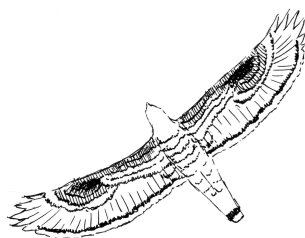


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GM



CHAPTER ONE

A Road Not Travelled

ZINN WAS a closed city. No Western traveller ever set foot inside it, and neither did I. But I stared wide-eyed into the heart of its darkness.

My first sight of it was from a great distance. I was travelling with a guide in a mountainous region. We were trekking along a narrow path with a sheer drop on one side. A misty blue-green valley spread below us and beyond that another range of mountains, lit randomly by shafts of sunlight breaking through the clouds. As I paused a moment to take in the view, a city appeared and disappeared on a mountain peak so swiftly I thought I must have imagined it, and indeed, with its shining towers and spires it seemed to belong more to the world of fantasy than reality. I questioned my guide about it. He told me it was the city of Zinn, and he had never been there. Though talkative as a rule he was unable or unwilling to tell me more.

At the next village we came to I made more enquiries but could discover little further. Outsiders were not welcome, and there were buzzards of enormous size that soared above the city and, it was rumoured, could swoop down and carry off a fully grown man. I was advised to forget about the city of Zinn, and there were no guides prepared to take me. Nothing could have aroused my curiosity more, and as an intrepid British traveller I felt honour bound to go there. So I set out alone.

The people of the valleys had known peace for centuries. They

were wise, gentle, innocent folk who cultivated small terraced fields and grazed their herds on the wide upland plains. They had come so to depend on one another for their livelihood they had forgotten how to hate and fight, and how to push and scheme for their own advantage. I had never known such hospitality. Everywhere I was welcomed and fêted and feasted; beautiful and modest young maidens shyly approached and eagerly listened to my stories of other worlds (though understanding little of what I said in a tongue which seemed uncouth beside their own). My hosts hinted that I might find one who especially pleased me, and after due courtship and ceremony make my home among them. Only when I mentioned the City of Zinn did a rare cloud trouble their pleasant and candid features.

Indeed I was tempted. At village after village where I stayed I was finding it more difficult to leave. Lovely eyes clung longingly to me as I shouldered my pack and set out again along the dusty road, always in the direction where I'd seen, through a gap in the mist and cloud, the distant prospect of a dream-like city.

The onset of winter brought my journey to a temporary halt. Snow fell for weeks, then howling winds swept across it, sculpting a pure white landscape of strange and terrible beauty, the silence broken by the thunder of distant avalanches. Roads became impassable and now I was forced to sojourn with a savage and treacherous tribe of nomads, becoming little more than a slave to them in return for a half gnawed bone and lick of sour goat's milk. I said nothing to them of my plans, nor did they enquire or seek any converse with me; and I lived and slept among the dogs that showed me more kindness. There were those among them who could have ripped me open in anger or jest, or for the amusement of their womenfolk.

Come spring and thaw I took the first opportunity to slip away, while the men were out scavenging and the women fully engaged in one of their many screaming cat fights. I followed a narrow road winding up a steep sided valley which became a rocky crevasse - nothing but bare rock and blue sky for miles. Finally I reached sheltered upland pastures, the fields bright with wild-

flowers of every hue, the air filled with the hum of bees and bird-song and the rushing of innumerable streams, shaded here and there by groves of alder and ilex trees. It was across this Arcadian landscape, surrounded by tender spring foliage, that I once again set eyes on the mystical city of Zinn. It ascended the slopes of the mountain on which it was built in a series of grand terraces, each buttressed by massive battlements topped with galleries and pavilions projecting out into space. There were many towers, steeples and turrets outreaching each other in splendour and elevation as they rose ever upwards, and all surpassed by a palatial building on the summit, itself surmounted by a single sky-piercing gilded spire. I could just see what I took to be cable cars moving up and down on rails that flashed in the sunlight. Lower down there were mazes of narrow streets, crooked and huddled together.

But before I could ponder any of this my attention was drawn to another phenomenon, which would indeed have been strange if I had not been prepared for it. There were dark specks whirling around and above the towers which I took to be the famous buzzards of Zinn. Though small at this distance, on the scale implied by the buildings they must have been more the size of eagles, or even larger. My eyes were riveted by them as I approached and I often stumbled, through not heeding the rutted, stony track that lead in the direction of the city. It was wonderful to see these great birds with beautiful outspread wings, circling round the dreamy towers of a fantasy city in great sweeps and curves of flight, on tenuous vanes that glittered in the sweet soft sunlight. As I approached, the realisation dawned on me that they were not birds at all but bird-like artefacts: kites indeed, flown presumably by people in the towers on cords too fine to be visible from a distance. At one point there was a sudden flash of light from one of the towers.

I came to a standstill and rummaged through my pack to find my binoculars. When I retrieved them and focussed on one of the wheeling objects even the kite theory had to be abandoned. It was indeed some kind of construction, but I could see a tiny figure poised precariously on a platform in the slender fuselage.

I moved on swiftly now, concentrating on the road and containing my interest until I could get a closer and clearer view. At last the amber walls of the city rose from the verdant uplands before me. The shadows of great wings swept across my path and I could hear creaking and fluttering as the structures strained against the wind. Looking up, my eyes were too dazzled at first by the intense light to see anything clearly, but at last I fixed on one as it passed in front of the city's massive ramparts. In proportion to the size of the machine the aeronaut working the tiller was still very small and slight. It must have been a child, a thin child at that.

I had now arrived at my destination and discovered the real nature of the buzzards of Zinn. But that discovery, like all discoveries, led only to the further mysteries. How was it done? And why? And then there was the city itself, with all its strangeness and secrets to explore. The road I trod was little more than a farm track, which turned to the right as it approached the city's walled perimeter, along the entire visible length of which in either direction I could see no opening or entrance of any kind. I continued along this lane as it seemed to follow the curvature of the walls, believing eventually I must find a way in. I came to a deep wooded valley and crossed a swift flowing brook, or small river, by a quaint little bridge. Out in the open again I caught sight of a curious object through a gap in the hedge.

In the middle of a field there was a structure of some kind: a rickety, flimsy thing put together with various bits and pieces, too organised to be a bonfire but too dishevelled to be any kind of building. After a moment's scrutiny I realised it must be one of the buzzards that had landed, and perhaps been abandoned. But then from behind it the pilot emerged, a child indeed, skinny, ragged, no more than a farmer's boy, or a street urchin. He appeared to be making some adjustments or repairs to the structure, and intent on his work had not noticed me. I advanced cautiously towards him through the gap. As soon as he saw me he jumped back, startled, frightened, as if uncertain whether to take to his heels or attempt to defend himself with the small tool he clung to in one hand. I stopped immediately and held up my

hands, the palms facing out and fingers spread, my eyes and features as open and unthreatening as I could make them. It seemed to work, and his panic gave way to a cautious acceptance of my presence. He went back to his task, still glancing warily in my direction. I sat down on the grass and busied myself with undoing my backpack and sorting through for some of the little parcels of food I'd salvaged to bring with me.

After a long hike, food eaten in the open air always tastes delicious, and I was visibly relishing a meaty bone, washed down with clear spring water. I picked out another and held it up in offering to the diminutive aviator who had been tapping and setting the trim of his machine with the skill of a piano tuner, the ruffled heap reassuming a bird like form as I watched. He approached quite nonchalantly now, took the proffered meaty bone and immediately began to gnaw at it. I beckoned him to join me and he sat down, crossed legged, still chomping at the bone. I just sat and smiled at him, enjoying his enjoyment. He had big brown eyes and a small head shaped like a hazelnut, cupped with dark shiny thatch. Finally he was satisfied and was licking his lips and picking his teeth with his nail. I handed him the bottle of water and he took a swig. Then I pointed to myself and told him my name: "Jason." He nodded and told me his - it sounded like 'Ark'. I repeated it and smiled and he smiled back. We were friends.

I tried to explain that I was a traveller from a far distant land, finding some of the words I had learnt on my journey to Zinn were intelligible to him. I showed him a world map in my atlas, indicating an estimated position of Zinn, then tracing back my route by land and sea to the British Isles. He was fascinated. I pointed to a tiny flake of green which was the Western Isle where I lived. When I mentioned Scotland his ears pricked up and his eyes opened even wider to take up a considerable proportion of his face. "Scottie!" - he pronounced the syllables quite precisely.

At this point a shadow passed over us and I looked up to see a buzzard about twenty feet above our heads. It wheeled round, showing the full spread of its wings, disappeared behind some trees and then zoomed towards us low and straight. Its legs dropped

and talons splayed to form skids and with wings arched like a swan's and tail dipped and fanned to act as air brakes it careered to a halt in front of us.

The skinny kid who jumped out was the same as Ark in build and complexion, and wore the same rough serge clothing of no particular colour. But this one was a girl and had a mop of blond hair. She raised her hand in a comradely salute to Ark as she approached, and seemed quite unconcerned about the presence of a stranger. I took this acceptance to flow from my easy relationship with Ark but I soon realised there was another reason.

She clearly had news of an urgent and serious nature to impart to him, and they jabbered excitedly to each other for some minutes. The one word I recognised was 'harr', harshly pronounced, like 'kharr', which meant fire. Only during an anxious pause in the conversation did Ark's attention briefly return to me. He pronounced my name for her benefit and hers for mine. 'Sulibe' is about as close as I can get to it. He pointed to the map and explained where I came from. Again the name 'Scottie' passed between them, with a measure of interest and mild surprise.

As we talked, more shadows swept over us and suddenly the air was full of wheeling buzzards, larger and smaller, some with one, some with two pilots, their hair flying and their cries shrill above the swishing and swooshing and the rattling flutter of outstretched wings. It was amazing how they avoided collisions as one by one they swung behind the trees and zoomed in to land, hauling up with folded wings in closely spaced rows. Other children appeared as if from nowhere, pulling trolleys on which they loaded the craft and rolling them off towards the wood on the other side of the field. They worked with swift efficiency, Ark and Sulibe joining them; so I got up too and was soon handed the end of a rope to tug with the rest.

Then there was a shout and everyone stopped and looked up. A single craft was coming in, losing height rapidly, its wings on fire and smoke trailing behind. We could only stare helplessly, and we could see the pilot and sense his desperation as he struggled to control his rapidly disintegrating machine. Miraculously he

managed to turn on to the landing path and hold his height a few feet above the ground before a fiery wing dipped and the whole contraption flopped down and crashed into a hedge in a blaze of sparks. Children were already running up with buckets of water from the river, not for the bird which was clearly a goner, but for the smoke blacked imp who stumbled from it, his shirt on fire. I quickly went over to the group surrounding him, thinking my first-aid kit would be needed. But he'd already been doused and his charred clothes exchanged for a wet towel, and the others were helping him to his feet. He looked cheerful enough and it appeared had come to no serious harm. Everyone seemed relieved but the sense of urgency remained. When I looked round all the other buzzard planes and all the other children had disappeared into the wood, and we swiftly followed them.

One by one the kids were wriggling into a hole scarcely bigger than a badger's set. They beckoned me to follow and I felt two little hands pushing me from behind. Nonplussed I shook my head but their quiet urgency was compelling. Small hands divested me of my backpack which swiftly vanished into the earth and then I found myself sinking and my feet going the same way. Pulled from below with my arms held back behind I was paralysed by the dread of premature burial and I could only shut my eyes tight and try to convince myself I was dreaming and must wake at any moment. I felt my rib cage being crushed and then soil in my face stifling my breath and my terror exploded into flailing limbs as I fought to regain consciousness. My Dervish-like frenzy continued for at least half a minute before it occurred to me that I was encountering no resistance, so I halted, mid fling, and opened my eyes. I found myself in a dimly lit cavern full of goblins, staring at me, almost invisible except for their glowing eyes and on each little face an enormous grin.

Released from my panic attack I struggled to regain my dignity, attempted a casual smile and began brushing loose soil from my clothes. Other hands were swiftly assisting me in areas I couldn't reach. Light came from a row of fat yellow candles on a rough wooden table, with matching benches on either side. The hole I'd

come through had disappeared but there were other smaller apertures in the wall through which some were peeping out; these admitted shafts of light whenever the watchers turned to report to the others. Suddenly there was a note of alarm, the candles were all extinguished and the whole assembly remained still and silent.

As the silence deepened my ears strained to catch any faint sounds that filtered through from outside. I could just hear the soft hush of the brook, and then there were voices, getting louder, heavy adult male voices, and the sound of an engine. The voices seemed all the harsher in contrast to the bird-like pitter-patter of the children's talk that my ears had grown accustomed to. Curiosity drew me to the row of look-out holes, at my eye level. Ark was peering through one, standing on a stool. He jumped down to let me look with a cautionary finger to his lips. I put my eye to the disc of daylight, a grass fringed spy hole no bigger than a tennis ball.

There were a dozen or so men in the field, examining the charred wreckage of the buzzard, scanning the ground and poking about in the hedges. They were burly men, stoutly clad in black woollens, with shiny brown leather boots, jerkins fringed with chain mail and close fitting steel helmets. Knives in holsters and thick truncheons hung from leather belts studded with steel roundels, and some carried poles with wide metal hooks tapered to needle sharpness. Several shouldered hefty guns like ancient fowling pieces. A Breughelesque militia indeed, but the mediaeval connotations were checked by the presence of a motor vehicle, a box-like van that could have served as an ambulance on the battlefields of World War One, its motor quietly chuntering. But this was no errand of mercy. They were looking for the buzzard kids, and if they were school attendance officers they certainly regarded truancy in a more serious light than their Western counterparts.

Rather incongruously one soldier was dressed in the smart tight fitting uniform and peaked hat of a modern day officer, with a short baton under his arm, clearly from his manner and bearing in charge of the operation. There were also two civilians among

them who from the cut and colour of their clothes and robustly porcine proportions fitted the universal stereotype of prosperous farmers. And there were dogs.

I watched with some apprehension. The search seemed to concentrate on the landing strip and the crash site. One trooper picked up the pilot's discarded shirt and after a cursory inspection tossed it into the smouldering ruins where it burst into flame. But the dogs were ranging more widely around the perimeters of the field, and even as I observed this I heard a rustling of foliage and panting breath. Then my spy hole was stopped by a long canine snout being thrust into it, and I reeled back as a blast of dog breath hit my nostrils. The beast set up a ferocious barking which almost immediately was joined by others, and the chorus swelled as the pack closed in. I looked round me, for guidance or assistance, but there was no one visible in the feeble light from the spy holes which flickered as the baying hounds pawed and snuffled at them. All had gone, except for Ark who stood next to me. It was now very dark, but he took my hand and led me away.

After several paces another opening appeared, faintly outlined by a dim light beyond it. Thankfully it was a good deal larger than the entrance to this underworld and I could pass through it on all fours, following Ark who only had to duck his head. As soon as we were through, two or three others rolled a round stone across the gap and eased it into place. It was a tight fit but they still pressed loose soil in around the edges. Then a black drape, hanging from a rail above, was drawn over. It all seemed well rehearsed and I felt a little easier now, in the care of hosts who clearly took my safety into consideration along with their own. We moved off together down a descending passageway, with earthen walls propped like a mine shaft, lit by occasional candles set in wall-mounted brackets.

We must have gone down a hundred feet or more below the surface and travelled three times that distance before the passage opened out into an enormous cavern. Judging by the structure of the rocks that enclosed it, it was a natural feature rather than another prodigious feat of juvenile engineering, though the floor had been levelled off with hard packed clay. Most of it was

occupied by buzzard craft, I would say fifty at least, and there were areas where maintenance and construction work were taking place. Other children were unloading packs from the bellies of the buzzards and taking them to long tables where they were being sorted. All went about their tasks in the same orderly way, quite unconcerned about what might be happening above ground.

My guide stood beside me, with a smile that suggested he was enjoying my amazement as I took everything in. Then he plucked my sleeve in a manner indicating there was more to be seen and done and I dutifully followed him back into the tunnel. We took one of several smaller side passages that branched off this main artery. I had to bend low in it and occasionally take to my knees; it was hard hot work keeping up with the elfin figure dancing ahead of me. The gradient got steeper until we came to steps made of logs set in the earth and filled back, and then we reached a spiral staircase rising vertically in a solid wooden tube. There was a disk of daylight above us, a welcome sight indeed, reviving my strength and spirits, and I grappled my way upwards with a will.

Emerging from an opening just wide enough to squeeze through I found myself in the crown of a great ash tree, embowered all around with leafy boughs. Ark had taken up a position towards the outer edge, standing confidently on a narrow branch and steadying himself with a light grip on a higher branch, and perched nearby another lad, half hidden by leaves and the dapple of leaf shadows. There was a quick exchange of greetings followed by a gesture to remain silent, and Ark turned to gaze intently in the same direction as his fellow watcher. I crept carefully along one of the larger limbs as far as I safely could and then lay flat on it. By dint of parting a spray or two I was able to gain an outlook beyond the world of foliage, to see what was going on of such interest.

My view travelled over the tops of trees to the field where the buzzards had landed. The dogs had been pulled off and the foot patrol was now assembled along the edge of the wood, on a line corresponding to the underground chamber with the spy holes.

The van had been backed up there as well, and the sound of the engine being revved carried towards us. The next thing I noticed, to my horror, was a pipe leading from the van's exhaust and disappearing into the ground. The men stood around in attitudes of casual indifference or idle curiosity, while the two plump farmers, hands on knees, stared more intently. The scene could have been a badger cull, carried out by Ministry officials at home - but these were humans, and children! Darker images from accounts of Hitler's Einsatzgruppen hovered at the edge of my thoughts.

But murderous though the exercise was, it was clearly not going to work. The chamber had been too well sealed and very soon the lethal gas was issuing back from the row of holes, and the farmers and troopers were being forced away. The engine was switched off and a brief conference took place between the officer in charge, the farmers and the man in the van. The latter climbed out and went to the back of the van, joined by two troopers. They got inside and were lost from view for a minute, but then emerged wearing gas masks with round goggle eyes and sinister proboscises, giving them an aspect better suited to the nature of their enterprise. Two carried spades, and the other a bundle of yellow cylindrical objects attached to a coil of cord. The spademen shovelled vigorously and soon knocked a gaping hole through the wall of the chamber, the object was chucked in and the cord trailed back forty yards or so, to which latitude all retired. A light flashed and then a flame fizzed and sparked its way like a snake in the grass till it reached and entered the breach.

A shattering blast and roar of muffled thunder. We felt the shock wave all the way up to the top of the tree. I saw the ground lift and erupt in a spurt of soil and shattered timber, followed immediately by a landslide from the bank above, bringing trees and bushes crashing down on top.

Had the military taken the trouble to excavate and explore the chamber they might well have found the entrance to the passage leading to the great cavern. But typically they preferred the laziest and most violent approach, and the one that made the loudest bang. They could not more effectively have sealed this point of

entry to the children's underground refuge - there must have been at least one other where the buzzards had been taken in. And doubtless too, as he ordered the men to pack their gear and prepare to march off, the commander, in the manner of his kind, was already mentally phrasing the report to his superiors, which would then form the basis of a press release of another successful operation against the insurgents, rebels, criminals, terrorists - however they chose to categorise their fearsome opponents.

The excitement over, my two companions now chattered happily together and Ark introduced me to the other boy whose name was Raldo. Voices from below signalled the arrival of others to relieve them on the watch. Ark and Raldo pointed to their mouths and patted their empty tummies and were soon scampering down the hollow tree trunk and back to the cavern, followed, with grunts, sweat and toil (fit though I was) by myself. Back in the cavern all eyes turned to us, but a few words soon dissipated the anxiety in them. The infantry were in retreat, the coast was clear, and it was time to tuck in to the lavish meal that had been laid out in our absence.

Boys and girls, younger and older, sat down on the long benches with no apparent order or ceremony and helped themselves freely. There were plates of cut meat and small delicious fish and bowls of salad, tough rye bread spread thick with dripping, familiar and unfamiliar species of vegetables, roots, nuts, fungi, and fruits, and tall jugs of fruit juices and sweet fresh water. Some of the smaller ones were being helped by their elders, siblings perhaps, but needed less coaxing when creamy puddings and honey glazed flapjacks were laid out.

The meal over, there was a riot of play and animated conversation. The young ones were skipping, tumbling, hiding, climbing, and playing with balls, dolls, push carts, and every form of innocent childish entertainment. The older ones paid little heed, intervening only when tears or a tumble required it. I noticed quite a few disabled children, missing an arm or a leg. They hopped around and joined in the fun quite as happily as the others and there was no sense of incapacity on their part or

condescension on the part of their peers. One little girl had her right leg amputated above the knee and used a slender bamboo crutch with great agility. But she also had a prosthetic leg which she carried around with her – it was much too big for her to wear: apparently a prized possession she had somehow acquired, and hoped, perhaps, one day she would grow into.

I spotted my backpack that had been placed safely on a shelf, and as I went to retrieve it was surrounded by an excited little mob eager to discover its contents. I sat down and took out my bits and pieces one by one, explaining them as well as I could and allowing them to be handled, which was done with reverent care. My Swiss army knife was much admired, and my torch, though to conserve the batteries I couldn't allow more than a brief demonstration. My binoculars, looked through both ways, were a source of wonder and amusement and my wind-up alarm clock was another winner. Almost everything was a novelty to them, even pens and pencils and a pencil sharpener. As for my mobile phone and digital camera, the former beyond the range of any signal and both out of battery charge, they were as meaningless to my audience as they were now useless to me. Again my maps were of great interest, and there was hushed attention as I tried to explain and they to grasp their significance – the dimly apprehended wonder of lands, continents, seas and oceans stretching far beyond the world they knew. It was obvious they had received no formal education of any kind.

As I talked I felt a small warm body pressed close to mine and looked down to see the smiling face of the girl with a false leg. Her name was Aya.



CHAPTER 2

The Pool

THE CHILD was speaking to me, and I trying to understand, when Ark appeared and indicated with a gesture of his hands and eyes that it was time for a conducted tour. As well as the main hall, which also served as a hangar for the buzzards and working area where they were built and maintained, there were side rooms formed from natural cavities and alcoves in the walls of the cavern. The largest contained the kitchen where food was stored and prepared. The sleeping areas were simply piles of rugs, furs and pillows where the children just flopped down at random when they were tired. There was little in the way of privacy or personal possessions. The washrooms were on a lower level and were salubrious, thanks to an underground supply of fresh water. There were rooms where certain games were played, one like squash or fives where a ball was struck against the cave walls, which being irregular sent it in all directions. I had a go but my reactions were no match for the pace and unpredictability of it. The storage of aircraft parts and materials occupied a good deal of space, and then there was a place where animals and birds were kept: pigeons in one cage, hawks in another, and small mammals mainly of the ferret family. Though lovingly cared for I guessed they had a use and were not just pets. Finally there was a room which seemed to be for prayer, or quiet reflection.

After several bedtime signals had been largely ignored a general round up of the smaller by the larger children was now taking

place. Some willing, others still protesting through their yawns and eye rubbings, they were gathered and funnelled into the sleeping areas. Little Aya came up to me and proffered her cheek for a goodnight kiss. I placed one there carefully and off she pegged with the others on her improvised crutch, with its wished for future replacement tucked under her free arm. Sulibe watched over her, and from a certain resemblance I guessed they were sisters. The sounds of romping, chatter and laughter continued for a while, then all subsided into silence. With the older ones more serious matters were now afoot. A good deal of activity centred round the craft, and I strolled over to take a closer look.

They were truly marvellous artefacts, varying considerably in size, design and materials. The body or fuselage was a light frame construction made of thin willow or bamboo rods: the cockpit having a platform for the pilot to stand on and any cargo to be stowed. Weight was obviously crucial. The head was modelled, painted and polished to resemble a raptor, with a fierce hawkish expression and menacingly hooked beak. Everything else in the machine was fully articulated: the wings, tail and each individual feather in them, and the talons could be raised and lowered like the undercarriage of a plane. An object could be grabbed in the talons and lifted forward to be secured by the pilot and similarly a package could be deposited fairly accurately in a chosen spot. This suggested that some kind of trafficking was involved.

The structures appeared to be made from almost any materials that came to hand, some natural, derived from plants and trees, some man-made, hammered out of thin metal or plastic cut from discarded household goods or waste of any kind. A complex system of ligatures controlled the trim of each feather and the angle or spread of groups that acted as ailerons. All were linked to the joy stick which had a T shaped bar on top with levers and rotating clutch controls. The wings as a whole could be 'flapped' to assist lift, an elliptical rather than up and down motion effected by locking the joy stick and turning handles on either side which simultaneously opened and closed the wings on the up and down strokes. In the larger two-'manned' machines the second crew

member operated the wing rotation and loading devices. Rather like a vulture the wings were beautiful and mathematical structures when spread out and in use but when closed formed a ruffled heap which only the skilled young engineers, checking the alignments and tensions of each separate element, could decipher. The tail could be lifted, dipped, fanned or narrowed and the talons, as I'd witnessed, could also act as skids when landing.

From looking round in the construction area it was possible to get a good idea of the evolution of the buzzards. There were some dusty old birds in the dark recesses with fixed canvas wings and simple controls, and others of primitive design were set up on stands for the younger children to play and practise on. The large machines with two navigators were among the most recent, and one designed for a crew of three, the most manoeuvrable yet made, was just off the production line. There was also a class of smaller craft and these too were very elaborate and sophisticated compared with earlier models. They were made out of some light alloy scrap hammered thin and flexible and were obviously designed for speed and manoeuvrability. A shifting ballast device with a weight that could be jettisoned, and the way the wings closed tight to form the profile of a missile, suggested they were intended to swoop down from a great height with perilous velocity.

The children didn't seem to mind my presence and I watched them at work, once again amazed at their skill, discipline and application. Then I wandered over to a group that were huddled together in conference. It included Ark, Sulibe, Raldo and the one with bandaged arms, called Sorren, who had come down in flames. These, I guessed, approximated to the leadership in a free and easy society, with no formal organisation or hierarchy, and not much in the way of rules. With the younger ones they were confident, easy going and reassuring. Now they were locked in earnest debate which seemed to centre on the causes of the fire, the injured pilot Sorren gesticulating in an attempt to explain what had happened and shading his eyes with his hand. A beam

of some kind, I gathered, had struck the craft. This appeared to be an unprecedented and worrying development. The name Jobu was much bandied about in a tone suggesting strong disapproval, uncharacteristically approaching anger and hatred.

It had been a difficult day and the strain was telling. Everyone was tired and the discussion was getting no further. Several were yawning and Sulibe appeared to have nodded off. Raldo roused her and we all headed towards the sleeping area, Ark drawing me along with the group. Having discovered me in the first place he took responsibility for me, in a casual but friendly way.

We entered a dimly lit chamber. Some who were already sleeping there were woken up by others who had just arrived – a relief watch I assumed. Everyone else just dropped down wherever they liked, curling up and burrowing into the bedding. Ark found me a place and Sulibe lifted her cheek for a goodnight kiss just as Aya had. There was a drowsy murmur of goodnight wishes as sleep claimed them and they became children again after the cares and responsibilities of the day. I put down my backpack and soon I too entered into the contented sleep of physical and mental exhaustion.

I awoke in pitch dark, struggling to disentangle my dreams from recent events which were no less fantastic. In a while my eyes were able to collect enough photons to make out dim outlines confirming that if what had happened so far was a dream, I was still in it. I was cold and pulled more blankets over me, and tried to compose myself to sleep again. But my brain had fired up by now and was asking questions and demanding answers.

Here was a tribe of happy, pleasant, and highly gifted children surviving on their wits, and being ruthlessly hunted with lethal intent by soldiers, apparently the regular armed forces of the neighbourhood, supported by the civilian population or at least one section of it. It was hard to accept that this death squad had emanated from the beautiful city of Zinn, but I could see no alternative explanation. Why were the children outcasts – why considered a threat? With extraordinary ingenuity they had taken to the earth and the air to evade capture but it seemed their

enemies had come up with some new device to bring them down – quite literally. Surely it was only a matter of time before their refuge was discovered. In short I had landed in the middle of a war zone. A very strange war but a war none the less. A mass killing was afoot, not as usual on ethnic or religious grounds, but generational.

For me this raised all kinds of issues. My whole philosophy was that of a traveller: one who arrives, observes, appreciates and moves on, but does not seek to question anything or take part in local affairs. I identified with the place I was in for the time I was there and it would remain undimmed in my memory, charged as it was with all the glamour and excitement of discovery. Then it belonged to me and I would never return to find that all had changed, and changed as always, for the worse. The temple may be razed and replaced by a Tesco, the grand squares and gracious avenues buried under multi-lane highways and high rise blocks. Even in my lifetime entire cultures and civilizations, in South America, Africa and the Middle East, that I had lived in and known intimately, had gone forever.

For me the traveller was a kind of poet. Memory and imagination created an ideal: it was his quest for immortality, for a world that never changed, an abiding city. I hated the idea of growing old and believed obscurely that by constantly travelling onwards through space I could avoid travelling through time. I would go on as long as I lived to new horizons, new marvels and mysteries of man and nature, and even death would be a new adventure. Perhaps I was already a ghost.

I must leave now, I told myself, before I get involved in this situation. There will always be wars, injustices, atrocities. What can one person do about that? And what possible use could I be, not even able to speak their language? There are terrible things happening all the time, but seen from outer space the Earth is still peaceful and beautiful and to embrace the whole planet and absorb and celebrate its beauty is the only reason for being alive. I still wanted to enter Zinn, with its prospect of architectural and cultural treasures. In a tribe of feral youngsters I was completely

out of place - I felt like Gulliver among the Lilliputians. But I was stuck in this cave and the problem was I hadn't the least idea how to get out.

These things went round and round in my head and I tossed and turned while all the children slept peacefully. The only resolution I could find was the thought that tomorrow in the light of day my path would be clear, and I could leave if I wished. At last I grew weary and slept again.

After my disturbed night I must have slept late. The light that shone into the cave, though faint, was the light of day, and the sound of voices and the general bustle of morning activity filtered through. I shouldered my pack and stepped out into the main concourse. A port had opened in the wall of the cavern revealing a long straight inclined passage up to an opening through which light was streaming. There was a set of rails leading up, fashioned from split bamboo and gleaming from constant use. This then was the entrance through which the buzzards on their trolleys were brought in - and hauled out too but none appeared to have moved today. The squadron had been grounded.

My hosts greeted me and beckoned me to help myself at the communal table. Everyone else had eaten but there was plenty left. I peeled an egg, ate some quince-like fruit and drank a cup of milk. I had all but decided to move on, and it was tempting to stock up a little for future need. I had no doubt that it would have been acceptable and even encouraged, but it seemed mean - ungracious. The hall was mainly empty now, with just a few engineers still tapping away and lovingly preening the great birds. Had they soared into the ether for the last time? That thought must have been going through the minds of their makers as well as mine.

I made my way up the ramp to where it debouched in mottled sunlight from the steep face of a wooded escarpment. I marvelled at the way the outer surfaces of the gates had been modelled to match their surroundings, with real bushes planted in them. A drawbridge spanned a stretch of dense brambles and descended in a tunnel through them and out through a screen of foliage to

the path below. I wanted to find Ark and the others I had met to tell them as best I could that I was continuing my travels, thank them for their hospitality and wish them well. So I crossed the bridge and took the path towards the river, from which direction the sounds of children at play reached my ears. The path opened into a clearing where the river widened into a natural pool, lined with rock and lush with ferns and mosses of many varieties, before splashing down a boulder strewn race to disappear into the darker depths of the woods.

The children were skinny-dipping in the pool. The excited pitch of their voices made a constant vocal ululation. Heads of some were bobbing up and down in the bright water and others were standing along the bank facing them, plopping in and popping out again like a row of penguins at the zoo. Still others were among the boulders washing their clothes, but these too were bantering with the swimmers and making occasional forays among them. The scene brought me to a standstill, filling me with a strange mixture of delight and pity.

They were so beautiful and innocent and so much a part of their natural surroundings. The intense light reflected by the water, shining and shimmering around and between the flowing frieze of their animated bodies, looked like tongues of flame, the very life force leaping up, the unquenchable resurgence of joy and hope. What hope, what future did they have?

In a moment my presence was noticed and I was being waved to and beckoned to join the fun. I spotted Ark among them and tried to signal that I'd like a private word but children were running up the bank, coaxing and pushing me and pulling my clothes off and again I found myself not entirely acting under my own volition. My resistance in any case was weakened by the fact I had been tramping for days and sleeping rough and really needed a wash. And the water looked very inviting. So I joined the party and was soon swimming with the dolphins; but these particular mammals were mobbing me, intent on splashing and ducking me as much as possible, little Aya's and Sulibe's beaming faces among them. I splashed back, causing great hilarity, but then decided

the horseplay had gone far enough and struck out up stream.

Being a strong swimmer I soon lost my escort. Pitting my strength against the swift, cool current invigorated me, and I must have swum over a hundred yards before I tired and waded up on to the shore. A couple of lads were fishing further upstream and we waved to each other. There was no one else around, so I lay down on the smooth sand, arms outstretched, absorbing the pure fresh air and the birdsong and the glorious light. Very soon I was asleep.

I was woken by the two anglers who spoke briefly and urgently, then ran off. As I rubbed the sleep out of my eyes and looked around to get my bearings I noticed some lights flashing near the top of a tree. Changing my position slightly I could see, through a gap in the foliage, a hill beyond with the road curving round it. There was some large glittering object there, coming in my direction. As it approached I realised it was another troop of soldiers on the march, the light reflected by their weapons and metal trappings. I quickly decided it would not be to my best advantage to be found naked and undocumented in an area associated with rebel activity. So I dived in the river and made swift current-assisted passage back to the pool. Alerted no doubt by their ever vigilant lookouts, the children had already gone to earth, safely concealed, I hoped and prayed, in their subterranean refuge. There was not a trace of them to be seen, but as I half expected my clothes had been washed and laid out to dry. My backpack was there too, undisturbed, with a daisy chain in the shape of a heart on top of it. I didn't need two guesses as to who put it there.

I judged it wise to keep clear of the patrol if possible so dressed hurriedly and retreated deeper into the wood, and waited quietly until it had had time to pass by. Then I made my way back cautiously to the path by the pool, and on from there to where it joined the road. The coast was clear so I continued my journey from the point at which it had been interrupted. A mile to my left the city of Zinn cut its fantastic shape out of the sky. The road broadly followed the curvature of its ramparts, with occasional detours to skirt one of the small round hills or placid lakes which were features of the terrain.

It was a rich and ordered landscape, which again seemed strangely at odds with the brutality I had witnessed. I encountered surly, glowering looks in the farms and villages I passed through, the ingrained suspicion and hostility of those who live under oppressive rule. I had no luck getting served at any of the inns I passed, although I had large denomination notes in many currencies to offer. I drank from the streams and chewed the succulent inner stems of grass but there was nothing ripe enough in the hedges yet to do more than stave off the pangs of hunger. Eventually a landlord who in better times would have been as jovial as they come, having scrutinised me carefully and decided I represented no kind of trick or threat, invited me into his own parlour and fed me well, but would accept nothing but my heartiest thanks in return.

There had to be an entrance somewhere to the city. From time to time I passed a small doorway set high up in the wall and connected to the ground by an open flight of stairs barely a foot wide. For any brave enough to risk the ascent, the nailed door at the top was as heavy and forbidding as could be imagined, and any unwanted visitor or unsolicited caller could easily be sent to his death. Beneath one of these unwelcoming portals what appeared to be a rib cage poking out of the grass gave weight to this theory. Tramping on I looked up to the heavens from time to time but the only buzzards I saw were a pair of real ones, circling above with their shrill mewling cries. Just once I saw a hawk-like shape very high up, flapping and gliding, which could possibly have been a winged child soaring free of all earthly fears. But I lost it in the sunlight before I could decide. The only humans I encountered on the road were farm labourers, on foot or driving horse-drawn wagons, and one in a rusty tractor that belched blue fumes. Happily there were no more patrols, though at some point I realised I would have to have dealings with those in authority. I felt more and more uncomfortable at the thought.

I must have walked half way round the walls of Zinn before reaching what I took to be the main port of exit and entry. On reflection it made sense for the rebels to establish their

headquarters as far from it as possible, giving them maximum time to observe enemy movements and avoid surprise attacks. Suddenly the country road I was on veered away from the city to join a main highway heading directly towards it. Traffic, in the shape of an occasional lorry or bus of similar vintage to yesterday's gassing van, passed to and fro, as well as an assortment of horse-drawn vehicles and an old man on a creaking bicycle. I kept to the grass verge with my head down, ignoring all, and plodding wearisomely so as to pass at a glance for a local serf. When I looked up, after half a mile or so, I saw a checkpoint ahead, with raised barriers and guard kiosks on either side of the road. There were soldiers, lounging and smoking, and occasionally pulling a vehicle in for a routine inspection.

As I approached I felt distinctly uneasy, an unfamiliar sense of foreboding replacing my usual confident sense of adventure. But I was already under observation and it would be risky to retreat. In any case I could hardly give up now after so long and difficult a journey. I came in friendship, I told myself; I had letters of introduction attesting as much that had served me well in many difficult situations. One was from a cabinet minister, another from a bishop, and a third, which often proved more effective than either, from a grand master of the Masonic Order. If refused entry I could simply walk away and honour would have been satisfied. At least I would have set eyes on an unknown city - unknown in the West even to fable, and a city, I had begun to think, that was better seen than experienced. So I summoned as much *sang froid* as I could and marched boldly up to the men, whose eyes had not left me since I first came into their view.

Assuming a cheerful and casual air I looked candidly into the expressionless faces of three thick-set dragoons who blocked my path. In my own language I told them my name and explained that I had letters of introduction to present to the authorities of the city. There was no movement or response from them of any kind. Meanwhile, through the open window of the guard box to my left I could see and hear another squaddy on the phone, speaking in the clipped robotic phrases of a soldier of low rank replying

to a superior officer. He put down the receiver and addressed the others, now in a rough familiar tone, bluntly summarising their orders with the unmistakable addition of several choice expletives. As a result the three men moved aside and one of them pointed, very slowly and deliberately, in the direction of the city. It was a step forward, but somehow it didn't feel like one.

From this point the road became an elevated causeway between high stone walls that blocked the view on both sides. As close as this Zinn lost all its ethereal magic: just a vast brutal wall stretching to the heavens and holding the visible world in its immense, impending shadow. The sky was empty, and glancing back I saw that the three soldiers had once again taken up their positions and stood motionless across the path, staring at me. There was no way back.

Above the entrance rose a high, pointed arch enclosing an iron palisade, itself surmounted by a coat of arms, menacingly jagged, cut into the stonework. The gates themselves were lost to view behind a modern brick and timber clad extension projecting outwards, with a steel framed gantry-like structure crossing the road, and with rooms or offices above and on either side. Another military reception party stood awaiting my arrival, as stolid and taciturn as the last one. This time I made no attempt at a greeting, estimating the likelihood of any kind of acknowledgment at about zero. I simply allowed myself to be escorted inside. A door was opened and I was directed into a small bare room, perhaps a cell. The door was closed, and then locked.

After pacing around a bit I realised I was in for a long wait and so might as well try to get some rest. A hard, narrow, slatted wooden bench was the only concession to bodily comfort. So I lay down on the floor using my backpack as a pillow and tried to rest and calm my thoughts. I was just beginning to wind down a little when the door burst open, one of the men came in, jerked the pack from under my head and left with it, banging and locking the door behind him. Shocked and discomfited I could only wonder if this seizure was to check my belongings or deprive me of rest. I decided the latter as they would otherwise have confis-

cated it at the outset. And I now noticed there were several spy holes in the walls.

It was hot and stuffy. The only window was a narrow slit near the ceiling and it was closed. I lay with my back to the clammy bare brick wall, closed my eyes, and told myself I'd been in tight spots before. Time would pass, and I'd look back on this as just another adventure, one for my memoirs. I'd done no wrong, I reasoned, not altogether with conviction, other than to be here, and I'd be happy now to leave and never return. I was as close as any Westerner had ever been to entering the unknown city of Zinn, and it was close enough. Looking round at my harsh and comfortless surroundings, I thought I really needed to be somewhere else.

It was an hour and twenty minutes by my watch before the door opened again. Two of my guards came in and pulled me to my feet, shoved me through the door and frogmarched me along the corridor into a much larger room. It looked like an office, with shelves, box files, filing cabinets, wall maps and charts, framed photographs of top brass and military parades, and centrally placed above a broad polished desk a large tacky oil painting. The subject of this was a garishly uniformed gent, with sharp twinkling eyes in a crinkly face which beamed a folksy smile of ghastly complicity at one and all.

At the desk below, facing in the same direction as the portrait but small and mean by comparison, and with unsmiling eyes behind his round, thick spectacles, sat a real life individual. His dwarfishness was exaggerated by his large peaked cap and the immaculate uniform and trappings of an officer. To his right sat another officer, this one very fat, his eyes dark slits in a puffy face, and a hatless one in plainer uniform to his left, busying himself arranging pens and papers, clearly a secretary or recorder. Facing the desk was a solitary wooden chair to which I was swept forward, and in which I was unceremoniously dumped.

"So. I see. You English," began the one in the centre. "Why you here English?"

"I am a traveller," I explained. "I came to see the City of Zinn."
"How you know Zinn? How you find? Who sent?"

“No one sent me here. I was in another country when I saw the city at a great distance. I thought it a beautiful city. I thought it would be good to go there and meet the people of Zinn.”

His eyes narrowed with incomprehension or suspicion, or both.

“I come in friendship,” I added hopefully.

He glanced down at my letters of introduction which were in front of him and flicked through them impatiently. “These papers, incorrect,” he snapped. “You not ambassador. Why you here?”

“Friendly interest,” I replied; “nothing more. Simple curiosity.”

“You spy!” he barked.

“No, of course not. There is no hostility between my country and yours. Zinn is not even marked on our maps.”

“Hah! Good job! You English, you Americans. Bloody imperialists. Bloody thieves. You find Zinn you send bloody bombs.”

I had to admit he had a point, but replied as calmly as possible: “If I told people at home about Zinn they would never believe me. They would think I was crazy. They’d say I made it all up.”

This seemed only to anger him more and he was about to spit out some other accusation when the fat officer, who had sat Buddha-like and inscrutable during this exchange, turned to him, raising his fat fingers, and spoke in a quiet voice. There ensued a discussion in the Zinnian tongue, in which the strident tones of the interrogator gradually abated, and at the end of which some agreement had clearly been reached. Meanwhile the secretary scribbled away furiously with a scratchy pen, trying to keep up with what was being said. Finally after a minute of tense silence the thin officer addressed me again.

“So. Must go. Now. Leave Zinn. Go. Not talk, Zinn - not tell person Zinn. Not come back Zinn. Never! You understand?” I understood. “You leave Zinn territory. Twenty-four hours we find you here, you Spy. We arrest. You dealt with. OK. You understand?”

I reaffirmed my full comprehension and was briskly escorted from the room and from the building. My profound relief was tempered only by the loss of my backpack and its contents. I decided to push my luck and asked the guards for its return, outlining it with my hands and pointing at my shoulder. They

stared at each other, nonplussed by a development not covered within the scope of their orders. With knitted brows one went back inside while the remaining one glared at me as if I had committed some outrageous misdemeanour and was now really for it. But after an anxious moment the other returned, gripping the rucksack in one enormous fist and then thrusting it into my hands. The other raised his fist and gritted his teeth as if about to deliver a punch, but with painful self restraint released his index finger instead, and pointed, with the same emphatic deliberation as the guard at the checkpoint had before. But in the opposite direction, away from the city of Zinn. I was only too ready and happy to comply.