

“I see the signs, I can read, you’re running at different speed. Anyway, I might be able to help there. Mary’s had an idea. She’s been looking over the business case for Andalucia and she thinks we should try and buy it from Sonny

and Shia. So since you're the one with the contacts there, we thought maybe you could make another visit to Shia and see if she'll do the deal."

Peter's heart beat in double time. Another kiss, and she'll be mine, he thought again.

"Might as well face it," Saul was continuing. "Mary reckons that if you could get it for less than a million credos we'd have a profitable deal."

Saul was watching Peter carefully. Peter's face was lighting up. So it's definitely true, thought Saul to himself. Peter did get up to something in Shia's little harem, and he's about to leap at the chance of another round. He can't be saved, oblivion is all he craves.

"Of course if you can get it for less..."

Peter nodded enthusiastically. "I'll call her right away and make an appointment. Probably best if I go to her place again, it's more discreet that way."

Saul eyed him again. "Anything under a million," he said. And if there's some left for you, you don't mind if you do, he thought, watching Peter carefully again. "Might as well face it," he repeated.

Peter was practically skipping round the room, before collecting himself and reaching for his address book.

You're addicted to love, finished Saul to himself. Well probably not love, but I guess Shia must have laid on the dancing girls in a pretty big way for your last visit. It's a good thing it was Mary who did the price negotiations. Addicted to Shia's harem anyway.

"I'll get right on to it and call her now," said Peter, grabbing his phone. "Might as well face it," he echoed to Saul.

You're addicted, thought Saul once more. "Might as well face it," he smiled, and headed out. Peter was already dialling...

Chapter 23

As he climbed into his car, Peter could feel himself shaking with excitement. Perhaps wobbling with excitement would be more accurate, as he had continued to put on weight recently. His hands were quivering so much he had some difficulty fitting the key into the lock, a problem he hoped would not repeat itself later with Fatmeh and Salima.

Fatmeh and Salima... The blue-movies in his head became more vivid, and he had to force himself to concentrate. First he had to conclude a successful deal with Shia, Andalucia for less than a million credos. And hopefully, (please please, he said aloud), Fatmeh and Salima would be part of the deal. At least Shia had been encouraging on the phone when he'd called to suggest a discussion around "some other commercially advantageous territorial adjustments." The appointment was certainly prompt. And better still, it was mid-afternoon, which hopefully meant enjoying Fatmeh and Salima's attentions and still getting home on time.

As he drove on, in amongst the fantasies of what might happen again in Shia's private quarters, he began to wonder about his discussion with Saul. Hadn't it just seemed a little bit too pat, almost as if Saul knew about what had happened last time he dealt with Shia? Surely that wasn't possible? It was hardly in Shia's interests for Saul or Mary to know what had happened. Unless Fatmeh or Salima had been indiscreet. But how could they have been? Sonny and Shia did not have reputations for being forgiving employers. Why should Shia's personal staff want to jeopardise what were (presumably) good positions. Positions... ahhhh, his mind began to drift again.

Sometime later he walked into the reception of Sonny and Shia Ltd, to be greeted once more by the uniformed Abdul. "Welcome back, Mr Fisher," said Abdul, his consonants thick and heavy as Peter remembered Salima's had been.

“Please to follow me.” They stepped into a lift, and Abdul pushed the button for the top floor.

As the lift rose, he turned to Peter. “I trust you found our hospitality most excellent on your last visit,” he said, with a half smile. Peter stiffened, folded his arms instinctively high across his chest, and said very formally back “yes, thank you, it was excellent. And Madame Shia and I made a very good deal for both our companies.” He attempted to assume the stern visage of a senior executive dealing with a minion. Abdul continued to smile, and his eyebrows twitched as he answered “that is very good sir. This way please,” he continued, and led Peter down a familiar corridor.

After walking through the same endless archways, Abdul knocked on a door, just as before, while Peter tried to calm his excitement at who might answer. He felt his stomach churn when Salima appeared, dressed exactly as he remembered (at least for the early part of his previous meeting). Her smile went right down him. “Good afternoon again Mr Fisher. Madame Shia is once more expecting you. Come this way.” She put her hand on Peter’s arm momentarily to steer him from the lift, and Peter almost missed his step.

Shia was reclining, as before, on a cushion on the thick silken carpets. She rose to greet him, and returned to the floor. Once again, Peter tried unsuccessfully to find a way of being both comfortable and dignified on his cushion. His efforts were not helped by his trying surreptitiously to spot Fatmeh.

“So, Mr Fisher, I understand you wish to make another territorial deal with us,” began Shia after a period of small talk.

Peter outlined his proposal to purchase Andalusia. As he finished Shia rose to her feet. “Please wait one moment, Mr Fisher. I must speak with my partner before we continue.” She clapped her hands, and to Peter’s poorly concealed delight, Fatmeh appeared, bearing a silver tray of mint tea and cakes. Shia

watched him intently, nodded briefly, unnoticed by Peter who was focussed on Fatmeh and the cakes, and left to call Sonny.

She returned after a few minutes. "I have spoken with El Hajj Sonny," she said, "and we have agreed that we could make a deal. Perhaps you have a price in mind?"

Peter mentioned an opening figure of half a million, and they discussed it back and forth for a while. Eventually they stuck at eight hundred thousand. It was clear the Shia was unhappy with this figure, but, despite the distraction of Fatmeh kneading his shoulders, Peter was remained focussed on securing his planned outcome.

Shia sighed. Peter sighed too, but for different reasons, as Fatmeh's fingers gently stroked at the skin above his collar. "It seems, Mr Fisher, that we cannot make a deal. I cannot sell you Andalucia for a mere eight hundred thousand. El Hajj Sonny is quite clear on the point."

This mention of Sonny made Peter tempted to ask if he was dealing with the monkey or the organ grinder. A glance at Salima, bending over with another tray of cakes, made him decide against: she might decide he was insulting her.

"Fatmeh, Salima, it seems Mr Fisher and I will not be able to conclude our business. Mr Fisher of course will wish to return to his office urgently to tell them the bad news. I think you will not be needed further today," said Shia, suddenly, clapping her hands imperiously. She began to rise. Peter saw his moment.

"Perhaps..." he began. Shia subsided, and signalled with her fan to her girls.

"Nine hundred," said Shia firmly.

"Eight hundred and fifty," replied Peter.

"Eight hundred and seventy," countered Shia.

Peter yawned elaborately. “Goodness me I’m tired. It must be the stress of our negotiations. Eight six five?”

Shia saw the point at once, as Peter had expected. “Fatmeh, Salima, Mr Fisher is in need of some rejuvenation. Fetch hot towels, Salima go fetch the oil. OK, Mr Fisher, eight hundred and sixty five thousand. It must be transferred to our account within 10 days. Our forces in Andalucia will then be beaten rapidly. And now, of course, you need to relax after the strain of our deal-making. I will leave Fatmeh and Salima to make you comfortable. It has been a pleasure, Mr Fisher.”

She rose, shook Peter’s hand, and left. As she exited, Fatmeh and Salima appeared again, smiling. Salima reached for Peter’s hand and guided it to the bowstring beneath her breasts. Fatmeh reached around and began to loosen his tie. Peter sighed, and pulled the string.

In another room Shia checked the video carefully. The camera was focussed clearly on Peter, who was being helped by Fatmeh to undo his shirt buttons. Shia smiled to herself. Men, she thought, so easy to manage. She checked again that the tape was running and left.

Chapter 24

Saul came fluttering urgently into Mary's office. "Mary dear, what year are the lovely people of earth in?"

Mary looked at the grin on Saul's face and decided to humour him. She glanced at her parallel calendar. "In fourteen hundred and ninety two."

"Columbus sailed the ocean blue," capped Saul. "In fourteen hundred and ninety two, Columbus sailed the ocean blue," he repeated excitedly.

"Peter did it then?"

"In more ways than one," grinned Saul.

"Oh come off it Saul. No *way* could our Saint get up to anything like that. He's too scared of his wife."

"Strange things are rumoured about Shia's harem, Mary, strange things. It can turn a man's head, so I've heard."

"Do you actually know something, Saul, or are you just making malicious gossip as usual?"

"Malicious? Me?" Saul protested. "Gossip, of course, malicious gossip, not I!" he cried virtuously.

"Bollocks," said Mary firmly. "Anyway, how much do we have to pay?"

"Eight six five, darling," answered Saul.

"Eight hundred and sixty five thousand credos? That's not bad, for Andalusia on a plate."

"Personally, I think he could have got it for seven fifty really. A hundred thousand plus must make it the most expensive shag in history."

"Really Saul. I just don't believe it. Anyway, eight six five is pretty good, when you think we've got your Columbus venture going at last."

“How *are* the finances actually, Mary?” asked Saul, becoming serious.

“Dreadful, *actually*, Saul,” she answered. “We can scrape the price together for Andalucia, but after that, we’ve reached rock bottom. We’ll be having to use that ghastly facility that Croc Cayman offered us if we need any more in the short term.”

“Don’t forget our ‘friend’ Livia.”

“I haven’t forgotten. I think that’s a last resort, don’t you?”

“Are we really absolutely at rock bottom?” asked Saul suddenly, after pausing for thought for a few moments.

“Well, scraping the barrel anyway. Why?”

“Well, once Columbus has safely discovered America and the fuss has started, we’re going to need to conquer it. That’s the point of the whole thing after all,” answered Saul.

“And?”

“Well, I’ve been thinking about that. Of course the real prize is South America. Big civilisation spread across the whole of the west of the continent. Not much in North America, although we ought to pick that off in time. But there’s a juicy morsel in Mexico. I thought we might do a pilot project there, make sure we’ve got it all worked out before we tackle the south.”

“And I suppose the pilot project needs funding?”

“Absolutely darling. Not much I don’t think, but a bit of course.”

“Well, there’s the change from the million we said Peter could spend. That’s about it.”

“So, a hundred thousand credos, give or take?” verified Saul.

“That’s about your lot.”

“I think that should do it actually,” said Saul. “Time to start planning I think.”

“In fourteen hundred and ninety two Columbus may be sailing the ocean blue, but in fifteen hundred and fifty we’re going to be voted out of existence in the All Investors Meeting, unless we’ve improved things an awful lot. Definitely time to start planning. Fifty-eight earth years! I’m really worried, Saul,” confessed Mary sadly.

“That’s ages, darling, absolutely ages. You’ll see. Dry your eyes, find the cash for me, and let’s get to it,” said Saul comfortingly. “I have a cunning plan...”

And with that, he turned and left. Mary followed him with her eyes, unsure for once if Saul was overconfident. Generation after generation she’d seen him deliver what he promised, however far-fetched, right from the first Letters to the Romans and so on. But there’s always a first time to fail, she told herself. Cash reserves at rock bottom, income at rock bottom, costs spiralling, and fifty-eight earth years to sort it all out. She sighed deeply. Her mobile rang, she answered it, and brightened immediately. It was Apollo, calling to invite her to his place at Delphi for a week’s break.

A little later they had agreed some dates. Mary called Saul and explained to him. For some reason Saul seemed particularly to approve of Mary’s blossoming relationship with Apollo. “So could you deputise for me that week, Saul?” she asked.

“Off with Apollo to beautiful Delphi? How marvellous darling! Of course I can deputise. You can tell Peter though! You know he thinks I can’t be trusted with money.”

“I’ll sort it Saul. I know it’s really short notice, thanks ever so much,” said Mary, trying not to gush.

“It’ll be a pleasure darling. I take it Croesus will be around that week to... help out,” said Saul meaningfully.

“You leave my Croesus alone, Saul,” teased Mary. “But yes he will be, so I’m sure it’ll all be in safe hands.”

“Oh it will, darling, it will, *especially* Croesus. My hands are ever so safe,” said Saul archly.

“Don’t do anything I wouldn’t,” replied Mary, giggling.

Chapter 25

Peter had been at a rather tedious conference about operational legislation. It had finished early so he decided to pop into the hotel bar for a swift half before heading home. He bought his drink, picked up a newspaper, and sat down in an armchair to read it.

“Do you mind if we join you?” a deep voice rumbled suddenly in his ear. He looked up and was surprised to see Jupiter and Saturn standing over him, each with a small cup of espresso. He put quickly put down his newspaper saying “of course not, be my guest,” but it was clear they were joining him whether he minded or not.

“So how are things with you?” asked Jupiter, his Italian accent even more noticeable than in the investors meeting.

“So so,” said Peter non-committally.

“As bad as that?” said Jupiter. “I think perhaps you will be needing another position after fifteen hundred and fifty, no?”

“Maybe,” said Peter carefully.

“By the way,” put in Saturn, “we heard some guy sailed from Spain westbound to America. You know anything about that, Peter?”

Peter was genuinely surprised, and it showed. “No nothing at all. We agreed we’d go eastbound with the ocean going sailing, and that’s what we’ve been doing.”

“This guy, Columbus or something, he is Italian, from Genoa. So of course, we heard what he is up to,” said Saturn. “You sure you’re not involved?”

“Absolutely,” said Peter. “We’ve not been using the Spanish, all our sailing has been from Portugal. In fact we’re getting a bit of friction from Gautama about our guys appearing on his coastlines.”

“No Spanish sailing west?”

“No Spanish sailing west,” confirmed Peter firmly. It was self-evident he was telling the truth. Peter was known to be a poor liar in any case. Saturn said something briefly in Italian to Jupiter, who nodded in response.

Jupiter resumed his own line of questioning. “So, what about fifteen fifty then Peter. How will you be voting?”

Peter considered. “I guess it depends on the situation.”

“For the company?” Peter had never heard Jupiter say so much before. Normally he left the talking to Saturn. Peter had always suspected that Jupiter’s English was so poor he had to use Saturn as an interpreter. It was evident that this was not so, although his accent was very strong.

“Yes. And of course, for me personally,” answered Peter carefully. He was sure Jupiter would take the point, and his next words confirmed that this was so.

“We hear the Operations Director at Shinto Express might be retiring soon,” said Jupiter.

“Due to ill-health,” amplified Saturn. Peter looked surprised. He’d been talking to the guy during the conference and he hadn’t seemed unwell.

“Maybe he doesn’t know it yet,” added Saturn, reading his expression. “Of course it might not happen that way. You never can tell with ill-health.”

“Guys who look quite healthy can suddenly come over real bad,” observed Jupiter.

Peter looked from one to the other. “Well, I don’t know, I mean, Shinto Express is about the same size job as I’ve got at Peter Saul and Mary. I was kind of thinking I was ready for a move up.”

Saturn looked over at Jupiter. “Hey Don Jupiter, I heard Gautama’s guy might need an operation around fifteen-fifty,” he said, not looking at Peter. “Might not be able to work again.”

“Is that so, Saturn?” replied Jupiter. “That’s a pretty big job we’re talking about there, I’d say Saturn.”

“It is Don Jupiter, a real big job. Of course he might not need the operation.” In their identical dark suits and waistcoats, throwing lines back and forth to each other, Jupiter and Saturn reminded Peter of a music-hall act he had been taken to once as a child.

“And there might not be any suitable candidates, even if he does,” said Jupiter, looking back at Peter.

“It’s all a question of timing, I suppose,” put in Peter, playing the straight man between the comedians.

“Right place, right time, that’s always the story,” agreed Saturn.

“And of course, it’s who you know, not what you know, that counts,” observed Jupiter.

“They say you can tell who are man’s real friends are when the votes are all counted,” added Saturn pointedly.

In an attack of boldness, that he later came to wonder might have been a poor idea, Peter decided to check a few implications. “I heard some of your guys are having trouble with Scheherezade’s patrols.” he said casually.

Jupiter’s dark brows furrowed very slightly. “You want to be careful, listening to rumours like that. Pantheon is an investment company, not a tour agency. Saturn, help me here, I was never too good at arithmetic. What’s ten percent of minus nothing worth?”

“A lot of nothing, Don Jupiter.”

“You want to look after your ten percent of Peter Saul and Mary very carefully Peter, very carefully indeed,” said Jupiter dangerously.

“Of course, being in charge of soulmining for a big, reputable outfit, soulminers going back and forth between the Great Planes and Earth all the time, that’s a job with real prospects,” commented Saturn.

“Not many prospects in an outfit that might not be there in fifty-odd years though, are there Peter?” With this, Jupiter and Saturn both turned and stared hard at Peter.

Peter stared back. Perhaps it was his beer talking, but he had decided he wasn’t going to be intimidated by all this. And he certainly didn’t want to get mixed up in some sort of drug-running with Jupiter and Saturn. On the other hand, the prospect of the Operations Director job with Gautama was too good to pass up. He’d always wanted a bigger job, something with more respect, in a properly run organisation. Saul was just so *amateur* somehow. That fuss over applying the proper Great Planes standards for the schism, for example. He couldn’t see Gautama getting mixed up in anything dubious like drugs. Gautama certainly didn’t need to, with all his success. Maybe he could land the job and then ignore Pantheon. Gautama would protect his key staff surely? They must be able to find an easier target than Gautama’s operation. Hadn’t they already mentioned Shinto Express?

“Well, there’s certainly plenty to think about, isn’t there?” said Peter, trying to sound casual.

“Don Jupiter thinks you should put your thinking cap on real hard,” said Saturn. He and Jupiter both rose to leave.

“Nice talking to you Peter,” continued Saturn. “Maybe you should take a nice little break in that villa in Paradise you got, and think it all over.” He and Jupiter shook hands with Peter, and left.

Chapter 26

It was Mary's week off with Apollo. Saul was deputising for her, a fact which Peter had inevitably taken rather badly. To exacerbate matters, the expansion of Purgatory, needed to hold their ever increasing stocks of souls while the refinery inspections continued, meant that Peter needed more staff. Technically this required sign-off from the Finance Director, which meant Peter needed Saul to sign. They were sitting in Mary's office discussing the figures.

Saul put away the temptation to toy with Peter by being difficult over his requirements. As usual with Peter's activities, it did seem a little over-engineered to Saul, but it wasn't an issue worth fighting over. He was too busy making the plans for the pilot conquest of Mexico, for one thing, and he certainly didn't want to have Peter coming down to his department to argue about his staffing and maybe seeing the plans at this stage.

Saul was just in the process of saying "no problem Peter, I'll get Croesus over to you with the forms later today," when there was a knock on the door and Moses appeared. "Hi Moses darling!" said Saul brightly.

Moses winced. "There's a call from Mercury, Mr Tarsus. He's passing and wonders if he could drop by."

"Sure Moses, send him right in," said Saul. "What's this all about I wonder?" He turned to Peter.

Peter shrugged. "I bumped into Jupiter and Saturn at that boring conference last week, and they asked if we were behind some bloke sailing to America. Name began with C, Italian apparently which was how they knew of course, but sailing from Spain. I told them 'no', obviously, and that seemed to settle it."

Saul kept his face guileless. He was about to reply when Mercury himself appeared at the door. The white tuxedo was back in place, and he appeared to have purchased new sandals, white with intricate gold buckles.

“Hi Merc, good to see you, what brings you to our humble offices at this moment?” said Saul.

“Hello Saul, morning Peter.” They shook hands, and sat down around Mary’s meeting table. “The boys asked me to drop in, give you a bit of news one of our guys just picked up on Earth.” He handed over a sheet of paper.

“Great news for you guys I think,” added Mercury, as Peter unfolded the document. It was the scanned image of a something official looking, with many important seals, written in Latin.

“Pass it over, Peter,” said Saul. “I know languages aren’t your thing.” Peter looked annoyed. He didn’t like reminding of the deficiencies in his education.

“Treaty of Tordesillas, Year of Our Lord 1494,” began Saul. He scanned the rest of it. “It appears to divide the new world into two halves. Everything to the west of a line of longitude, errr, through the Atlantic I think, for Spain. Everything to the east, for Portugal. At least that’s the gist of it as far as I can tell. I’ll get Moses to translate it properly later.”

“Fantastic for you, isn’t it?” said Mercury. “Saturn heard they were starting to discuss it, and kind of nudged them along. The boys thought it would be helpful if your Portuguese ships had a clear run east.”

“It’s great,” said Peter, genuinely. “Say thanks to Saturn for us. In fact I’ll drop him an email myself.”

He’s going to be pretty cross when he finds out, thought Saul, knowing it would probably be himself who ended up telling Peter. He could hardly ask Mary to do it.

“Of course, the boys’ll deal with the Spanish, if that’s OK by you. Slow them down a bit,” said Mercury.

“Oh, I think that’ll happen by itself anyway,” cut in Saul. “Maybe we should just let it take its course. With all our efforts going behind the Portuguese chaps, I don’t think the Spanish will get anywhere fast, do you?”

Jupiter and Saturn have moved awfully quickly, he was thinking to himself. Columbus only got there two years ago and they’ve already sorted out this treaty to try and make sure we don’t follow him up. I think I might just risk talking to that cousin of mine, that disreputable young Lebanese lady who always seems to know so much. She always has a price for everything though, and there’s really not much cash to go round.

Mercury was excusing himself, and Peter said he would show him out. Saul closed the door behind them, and began to search through his address book. Finding what he was after, he picked up the phone, and called a private mobile number.

“Salima? Hi, sweetheart, cousin Saul here... Yes, I’m fine, how are things going with you. Still in the information profession?... Good, well I’m buying darling. I need to know a few things... Pantheon Alliance and their, errr, smuggling interests in the Americas... Yes, I know it’ll cost me, it always does with you darling doesn’t it?... OK, call me back when you’ve got some news. On my mobile sweetheart, not the office phone. Talk to you later. Toodlepip darling.”

While I’m waiting, he thought, I might as well just catch up with the state of a few more routine things. He opened the door again. “Croesus, could you come on in now. I’d just like to go over a few things with you.”

He spent some time with Croesus, reviewing the potential costs of launching Luther and doing the schism. It was rather expensive, and with the Portuguese and Spanish both launched, and apparently competing over spheres of influence already – the Ocean Going Sailing project had all happened much faster than they’d expected – it really didn’t look like Luther was going to be needed after

all. Maybe they could cancel the schism. He called Moses, and asked him to add to the agenda for the next board meeting.

“Do you want to go over the progress on the Printing project,” Croesus was asking.

Saul eyed him up. Mary and Peter both seemed to be getting their share of action, he thought. Why shouldn't I? “Yes, but I'm really terribly busy for the rest of the day, Croesus. Maybe if you could spare the time, we could go through it in the bar over the road after hours?” He looked Croesus significantly in the eye.

“OK Saul,” said Croesus. “I'll see you there.” He stood up, ran his eyes carefully over Saul from head to toe, turned, and left the room.

Later that day, Saul's mobile rang. It was his cousin, Salima. “Ten thousand,” was her opening greeting.

Saul sighed. “Give me the account number, and I'll get it transferred now.” Salima read out a number. “Call you back in five, my dear,” said Saul, and stepped back out into the Finance department. Thank goodness he was covering for Mary. There was no way she'd have approved a ten thousand credo transfer to an unknown bank account with no strings attached. Fortunately, he could authorise it himself this week. He spoke briefly to Croesus, who nodded, did something on his computer, and gestured to Saul to enter his approval password.

Walking back into his own office, Saul called Salima back. “All done, darling. It had better be very very good, for that kind of money.”

“Oh, I think you'll find that it is, Saul,” came Salima's voice back. She had kept a hint of the middle-east in it, a hint which Saul had long ago erased from his own speech. “There's a little bonus item in it which I'm sure will make it worthwhile,” she continued.

“Go on then darling,” said Saul. “Give.”

“Pantheon and the Americas: Cocaine smuggling, Saul,” said Salima.

Saul nodded. “It’s what I suspected. Ten thousand’s an awful lot for just that.”

“That was just your starter for two. Your bonus for eight is that I was entertaining one of your executives recently.”

“One of mine?”

“One of yours. Well not executives. Partners really.”

Saul decided he had better pretend this wasn’t also what he’d suspected, although it hadn’t for one moment occurred to him that it would be cousin Salima that Peter had been seeing. “Good grief!” he said. “Did he pay himself?”

“No he didn’t.”

“Who did then?”

“Professional secret, Saul. I really can’t tell you that.”

“A lot of times?”

“Twice.”

“A fat man?”

“You said it Saul, not me.”

“OK, Salima, you’ve earned your ten thousand. Any chance of us meeting before the family get-together?”

They exchanged a few items of family gossip before hanging up. Saul sat down to think through the confirmation that Jupiter and Saturn were trying to keep them away from the Americas because they were smuggling cocaine. As far as Saul was aware, it only grew on Earth in South America. It wouldn’t grow on the Great Planes at all. Pretty obviously Pantheon were keen to stop them spoiling their operations. Presumably they had already become more difficult with Scheherezade’s new patrols in the Ether. In any case, it was clear that

Jupiter and Saturn might well continue to get in the way of any initiatives they might take in the Americas. Saul pulled out his Conquest-of-Mexico pilot project plan, and made a few alterations.

He glanced at his watch. It was time to meet Croesus in the bar.

Chapter 27

Mary was going through her in-tray after her holiday when she came to a very disturbing item. It was an envelope marked Urgent, Private and Confidential and it bore the logo of Gautama's company. Uneasily she opened it and read the letter. Then she picked up her phone and called Saul and Peter in rapid succession, asking them if they could pop down for a brief meeting.

Saul was first to appear. "Hello, Mary darling, you look simply marvellous with that tan. How was your break?"

"Gorgeous, Saul."

"Delphi, Apollo, or the holiday in general."

"All three!" grinned Mary. "Apollo is such a great guy, really caring and considerate, but intelligent and astute and..."

"And Delphi?" interrupted Saul, smiling.

"His place at Delphi is just fantastic. High up on the hills, looking down across the olive fields to the blue sea. You know, Saul, I could really see my future there."

"I think that's what happens at Delphi, darling," said Saul sardonically. Mary was saved from replying by the entry of Peter.

"Morning Saint!"

"Morning Saul, morning Mary, good holiday?"

"Great thanks Peter. Anyway," Mary became serious, "I think you should both read this, and then we have to decide what to do." She passed over the letter. It was an official objection from Gautama to the voyage of Magellan and his landing in India. It gave them two weeks to cease supporting Portuguese activities or else face legal action 'or other appropriate measures'.

“That seems to settle it then,” said Saul. “We have to abandon the Portuguese and these pointless eastbound voyages. No way can we afford to take on Gautama, especially with business the way it is.”

“But we simply cannot go west without a formal resolution from the All Investors Meeting. Which I personally do not think we will get,” countered Peter. His arms were folded high on his chest, and he was declaiming from behind them.

Armed with his call to Salima, Saul decided to bite the bullet. “Well, actually Saint...” he began.

Peter’s eyebrows knotted. “Go on,” he said, ominously.

“Actually we are already going west. I’ve a lovely chappie called Columbus reached the Americas a few years back actually, and we’re already following it up.”

Mary sat very still, waiting for the explosion.

“And you didn’t see fit to involve me in this decision?” began Peter. “Only weeks back I was denying directly to Jupiter and Saturn, to our biggest shareholders, that we had any involvement in Columbus and his Spaniards. And now I find that I have been put in the position of lying to them, because, despite my share in this business, and position as Operations Director, I have not been kept informed about actions you have been taking in the company’s name! Mary, did you know about this escapade of Saul’s?”

Mary coloured slightly, and was about to answer when Saul cut in.

“I know it’s changing the subject briefly, Saint, but just while I remember it, my cousin Salima asked me to give you her regards. I was talking to her yesterday you see and...”

“Cousin? Salima?” said Peter faintly.

“Yes, she said you’d met at Sonny and Shia’s. She does some PA work there I think,” said Saul, backing his hunch.

“Oh yes, Salima, yes,” said Peter, attempting to cover. “Nice girl, Salima, yes. I think I remember her.”

Mary looked on bemused, as Saul continued firmly “Of course, I take full responsibility for Columbus. Maybe I could come up to your office in a bit, and try to explain and apologise?” He looked meaningfully at Mary.

“Oh, err, great deal you got us over Andalucia, Peter,” she said. “Eight hundred and sixty-five thousand was a fabulous price. Brilliant negotiation, I never thought you’d get it for less than nine fifty.”

“Thank you Mary,” said Peter faintly. He looked at Saul. “Yes, yes, do come up to my office when we’ve finished here, perhaps we could talk it over a bit more first. Absolutely.”

“I think we’re going to need a Board meeting rather soon,” said Mary brightly. “Later this week perhaps? Bring forward the quarterly one to Friday? We could discuss how to respond to Gautama in that.”

“Good idea Mary,” said Peter, beginning to recover, although his mind was racing. What did Saul really know?

“Did you see the news this morning, by the way?” asked Saul, deliberately changing the subject.

“No?” said Mary.

“They’ve finally chosen a new Labour Minister. A Chinese name, Mr Deng, I think. Deng Pao Shing, or Deng Shing Piao, or something like that.”

“Deng Xiao Ping?” said Peter, with raised eyebrows. “Well, it’s certainly a change from Charles Stuart.”

“Why?” asked Mary.

“Well, shall we say he has a reputation for being ‘firm’ with demonstrators and strikers and that kind of thing,” answered Peter.

“Should make it a bit easier for you next time you have to deal with that Winter woman then, eh Saint?” said Saul breezily.

“Indeed it will. I’ll be off now I think. See you in a few minutes at my place Saul?” Peter puffed out.

Mary raised her eyebrows at Saul.

“I told you strange things happen in Shia’s harem, didn’t I darling,” said Saul, by way of reply.

“I still don’t quite believe it. But you certainly touched a nerve when you mentioned your cousin Salima. Is she really one of Salima’s personal assistants?”

“Well, she provides personal services, let’s put it like that,” replied Saul with a mischievous grin.

“Let’s hope Mrs Fisher doesn’t know about her too then,” said Mary. “Peter’s life wouldn’t be worth living.”

“I think that’s occurred to Peter too, don’t you darling? Anyway, I’m off to meet him now, talk it over man to man.”

“Which reminds me Saul,” said Mary with mock sternness. “I heard you were seen in the bar with my Croesus.”

“You do let yourself listen to such dreadful gossip Mary,” said Saul, flicking a strand of hair back into place as he walked out.

Chapter 28

By good fortune, Saul had been early into the office, and had found himself signing for the delivery of a parcel addressed to Peter. It was about the size of a paperback, and had the logo of Sonny and Shia on it. Before heading up to talk to Peter, Saul returned to his desk and collected the parcel. He shook it slightly, and smiled grimly to himself as he heard it rattle. There could be little doubt what was in it. He took it with him as he headed up the stairway to heaven.

Peter was sitting whitely behind his desk. Saul, who knew him well, read a mixture of fright, anger, and bafflement in his face as he looked up. So much the better, he thought.

“Parcel for you,” he said to Peter. “From Shia.” He delivered his punch as Peter looked up.

“Wonder what it could be?” said Peter innocently taking it. “Looks like a box of Turkish delight maybe?” he said with attempted flippancy. He began to open it, saw the video inside, and sat down heavily. “Maybe I’ll save it for later,” he muttered, reaching for one of his drawers.

“We’re both grown up, and we’ve worked together a long time, Peter,” said Saul harshly. “I know what’s in the parcel.”

“And?” said Peter, his arms folding.

“And I don’t want a bloody good Operations Director and an even better colleague going to pieces and doing anything stupid,” said Saul, suddenly softening his manner. “I’ve met your wife a few times, remember.”

Peter winced, and then looked up at him hopefully.

“Listen. You know the company’s in the shit. I know you’re in the shit. We’ll make a deal. You stop flapping like a penguin about the Columbus expedition and ocean going sailing heading westbound, so we can all get on together and

conquer the Americas. I'll support you while you dig yourself out of the hole you seem to have climbed into with Shia. Deal?"

Peter thought for a moment, balancing his chances. On the one hand, there were Jupiter's rather vague promises about bigger jobs and accidents in the future. On the other hand, the very definite and immediate threat of the video.

"Why don't we see what Shia's message is?" suggested Saul, interrupting his thoughts.

Peter extracted the parcel again from his drawer, and pulled out a letter. "Dear Mr Fisher," he read. "It has been a pleasure doing business with you and entertaining you. I'm sure you will find this copy of some of your time here amusing. Please give me a call, and I will be happy to sell you the original. Kind regards, Shia."

"I'll sign off anything you have to agree to get Shia off your back. Two Directors will be enough, although I'm sure I can fix Mary too," prompted Saul.

"Does Mary know?"

"She knows about Columbus," answered Saul carefully. "I had to get her involved to get him the money for his grant. And she's agreed with me all along that we had no real choice but to go west. She has particular reasons for not wanting complications with Gautama I believe."

Peter was silent.

"Look Saint," began Saul again kindly. "I want the company back together, I want you on board, and I want Peter Saul and Mary to be the success it used to be. Now do we have a deal?"

"Salima's really your cousin?"

"Yes she is. And if you really want to carry on seeing her somewhere more discreet, she's expensive but not quite as expensive as visiting her at Shia's. I'll give you her number if you like. As I said, I've met your wife several times."

“OK Saul, thanks. Yes we have a deal. I’m really sorry.”

“That’s OK Peter. Call Shia in a few moments, get it over with. I’ll be on my way now.”

“Saul, look thanks, really thanks.”

Saul’s face twisted with embarrassment, and he left to tell Mary that Peter would cooperate with the conquest of the Americas without any more problems.

Peter picked up the phone and dialed.

“Mr Fisher, how nice to talk to you again. Of course, you would like the original of a certain item. It could be arranged,” said Shia.

“Do you have a suggestion?” asked Peter carefully.

“There is a little war taking place at the moment between your little Venice and our magnificent Ottoman empire, yes?”

“Yes,” agreed Peter, although he hadn’t paid it much attention. It seemed like just a border squabble of the kind that was always taking place in that part of the earth.

“I think perhaps you could lose a few battles, and some fortresses around the coast of Greece, in the next few months. I will place a certain item with a lawyer, with instructions to send it to you when the Ottoman forces are in possession. Is that acceptable?”

Peter was deeply relieved to get off so lightly. Of course the consequences of letting Sonny and Shia into Greece were probably going to be unpleasant in the long term. But right now the long term seemed unimportant.

“It’s acceptable,” he said. “I’ll expect a lawyer’s letter...”

“Today, by courier. Goodbye Mr Fisher.” There was a click as Shia disconnected.

Now what? Peter felt the need to re-establish himself, in his own eyes as much as anybody else's. What could he do? Of course, the schism! He'd been neglecting it. He could get it moving again, make a really thorough job of it, show the world he knew how to run a project and do a top quality schism. Now, where was that Luther file?

Chapter 29

Mary entered the board room expecting a difficult meeting. She'd been too busy catching up after her week with Apollo (she sighed, wistfully) to speak with either Saul or Peter after the argument about Columbus. Despite Saul disappearing to discuss it privately with Peter, and his apparent, she hesitated before using the word, blackmailing hold over him, she was still expecting blood on the carpets. And she was increasingly sick of her role as peacemaker.

To her surprise, she found Saul and Peter already seated, and apparently discussing some practical points in a document headed "Conquest of Mexico, Project Plan." It look well enough presented to be Croesus' work. It would certainly be most unlike Saul to have produced anything so formal.

"Morning you two," she said brightly. "Did you write that yourself Saul?"

Saul coloured slightly. "Well hello Mary," he said. "Your turn to chair this one isn't it?"

"It is. And did you?"

"Did I what?"

"Write it yourself."

"Well, maybe I had a bit of help from my friends."

"Friends on my staff?"

"Well, he does present everything so beautifully." Saul saw Mary's scowl and continued hurriedly. "Anyway, look it comes later on the agenda. Why don't we start the meeting. Here's Moses!" he said thankfully, as Moses shuffled in with his tablets.

Mary decided not to pursue it further, and called the meeting to order. After some routine administrative items, they came to the finances. Mary passed round some papers.

“Sorry I couldn’t get these to you before, but you know I’ve been away and then we brought the meeting forward. And I think some of my staff might have been a little distracted,” she couldn’t resist adding, looking pointedly at Saul.

“Anyway, I think ‘dreadful’ just about sums up the position. I’ll start with the income side. It’s fairly straightforward. The Black Death wiped out half our population. And the refinery inspections are still going on, and we’re still stockpiling into Purgatory, so we’re only able to sell half of what’s left. So income is about a quarter of what it was a hundred years back.”

“I suppose it’ll improve once we can start releasing souls from Purgatory will it?” asked Peter.

“It’ll improve to a level where we can about break-even. If we just turn to the next page and look at costs you’ll see they’re running about double, measured on a per soul basis, compared to a hundred years ago. The soulminers’ pay award, coupled with the extra costs involved in running the Purgatory operation have seen to that.”

“Cash reserves?” murmured Saul.

“We’re trading at a loss as you can see. We can probably last about another 10 years before reserves reach zero. After that, we’ll have to borrow, and that means Croc Cayman’s pound of flesh. And we won’t get even that if the figures still look like this.”

“I guess we have to hope for the next soulminers strike to be sooner rather than later then?” observed Peter.

“Well, it would certainly help if we could get the soul-flow back to normal,” answered Mary.

“Have you kept any back for special projects, darling?” asked Saul anxiously.

“You said you needed about a hundred thousand for your pilot project in Mexico, Saul. I’ve kept that out of the saving Peter made buying Andalusia.

Since he got it for less than a million, the difference is what's left for your project.”

“I'll only need a hundred thousand, Mary,” confirmed Saul.

“That still leaves thirty five thousand credos or so I believe,” said Peter. “Perhaps we could discuss my progress report on the schism now?”

“I think we've all got the message about the finances. If it's not improved by say 1520AD, we won't be trading,” said Mary flatly. “So yes, let's have your item.”

“Actually I've been thinking about the schism,” put in Saul. “Maybe we don't need to run it now?”

Peter's eyebrows shot up, and he leaned back and folded his arms.

Saul was continuing. “I mean, the idea was to stimulate our people to go out and conquer brave new worlds, and so on wasn't it?” Mary nodded. “Well, they're doing it anyway, aren't they? So perhaps we should just leave friend Luther in UHT, and save him for another day.”

“Not possible Saul,” said Peter firmly. They looked at him.

“Err, why not Saint?” said Mary, sensing trouble.

“Because I've already taken him out of UHT. He's been to Rome about five years back, and been suitably horrified by the corruption and decadence of the established church. He just wrapping up his theses as we speak, probably ninety-five altogether. And then I expect we'll follow Saul's original plan and get him to nail them to a porch, and watch the fireworks start.”

Saul was in a dilemma. On the one hand, the schism was a waste of time and money, and ran the risk of distracting the Spanish just when he wanted them focussed on world conquest. On the other hand, it would keep Peter busy and out of his hair, just when he personally needed to focus on world conquest.

“Could we just take another look at your theological basis?” he asked, temporizing.

Peter distributed some documents, and began to run through them. Midway through, Saul, unable to contain himself, exploded suddenly. “What the hell’s this, Saint? ‘No requirement to attend regular confession?’!”

“What’s wrong with that?” asked Mary.

“Non-confessional faith?! How on earth are we meant to get our message over to the punters without a giving them a regular statement of their account? How do you expect me to run a doctrine without regular priestshots? How do we communicate special offers, for example? We could never have set this purgatory concept up if we weren’t issuing regular accounts to every punter.”

“Aren’t you over-reacting a bit Saul?” asked Mary. Here we go again, she thought, Mary the peacemaker. “They’ll still go to church every week, surely?”

“And the new set up means they’ll have to listen to lengthy sermons every time. You’ll still be able to get the message across, Saul. You’ll just have to use a slightly different medium. Sermons instead of one-to-one coaching.”

Saul collected himself. This was one they’d have to fix later. Right now, there were more urgent issues, and he really couldn’t afford to quarrel again with Peter so soon after getting him back onside.

“Of course you’re right,” he said conciliatingly. “Sorry, I was wound up by the finances, hadn’t really appreciated how awful they were till this morning. Sorry Peter, please do continue.”

Peter resumed, and was noting that he expected to need most of the remaining project funds when Saul chipped in, “actually, we’ve got the Printing project much further down the road than I expected too. It should really help you out getting Luther’s message across and stimulating arguments all across Europe. Why don’t you take *all* the remaining funds and spend the extra on Printing, Saint?”

Mary was relieved. It seemed there wouldn't be a fight to break up after all. "OK, I think we'll take that down to the minutes then." She nodded to Moses, who began to scratch some notes on his tablet.

"Back to the agenda then. Pilot project for conquest of Americas. Mexico. Saul, your item," she said, taking the folder Saul passed over to her. She looked at it closely. There was no doubt it was Croesus' work.

"Well, there are two main aspects to deal with, as you can see presented so nicely in the beautiful document you have in front of you," said Saul provocatively.

"Which are?" asked Mary severely.

Saul was unabashed. "Well the actual conquest itself, of course. We've picked the leader, lovely chappie named Cortes, Hernan Cortes. We had another little ocean going sailing trip, Grijalva I think his name was, who conveniently enough managed to discover civilisation on the coast of Mexico. I paid a decent bonus to the agent who did the manifestation as his navigator, by the way," he added as an aside. "I hope neither of you objects."

Bonus payments in Marketing were known to be one of Peter's bugbears, but he kept quiet. Thank goodness for small mercies, thought Mary to herself.

"Anyway this Grijalva got everyone all excited, and friend Cortes is equipping his expedition at this very moment."

"How much is that going to cost?" asked Mary.

"Well that's probably around sixty thousand out of the hundred," answered Saul.

"And the other forty?"

"That's the other part of the game, darling. We need to distract the current soulbroker in Mexico."

"Who is it?"

“One of the real old firms, Hearts-of-Gold they’re called. Really just one rather middle-aged chappie, with an unpronounceable name. Chaosll or something. It’s written down there. Here we are. Mr Q Coatl.”

“What does the Q stand for,” asked Peter.

“Quetzal I think. Odd name.”

“Quetzal Coatl?” confirmed Mary.

“You said it, darling,” grinned Saul. “Apparently he’d got things sorted so he just had to visit them every fifty-two years, and otherwise just let the soul-flow look after itself.”

“So how are you distracting him?” asked Mary.

“My cousin Salima has got a job as his PA.” Saul sat back to enjoy the effect. Mary tried not to laugh, while Peter looked at his hands.

Unable to resist the temptation, Saul passed a card over to Peter. “Here’s the address for Hearts-of-Gold Ltd, you might want to give them a call sometime,” he said.

Peter attempted to look unconcerned. “Oh yes, certainly. I don’t think I’ve met their operations director, might look him up,” he added unconvincingly.

“You do that,” smiled Saul. “And that’s all there is to it really. This Quetzal chappie is due to make another visit to them in about two years time, but his thoughts should be elsewhere and Cortes can just sort of move in. I was just running through some of the details of the logistics, divisions amongst the local kingdoms, that kind of thing, with Peter when you came in, Mary.”

“It all looks very thoroughly worked out to me,” said Peter pompously. “I move we approve the plan.”

“Carried,” said Mary. “Moses?”

“There are a couple of other points, actually,” said Saul.

“Yes?”

“I think it might be a good idea to try and pretend we’re still giving a high profile to our eastbound expeditions and our Portuguese bunch. It might just help distract certain key spectators, don’t you think?”

“Sounds a good idea to me. What do you suggest?” said Mary.

“I think Mary should handle replying to Gautama’s protest, and manage the Portuguese for a bit. That alright with you Saint?” Peter nodded. Mary looked unhappy but Saul was continuing “the fact that it’s our FD handling operational matters ought to reassure Gautama that we really are just seeing it as a trading venture going forwards, while the fact that it’s still one of the Board ought to reassure Jupiter and his friends that we’re still serious about heading eastbound. Do you see what I mean, darling?”

“OK,” said Mary glumly. “So you think I should reply to Gautama saying that the Portuguese are only there for trade, not conquest.”

“Absolutely. And try and make sure that’s really the case for a bit I think, don’t you?”

“And your second point?” asked Mary.

“I think we ought to try and fix the other shareholders. See if we can get Beelzebub and Mrs Carpenter to privately approve this American stunt. I’m pretty sure I can get to Beelzebub on the quiet fairly soon.”

“I don’t think there’s anything to lose there,” put in Peter. “You know I’d be much happier if I didn’t think we were doing all this in direct opposition to what was resolved in the All Investors Meeting.”

“Do you think you could handle the Carpenters then, Saint?” suggested Mary. “You know Mrs C approves of you.”

“I can certainly give it a try,” said Peter.

“Marvellous, Saint. Thank you,” said Saul. “I think that about wraps it up Mary?”

“You seem to have thought of everything Saul,” said Mary admiringly. Which was true, she thought.

“OK, end of meeting, then, Moses you got all that?”

Moses nodded, and continued scratching notes.

Chapter 30

Peter was due to go out shortly for lunch with Mr and Mrs Carpenter. He glanced at his watch. Another ten minutes or so. His hand hovered over his phone, while he debated with himself for the final time. He finally resolved to go ahead, picked it up, and dialled a number. It was answered promptly.

“Hearts-of-Gold Soulbrokers, how may I help you?” said a female voice.

“This is Peter Fisher here, from Peter Saul and Mary, I wonder if I could sp....”

“Ah, Mr Fisher,” said the voice. “My name is Salima. I think we have already met. Saul Tarsus said you would be calling. I believe you would like a price list?”

“Er... well....er....” stammered Peter.

“If you would just give me your email address, I can send one right over to you now.”

Peter read out his details.

“You will find my contact details in the email. I look forward to speaking to you again, Mr Fisher. Good bye for now.” The phone went dead.

Deciding it would be better if he read the email later, Peter pulled on his coat and headed out for his lunch.

A short while later, he sitting with Virginia and Joseph Carpenter in a smart restaurant. Mrs Carpenter had asked how the schism was going, and Peter was giving her chapter and verse. She beamed approvingly.

“Very good Peter. I take it Saul isn’t involved in it at all then?”

“Not right now, Mrs C, I’m handling it all personally,” said Peter, puffing up a little.

“No wonder it’s all going so splendidly,” smiled Mrs Carpenter. Her hair seem to have been rinsed to a colour to match today’s twinset, which was a rather electric blue. Joseph, in his usual browns, looked particularly drab next to her. He was losing the battle to eat his langoustines tidily. Bits of shrimp were scattered across the table-cloth.

“And how’s the sailing project?” continued Mrs Carpenter.

“That’s going very well too. Your recommendation of Portuguese oak has been a real success,” said Peter, turning to Joseph, who looked embarrassed.

“Well thank you, I was sure it would be just the right kind of wood for you, you know...” he began.

“And are you still heading east?” Mrs Carpenter cut through Joseph’s meanderings.

“Well, it’s funny you should mention that,” began Peter. “We are going east, of course, Saul’s been handling it...”

Mrs Carpenter let out a harrumph. “Saul? He couldn’t handle a rowing boat. Maybe you should take a hand in it yourself Peter. Perhaps you could go west while Saul messes up the east?”

“Well the All Investors Meeting did insist on going east, Mrs C,” said Peter.

“As I recall, Jupiter and Saturn insisted on going east. I was against it, if you remember. I thought it would be a failure, especially if Saul was leading it.”

It was turning out rather better than Peter had expected. “So,” he said carefully, “we could count on your support if we were to try west instead?”

“Certainly.” Mrs Carpenter nodded emphatically. “Couldn’t they Joseph?”

“What? West? Oh yes, indeed my dear, absolutely you have my votes Peter, of course,” wittered Joseph.

“Provided you’re leading it, Peter,” said Mrs Carpenter. “You are going to lead it, aren’t you? Not Saul?”

“Yes,” answered Peter firmly. I am *going* to lead it, he thought, even if not quite yet. Once Saul’s done the pilot project in Mexico, I’ll make sure I’m in charge of the main conquest of South America. After all, it will be a special-operations-on-earth matter by then, not R&D at all. My department, not Saul’s.

Chapter 31

Saul and Mary were sitting in Mary's office, attempting to find a formula to describe Salima's activities at Hearts-of-Gold that would allow them to claim tax allowances in a fashion that would be acceptable to the tax authorities, when Peter came bouncing in excitedly.

"Have you seen the news?" he boomed.

"No, we've been busy with Salima," grinned Saul.

Peter's flinched slightly, before continuing, "it's happening, just what we wanted!"

"What's happening, Saint?" asked Mary.

"Another Soulminers strike!" said Peter happily. "I heard it on the radio on my way back. Why don't we go and watch the TV in the boardroom?"

"Sounds good to me," said Mary, and they trooped out.

The television news confirmed Peter's announcement. A grim looking Augustus was interviewed, announcing that Deng Xiao Ping would be handling it for the government, and that there would be no further concessions to S.O.U.L. Deng Xiao Ping appeared briefly to say he would be seeking early meetings with all those involved and reiterating Augustus' no concessions announcement. Finally Ms Winter appeared smiling toothily. Before they could hear what she had to say, Moses appeared in the doorway.

"There's been a call for Mr Tarsus, from a Mr Deng. Please would he attend a meeting at the Ministry of Labour at 4pm, bringing a detailed report on stockholding in purgatory with him," said Moses, deadpan.

"Game on, girls and boys," cried Saul. "We'd better sort out the report they want. I think I could do with help from both of you." He rose, bizarrely managing to appear both languid and urgent at the same time, and switched off

the television set. “I think we’ve got the message, haven’t we. Your office, Saint?”

As they walked across the office, Moses appeared a second time. “A Ms Winter called, for you Mr Fisher,” he said. “Would it be convenient for her to meet you here tomorrow morning?”

Peter looked over at Mary. “Are you free tomorrow, Mary?” he asked, rather sheepishly.

“Surely you can deal with the Winter woman?” mocked Saul.

“Leave it, Saul,” said Mary sharply. “Yes Peter, I can be free. Do you want me in the whole meeting?”

“If you wouldn’t mind Mary. You seem to be able to calm her down better than I can. Anyway, let’s get the figures together for Saul this afternoon shall we?”

“Would you mind making a start yourselves,” said Saul suddenly. “I’m just going to call Beelzebub’s secretary I think, and check he’s going to be there too.”

Mary asked Croesus to join herself and Peter preparing the figures. Might as well impress Deng with the presentation she thought to herself. Saul, predictably, was delighted when he came in a few minutes later. Mary quashed him as she went over his brief.

“Basically, we’ve built up about ten years’ stock based on our normal rate of sales. Of course, if no one else has any stockholdings, and it’s all down to our souls in our Purgatory, we could probably supply the government for about two years,” she summarised at the end. Croesus was taking detailed notes, and asked if he might leave to prepare the presentation.

“Make it beautiful, darling, make it beautiful for me,” called Saul as Croesus left.

“It should just see us through Mexico, if it all goes according to your timetable Saul, and provide us with enough funds to operate until about 1530 or so, and run a fairly cheap conquest of north or south America I suppose. This strike means it’s better than it was, assuming Beelzebub opens his refineries back up to us and we get a good rate for the souls from Purgatory, but it’s still not fantastic. We still need more souls going through or we’ll still be running at a loss in the long term. It’s still going to be pretty challenging to be running at a good profit by fifteen fifty and the meeting.”

“What are you going to say to the Winter woman?” asked Saul.

“Tell her to get lost I guess,” replied Peter.

“Wonderful darlings,” said Saul. “I say, I need to be getting on if I’m going to make it to the Ministry on time. Have fun with Ms Winter!”

Chapter 32

Saul presented himself at the Ministry of Labour, and found himself whisked off by a rather serious young man, who showed him into an office on the top floor. Entering, he found Beelzebub, Scheherezade and a small, tough looking Chinese man whom he recognised as Deng sitting around a table. They rose to greet him.

“How’re ya doin’, Saul?” said Beelzebub, waving a cigar expansively. “Good to see ya again.”

“Hi Bubba,” said Saul.

“Hello again, Mr Tarsus,” said Scheherezade musically. “Have you met Mr Deng, the Minister for Labour?” Deng put down his cigarette – as Saul discovered, he appeared to chain smoke – and shook his hand.

They exchanged introductions and got down to business. Saul passed around Croesus’ excellent presentation of the Purgatory situation, and talked through it. There were many detailed questions from Deng, and Saul was glad both that he was properly prepared and that Beelzebub was there with him.

Finally, Deng and Scheherezade seemed satisfied. “So, it seems you could see us through a strike of around two years’ duration, Mr Tarsus.” It was a statement from Deng, not a question.

“Excellent. I think this time we will make a more...” Deng hesitated, seeking the right word, “sensible resolution with the Soulminers’ Union.” He smiled slightly.

“I sure hope so, Mr Deng, I sure hope so,” said Beelzebub.

Scheherezade turned to Saul and Beelzebub. “Although it is not my department, of course,” she smiled slightly, “I think you will find that the inspections of your refineries will cease as of now. You should find, Mr Tarsus,

that you are able to ship your souls steadily to Hell Refineries, at that they will be able to process them and pay you a fair price for them.”

“You’ll get quite a premium for them, Saul, quite a premium,” boomed Beelzebub.

“That’s fantastic news, thank you very much,” said Saul, feeling obliged to contribute but uncertain what he could add.

“Will you excuse me, Mr Tarsus?” said Deng. “I’m sure you will understand I have much to attend to at this time. Your presentation was excellent, Purgatory is a fine concept. You are to be congratulated. Goodbye for now, Mr Tarsus.” He rose, shook hands and left.

“I mentioned to you last time we met that we had heard some interesting stories from some smugglers we picked up, Mr Tarsus,” began Scheherezade.

With Deng gone, Saul felt able to relax slightly. “Please call me Saul. And do go on,” he said.

“I understand you are attempting to, shall we say, interfere in their operations?”

Beelzebub smiled knowingly at him. “We know you’re aiming for south America, Saul,” he said. “It’s pretty fine by us, as long as you don’t try to start up where Jupiter and his boys might have to leave off.”

Saul looked startled. “You mean, you’ve no problem with us ignoring the All Investors Meeting?” he said, caught off guard.

“Hell refineries is no fan of cocaine smuggling,” said Beelzebub firmly. “It’s pretty obvious why Jupiter and Saturn wanted you headed off east.”

“So it’s definitely cocaine then?” asked Saul. He might as well confirm the rumours.

“Definitely, Saul,” said Scheherezade gravely, “but as yet, we can’t prove it. Smuggling ginseng, well that’s a bit against the law of course, but really not too serious. Cocaine, on the other hand...”

“With the government publicly committed to the war on drugs...” added Beelzebub.

“If you decide on a conquest of South America, you can count on some, shall we say, unofficial official assistance should you need it,” said Scheherezade. “And of course, we still owe you the favour we promised as a reward for accepting us messing you around with the refinery inspections. Good luck, Saul, and good luck in your business ventures.”

It was a dismissal. Saul began to leave, and was surprised to see Beelzebub remain behind. He was about to comment on it, when he caught Beelzebub’s eye and decided against. The same rather serious young man was waiting to show him out. Saul eyed him up speculatively but thought better of that too.

Chapter 33

Peter and Mary were waiting in the Boardroom when Moses showed in Ms Winter, the Queen of S.O.U.L.

“Well, sister, how yo’ doing!” she shrieked at Mary as she entered.

“Good morning, sister,” said Mary carefully.

The Queen gestured at Peter. “Sister, you still working with this Hoooooot Stuff?” she yelled. Mary smiled despite herself.

“I’m gonna get some Hot Stuff, baby, this morning, gonna have some Hot Stuff baby...” sang the Queen. Peter tried manfully not to flinch.

“Good morning Ms Winter,” he began. “We understand you’re here to explain the reasons behind this latest, and I must say, unnecessary, strike,” he finished pompously.

“Pay, Hot Stuff, Pay!”

“But you’ve already received a very significant increase as a result of the settlement made when Charles Stuart was Minister for Labour,” objected Peter. Mary willed him to relax a little, and at least use a normal tone of voice. It seemed that the Queen brought out his most stuffed-shirt manner.

“We work hard for the money,” began the Queen in response.

“We’re not disputing that...” attempted Peter, but he was quickly drowned out.

“So hard for it honey. We work hard for the money, so you’d better see us right!” sang the Queen.

“After the last pay rise,” tried Peter again, “I really feel we’ve already seen you right.”

“It’s a sacrifice working day to day, for so little money, just bits of pay!”

“But the last huge rise was only a generation ago!” objected Peter. Mary was beginning to feel she needed to make a contribution but the Queen was back in full flood again.

“Twenty-eight years have come and gone, and I’ve seen a lot of tears, of my members who come in, they really seem to need me there.”

Peter hesitated, and Mary saw her chance.

“I’ve known a few girls who thought they were pretty smart,” she began. This had never really been her sort of thing, but there was a time and a place. At least she seemed to have caught the Queen off-balance for a moment. “But you’ve got being right down to an art,” she continued more confidently.

“I have sister, I have,” cried the Queen. She was watching Mary carefully, with what seemed to be the beginnings of some respect.

Mary carried on. “You think you’re a genius, you drive me up the wall...”

“I’m a regular original,” put in the Queen.

“A know-it-all,” replied Mary. This was probably taking it a bit too far, and it allowed the Queen to get her next line in first.

“Oh-oo-oh, you think you’re something special,” she pointed at Peter. “Oh-oo-oh, you think you’re something else,” pointing at Mary this time.

Mary saw her moment. “Okay, so you’re the Queen of SOUL – That don’t impress me much,” she rapped the table in rhythm to emphasise the final five words.

“So you got the lines, but have you got the cash? Now don’t get me wrong (sister!),” shouted the Queen, “yeah I think you’re alright. But that won’t pay my members in the middle of the night.”

“That don’t impress me much,” rapped out Mary again. Peter watched agog. Mary’s performance was a revelation, and it was clear she was getting the better of Ms Winter.

Evidently the Queen thought so too, for she decided to try a different approach. “I’m a lady who’s sure,” she cried, “all that glitters is gold, so I’m trying the stairway to heaven.”

Mary was equal to her. “When you get there you’ll know, that the tills are all closed, and with no words will you get what you came for!”

“We’ll never sell out, we never will...” The Queen was reverting to her opening approach. “We work hard for the money, so hard for it honey, we work hard for the money and you better see us right.” She put on her coat, and strode for the door.

“Good day to you Sister,” she cried. “Good day, Hoooot Stuff,” she cried at Peter, and stormed out.

Peter stood and applauded. Mary bowed. “If only Saul could have seen you,” said Peter admiringly. “You were magnificent. She won’t bother us again I don’t think!”

“Actually I rather enjoyed that. Maybe there’s a future for me as a union militant if things don’t work out here,” smiled Mary.

Saul appeared in the doorway. “Ms Winter just passed me in the corridor going like a battery hen out of hell,” he said. “It went well then?”

“Mary was fabulous,” said Peter, and described the recent action.

“So it was your dulcet tones carrying through the window that I could hear as I was parking the car was it?” said Saul.

Mary blushed. “How did you get on at the Ministry?” she asked to change the subject.

“Excellent, I would say darling. Deng’s pretty tough, which is good news I think, should mean the strike drags on and on and fills up our purgatory coffers,” began Saul. He went on to give an account of the rest of his discussions. As he reached the end he almost mentioned Beelzebub remaining

behind with Scheherezade, but changed his mind. After all, he wasn't sure if should read anything into it. On the other hand it might come in useful.

“How's Mexico going?” asked Mary as he finished.

“All according to plan so far, darling.”

“I know we've only recently had one,” said Peter, “but could I suggest another Board meeting once Mexico is under control? We've got a few decisions to make I think, especially about our biggest shareholders.”

“If you'll chair it, then yes you can,” said Mary.

“I'll let you know when Mexico's wrapped up then, shall I?” suggested Saul.
“We can have it a few days later.”

Chapter 34

Another day, another board meeting, thought Mary. At least she wasn't chairing this one. Peter was already there when she entered the boardroom. Seeing her arrive, and now safe from being alone in the room with Peter, Moses followed her in.

They waited a few moments for Saul to arrive. Peter looked at his watch. "Perhaps we should start without him?" he suggested, tentatively.

"Come off it Saint. I think he just wants to make an entrance."

Right on cue, Saul flounced into the room. "Item one," he declaimed. Peter looked slightly irked, and in any case item one was supposed to be 'minutes of the previous meeting'. "Item one," said Saul again, "ladies and gentlemen, I am proud and delighted to inform you that, as of this hour three weeks ago, Mexico is now a Christian country! Hip hip..."

"Hooray," answered Mary. "That's fantastic Saul!"

Even Peter, who found it difficult to take pleasure in someone else's successes, looked pleased. "Very well done Saul," he said rather stiffly. "Moses, take to the minutes that the meeting congratulated Saul on an outstanding achievement in the speedy conquest of Mexico."

"Seconded," added Mary, applauding loudly.

"Perhaps we should move into the financial report, Mary," suggested Peter.

"I take it you've all read the pack, yes? Good. Well, in summary, we're now getting a decent return on Andalusia and Mexico should start delivering souls to us within the next few months. There's some strange figures from Greece, where we seem to have lower returns than forecast..." Peter looked down at his papers guiltily "... but otherwise, we're now just about trading at break-even again."

“Is that it?”

“Well apart from the odd soul here and there that the Portuguese have converted in India which, given the amount of management time it takes us to deal with the official protests from Gautama’s people on each occasion, I’m not sure are actually making us a profit anyway, that is indeed it.”

“Well that sounds OK,” said Peter cautiously.

“Yes and no. Yes, we’ve stopped making a loss, which is good. But the only reserves are the premium we’ve been getting on the souls from Purgatory. I believe we’re going to discuss funding another American expedition later in the meeting. There’s just enough for that, but that’s it. Not another drop. If you want to pay for anything else, it’s off to talk to Croc Cayman.”

“And the pound of your fair flesh?” suggested Saul.

“An *equal* pound, I think you’ll find, Saul. Yours too that means,” retorted Mary.

“How much more stock have we got in Purgatory?”

“About another six months,” replied Peter. “We really could do with the strike ending soon.”

“I don’t think it’s far away, Saint,” said Saul. “You’ve seen the papers I suppose.”

“Indeed I have Saul. Let’s hope you’re right. Now perhaps we could take stock of where we are with our shareholders?” suggested Peter.

“Well, you know about Beelzebub. He’s pretty happy with how it’s going, and he’s got no objections at all to the American venture as far as I could tell. In fact...” Saul added carefully “... he seemed to want to please Scheherazade for some reason, and was encouraging us to conquer South America to stop the drugs trade.”

“Which we’re pretty sure is being carried on by our biggest shareholders,” observed Peter. “Do we have any plans to replace them?”

“Actually I think Gautama would like to buy a stake,” said Mary incautiously.

Saul watched the wheels turn in Peter’s head.

“That sounds an excellent idea,” said Peter. “It would be good to get some of his expertise in running a big operation, now that we’re expanding.”

“No more than ten percent,” said Saul firmly. “He’s an expert at turning small stakes into controlling interests.”

“How about the Carpenters,” Mary interjected hastily, before Peter could argue. “How did you get on there Peter?”

“Splendidly actually,” said Peter, puffing out his chest a little. “Mrs C was very impressed by my, er, the schism and how it was being handled. I don’t think she likes Jupiter very much, and basically she said she was happy for us to head for the Americas.”

“Just that?” asked Saul, disbelievingly.

“Well, actually, she said she was happy as long as I was leading it and you weren’t involved Saul,” said Peter.

“That sounds more authentic,” grunted Saul.

“And Mr C?” cut in Mary.

“The usual. He looked delighted when I thanked him for his Portuguese oak suggestion, but otherwise he just agreed with Virginia, as always.”

“So really, if it came to a vote, we could count on backing from the shareholders for expansion in the Americas then?” summarised Mary.

“Informally yes,” said Peter. “I’m not sure we can record it in the minutes.”

“Oh come on Saint, stop being such a pedant. Of course we can. ‘Soundings have been taken with the following shareholders, who supported the scheme to

expand in the Americas. As a result, this course of action now has majority shareholder support,’” improvised Saul. “Did you get that Moses, darling?” he chirped. Moses dourly scratched some notes.

“So, that brings us on to the key point for this meeting then,” boomed Peter looking at his notes. “What is our next step in the Americas?”

“It’s pretty obvious isn’t it Saint? Sort out a conquest of the south, using the same methods as our pilot in Mexico. What is there to discuss?”

“Well, I really think we should have a more formal discussion than that,” huffed Peter.

“Oh come on Peter, what are the options?” said Mary, becoming irritated by Peter’s moment of pomposity. “North or South seems to sum it up as far as I can see.”

“And there’s bugger all in the north except buffaloes and barbarians. And not many of them at that, darling,” said Saul.

“So really, there’s no option is there. South America has to be the next target. Let’s not forget that there’s only thirty years left until our 1550AD deadline,” reminded Mary.

“Yes,” agreed Saul. “It’s all very well having stopped making losses, but we’re supposed to be trading profitably by then and paying a nice fat dividend, otherwise our lovely shareholders can just shut up our shop, can’t they?”

“I still think we should evaluate our options more pr...” began Peter.

“And I’ve found another lovely chappie...” said Saul across him. “Pizarro, his name is. Francisco Pizarro,” Saul rolled the ‘r’s with relish. “Perfect for the job.”

Peter decided on a different tack. “Excellent Saul. Now, given how fragile our shareholder support is for this scheme, I really think we ought to follow Mrs Carpenter’s suggestion and let me handle the conquest.”

Mary just waited.

“Fine with me, Saint!” said Saul, to her surprise.

Peter was committed to arguing his case, despite having won already. “I mean, the pilot project in Mexico, that was R&D wasn’t it?” he said. “A conquest following the same model is special-operations-on-earth, and falls in my domain.”

“Absolutely Saint!” agreed Saul again. “I’ll hand our Pizarro chappie over to your boys and girls right after the meeting. ”

“Moses, for the minutes please...” began Peter.

“Peter to organise conquest of Incas,” finished Saul. “Got that Moses? By the way Saint, a part of the plan was to arrange a famine amongst the Incas before Pizarro lands.”

“Is it in the budget?” asked Peter.

“Oh absolutely. Maybe Mary could speak to Four Horsemen?”

“Oh yes of course. You know I was at school with Famine, a really sweet girl actually. If you let me know the dates, I’ll call her after this meeting,” said Mary.

After a few routine items, the meeting broke up.

“Are you well Saul?” said Mary after Peter had left.

“Never better,” said Saul cheerfully. “Peter’ll be much better at this Inca thing than I will.”

Mary arched her brows.

“Not to mention another lovely chappie called Almagro, Diego Almagro, that I’m keeping up my sleeve in case Peter mucks it up.”

“Ah,” said Mary.

“Ah,” said Saul in agreement. And one or two other things up my other sleeve, he thought to himself. “I’d better go hand over friend Pizarro to Peter’s tender mercies.”

Chapter 35

Mary had missed the news that morning, and had been obliged to listen to at least a dozen people greet her in the office with the information that the soulminers strike was over.

It seemed a momentous enough announcement to justify spending a few minutes in the boardroom, watching it on TV.

As she switched it on, a tearful looking Queen was pictured, speaking to her supporters gathered outside in the cold dawn morning.

“Listen to the wind blow,” she started softly. “Watch the sun rise.”

“We’re in the shadows, damn the government, damn their lies,” she went on rather more strongly.

The newsreader came on to say that Ms Winter had resigned, and put her name forward for re-election to the post of General Secretary of S.O.U.L. The pictures cut back to Ms Winter.

“And if you don’t vote for me now, I will never lead you again.” The pictures cut to her supporters chanting for her to stand again and remain leader.

“I can still hear you saying,” cried the Queen back to them, “we must one day break our chains.”

Despite the difficulties caused for Peter Saul and Mary Ltd by the strike, Mary had conceived a certain liking for the woman. She secretly rather hoped she might be re-elected.

“I can still hear you saying, we must one day break our chains,” she said softly to herself, thinking back to their last meeting.

Peter, frontling in, interrupted her reverie. Mary turned to him, rather irritated. If he had been less fat he would evidently have sidled in, but his present bulk limited his options.

Deng Xiao Ping was appearing on the screen to announce the end of energy rationing and the resumption of normal supplies of refined souls. Mary switched it off as Peter settled heavily in a chair.

“Trouble?” she said, reading his manner.

“Well, yes, actually Mary,” he said sheepishly. “Er, sorry to interrupt you by the way.”

This apology was sufficiently out of character for Mary to put away her irritation and say sympathetically “what’s up Peter?”

“It’s Pizarro,” he said.

Mary raised her eyebrows.

“He’s stuck,” said Peter with difficulty.

“Stuck?”

“Yes. On some bloody island in the Pacific called The Isle of the Gorgon. And he’s starving to death.”

“Have you told Saul this?” she asked.

Peter winced. “I couldn’t quite face it yet,” he said. “Er, maybe you could speak to him, see if has any ideas.”

Coward, thought Mary to herself. After you insisted on taking control of the project, now you can’t bring yourself to admit you’ve mucked it up can you? On the other hand, she could already hear Saul’s sarcastic tones and had to admit she wouldn’t like to be in Peter’s shoes. However, it had to be faced. Their whole future was bound up in this expedition that Peter had managed to strand starving on some isolated island.

“OK Peter, I’ll mention it to him, see if he’s got any ideas. Are you going to get back to trying to extract them?”

“Well yes, but honestly Mary, I’ve tried absolutely everything. I feel like there’s someone else making sure I never get anywhere with them,” he said downcast.

“Don’t be ridiculous Saint,” said Mary briskly. “How could there be? You get back to trying to rescue our project, and I’ll speak to Saul.”

“Thanks Mary,” said Peter, more subdued than she’d ever seen him, and he frontled back out.

Mary collected her thoughts. The end of the strike meant the end of any premium payments for souls in Purgatory. They were back to breaking even, just about. The conquest of the Incas was the absolute top priority. Despite her irritation with Peter’s apparent incompetence, her own hands were not completely clean either. She’d been unable to organise the famine they’d agreed on. She went to talk to Saul.

Chapter 36

Mary walked briskly and unannounced into Saul's office. Saul jumped, looked up guiltily, and hastily tried to conceal his reading material under a folder. Mary saw the title before he had succeeded in hiding it. "Rustic Villas and Cottages in Iberia." Looking around his office, she could see several other brochures piled up under more ordinary files. It appeared that, at this moment of crisis, Saul was planning his vacation.

"Going on holiday, Saul?" she asked sarcastically.

Saul looked rueful. "Well, I was maybe thinking of taking a short break. Just a weekend, you know, something like that." He put the brochure down in front of him.

"I won't sign Croesus' holiday form. We're too busy right now."

"Nothing was farther from my mind Mary dear." Mary looked disbelieving. "Anyway, what brings you here with such a head of steam?" asked Saul.

"Peter's mucked up Pizarro already," she said.

"That was efficient of him darling," smiled Saul. "I never thought he'd managed it quite so quickly."

"Be serious Saul," said Mary, exasperated.

"Oh but I am, darling, I am. How's the famine going by the way?" he asked suddenly.

"How did you know? OK, yes I admit it. Mary's mucked up the famine already," she said, trying to put a bold front on it.

"That doesn't sound like you, Mary. Mucked it up how?"

"Well, I spoke to Famine, she's still as nice as she always was."

"Said you needed a famine in South America," continued Saul for her.

“And she said, sorry, she was already engaged in that region. Would I like a death or a war, they were both free, but sorry, no famine.”

“Did she say where? Or who was paying?”

“Get real Saul. Of course she didn’t. I asked of course, but I knew the answer before she gave it. Client confidentiality. To be fair, Four Horsemen could hardly carry on without it, could they? She couldn’t possibly tell me.”

“So come on Mary dear, putting two and two together is your strength, not mine.”

“I need help with the addition sometimes Saul.”

“Let’s just run through it shall we? What’s Peter’s problem with Pizarro?”

“They’re stuck on some Island of the Gorgon, starving,” answered Mary.

“Caught in a famine in fact?”

“Caught in a famine, yes,” grinned Mary. She was beginning to see where Saul was leading.

“And your friend Famine is busy with a job in South America?”

“So who has a particular interest in stopping our Conquest?” said Mary triumphantly.

Saul stepped in quickly. He really didn’t want Mary thinking that one through too carefully right now. His fingers stroked the Rustic Villas brochure nervously. “Our smuggling shareholders, evidently.”

“Could we find out?”

“Well, I seem to remember young Croesus has some contacts at Four Horsemen. And he does need a holiday,” said Saul.

“OK, Saul, you win, I’ll arrange for him to try and find out.”

Saul grinned. Hook line and sinker, he thought. “Marvellous Mary, I knew you would! How’s things going with Apollo by the way?”

“Wonderful, Saul, although we both seem to be really busy with work at the moment,” she replied, her face lighting up.

“Maybe you need a break too darling.”

“Fat chance of that right now.”

“Well, maybe when young Croesus is back at his desk then,” smiled Saul.

As Mary left, he picked up the brochures again. None of them were quite right. A sudden thought struck him, and he set off for Peter’s office.

Peter looked up guiltily as he entered. He was just wondering if Mary had spoken yet to Saul about the Island of the Gorgon fiasco when Saul startled him by saying “Peter, I’m a bit worried about Mary at the moment.”

“In what way?”

“Well, don’t you think she looks a bit strained?”

“Can’t say I’d noticed it.”

“She’s messed up doing the famine you know.”

“Has she?” Peter brightened visibly.

“Yes, it’s really very out of character. I’m quite worried, I think she needs a break, get away completely.”

“Oh absolutely.” Peter nodded vigorously. If Mary’s famine was going to distract from his Gorgon Island disaster, he was happy to agree.

“How, er, remote is your villa, what’s it called again?”

“Paradise. Well, maybe three quarters of a mile from the nearest place.”

“Peaceful then. Romantic?”

“I go there with my wife and three small children,” said Peter dryly.

“Ah yes, fair point.” Saul thought of his occasional meetings with Mrs Fisher, and shuddered. “It could be romantic though, I take it, if there were just Mary and Apollo staying in it?”

“Well I suppose so. Do you want me to lend it to her?”

“Does it have a TV? Radio? Phone?”

“Of course it does, it’s fully equipped. Swimming pool, bar area...”

“Yes, yes, I’m sure it’s got everything. But I’d like Mary to really get away from it all. Could you pop over and take the TV and radio out. Oh yes, and the phone?”

“Stock up the freezer too?”

“Well, if you could aim for the full Robinson Crusoe effect, that would certainly help, I think Saint. If you could assume she’ll have Apollo there with her, and leave some stuff for him too, that would be great.”

Peter thought briefly and then nodded. “OK, Saul, I’ll go over sometime in the next couple of weeks and sort it all out. Do you want me to tell Mary the good news?”

“Oh, no, Saint, I thought we could make it a surprise for her.”

“When do we tell her then?”

“Not quite sure yet. Why don’t you let me know when you’ve fixed the place up, and we’ll decide then?”

Chapter 37

Croesus reappeared in Mary's office on Monday morning after his surprise week off, looking tanned and fit. He was followed closely by Saul, whom Mary eyed suspiciously. Saul seemed to have been to a surprising number of meetings offsite during the previous week, and Mary was sure she could detect a hint of sunburn in his usually sallow complexion.

"Hi Mary," said Croesus enthusiastically. Saul grinned behind him. Evidently he knew what was coming. "Pay-dirt," said Croesus, his mild Boston twang coming through.

Mary smiled back. "You found out about Four Horsemen then did you?"

"I sure did Mary," answered Croesus. "I know it's not real relevant now, but they did the Black Death. But Gautama paid for it."

"Gautama? Not Sonny and Shia?"

"Definitely Gautama. Apparently he was aiming to distract Sonny and Shia. Make them think there were easier pickings to their west. I think they're putting him under some pressure in north India right now."

"Interesting," murmured Saul.

"And?" said Mary. While it was interesting, it wasn't relevant to their immediate problems. The Black Death was ninety years ago now.

"Famine?" grinned Croesus.

"Come on Croesus, give us the goods," said Mary impatiently.

"Yes Ms Magdalene," said Croesus cheekily. "The good lady Famine was engaged by one of our current shareholders to do a job on a certain island in the Pacific."

"The Isle of the Gorgon?"

“You got it Mary.”

“And which shareholder?” said Mary, feeding him lines patiently. Ah well, she thought, it seems like he’s earned it.

“The biggest,” replied Croesus. “The Pantheon Alliance.”

“Jupiter and Saturn as ever was,” said Saul.

“So now we know,” said Mary. “The next question is: what can we do about it?”

“I think I might make a phone call, Mary darling,” said Saul.

“Who to?”

“Our Foreign Minister I think. She wants this conquest to go ahead, and she wants the cocaine smuggling stopped.”

“What can Scheherezade do?” asked Mary, knowing the answer before she’d finished asking. It seemed to be her day for playing the stooge.

“Lean on Four Horsemen.”

“Go to it Saul. And well done Croesus, that was a great piece of work.”

“Do I get a raise?” asked Croesus, half jokingly.

“I think that might have to wait until we’ve conquered the Incas,” said Mary with a smile.

“Can I use your phone Mary?” said Saul.

“Go right ahead, Saul,” she replied. “Croesus, you’ll excuse us I’m sure.” Croesus exited gracefully. Mary noticed Saul following with his eyes. “Concentrate on the matter in hand,” she said.

“I was,” said Saul. “But I suppose you mean this hand,” he gestured with the handset. He dialed a number written on a small card that he extracted from an inside pocket, and asked for the Foreign Minister.

“Saul Tarsus, of Peter Saul and Mary Limited,” he replied to a question from the other end, and set the phone to conference mode.

“Saul Tarsus,” came the voice of Scheherezade over the speaker, still hypnotic despite the metallic effect of the phone. “How can I be of assistance?”

Saul explained that their conquest of South America had been halted by a famine, almost certainly arranged by Jupiter and Saturn.

“What would you like me to do, Saul?”

Mary raised her eyebrows. “I didn’t know you were on first-name terms,” she whispered. Saul waved her down. He was listening intently, and thought he could hear a male voice in the murmuring in background with a Texan accent.

“Well, the activities of Four Horseman are regulated by your Ministry, I think,” he began.

“It is called OFPOX, the Regulator covering apocalyptic activities external to the Great Planes.”

“Perhaps OFPOX could suggest to Four Horsemen that the activities of Famine in South America might be in contravention of the regulatory framework governing their activities,” prompted Saul.

“I believe it could,” came the reply. “You will receive some news later today. Goodbye Saul, and thank you for the information.”

The phone went dead. Saul and Mary looked at each other.

“Well, that seemed promising enough. Not much else to do now but wait, is there?” said Mary

“Not much else to do? Perhaps you could think about taking that break then Mary dear, now Croesus has returned safely from his mission.”

Mary sighed. “It *would* be lovely. Maybe I’ll give Apollo a call and see if he stands any chance of getting away in the near future. Any suggestions about where we could go?”

“Not back to Delphi?” asked Saul.

“It was lovely there. But I’d quite like to see how we get on somewhere more neutral, I suppose,” answered Mary, half to herself.

“I’ll put my mind to it,” said Saul. “I’ve read enough brochures myself recently, as you discovered. I’ll have another look, see if I can come up with anything that might suit you.”

“That’s great Saul, thanks. Better get back down to work if I’m to stand any chance of getting away in the near future.”

Mary had a busy day at her desk. It was mid-afternoon before she was interrupted by Moses. “There is a call from Four Horsemen for you, Ms Magdalene,” he said.

“Put it through. Mary M...”

“Mary, how lovely to speak to you,” came Famine’s voice.

“Famine, how are you darling? How’s it going?”

“We’re going great guns, Mary, as always. I hear marvellous things about Peter Saul and Mary too, still.”

“We’re doing OK I guess,” said Mary.

“Anyway, Mary, you called me a while back about a job you wanted doing in South America. Are you still interested?”

“You said you couldn’t do it.”

“No, I had another client. Can’t tell you who. But, to be honest, we’ve had the regulator on to us, warning us off the job. I don’t know what we’re going to tell the client. Not good for our reputation. But I’ve had to drop it like a hot coal.”

“OFPOX? I thought they were rather toothless actually, Famine love.”

“Not this time sweetheart. Fair gave me the creeps. Even Death was a bit more subdued than usual. Anyway, do you still want your job doing?”

“I’m not sure right now, Famine love, I’ll have to take it back and see if we’re still interested. I’ll try and call you back, OK? Are you going to the reunion next year?”

“I’m not sure yet. Depends on work I suppose. Call me back Mary, let me know. Bye for now.”

At that moment Peter hurried in. “Mary, did you tell Saul about me getting Pizarro stuck on the Isle of the Gorgon?”

Mary was wondering how to answer his, when Peter rushed on. “Well don’t bother, I’ve had a brilliant bit of news. His partner, err, Almagro I think he’s called, has got a ship through, and they’re off to recruit another expedition!”

“That’s good news Peter.”

“Thanks. Look, I’m going to call a Project team meeting tomorrow to review progress and agree the next steps. I take it you and your people can make it?”

“I’m sure we’ll fit it in, Peter,” said Mary. “It is fairly important after all.”

“Great. Must dash. See you tomorrow.” Peter hurried out, breathing heavily.

Chapter 38

As usual, Peter had assembled every plausible manager in the company for his Project Progress meeting. Carefully prepared reports were distributed in bound packs around the table in the boardroom. Peter sat at one end, reading from his report. As well as Saul and Mary, Croesus and Midas from Mary's department, most of Peter's managers, and even a few of Saul's senior staff were ranged around the table. Peter had even found an excuse to invite Moses, who sat scowling at the foot.

He was explaining that Pizarro, having returned to Panama assisted by his partner, had re-equipped his expedition and was now marching into the interior of Peru. So far, the locals had apparently been accommodating. Peter drew attention knowledgeably to the similarities with Cortes' conquest of Mexico.

"How many men in Pizarro's force, Peter?" asked Saul genially.

"A hundred and sixty-four," answered Peter proudly, and was about to continue his report when a strangled noise from Saul made him look up again.

"Jesus Christ!" shrieked Saul.

There was a dead-silence around the table. By convention, no one ever, ever, mentioned that name in Peter Saul and Mary Limited.

"Explain yourself Saul," said Peter, leaning back and folding his arms.

Saul had regained command of himself. "My apologies for my language boys and girls," he said looking around the table. "Peter, I'm really not convinced that trying to conquer an empire many times the size of the one we had to deal with in Mexico using only about a quarter of the troops is necessarily a recipe for success," he continued mildly.

"But we're following an already proven concept, and Mary, you must agree we need to economise wherever possible," replied Peter.

“Yes, wherever possible. But surely... oh never mind,” said Saul, still privately horrified by what Peter had done. “A hundred and sixty-four men. Right. And they’ve reached, where did you say?”

Mary watched aghast. *Another* argument? And this time in front of half the staff. Morale would plummet. Quite apart from Peter’s stupidity. How on earth could he have decided to go with such a small force? She knew the answer of course. Peter was determined to prove he could do better than Saul. Bloody men, she thought, as she stepped in to cool things down.

“Peter’s already said that they’ve reached Tumbes, Saul,” she said.

“Right Mary, yes of course,” said Saul. “Sorry Peter, I missed that bit I think,” he continued humbly. Don’t overdo it, thought Mary, seeing Peter bridle again.

“Well, the question I suppose is, can we improve the chances of success a bit. ‘Mitigate some project risks’”, he said rather pointedly to Peter, deliberately using the jargon.

“Well this is a perfectly good moment to review the project risk strategy Saul,” said Peter thinly.

“I think we need to reduce the odds a little, that’s all,” said Saul. “I propose that we engage the services of Four Horsemen, and more particularly Pestilence as soon as possible.”

“And where is the money for that going to come from?” said Peter.

Mary looked troubled. She nodded at Midas, who leaned across the table and handed her a folder. “There’s only one source of funds available to us at present,” she began. “We will have to take advantage of the facility offered to us by Cayman and Swiss.”

She gathered herself. “Do we have agreement that we need to follow Saul’s suggestion?”

“Perhaps we could take this offline?” threw in Peter.

Mary cringed as she saw Saul about to rise to Peter’s bullshit-bingo prize winner. She stepped in again quickly.

“I think perhaps the financial situation makes this a Board decision,” she said firmly, taking command. “Moses, would you be kind enough to arrange an emergency Board meeting, starting in about,” she glanced at the clock, “fifteen minutes time.”

Moses nodded and rose to leave.

“Thank you all for your time this morning,” continued Mary. “I’m sure Peter will email you all with an update after the Board discussions.”

There was a general shuffling of chairs. Peter was fuming at the end of the table. Rising suddenly, he was first to the door. “See you in a quarter of an hour,” he said, the falseness of his smile evident to everyone in the room.

Soon Mary and Saul were the only ones left. Saul looked apologetic. “Sorry Mary darling, thank you for rescuing me. But honestly, I could strangle Peter. I’d better go call Pestilence hadn’t I, and get a price. Back shortly.”

Chapter 39

The atmosphere in the Board room was strained. Mary had privately spoken to Moses, and suggested he would not be needed. It was unlikely to be a very formal meeting.

Peter was first back in. “Bloody Saul,” he began. “He’s read the damn report hasn’t he? It’s quite clear how many men are involved. If he really wants to object like that, why can’t he do it discretely in my office?”

“Er, where in the report does it mention the hundred and sixty-four men Peter?” asked Mary sweetly.

“Haven’t you read it?”

“Of course I have. And I couldn’t find any mention of the size of the army,” she said more firmly. “Perhaps you could show me?”

Peter was checkmated. He had not mentioned it deliberately, not wanting to spoil the glory later when he could show them all he had conquered the Incas more quickly and economically than Saul had dealt with the Aztecs. But Mary always read everything sent to her meticulously. She knew it wasn’t there. There was no point in him trying to pretend it was.

“Well, I must have left it out,” he said petulantly. “Anyway, it doesn’t matter that much does it?”

“Well...” began Mary, wondering where to start. “I’m not really convinced you’ve sent a big enough force either. Although I wouldn’t perhaps have expressed it like Saul did,” she added with a smile.

“Exactly,” bristled Peter, before the penny dropped. His shoulders slumped slightly. “So you agree with Saul?” he said meekly.

“Well, yes Peter, actually I do. Never mind,” said Mary brightly, “I think his Pestilence idea’s a good one actually.”

“Well I’m not so sure...” began Peter.

“Let’s go with it shall we,” said Mary flatly. Peter looked hard at her for a moment, then shrugged his shoulders.

Saul reappeared. “I got hold of Pestilence, and she’s given me a quote,” he said gloomily.

“Go on, how much?” asked Mary, reading the signs.

“Two million,” said Saul quietly. Mary held her head in her hands.

Peter brightened briefly. “Well I really don’t think a company in our situation can possibly afford...” he blustered.

“I’ll get on to Croc Cayman and borrow the money,” said Mary, cutting through him. “Better decide which part of your body you fancy having him carve his pound of flesh from,” she added, attempting to brighten the mood.

Saul was eyeing Peter up as if selecting his preferred spot for Croc. Instead he launched a barb of his own. “Now, the next thing, we need, I think, is some direct support for Pizarro on the ground,” he began.

“Oh no,” said Peter. “I’m not...”

“That sounds a splendid idea Saul,” said Mary. “That should certainly help it all along.”

“Just what I thought darlings,” cried Saul, recovering his normal manner. “Now Peter, a Personal Manifestation from you should be just the thing.”

“I hate doing Manifestations,” puffed Peter. “What if it goes wrong and I get killed? It doesn’t exactly look like a walk in the park, this Pizarro expedition.”

“I’m sure we’ll pick your soul up and recycle you in the usual way,” replied Saul patronisingly.

“Why don’t you go yourself, since you’re so keen on the idea?” complained Peter sourly.

“Well, I’ve found the perfect job actually, and I think it’s just so you, Saint,” said Saul, his eyes twinkling.

“What?”

“The expedition needs a priest. I really don’t think a gay vicar’s going to cut it with this Pizarro chappie, is it? And you do the Vicar of Christ bit so well Peter darling. Born to the role you were.”

“My wife will go mental if I’m away on a Manifestation at the moment!” wailed Peter.

“That’s life in a blue suit for you,” said Saul coldly. “Did you manage to call Hearts-of-Gold up by the way?” he added pointedly. Peter subsided rapidly.

“Good, that’s settled then,” said Mary. “What’s the priest called, by the way?”

“Friar Vicente Valverde,” said Saul, checking his notes. “Oh yes,” he muttered to himself as he flicked over another page. “Now then Mary,” he began in a kinder tone. “Peter and I have been worrying about you, darling. We really do think you should take a break once you’ve sorted out the facility with Croc Cayman. After all, there’ll be a mountain of work for you do deal with integrating South America in with our accounts once we’ve conquered it. And we’ve found the perfect place, haven’t we Peter?” he finished meaningfully.

“We have indeed,” said Peter proudly. “Paradise Villa is at your disposal Mary,” he announced, taking his keys from his belt, removing a large golden one, and pushing it across the table towards Mary. “And your friend Apollo’s, of course.”

Mary was touched, and it showed. “Well, I really don’t know what to say. It’s really very kind of you Peter. And you Saul, for arranging it. I’d love a break with Apollo at Paradise. But are you sure it’s sensible for me to be away at the moment, just when we’re so busy?”

“Oh, I’m sure Peter and I will cope,” said Saul. “And don’t forget, we’ll both need a break once this Inca thing is over, I’m sure. Certainly Peter will after his manifestation. You’re doing us a favour going now, then you can cover for us when you get back, can’t you?”

“Well actually...” began Peter but Saul overrode him.

“Go on Mary, go and call Apollo, and then Croc Cayman. In that order!” said Saul, in a mock-bullying tone.

Mary considered continuing to protest. Professionally, she knew she probably ought not to leave the office at such an important time. But on the other hand, there was Apollo. The corners of her mouth turned up slightly as she pictured him. She really would like to spend some more time with him, and Peter’s villa was perfect. It would be neutral territory, just like she’d wanted. “OK Saul,” she said smiling. “I’m on my way. And thank you again, Peter, it’s really wonderful of you.” Peter looked smugly back as she strode out of the room.

Once she was gone, he turned on Saul. “Leaving aside the issue that you’re a complete bastard just for a moment,” he said, “is it really sensible to have Mary out of the office just when I’ve got to be away myself doing this Manifestation you’ve set me up for? I went along with it just now, but I’m really not too happy with two of us being out of the office at the same time at such a critical juncture.”

“I think you’re missing the point, Saint.”

“In what way am I missing the point?” asked Peter crossly.

“Well, it wasn’t just numbers of soldiers that was missing from your beautifully presented project plan.”

“Explain yourself Saul.”

“Look. How did we conquer Mexico and the Aztecs quite so easily?”

“Guided Cortes carefully and ran into a bit of luck with divisions amongst the Aztecs and prophecies and that sort of thing,” answered Peter.

“OK. Well, we’re going to guide Pizarro carefully. Or rather you are as Friar Vicente. That’s the first part ticked off. What about the divisions and prophecies and general bad luck on the other team?”

“I’ve already taken your point Saul,” said Peter, annoyed. He did not care for being patronised at any time, and especially not by Saul. “We’re going to pay for Pestilence to cause the chaos.”

“Good, that’s point two. What else did we do in Mexico?”

“I’m not an infant, Saul.”

“OK, then. The third thing we did was to distract their soulbrokers, didn’t we. With cousin Salima. Which,” added Saul acidly, “is why I didn’t raise the point while Mary was still here.”

“No need to rub it in more than you have done already. Don’t think I missed you mentioning my calling up Hearts-of-Gold.”

“So who is the Incas’ soulbroker?” persisted Saul.

“Well, Hearts-of-Gold, obviously. So presumably Mr Coatl or whatever his name is, is still being distracted.”

“Wrong. What do the Incas worship?”

“Well, just like the Aztecs I thought. The usual bronze-age pantheistic mixture,” answered Peter defensively.

“You really haven’t done your homework properly for this project Saint, darling. Most unlike you actually. They worship the sun.”

“Sun-worshippers?” The penny dropped. “Sun-worshippers! Ah, I see.”

“Exactly. Their soulbroker is none other than Apollo, chairman and managing director of Sunworshippers Worldwide Inc. Better known to you and me, Saint, as Mary’s latest squeeze.”

“And you’re going to get Mary to distract him? She isn’t going to like it when she finds out Saul.”

“She isn’t going to find out. You did take out the television and radio from your villa as I suggested, didn’t you?”

“Fortunately, yes. But I still think you should tell her,” said Peter firmly.

“And tear her loyalties between Apollo and this company? Do be sensible, Saint.”

“I hope you’ll take full responsibility for this Saul,” continued Peter severely.

“Yes, I’ll take full responsibility Saint,” said Saul heavily. “And now don’t you think you’d better go into training for the priesthood?”

“Oh, it’ll just be the usual,” said Peter moodily. “As you’ve already pointed out, I’ve done it enough times before. It won’t have changed much since last time. Anyway, there’s something much more urgent I need to do first.”

“What’s that?”

“Work out how to explain to my wife why I’m going to have to be away on business just now. She’s already hopping about the villa.”

“Didn’t you tell her?” asked Saul, astonished that Peter had managed to do something without referring it to the dreaded Mrs Fisher.

“No. I didn’t think I’d need to, we weren’t planning on visiting at the moment, I thought I wouldn’t be able to get away from the office.”

“So how did she find out?”

“I didn’t think it through properly, and arrived home with an armful of TV and radio one evening, didn’t I?” said Peter bitterly, and walked out.

Chapter 40

Saul pulled up outside the offices of Four Horsemen. It was a rather forbidding stone building, decorated with gargoyles and statues. He was just admiring a splendid looking beast with seven heads and ten horns when, to his alarm, the woman sitting on it dismounted and walked over to him.

He was about to climb hurriedly back into his car when he realised that the woman was none other than Pestilence.

“Good grief, Pestilence darling, is that really necessary?”

“Let’s say it impresses the clients. Welcome to Four Horsemen, Saul.”

A door opened silently for them and they walked in. Pestilence showed him into an office decorated with pictures of electron-microscope close-ups of various viruses and asked her assistant to fetch Saul a coffee.

“I’ll just go change if you don’t mind. Make yourself comfortable. I’ll be back in a moment.”

Saul studied her briefly on her return. The loose greek robes she had worn on the statue had been discarded and replaced by a tight-fitting black suit. She was tall, very white skinned, with long dark black hair, and bright red lipstick and nails. Saul had been about to take an apple from the fruit bowl on the table when he thought better of it. It reminded him of Livia’s grapes.

“Mirror, mirror on the wall,” he intoned. “Who is the fairest of them all?”

“You don’t miss anything do you Saul,” observed Pestilence.

“Is the poison queen image really necessary?”

“Like the statues, Saul, it impresses the clients. It convinces them I mean business. Especially if they happen to have seen me singing.”

“Fantastic gig on election night, darling.”

“Thank you Saul. Now, you wanted to talk about a job in South America I believe?”

Saul explained his requirement. Pestilence considered for a moment.

“I think the best option would be a smallpox plague,” she said. “There’ll be no natural immunity there, so you should get the kind of death-rate you’re looking for. And it’ll be easy to explain historically as well, so there’ll be no problem with the Regulators.”

“OFPOX you mean?”

“Yes. They’ve become a lot stricter recently about unhistorical cataclysms. We got fined quite heavily when War did the Genghis Khan job. The Regulator argued that it was unrealistic to have expected him to have covered the distance from Mongolia to Hungary without outside aid.”

“Smallpox it is then. You mentioned two million credos over the phone? How about a discount as I’m such an old friend.”

“Never mix business and pleasure Saul. Two million. Take it or leave it.”

Saul pretended to consider. He had no choice. And he knew that Pestilence knew he had no choice. Four Horsemen would certainly have been monitoring anything as significant as a continental conquest very closely indeed, hoping for a business opportunity. Under the circumstances, it wasn’t a bad price.

“I’d like to be sure the plague takes out the current emperor,” he said tentatively.

“We don’t guarantee specific victims with a Pestilence attack, Saul. I assumed you’d know that.”

Saul did know that. He had just been hoping to get a little extra for the money.

“So, what would it take to guarantee he’s a victim?”

“Named individuals are Death, not Pestilence. Shall I ask him to join us?” suggested Pestilence. Saul nodded, and went to the door and spoke briefly to her assistant.

Momentarily the door opened, and a youngish looking man joined them. He had dyed black hair, green fingernails, a stud through his lower lip and wore a fading black T-shirt that looked as if he had owned it for several years, and tight black jeans. Only the reaper earrings hinted at his occupation. Having met Death before, Saul was unfazed by his artschool-student appearance.

“Wotcha Saul,” said Death.

“How’s it going, Death?” replied Saul.

“Pretty good, mate, not bad at all. I understand you want a certain emperor geezer taken out?” Unlike Pestilence, Death had cultivated his cockney twang as part of his image. Presumably it must impress the clients too, thought Saul. Death was certainly never short of work.

Saul repeated his requirements.

“Name?” asked Death crisply.

Saul checked his notes. “Wayna Capac, otherwise known as the Great Inca, Lord of the Four Quarters.”

Death wrote it down carefully. “Bronze-age civilisation?” Saul nodded in reply.

“Pestilence doing a full plague?”

“Yes” agreed Saul.

“Which one?”

“Smallpox,” answered Pestilence.

“Do you want insurance against injury to third parties?”

“Don’t think so.”

“Is that yes or no, mate?”

“No then,” said Saul.

“Fire? Accidental damage?”

“No,” replied Saul, rather bemused by these options.

“Sounds pretty straightforward then mate. When do you need it doing?”

“As soon as possible.”

“Does that mean now, or do you want it done retrospective like? Retro’s extra,” added Death rather insolently.

“I think retrospective might be quite a good idea actually, Death darling,” said Saul.

“OK guv, give me 10 minutes and I’ll do you a quote,” said Death, rising lazily and heading for the door.

“He hasn’t changed then?” observed Saul when he had left.

“As you see,” replied Pestilence. “But his work’s fantastic, his clients love him, and he generates no end of repeat business.”

They chatted inconsequentially for a few minutes before the door reopened and Death lounged back in. He slid a piece of paper in front of Pestilence.

“Costings are all there, sweetheart. He’s your client,” he nodded towards Saul, “so I’ll leave you to fix the price with him. Pretty standard job I reckon mate,” he said to Saul. He made for the exit again. “Let me know when you’ve sorted it, and I’ll get straight on with it,” he said, putting his head round the door a second after he had left.

“Well?” asked Saul.

“Another million and a half,” replied Pestilence watching him carefully.

Saul smothered his horror. He’d expected it to be considerably cheaper. “Don’t you do a buy one get one free deal?” he asked brightly.

“Very amusing Saul.”

“Well, I’m sorry, but I think I might have to manage without the Death then,” said Saul, trying to sound definite.

Pestilence smiled. Saul realised he was being wound up. “Do you always do business like that?”

“No Saul, but you’re an old friend, as you say. We’ll do it for two and three quarters combined.”

“Two and a half?” tried Saul hopefully.

“Two and three quarters,” said Pestilence with finality.

Saul stretched out his hand to shake on the deal. On the one hand it was a good price. On the other he knew why he was getting the reduction. It had nothing to do with being an old friend. Pestilence, he suspected, was confident he’d have to come back for additional work shortly. She was probably right.

Chapter 41

Mary was feeling rather harassed when Saul appeared in her doorway. She had managed to reach an agreement with Cayman & Swiss for a loan to cover the cost of Pestilence, after a painful negotiation. Now she was trying to get a mountain of paperwork in some sort of fit state to leave before she went on holiday. She was less than pleased when Saul explained what he wanted.

“Another three quarters of a million credos? Oh god, Saul, do you have any idea what I went through to get Croc to agree to the two million you asked for?”

“I’m terribly sorry, darling,” said Saul, “but the more I thought about it, the more I still think this expedition needs every assistance it can get. A hundred and sixty-four men! Dear oh dear.”

“Couldn’t you have got it cheaper?”

“She gave me a huge discount as it is Mary, dear. I don’t think I could have got it for any less. Not with the retrospective option in it too.”

“Do we really need that?”

“Perhaps we should ask Peter. Now he’s going himself I think he feels he needs all the help we can give him.”

“He’s certainly spending a lot of time in the gents.”

“I’m not sure whether he’s more frightened by doing the Manifestation or by talking to his wife, actually.”

“OK, OK, there’s no need to ask Peter. With his bowels on the line, I know which way he’ll vote. I’d better get back on to Croc and see I can squeeze another drop or two out of him. He’ll think I’m an idiot though, fixing a loan and then coming back for more a couple of hours later. I’ll call you back in a bit.”

“Marvellous darling, I’ll be waiting. By the way, have you fixed the dates for your stay in Paradise yet?”

Mary gestured to the mounds of folders on her desk. “What does it look like? I might just get all this straight before I leave. Just don’t distract Croesus for the next couple of weeks.”

“Me?” said Saul with mock innocence as he left.

With a deep sigh, Mary picked up the phone again. “I’d like to speak to Charles Cayman please. Mary Magdalene from Peter Saul and Mary.”

She was put through immediately. “What find I here? Fair Mary’s counterfeit,” came Croc’s opening greeting.

“No, it really is me again Croc. I know we’ve only just fixed our deal, but it turns out we need a bit more.”

“Madam, you have bereft me of all words,” he answered.

“Three quarters of a million,” she said straight out.

“Thou stick’st a dagger in me. I shall never see my gold again. Three quarters of a million credos at a sitting?”

Mary laughed despite herself. “Come on Croc, three quarters of a million at the same terms. You know we’re good for that much more.”

“On what compulsion must I, tell me that?”

Mary steeled herself. Why not? It had worked on the Winter woman. Let’s go for it. “The quality of lending is not strained,” she began. “It droppeth as the gentle rain upon the soulbrokers beneath.”

She heard the agreement in Croc’s voice as he began to reply, and silently heaved a sigh of relief. Finally the deal was done. She called Saul back.

“I got it Saul,” she said.

“That’s absolutely brilliant, Mary,” he said. “You’ve really earned that holiday today.”

“Thanks Saul. But Croc made it very clear that there’s absolutely no more available. He was reluctant enough to give us this. Don’t spend any more money while I’m gone, is that clear?”

“How’s Apollo?” replied Saul.

“Fantastic Saul, but don’t change the subject. No more spending.”

“Got it darling. No more spending at any cost. Or is that any price?” said Saul mockingly putting down the phone.

“Nnnngggh!” squeaked Mary in exasperation through clenched teeth, before returning to her paperwork.

Chapter 42

Saul wanted to catch up with Peter before he went off to do his Manifestation. He headed briskly up the stairway to heaven. At the top, he decided to pop into the gents on his way and turned and headed swiftly through the doorway.

Inside was Peter, standing in front of the mirror, dressed in the full costume of a sixteenth century Friar, looking unhappy. Hearing the door, he tried to dive unseen back into a cubicle, but Saul was too quick for him.

“Where are Robin Hood and Little John?”

“Very funny Saul. It’s extremely uncomfortable, I can tell you. Not to mention draughty. And this one’s too tight.”

“Oh but it’s *so* you, Saint darling. Really it is,” said Saul, laying the camp on heavily.

“Did you want me?” asked Peter crossly.

“Yes I did, as a matter of fact,” said Saul, desperately trying to maintain a serious expression on his face. “It’s about your taxes. I got a message from Prince John saying you’re way behind and...” he was unable to carry on, and giggled.

Peter waited for him to finish.

“No really I did I want to talk to you,” said Saul, getting a grip on himself. “I’ll just use the facilities, and then meet you in your office when you’ve changed. I just want to make sure we’ve covered off everything before you have to leave.”

“OK,” said Peter huffily, and disappeared into a cubicle. There was the sound of a protracted struggle from within, like a heffalump trapped in an undersized honeypot.

Sniggering to himself, Saul went to wait in Peter's office. Some considerable while later, Peter reappeared, rather red in the face, but dressed in his normal office attire.

"I was just about to organise a rescue mission for you Saint."

"Here, or down on Earth?" demanded Peter, still cross.

"Do you think you'll need it down on Earth then?"

"Now I've studied the situation on the ground in detail during my reconnaissance, I'm sure I'll need it. Here look, I've filled in my recycling permits ready for you to sign." He pushed some papers over to Saul. They were the official forms exempting his soul from refining if he should accidentally be killed during his Manifestation. Another form allowed him to reoccupy his existing body without waiting for the normal quarantine period. Saul countersigned them, and handed them back expressionlessly.

"Isn't there something else we could do?" asked Peter rather plaintively.

"How about a civil war?"

"Anything if it helps. Don't you think it might be overdoing it though. We've already got Pestilence and Death on the job. Maybe we could ask Famine to come back and go for a full house?"

"Since you're going to have to live off the land while you're down there, Saint darling, I don't think Famine's quite what you want at the moment."

"OK, perhaps not. What did you have in mind for the war?"

"I'm not sure yet. I thought I might call Four Horsemen again, and see if they can suggest anything. Mind if I use your phone?"

"Go ahead," said Peter, folding his arms and sitting back to watch Saul make the call.

"Pestilence darling, how nice to talk to you again.... No no, no complaints, the smallpox and the death of Wayna whatsit are going fine as far as I know.

Look I was ringing about maybe getting War involved... Yes, yes, I know it's never a cheap option... Yes, yes, put him on."

Saul turned to Peter. "Shall I put him on speaker?" Peter nodded.

"I've got Peter Fisher, our Operations Director here with me," he said into the microphone.

"Hi Saul, good day to you Peter," came the transatlantic basso drawl of War. "Hi Peter," they heard Pestilence echo.

"How can I be of service then Saul?" said War.

"Well, I was wondering if we could maybe do a civil war as well as our other projects in South America," said Saul tentatively.

"Do you want that seamlessly integrated with our other activities, Saul?" asked Pestilence crisply.

"Well, I suppose so..." began Saul when Peter cut across him "Yes please."

"Retrospective as well?" persisted Pestilence.

"Yes to that too," answered Peter. "If not sooner," he added in an aside to Saul.

"One moment please," they heard the speaker click off.

After a minute of so, War's rumbling voice came back on the line. "We think the best bet for you guys would be a war of succession. How does that sound?"

"Go on," said Saul encouragingly.

"Has this guy Death's doing in for you - Wayna Capac is it?" said War with some difficulty over the unusual syllables "has he got any heirs you guys know of?"

Peter looked on his PC. "Can you hear me? Yes, two, it seems, Atahualpa and Huascar."

“You spell those for me please Peter,” came War’s drawl. “I ain’t so good with foreign names.”

Peter spelled them out.

“OK fine, I can do you a swell civil war of succession with that. Pestilence, you wanna tell them the bad news?”

“Three million, Saul,” said Pestilence.

Saul and Peter looked at each other.

“Three?” asked Peter in strangled tones.

“Three,” confirmed Pestilence.

“Sestertii or Credos?” tried Peter.

“Credos,” answered Pestilence flatly.

“Take it or leave it guys,” drawled War.

“Er, we’ll have to get back to you,” said Saul faintly. They finished the call.

“Mary’ll go ape,” said Peter.

“She won’t,” said Saul. “She won’t because we won’t get the money. She’s made that quite clear to me. There’s no point in even asking her.”

“Oh. Oh dear,” said Peter, thinking of his imminent Manifestation.

Saul brightened suddenly. “Don’t worry Saint. I think I might be able to fix it.” He rose abruptly. “I’ll be back,” he called over his shoulder hurrying out.

Peter looked puzzledly after him, then with a grunt turned back to a large suitcase hidden behind his desk. It was full of priests’ costumes. He replaced the one he’d draped over his chair, extracted another, and headed disconsolately back to the toilets.

Chapter 43

Saul hurried back to his office, hunted in an inside pocket for a carefully preserved card, and picked up the telephone. A minute or two later he was connected.

“Good afternoon, Mr Tarsus, how can I be of assistance?” asked a still, small voice of calm. It seemed to carry and fill the space, even over the telephone.

“Er, good afternoon Mrs Augustus,” replied Saul evenly. “You once promised me to return a favour if you could?”

“Indeed Mr Tarsus.” There was a pause, which Saul, uncharacteristically, struggled to fill.

Recovering, he explained what he wanted.

“Augustus is extremely grateful for your assistance with the soulminers strike, Mr Tarsus,” said Livia.

Saul waited.

“It will be as you request. Please remain by this number, and wait for a call. Goodbye Mr Tarsus.”

What it must be like to have that kind of power, he thought wonderingly, as he paced the room nervously, waiting for the phone to ring.

After a tense twenty minutes the phone rang. He answered and a voice said simply. “Mr Cayman’s compliments, Mr Tarsus, and 3 million credos, advanced for ten years at nought percent, interest will be in your account at 4pm. We will call your Finance Director to confirm the details shortly.”

Saul thought briefly, glanced at his watch, and said “could you make that call at 3:30pm exactly please?”

“Certainly Mr Tarsus. Fifteen thirty hours, call to Ms Magdalene on the usual number.”

After waiting ten minutes or so, Saul hurried out and over to Mary’s office, knocked, and went in without answering. She looked up with some irritation. “I’m rather busy Saul,” she said.

“Peter and I have been talking some more about the Conquest,” he said.

“And?”

“We’ve agreed that we need to do a civil war as well,” went on Saul rather breathlessly. “We’ve just been on to Four Horsemen, and they’ve quoted us a price of three million.”

“Saul, I’m very busy right now, I really can’t waste time at the moment. I’ve told you already. No more spending.”

The phone rang.

“Answer it,” said Saul.

Mary gave him a foul look, and took the call. After listening briefly, she paled and sat down. “Nought percent for ten years?... Three million.... Yes, yes, it’s absolutely fine, please go ahead with the transfer.”

Putting the phone back down, she turned to Saul who was looking exceedingly smug. “How on earth did you manage to fix that?” she asked. “Interest free? I can hardly believe it.”

“Friends in high places, darling, friends in high places. And now, I think, Mary, you can take your holiday with a clear conscience. I’ll leave you to your paperwork.”

“Thanks Saul,” she said simply.

“Enjoy yourself, darling,” said Saul, recovering his usual manner. “Have a great time with Apollo.”

Mary smiled broadly at him as he headed out to tell Peter the good news.

Chapter 44

Saul caught up with Peter in the reception lobby, waiting morosely for a taxi.

“Not changed?” he asked, eyeing up Peter’s usual suit.

“The Friar gear’s in here,” answered Peter, gesturing at a large, medieval looking trunk. “I thought I’d change in the etherjet terminal.”

“Did you find an outfit that fitted better?” asked Saul with a twinkle.

“Yes, but I still couldn’t face sitting in a taxi in full conquistador-priest’s rig. I’ll leave the suit with left-luggage.”

“I brought you a present to help you on your trip, actually,” said Saul, reaching into an inside pocket. He was suddenly struck by a thought, and stopped. “What’s the mobile reception like at your villa?” he asked.

Peter looked confused by the abrupt change of subject, but answered after a short pause. “Terrible. I’ve written to complain about it at least twice and...” He stopped suddenly, realising what Saul was getting at. “Dreadful, fortunately. The whole area’s dreadful. Too isolated for the mobile companies to bother providing decent coverage. There’s no chance of Mary getting called, if that’s what you mean.”

“Thank heavens for that. I only just thought of it. Does that mean Apollo’s mobile won’t work either?”

“No chance.”

“Excellent. Anyway, I found this for you.” He extracted a small silver crucifix attached to a silver chain.

Peter looked baffled. “Er thanks Saul, but I’ve already got a crucifix, obviously. I could hardly do the job without one.”

“Not like this one you haven’t,” said Saul and touched the ruby at the centre of the cross. Immediately the crucifix flipped open to reveal a small keyboard and display.

“It’s a Noetherian Ring,” said Saul in response to Peter’s eyebrows. “The very latest gadget. It took me ages to find one shaped like a crucifix mind you.”

“What does it do?”

“Well, I’m hardly the man to ask, but I understand it connects you from Earth, across the Ether, to the mobile networks here on the Great Planes.”

“So it’s a mobile that works from Earth?”

“Absolutely, darling. Mind you, I don’t think they work terribly well yet, the technology’s too new. They did a demo in the shop and the signal was barely audible. But it’s OK for text-messages as far as I could tell. Might help you keep in touch with us.”

“And my wife,” said Peter brightly. “Thanks Saul, it’s a fantastic idea.”

“You have to keep it on the chain, it acts like an aerial I believe.”

“Brilliant,” said Peter. He was unlocking his trunk to put it in when there was a heavy bumping noise from the stairwell.

“Hurry up,” said Saul, “I think that’s Mary coming.”

Sure enough, Mary appeared with two enormous suitcases.

“You leaving now too?” she said to Peter as she set down her luggage.

“Yep,” said Peter rather tightly. It was evident he was starting to become nervous.

Mary took pity on him. “I’m sure you’ll be great on this Manifestation, Saint,” she said. “You know you’re a natural at these priests. And I don’t think the conquest could succeed without you,” she added encouragingly.

“Absolutely,” echoed Saul. “We’re really depending on you Peter.” No harm in encouraging him, he thought.

“Well, let’s hope so,” said Peter. “Are we sharing a cab?”

“All my bags are packed, I’m ready to go, I’m standing here outside our door,” answered Mary.

“The taxi’s waiting, he’s blowing his horn,” observed Saul.

“So kiss me and smile for me, tell me that you’ll cover for me,” grinned Mary, giving Saul and Peter large hugs.

“I’m leaving on a jet plane, don’t know when I’ll be back again, oh guys I hate to go,” said Peter, picking up his trunk.

“I’m leaving on a jet plane,” echoed Mary, “and I’ll be back in a couple of weeks, alas.”

Saul helped her load her amazingly heavy bags into the taxi, and stood watching the taxi pull away. As it disappeared round the corner, his rounded shoulders slumped and he headed tiredly back to his office.

Smallpox plague, distraction of Apollo, death of Wayna Capac and civil war amongst the Incas, Peter there to manage it on the ground. He ticked them all off on his fingers. He felt like he’d thought of everything. It still couldn’t stop him feeling nervous. Perhaps I need a little distraction myself, he thought, and strode off to arrange an urgent financial review with Croesus as his last meeting of the day.

A last idea occurred to him suddenly, and he changed course and gave Beelzebub a call.

“Hi Bubba, how would I go about arranging a press blackout on our activities in South America?”

“No problem, Saul, leave it with me.”

Half an hour his phone rang. It was an official from the foreign office. “I am calling on behalf of Scheherezade, the Foreign Secretary to inform you that a press blackout on activities on Earth in South America has been put in place, Mr Tarsus.”

Well, how about that, thought Saul.

Chapter 45

Mary lay on the beach outside Peter's villa. Apollo was beckoning her to join him in the sea. She waved back lazily. It really did seem like Paradise, here alone with Apollo in such a beautiful spot. They'd been there just over a week, and it was going like a dream.

Mary felt warm, contented, secure and loved.

By contrast, Peter was freezing, exhausted, hungry and frightened. Being a systematic man he was just attempting to arrange these adjectives in order of priority in his mind when yet another soldier approached him to hear his confession and give him a final benediction. He seemed to have spent the whole night doing this, although he could understand why. Anyone believing what these men believed would want to have made their peace with their god under the current circumstances.

They had marched relentlessly across the high Andes, driven mercilessly by Francisco Pizarro, without doubt the hardest man Peter had ever come across. When a few of his soldiers had ventured a protest, Pizarro had replied "it is not appropriate to show fear, and still less to think of turning back," and gone on to point out that the moment they flinched, the enemy would be upon them.

Peter had been sick with the altitude, and his friar's robes had hardly kept out the cold of the mountain nights. Every step of their way had been haunted by soldiers of the new emperor, Atahualpa, who, it appeared, had recently won the civil war Saul had arranged.

Now they were camped high above the valley over the town of Cajamarca. It was still night, and all around they could see the campfires of Atahualpa's army. Pizarro had estimated their numbers at upwards of thirty thousand and Peter was not inclined to doubt him.

Another soldier approached him for blessing. “I am full of fear, Friar Vicente,” said the soldier. “We are so few, and so deep into the land, with no hope of rescue.” Peter did his best to say the right words and utter the appropriate benedictions.

He was expecting battle to be joined at first light when, to his surprise as the first light of dawn shone over the hills, he was informed that he would be joining an advance party, who would be meeting Atahualpa south of the town. He was just looking for a moment when he could find a quiet corner and send a text-message back to Saul, when the summons came.

The advance party was led by a captain named Hernando de Soto, with whom Peter had formed a reasonable relationship. He was at least easier to handle than Pizarro. He assembled a small group of cavalry, followed by Peter with a group on foot, and headed to meet Atahualpa and his retinue.

Seeing Atahualpa, de Soto spurred his horse right up to him. Atahualpa did not flinch, and Peter conceived a certain admiration for him. He certainly looks the part of a great emperor, he thought.

They were offered an unpleasant sour fermented drink, which Peter later discovered to be maize beer, in golden cups. De Soto poured his on to the floor, and the rest of the advance party followed his lead.

Atahualpa looked extremely cross for a moment, then recovered himself, and through his interpreter told them that they should wait in one of his buildings facing on to the ceremonial square in the centre of Cajamarca. There was little they could do but agree. Peter followed his group back to the main force of the Spaniards, and from there they headed into the town. They hid amongst the colonnades of the building indicated to them, looking over the great plaza, and waited.

Left alone in his hiding place at last, Peter flipped open his crucifix and hastily tapped out a message to Saul. “The indians’ spies are letting Atahualpa

know we are all inside this hall, full of fear, and none of us is showing our face in the plaza,” he typed. “It is true what they are saying, because I can see myself many of us who without noticing are pissing ourselves out of sheer terror.” Hearing a voice behind him he hastily clicked send and normalised the Noetherian Ring. He was very grateful for Saul’s gift, which had allowed him intermittently to keep in touch with his wife. This would undoubtedly save him a great deal of trouble later, he thought to himself.

Chapter 46

Saul was feeling tired. It was proving harder work than he had expected to manage Mary and Peter's departments as well as his own. He was just taking a short break over a coffee in his office when Peter's text arrived.

He read it and shuddered. He was rather regretting his last-minute idea of the press blackout, as it left these brief text messages from Peter as his only source of news on the ground. Occasional at best, staccato and disjointed, they left a good deal to the imagination. His imagination was now attempting to conjure what it must be like hiding amongst the colonnades by the plaza in this town Cajamarca. He glanced at a map, whilst trying to picture the frightened men and smell the stench of the horses, sweat, and – if Peter's message was to be believed – human urine. Ugh.

His musings were interrupted by the phone. Answering it, he found Beelzebub on the line.

"How're ya doing Saul?"

"Actually, Bubba, it's quite hard to tell."

"Well, Saul, that's partly why I'm calling. That press blackout we arranged...?"

"Yes," said Saul slowly.

"Well, Scheherezade only set it up as a favour to me, really Saul."

"Thanks for that. Bubba, I appreciate it."

"Not at all, Saul, not at all. I'm on your side after all. Anyway, the point is, she's having to cancel it."

"What!?"

"Yeah, well, it seems there was a load of pressure from certain interested parties applied to the freedom of information office, and they've caved in."

“What interested parties?”

“Give me a chance Saul,” said Beelzebub.

“Sorry, Bubba, do go on,” said Saul contritely.

“Scheherezade’s border patrol people have been listening to a lot of tales recently, from these smuggler guys they’ve picked up.”

Saul was struggling to see the connection when Beelzebub continued. “But now she’s been able to weave a web of these stories around a couple of our mutual acquaintances.”

“You mean...”

“Sure Saul, that’s exactly what I mean. The pressure on the freedom of information office was the last piece in the jigsaw-puzzle, so to speak. The final strand in the web.”

“So she’s arrested...?” Saul paused, waiting for confirmation.

“Jupiter and Saturn.”

“Mercury too?”

“Not that I’ve heard of. I know he comes to your meetings, Saul, but he’s only a messenger-boy really.”

“Any chance of reversing the press blackout decision?”

“None at all, Saul, none at all. You’ll just have to grin and bear it.”

They ended their call, and Saul contemplated for a moment. On the one hand, contacting Peter directly risked all kinds of repercussions at such a critical juncture. On the other hand, the risk of Apollo finding out what was happening behind his back was too serious to ignore.

Arriving at a decision, he reached for his phone, and tapped out a brief message. “Urgent you do it now: Saul. P.S. Good Luck.”

Chapter 47

Peter's cross buzzed and vibrated discretely as he looked out into the plaza. A huge procession of people was entering, many of them soldiers, elaborately dressed, but many ordinary townsfolk too, apparently there to watch the spectacle. Finally Atahualpa himself was carried in, seated on a golden throne on the top of his litter. Peter flicked open his cross and read Saul's message. At that moment he felt footsteps approaching him, and frantically clicked the crucifix shut again just as Pizarro himself tapped him on the shoulder.

"Friar Vicente," he began, looking strangely at the crucifix. Peter wondered what he had seen. "Do you have any message from the Lord?"

Steeling himself, and thinking of the message from Saul, Peter looked the old conquistador in the eye. "We must make our move now captain-general," he said. Pizarro nodded firmly, led him over to where his captains were gathered, and they began to discuss their plan.

Some short while later, Peter found himself leading a small party across the great plaza towards Atahualpa's throne. Pizarro was alongside him, an Indian interpreter behind him. A handful of men accompanied them. Peter found he could no longer feel his feet as they walked slowly, with as much dignity as they could muster, through the crowds.

Halting before the throne, Pizarro made a short speech, explaining that he was the ambassador of a great ruler who desired friendship with the Incas. After listening gravely, Atahualpa replied that he had no need of such a pact of friendship. Peter felt his moment had come.

Stepping forwards boldly, he held up his crucifix. He had a brief moment of panic as his finger accidentally brushed the central ruby, but thankfully it did not flip open. It was difficult to imagine what the consequences might have been if it had done.

“The King of Spain is a friend of God himself,” he cried, and waited for the interpreter to repeat his words. “You must renounce all other gods as a mockery of the truth and worship only our god,” he continued.

Atahualpa looked both surprised and disdainful. “I cannot change my belief in the immortal sun,” he replied. “What authority do you have for your beliefs?”

Peter reached for his bible. “It is all written in this book I am holding,” he replied, opening it at one of the gospels. He glanced at the page and remembered the rather fraught days he had spent many years earlier proof-reading Saul’s hasty drafts of this particular section. It was still (in his view) riddled with inconsistencies, but with the printer’s deadline approaching it had been all he could do to eliminate the worst of the marketing jargon. There was little doubt that the final version had been improved by the omission of phrases such as “new messiah, washes your sins whiter than ever” and “now with even more loaves.” He was brought urgently back to reality.

“Give me the book so that it can speak to me,” said Atahualpa. Peter handed over his bible, and it was passed up to the Inca.

Atahualpa looked carefully at the book, and then held it to his ear, page by page, listening. The crowd in the square had fallen silent. “Why does the book not say anything to me?” he asked, finally. And, without moving from his throne, he threw the bible on to the ground.

“The Indians are against the Christian faith!” cried Peter promptly, and beside him Pizarro made the agreed signal for an attack.

Chapter 48

The blow fell on the eleventh day of their holiday. Apollo had walked down to the nearest store, a matter of three quarters of a mile or more, while Mary was preparing lunch. She was just trimming steaks for the barbecue when Apollo appeared, walking very quickly and holding a newspaper. He had a face like thunder.

“What’s the matter my love, why the sad face?” began Mary, walking out to meet him on the patio.

“You used me Mary. You’ve just been using me all along.” He threw the newspaper on to the table in front of them. “Capture of Atahualpa,” read the largest headline.

Mary was so stunned she could not reply.

“All this while you’ve been pretending you loved me, when it was just a cynical ploy to distract me while your pathetic little firm took over my territories.”

Suddenly Mary saw it all. Oh you bastard Saul, she thought viciously. But that could wait. Right now she needed to convince Apollo.

“No Apollo love, please, really it wasn’t like that at all,” she finished weakly, as her tears began to flow.

“Don’t be ridiculous Mary. It’s perfectly plain. I never believed it possible that anyone could stoop so low as to whore themselves for their company, but apparently I was mistaken,” said Apollo brutally.

“No Apollo no, I wasn’t, I love you, it was Saul, he set me up. I love you,” she wailed.

“You really think I’m going to believe that. I thought you would have a higher opinion of my intelligence by now, Mary.”

“It was that bastard Saul. I love you,” she repeated desperately.

“I’m going to pack, and I will be leaving shortly. I suggest you stay outside here and read that newspaper while I do it.” He strode off into the house.

Mary began to run after him, but he shrugged her off, and she returned weeping to the newspaper.

By our special correspondent, Waman Poma’ it began, and went on to describe the events in which Peter had participated the day before. It continued *‘They killed the Indians like ants. At the sound of the explosions and the jingle of the bells on the horses’ harness, the shock of arms and the whole amazing novelty of their attackers’ appearance, the Indians were terror stricken. The pressure of their numbers caused the walls of the square to crumble and fall. Desperate to escape from being trampled under the hooves of the horses, in their headlong flight so many were crushed to death. So many Indians were killed it was impracticable to count them.’* Mary paused to wipe her eyes, before scanning down to the final paragraph. *‘Atahualpa Inca was pulled down from his throne without injury and became the prisoner of Pizarro. He was put in chains and placed under guard by the Spanish soldiers in a room close to Francisco Pizarro’s lodgings. Deprived of his throne, and all his majesty, he was left sadly and disconsolately sitting on the ground in his prison...’*

Apollo reappeared as she finished reading this account. He was carrying a small overnight bag into which it appeared he must have rapidly thrown a few things. Mary rushed to him, but he turned coldly and began to walk away.

“Goodbye Mary,” he said quietly as he strode through the gate.

Mary fled into the house, sobbing, overturning the furniture and throwing crockery to the floor.

Chapter 49

Mary had refused to return to the office. She was too distressed, was all she would say. In the end, in desperation, Peter spoke to Virginia Carpenter, and she in turn arranged to visit Mary at her flat

“Saul. I hate him,” said Mary. There were large shadows under her eyes, and she seemed to have lost weight.

“Yes, Mary, dear,” said Mrs Carpenter sympathetically, “but really you must see that...”

“He’s a devious, manipulative bastard and he’s ruined my life,” cut in Mary.

“Well since I knew his parents, dear, then I can’t agree with all of what you say. But certainly I could share some of the opinions you express,” said Mrs Carpenter primly from the sofa.

Mary smiled faintly.

“Which is why it’s so important for you to go back to work, you see,” continued Mrs Carpenter, sensing her opportunity. “Peter’s a splendid fellow of course, he did a wonderful job on the ground in Peru, but I really think he needs some support dealing with a person like Saul. Peter’s too nice, too straightforward.”

“Meaning I’m not?” said Mary petulantly.

“Well, you didn’t sound it just now did you dear?”

Mary didn’t reply.

“The company needs you, Mary. The shareholders need you, certainly Joseph and I do.”

“But I can’t...”

“Of course you can, dear. Now, why don’t you come back for the All Investors Meeting? You are a shareholder as well aren’t you? And I really don’t trust the finances when that deputy of yours, what’s his name...”

“Croesus.”

“Yes him. Anyway, when he prepares the figures. He’s too close to Saul for my liking, much too close.”

“Croesus is alright Mrs C, really he is.” There was a pause. “Alright, I’ll come to the meeting,” said Mary heavily.

“Thank you Mary,” said Mrs Carpenter, straightening a fold in her skirt.

“Was there anything else?” asked Mary, the effort of the politeness showing.

“Just some news you might not have heard, dear. I don’t suppose you knew that Jupiter and Saturn were arrested?”

“I’m not altogether surprised.”

“Really? I wonder that you didn’t mention it. However,” resumed Mrs Carpenter, “they have been. Pantheon has had to appoint an Official Receiver. I understand that Charles Cayman is carrying out that particular duty.”

“What happened to Mercury?”

“That young fool? He seems to have been cleared of any involvement and to be working as Mr Cayman’s assistant,” answered Mrs Carpenter. “You will definitely come to the meeting won’t you?” she asked again carefully.

Mary sighed. “Yes Mrs C, I’ll come. Would you like some more tea?”

“No thank you dearie, I must be off. Joseph will have run out of change for the meter by now. Thank you for the tea. No no, I’ll show myself out.”

Chapter 50

Arriving slightly late for the All Investors Meeting, Mr and Mrs Carpenter found Mary hovering outside the reception. “Come on dear,” said Mrs Carpenter firmly, and taking Mary’s arm, steered her into the Boardroom.

There was a fractional silence, and then Beelzebub said simply “Howdee Mary, good to see ya back, come and sit down by me,” and, as Mary allowed herself to be guided to a chair there was a general chorus of greetings.

Saul sat at the head of the table, chairing the meeting. Mary refused to look at him. Croesus was sitting nervously next to Saul. Beside him sat Mercury, in a curious new pair of green sandals, sitting slightly back from Croc Cayman who today had chosen a dark olive suit. He smiled toothily at Mary.

Saul cleared his throat. “Er, welcome everybody to the All Investors Meeting, brought forward from its originally scheduled date of 1550AD,” he began. “First of all, I’d like to welcome Mr Cayman, in his capacity as Official Receiver for the Pantheon Fund Manager’s Alliance.”

Croc Cayman inclined his head in acknowledgement. “Jupiter’s deeds upon my head, I crave the law,” he declaimed. Seen close up under the bright lighting of the boardroom, his skin looked scaly and wrinkled.

“Sure thing Croc,” said Beelzebub, laughing.

“It’s Mr Cayman’s job to maximise the value of Pantheon for its creditors,” put in Mercury rather obsequiously. “We’re looking for a good short-term dividend from the investment in Peter Saul and Mary and then we’ll be trying to find buyers for the shares.”

“Sounds like a good moment to talk about the finances then,” smiled Saul. “Er, as Mary’s been off sick recently, I’ve asked Croesus here to present this point.”

Mary glowered briefly at him before looking away again. She opened her folder dutifully as Croesus began to run through the finances.

“...So in conclusion, the profitability has now been restored to levels in excess of those enjoyed prior to the Black Death and medium term prospects are excellent as the population recovers in our newly conquered sectors,” summarised Croesus. “We anticipate repaying our short-term loans from Cayman and Swiss comfortably ahead of schedule.” He glanced over at Croc Cayman.

“Give me my principal,” observed Croc.

“And let you go?” enquired Beelzebub with raised eyebrows.

“Well, as Mr Cayman implies, the majority was offered to us free of interest, and we will of course be paying that off immediately,” replied Croesus.

“Is that permitted?” asked Mrs Carpenter suspiciously. “Mary?” she said sharply.

“Oh yes, no problem,” muttered Mary listlessly, not looking up from her papers.

“And finally, we are pleased to announce that a ‘conquest’ special dividend will be paid immediately to all shareholders,” concluded Croesus.

There were smiles around the table. Peter looked thoughtful before coming to himself and saying “That was excellent Croesus, thank you.”

“I think that’s your point done, Croesus,” said Saul approvingly. “I suggest you go now and attend to that other matter,” he added rather mysteriously. Croesus nodded acknowledgment and left the meeting.

“And now, Peter, let’s hear all about Peru,” said Mrs Carpenter brightly, after glancing at her agenda.

Saul hastened to regain control. “Next item on the agenda, report on conquest of Latin America, beginning with an account of the pilot project in Mexico,” he ended pointedly. He gave a brief account of Cortes’ campaign.

“Mighty fine work, Saul, mighty fine,” said Beelzebub, banging the table with his fist.

“Yes, very good Saul,” said Mrs Carpenter thinly. “Now, Peter, Peru.”

Peter, who had fidgeted impatiently through Saul’s account, looked round expansively and plunged into an enthusiastic description of his part in events. He was forced to acknowledge the beneficial effects of the activities of Four Horsemen.

Mrs Carpenter was flicking through her copy of the accounts. “Couldn’t you have got a better discount on all this work they did for you, Saul?” she asked sharply.

“It’s quite difficult to negotiate with your balls in the vice, Mrs C,” answered Saul sarcastically.

“Really Saul. I do dislike all these underhand methods, plagues and assassinations. Peter’s method is so much more honourable don’t you think?”

Peter beamed. “Perhaps we could move on to the next item,” said Saul, his face falling slightly as he saw what it was. “Progress on the Schism. Er, your point again Peter I think.”

“Thank you Saul,” said Peter a shade patronisingly. “Well, as you will have read, our man Luther nailed up his ninety-five theses, and since then...”

“...all hell’s been let loose,” cut in Saul. “We’ve had a Diet of Worms, and...”

“Really Saul. Must you continue to be so disgusting,” put in Mrs Carpenter. “Do go on Peter.”

Saul gave him no chance. “And now they’re frantically reforming and counter-reforming and heaven only knows where it will all end.”

“I’m sure Peter has it under control, don’t you Peter?”

“Oh absolutely, Mrs C, absolutely.” Peter tried to look confident. Beelzebub looked carefully at him but said nothing.

“Any more points?” asked Saul.

“Only to remind you that we need buyers for the Pantheon stake in the company,” said Mercury. “If anybody could suggest anyone?”

“Moses, take an action to the minutes for everyone to speak to their contacts,” said Saul. “Any more. No?”

“Hey Saul, aren’t you forgetting something?” chuckled Beelzebub, waving his cigar.

“What is it Bubba?”

“This meeting is supposed to vote on winding up the company. Remember?”

“All those in favour of winding up?” asked Saul, looking round the table cheerfully. There were no votes. “Against?” All hands were raised. “Well, that’s carried then. Meeting concluded.”

Mary got up miserably, and headed briskly back to her own office without speaking.

After a few minutes chatting with Beelzebub and Croc Cayman, Saul wandered around the table and spoke quietly to Mrs Carpenter. She was talking busily to her husband. “A special dividend. Marvellous isn’t it Joseph. That place on the coast we’ve always wanted, perhaps I could get back on to the agents and...”

“Mrs C,” interrupted Saul softly. “I wonder if you could spare me a moment.”

Mrs Carpenter eyed him with disfavour. “What is it Saul?”

“If you would just come with me to Mary’s office please, Mrs C,” said Saul insistently.

It was clear that she was about to argue, but the mention of Mary evidently changed her mind. “I suppose so, Saul,” she said. “Come on then, let’s go if we’re going.”

They walked through the offices into Mary’s department. Saul stopped briefly by Croesus desk and asked a sotto voce question. He received a nod in reply. Boldly taking Mrs Carpenter by the elbow, he steered her to Mary’s door, knocked and walked in without waiting for a reply.

Mary was sitting at her desk behind an enormous bouquet of red roses. There were tears on her face again, but it was clear that they were joy not misery.

“Mary dear...” began Mrs Carpenter.

“You’re still a devious, manipulative bastard Saul,” said Mary looking him in the eye. “But thank you very, very much.”

She passed the card from the roses over to Mrs Carpenter. “Mary, please forgive me. I should have listened. Please please forgive me. I love you so much. Apollo,” it read. “P.S. call me, please call me.”

“I called him. He’s coming right over this evening,” said Mary happily. “He told me you’d called him and explained it was all your fault,” she turned to Saul.

“Well, yes, it’s true. I promised I’d take full responsibility for it, so I did,” answered Saul. “We talked for a bit, and he agreed that all was fair in business and war.”

“But not in love?”

“You tell me Mary,” grinned Saul. “I think actually he was relieved to be able to focus his attention fully on his holiday-homes business. Anyway, he was

much more concerned about you than his finances, and he asked me if I had any suggestions, and, well, there you are darling,” he finished, gesturing at the roses.

“Thanks Saul,” said Mary, getting up and hugging him.

“I’ll show you out, shall I, Mrs C?” said Saul.

After they had left, Peter, who had apparently been hanging around outside waiting for them to finish, came in, looking a little sheepish.

“Hi Mary, how’s things?” he asked, rather superfluously.

“Did you know?” she asked.

“About this. Well yes, Saul told me before the meeting actually.”

“No Peter. I meant about the villa.”

Peter hung his head guiltily.

“You’re a devious manipulative bastard too then,” she smiled.

“How did you know?”

“I could hardly imagine you having a place with no TV or phone in it.”

“I suppose not. I’m glad to see you’re so happy about it.”

“I’m in a forgiving mood just now,” smiled Mary again.

“Er, good. Then I wonder if you could do me a small favour?”

“Go on, Saint.”

“This special dividend we’re all getting. Do you think you could pay it into a different bank account from usual?”

“Hiding money from your wife are we?”

“Here’s the account details,” answered Peter quickly. “Would that be OK?”

“No problem Peter, give these details to Midas and I’ll get him to arrange it.”

Chapter 51

Back in his own office, Peter closed the door carefully, sat down at his PC and located a particular file. He studied it closely for a few moments, and then with slightly trembling fingers, picked up the phone and dialled.

“Hearts-of-Gold Ltd, how may I help you?” answered a familiar voice.

“I was worried you would have gone out of business.”

“We close down next week. Is that Mr Fisher?”

“It is,” he replied, his heart racing.

“I believe you would like to place an order.”

