

4

‘Here,’ said Sebastian, indignantly, looking round at all the shocked faces around him. ‘What’s he going on about?’

Mr Walty’s face assumed a ghastly smile.

‘You’ve been chosen, boy,’ he explained.

‘What?’

‘As High Priest’s apprentice, boy. So, get your things together, and his omniscience will take you to the Temple.’

‘What?’ said Sebastian, hotly. ‘Just a flaming minute! You must be joking!’

Mr Walty began taking things out of Sebastian’s locker.

‘It’s a great, a huge honour,’ he said. ‘We’ll miss you, of course—’ here he failed to suppress a huge seraphic smile, ‘—but we’ll have to try to bear our loss cheerfully.’

Sebastian scowled, and put his hands on his hips.

‘Now look here,’ he said, ‘I’m not going to be anybody’s apprentice! I’m going to be a gangster, I am, when I grow up. I’ve got it all planned.’

Mr Walty was still taking things out of Sebastian's locker.

'A gangster,' Sebastian went on, doggedly. 'We're going to have our own hideout and be gangsters, Gerald and me.'

'Fancy *him* being High Priest's apprentice,' said Dora, in disgust.

'Those divining rods must have gone wrong,' said Horace, dangerously.

'Would you like to take your tree-sculpture with you?' asked Mr Walty.

'No,' said Sebastian.

'Well, then. Say goodbye to Sebastian, Class Seven, and wish him luck in his new life.'

'Goodbye, Sebastian,' said everyone drearily. 'Good luck, Sebastian.' But there was a hiss amongst the sing-song, and it said, '*My uncle's going to kill you.*'

'Come along, then, Blewitt!'

Sebastian didn't budge. He stood and scowled.

'Now look here,' he said, 'if I go with the High Priest, does that mean I don't have to come to school any more?'

Mr Walty's face split into a smile of rapture.

'That's right, my boy.'

No school.

'And I get to ride in the limo?'

'Yes, yes.'

Sebastian nodded.

'OK,' he said. 'I'll give it a go, then.'

And he picked up Ellie's tin of beetles and made

his way out of the classroom without a backward glance.

The limo was brilliant: Bert, the driver, wore a peaked cap, and everybody waved and smiled as they went along, and there was even a drinks cabinet with various revolting paint-strippy liquids and some lemonade in it.

The limo rocked massively round the tight cobbled corners of the City and hummed its way through the elegant garden squares. Quite soon it swerved past a man bearing a placard that read 'BREAK THE CHAINS OF ORA' and by the huge pillars of the portico that guarded the entrance to the Temple.

'Cor!' said Sebastian, looking with new interest at the carved bees that swarmed busily over the golden stone, and at the great stone turkey that peered indignantly at everyone who went past.

The limo lumbered round one last corner and slid to a halt. The High Priest was heaving himself out of the car almost before the handbrake had creaked on; and by the time Sebastian had found the electric door-opening button the High Priest was burrowing busily in the boot.

There was a heavy suitcase and various plastic bags on the cobbles behind him.

'You going on holiday?' asked Sebastian.

The High Priest's answer was muffled by his huge burrowing backside.

'On retreat. To get away from . . . from all the

pressure. It's a nice place. Quite pleasant since they've drained the cellars. Not so whiffy. And not even Ora could expect me . . . He will be merciful. I'm sure He will be merciful.'

He looked furtively left and right and then heaved his suitcase over to the grubby taxi that was lurking on the other side of the alley.

'Turville will look after you,' he said, throwing the case onto the back seat. He waddled back to the limo, his face mauve with sweat and haste, to seize the plastic bags. 'Er . . . tell him I've gone.'

The High Priest threw the bags into the back of the taxi, wrapped his glittering robe closely about his knees, and wedged himself into the front seat.

'Good luck,' he said gruffly. 'Go on round and in the main entrance. Watch out for . . . er . . . well, good luck, anyway. I'm sure they wouldn't do anything much to a child. Oh, and you'll need these.'

He fished fussily in a carrier bag and handed over a golden box a bit like Sebastian's brother Robert's clarinet case. Then the High Priest slammed the door and the taxi drew away with a roar of holed exhaust and a cloud of choking smoke.

Sebastian shrugged, and made his way back round the Temple wall into the dazzling sunshine of the portico.

The man with the placard stopped when he saw him.

'Oi,' he said. 'What are you doing round here? You should be at school, shouldn't you?'

‘Not me,’ said Sebastian. ‘Not any more. I’m the new apprentice.’

‘Come off it, you’re too young. Now run off home before you get into trouble.’

‘No, I am,’ said Sebastian. ‘It’s brilliant. It means I won’t have to go to school any more. Not ever!’

The man looked at him again, more closely: then he shook his head, leant his placard against a golden column, and put his hands on Sebastian’s shoulders.

‘You needn’t do it,’ he said, earnestly. ‘Look, just walk away, now. You don’t want to get mixed up with all that lot. They’ll take you to pieces, they will. Brainwash you. Have you living in fear and trembling, a slave to superstition and corruption.’

Sebastian considered.

‘Yeah,’ he said. ‘But I won’t have to go to school any more. And, in any case, I’ve got to hand in the stick-things.’

The man with the placard sighed gently and mournfully and all his wrinkles seemed to settle and deepen. He patted Sebastian on the shoulder.

‘Poor lad,’ he said. ‘Poor lad. Enmeshed in their snares already. But look, young man—’

‘Sebastian,’ said Sebastian. ‘Sebastian Blewitt.’

‘—Master Blewitt. You know me, don’t you? Finley Wortle. I’m here every day, protesting. A lone voice of reason in a world of fear. So if you ever need help—’

‘Yeah, ta,’ said Sebastian. ‘Thanks a lot, all right?’

He pushed hard at the great door of the Temple and it gave way slowly, heavily, with a wheeze of sealed air.



He slid through the opening and the door closed behind him. All the outside noises: cars, and the flutter of footsteps, and the tumbling jackdaws, sighed into cushiony quietness, and Sebastian was enveloped by a scent of beeswax, cloves, and mildew.

And then the eyes saw him. He felt them, like a brush of fur across his face.

He looked up, and there was the great golden statue: the fine muscles of the chest, the rigid waving of the hair; but most of all the eyes, staring. Ora: ruler and god and worker of miracles.

Sebastian gave him the thumbs-up.

'Wotcha,' he said.

