

# The Tirnano

## Book 1

### FINN

### Peter M. Emmerson

Two teenagers born 800 years apart, are brought together to lead the battle against the children of the ancient gods, those terrible giant golem: **The Anakim.**

# **THE TIRNANO – BOOK 1 – FINN**

**Copyright: Peter M. Emmerson 2012**

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

All rights reserved, including the right to reproduce this book or portions thereof in any form whatsoever.

This Book is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This Book may not be re-sold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this book with another person, purchase an additional copy for each reader.

## Acknowledgements to:

I give sincere thanks to a huge bunch of friends and family who have encouraged me, but especially to; Mary my wife, and my children, Karen (Kas), Darran and Sarah.

Thank you to my (virtual) friend; Sarah Ashwood - an American author and poetess of distinction, her assistance with the creation of Ny-mo and Winn in Book 1, and for some serious editing and encouragement that has been invaluable.

In addition I cannot complete these thanks without mentioning my wonderful Tag Team friends from Slush Pile Reader; namely Kaz, Eugene, Alexie, Jan and Margaret for support suggestions on writing techniques, and most of all for seriously good advice.

## About Pete

Born in Brentwood in Essex. The only son of an English Father and an East African born German Mother.

Father of 5, Step-father to 2, Grandfather to 12. Retired, and Living in the 1066 county of East Sussex on the South coast of England.

I joined the British Army as a boy-entrant in 1961, served in a number of countries around the world, picking up strange habits along the way, including 'people watching' which has become an invaluable aid to me in character creation.

Over the recent years I have developed an interest in the pantheon of Egyptian Gods and their followers.

I have delved extensively into numerous translations of a multitude of different documents on Ancient Egypt and found nothing which contradicted my conclusions. In fact the deeper I researched so I discovered more and more parallels to the three present day religions which have their origins in the area known to us as; The Middle East.

In 2005 and 2009, I visited Luxor in Egypt. I was most intrigued by the tomb wall paintings in the valley of Kings and countless other sites which depicted a buried dignitary and his interactions with the Ancient Gods. – The Gods were painted as much larger than the general populous, which led me to consider that - other than the easy answer:

‘To enhance their status

I believe there could be an even more simple answer...

That:

They were actually greater in stature than humans, and they were not of this earth, they were visitors from the stars.

(Well, that’s what they are in the Tirnano books.)

Aliens -- Giants -- The Watchers

## **The Akadian Language**

The Akadian language is not meant in any way to be anything other than a fictional language, so I apologise for a little poetic licence here and there. After all, hundreds of

years have passed and languages adapt and evolve. (Compare the English language of today with just 100 years ago.)

I trust you have as much fun reading/understanding 'The Leid' as I had constructing it and I hope you don't end up too bamboozeld.

I created most of the Akadian names with a 'Q' preceding; (This is pronounced like a tongue click on the roof of the mouth. Similar to a 'tutting' sound.)

~

Seek the Babe with Brother One

Honour the Brother with his Blade of Souls

Worship the Mother with her Shield of Stars

Remember the Knight with Demons Dead

Respect them all - for all are One

~

## **The Holborn Incident**

### **The Anakim, Children of the Watchers**

### **The Southern Plains**

After crossing the vast Southern plains, that endless, no-man's land, they finally arrived at the ocean. The Southern plains were clean. No sign had been discovered of The Uncursed.

One hundred and forty three nights without break they had ridden, searching. Now, mounts worn out and troopers exhausted, they surveyed the violent black seas.

The Anakim, the Children of the Watchers were sealed, bound within the southern plains; the patrol was tasked to break that binding. They turned towards the north, towards the land their masters coveted.

Avoiding the rocky outcrops, the nocturnal six legged Gurts, their steeds, were forced to leap unnaturally, assuming an irregular bounding gait rather than their usual ground-eating lope. Were it not for the neck ties and ankle straps between the first and second sets of legs which their riders gripped tightly, the troopers would have been unseated at the first bound. The strictly nocturnal Gurts, holding no allegiances, would have galloped away across the plains, leaving the Anakim to continue their patrol on foot.

The open plains were not the mounts' natural habitat, nor did the troopers care overmuch for the terrain. Like the Anakim, the Gurts had been spawned by the Nephillim in the fires of the shellac pits of Dilkadek, secreted within the deep, dark shadows of the mountain gorges of Crasatul, a place not spoken about in casual conversation, far to the West of the flat lands through which they now journeyed.

Samlazaz, the Anikim leader called a halt; the first tinge of dawn had begun to creep over the distant horizon. The Gurts formed a circle and hunkered down creating a tight group, swiftly digging holes for their heads with massive front paws; they assumed rock form and buried their heads in the ground.

Deep rumbling snores commenced.

“Kokablel!” shouted Samlazaz.

Kokablel, one foot trapped by the all too swift collapse of his now dead to the world Gurt, was kicking the beast with the other in an attempt to free himself. Frustrated, he slipped his eating knife from its sheath and sliced the tie with the stained blade. He pulled his foot free with a curse.

“Yes Sir,” he answered, assuming a semblance of attention.

“Go rustle up some fresh victuals.”

“Yes Sir.”

Kokablel snatched his collecting pouch from his saddle roll, unpacked it and slipped the strap across one shoulder. He gave the Gurt another kick for good measure as he picked his way amongst the ring of snoring brown boulders.

“Make it snappy. Would be nice to eat sometime,” growled Samlazaz.

“Bog off,” muttered Kokablel under his breath, hoping he wasn’t overheard. He knew the ill tempered troop leader would have him on food patrol or worse forevermore.

Luck was with him. At least, regarding Samlazaz; he hadn’t heard. In other ways... Well.

Kokablel stomped angrily away from the clutch of his fellows who were making ready to adopt rock form, joining their Gurts in sleeping the hot, bright daylight hours away. He’d paced no more than a few hundred strides from the assembly when he willed his senses to begin initiating a search. Catching a whiff, the trace of a tear, he stood and began waving his arms in the prescribed manner. At the third attempt he caught hold of an

open edge. Reaching inside, Kokabel pulled it, and stepped through.

Holborn Circus

London, England

September 2008.

A red object smashed into him. High as his knee its impact almost knocking him from his feet. All around were hollow rocks, hills, and mountains full of bright lights... and tasty worms.

They scurried from him. Fast, but not fast enough. How he would feast. He delighted in their taste.

The red rock began to spurt a warm, fluid over his foot. He rolled his head down his leg, to where his limb had been struck by the thing and licked, tasting. It was created from rocks, many different categories of rock, but rocks all the same. Rocks and silicates that had been melted in fire and their shapes altered.

That interested him, but he hadn't time for study. Providing for the troop was of greater importance. One of the worms was hanging halfway through a broken slice of silicate at the front of the rolling rock. He pulled it free; it had been trapped amongst the crumpled and broken pieces. Wriggling, it made a screeching sound through a hole in its exposed end. He lifted it to his nose and sniffed. It smelt good. Kokabel bit off the exposed portion crunching the crispy morsel, relishing the exquisite taste of the juices as they flowed across his tongue and around his mouth, ravishing his senses. He felt his blood race, his senses sparking. He swallowed the delicious crunchy piece, sucked the remainder dry, and then threw the remnants away. It was too much trouble to peel off the inedible outer coverings.

About him were rocks of various shapes and sizes. Hundreds of worms moved in them,

issuing their high-pitched noises. The rolling rocks had come to a halt when the red one smashed into him; they too had worms inside. Some held just one or two, but others, the larger red ones, were full.

A white rock, with a flashing blue light, emitting a howling noise, wove its way through the stationary rocks towards him. Its wailing annoyed him. Wrenching his foot free he made his way towards it, kicking any stationery rocks out of his path. Upon reaching it, Kokabel stamped on the wailing rock three times. Defenseless, it crumpled and flattened. Instantly, the annoying howls ceased, his irritation subsided.

The rock that had crashed into him was packed with worms, most of them waving miniature arms and opening their holes to squeal as they attempted to escape from the two levels. Easily, Kokabel lifted it, swinging it smoothly onto his shoulder.

With his free hand he began picking up scattered worms which lay unmoving on the ground. There were some he noticed, massing; frantically attempting to return to a hole in the ground from where they had previously spewed in their hundreds. He snatched up handfuls of them, stuffing them into his cavernous pouch. Inside it many were still moving. Others that had fallen from the red rock were still.

As soon as his pouch was full, he waved his free arm, feeling once again for the tear.

Finding it where he'd left it; Kokabel stepped through, allowing it to close behind him.

Stop Press.

The London Evening Standard.

Holborn, London.

Stone Giant Rocks Busy City Crossroads.

85 dead, 140 missing.

Government in Confusion.

September 30th 2008.

8:02am - During this morning's rush hour, city centre commuters were attacked by a terrifying giant creature. The creature killed eighty five and injured many more in less than three minutes of unprecedented horror. One hundred and forty are reported missing.

The number 38 bus, full of commuters, had been crossing the junction of Tottenham Court Road and Euston Road, when it came into collision with the creature which appeared to be created from granite slabs.

The giant described by horrified observers, as carrying a massive red pouch, caused mayhem, smashing numerous vehicles, including a police car. All the witnesses interviewed described the creature as a three to four storey nightmare made of rocks. The monster lifted a Double-Decker bus onto its shoulder before disappearing with over one hundred and forty people whom it had packed into its pouch.

Experts examining the CCTV recordings of the incident have put its height at between eleven and twelve yards. Police too are said to be examining these CCTV images, no comment was given by a Scotland Yard spokesperson.

The Prime Minister has called for an immediate investigation and a Ministerial Report.

CCTV Pictures and eye-witness reports; Pages, 2, 3, 4 and 5.

The Southern Plains

Children of the Watchers

Kokabel dropped the red rock and emptied his pouch alongside. Some of the worms were still moving, opening their holes and screeching. He picked them up, one after the other, and with a swift squeeze stopped both their wriggling and the irritating noises.

Araklba the cook should be pleased: there was more than sufficient food for one night. Good food too in Kokabel's opinion. True, they needed cleaning and stripping of their tasteless outer coverings, but drying and salting should make them satisfying and crisp, although personally he preferred them fresh and raw.

"How come you got worms? I thought you'd have gone for the four legged-brownies with the, pointed heads. Much more meat on them," his commander, half in and out of 'rock form,' said, rolling forward, to investigate.

"Guess I got the wrong tear, sir."

"Well, you can take that red thing away. It's irritating my senses."

"Yes, sir," Kokabel acquiesced with a half-hearted salute.

He lifted the empty rock onto his shoulder, and marched back to the tear tremor area.

"Get some decent meat while you're there. This lot won't last long. It's all dead, won't keep," the patrol cook shouted after him.

Now Kokabel was hot and bothered. Not only did he have to get rid of the red rock, but that waster Araklba wanted more meat. When were they going to understand that the only meat they really needed was the worms?

At this rate, probably never.

At the first tear he found, Kokabel stepped through and with all his prodigious strength heaved the empty red rock. The region was another of those worm infested, mountainous areas. What damage the rock might wreak, he cared not.

Without taking notice of where it landed, he stepped back, closing the tear behind him.

~

New York. USA.

New York Times

London Double-Decker Flies In.

September 30th 2008, 08:48EST

At 08:48 today, a London Double-Decker bus materialized, and flew from the junction of West 64th Street, down Broadway before crashing into the base of the Columbus Circle monument, causing eighteen deaths and twenty seven serious injuries.

The bus has been identified as the same vehicle which disappeared from a crowded intersection in Holborn, London, five hours previously.

NYPD is currently in communication with Scotland Yard.

The Southern Plains

Swiftly searching other nearby tears, he found one opening onto the habitat of thousands of four-legged, pointy-headed brownies. Kokabel filled his pouch with the bawling creatures; once again he took time to wolf down one, as he picked up the others. He was disappointed that consuming it brought no marked increase of his powers. Only the worms did that. Only they made his blood sing.

It was sunset when he finally made his way back into camp, his colleagues were slowly awakening. Darkness must fully descend before the Gurts stirred, and they could move out. Plenty of time for a proper meal, then. Kokabel made for the cook fires to empty his pouch. Araklba laughed. "Maybe you get tomorrow off, matie. Thanks for this little

lot. Well done.”

“Bog off,” Kokabel snapped, removing his pouch and shaking it to make sure all the muck and rubbish was cleared out.

The Daily Nation.

Nairobi, Kenya.

10th April, 1957.

Several reports are being received by our offices of sightings of giant grey creatures, seen chasing and catching wildebeest near the Ngorongoro Crater. Local Masai tribesmen are saying they are servants of Engai, the mountain God, and are forecasting doom will follow shortly.

The sightings have not been corroborated, and have been attributed to a spate of liqueur thefts in the nearby township of Arusha in Northern Tanzania.

## Part 1

### Prologue

#### The Temple of Dilkadek.

A millennium had passed since the Ennead of Heliopolis had last walked together in the same room; they laid aside their differences to speak face to face.

“Why have you called me to this fly-blown, disease infested place, sister-wife?” demanded Seth.

He stood where he had manifested, behind the black basalt cathedrae, his shadow thrown onto the wall beside them. His brother and two sisters rose from their thrones to face his flickering, grotesque silhouette.

“We have grave news, brother-husband,” replied Nephthys, extending her wings in a gesture of homage.

The Lord of Chaos strode from behind the dais, “Then speak!” he said, his voice, issuing from the outlandish mouth and throat boomed with an echoing quality, two voices blended ineptly into one. “I weary already of this place.”

“Is that the only greeting you have for your siblings after all this time?” asked Isis in her soft sibilant way, she moved towards him in a sinuous manner.

Seth threw up his right arm in a warding gesture, “Keep away from me sister; I need not your vile magic contaminating me.” He turned to Osiris his voice dripping disgust, “Have

you no respect for your image brother, why have you not as yet improved your appearance, that filthy, ugly green face? It does you little favour.”

“At least my brother-husband can be recognised, what is that ridiculous visage you refuse to give up?” asked Isis.

“Enough,” cut in Nephthys, “we are not here to indulge in petty bickering.”

“Well sister, what are we here for?” hissed Isis.

“I have divined that the Light is contriving to bring together outlandish warriors from the deepest ends of space and time to stand against you. Worse still, your Anakim have found no way to break through the crafted barriers shaped by that interfering aberration Bes.”

“Stamp him out!” Boomed Seth.

“Ra and his kin have thrown in with that fat dwarf, there is no way that alone, will you be able to stand against them. You have need of us, your dear brother and sisters, for together we can augment the Anakim’s ability to break the barriers. Together we can bring your plan for this disgusting world to completion.”

Nephthys looked at the three gods who stood before her. “Are you prepared to join me to bring to fruition my brother-husband’s plan to create a paradise more splendid than that from which we were deported so inconveniently?”

“Has the Light yet activated seeding?” Osiris spoke for the first time, the three spun towards him; the sound of his voice had not been heard for many thousands of years. It was a low croak, such as might have emanated from the throat of a great bullfrog; it carried latent horror. An intimate understanding of death curdled and crawled within it.

“So it speaks,” said Seth.

“I but posed a question brother,” continued Osiris, his grotesque green head spun, his yellow eyes gazed malevolently at the magnificent figure of the Chaos Lord.

"It has, - the final creatures have been planted by the Ogdoad throughout the land masses." It was Nephthys who answered.

"What forms have they?" Seth interjected.

"That of their creator... Atum is as ever nothing but vain about his appearance."

"It matters not, they will one day provide our progeny with much sustenance," hissed her sister.

## Three Cryptids

### A New Assignment

London, England

March 2011

The radio alarm beside her bed burst into life. Disgruntled Dr. Jeanne McLennan pried open her eyes. Green digits displayed 5:45 A.M. The accompanying music was the usual schmaltz. "Gies a break," she muttered, tapping the snooze button and burying her head under the pillow.

Please... just another five, she thought. Shouldn't have killed the dregs of that Shiraz last night, always does it for me.

Ten minutes later, ready or not it all began again. Tapping the reset button, Jeanne left the radio playing while climbing out of bed and shuffling in the direction of the bathroom.

"Paulie, darling, rise and shine, another school morning. Just a couple more days 'n' it's your hols," she called from outside his bedroom door.

"C'mon, answer, son - you awake?" A youthful grunt of despair emanated as she disappeared into the bathroom. Business concluded she deliberately ignored the mirror suspended above the porcelain sink while washing her hands.

Heaven knows nobody wants to see that first thing in the morning, she snorted,

reaching for a towel with dripping fingers.

Her phone beeped twice and began vibrating on her bedside table as she stepped back into the bedroom. Retrieving the mobile she flipped it open. A text from the Commander:

SEE ME IMMEDIATELY YOU GET IN

Rolling her eyes, Jeanne dropped the phone on her bed. Well, I'm not going to rush around like a madwoman. Not this morning. It was the usual curt communication she'd come to expect from her section leader, and probably signified nothing of any greater importance than his legendary impatience.

Precisely 8:30 A.M., passing through the rotating doors of the offices of ANS (London) Jeanne pressed her security badge on the grey pad and waited for the glass doors to part. Dressed in a business-like grey pinstripe two-piece over an open-necked white blouse, her auburn hair cut in a stylish bob she moved with the quiet confidence of knowing she could still turn male heads. Her sensible three inch heels clicked on the marble floor, her pearl earrings and matching necklace swinging slightly as she made her way to the elevators.

She rode to the tenth floor the Commander's level, where the uniformed security officer after closely ratifying her ID passed her through. She rapped on the plain white door.

"Enter!"

Obediently, Jeanne pushed open the door and stepped inside. The room was dimly lit and sparsely furnished; the present commander of ANS did not subscribe to the usual luxurious and sumptuous trappings of seniority. A simple oak desk, a phone, a high spec computer with a huge old-fashioned CRT monitor and a pair of folding chairs accompanied a cluster of beat up grey filing cabinets, summing the entire contents of the room.

"Sit."

Jeanne's nose wrinkled at the tendril of smoke rising from a half-stubbed cigar butt

partially buried in a burgeoning ashtray which retained pride of place on the desk. Whatever happened to the law about smoking in the workplace? Mind you, I'm not going to remind him of any laws, current or otherwise.

"Sit, I said."

"Yes sir."

Smothering a grimace, she drew up one of the folding chairs and parked herself opposite. The desk lamp aimed in her direction threw him into silhouette. She could barely make out his features. Other than a close-cropped head and stocky outline she couldn't have accurately described him. However, I know his voice well enough.

"You're from Aberdeen, right?" It was more a statement than a question.

"Actually no, sir, but I was there with the Grampian police for a few years."

In typical bull-like fashion he barged ahead without acknowledging her reply. "You were an Inspector before leaving the police and joining ANS."

This time a definite statement, "Yes sir."

"And you have a Doctorate in Psychology from Aberdeen University, yes?"

"Yes sir."

Why all the questions? Jeanne fought down the urge to squirm.

"And your parents lived in Stonehaven where you went to school?"

"Yes sir."

Where is all this leading? My personal records are all up to date. What's the reason behind all these questions?

“So you know the area well enough?”

Well enough for what? “I guess so sir.” Jeanne’s mounting unease showed in her voice.

As if he’d read her mind the Commander promptly answered her unspoken question. “I want you to build a team in Aberdeen. We have a possible alien under examination at the Turner Institute. You are to find out the whole doings about it and where it came from. You leave tomorrow. That’s not a suggestion or a request.”

Jeanne’s head felt like it might explode. Instead, her mouth fell open, shock and disbelief manifesting themselves on her features.

A lead post! Wow, but I can’t move away --- not now I’ve got Paul settled here. But a lead post! I’ve been hoping for a lead. --- But to Aberdeen? Oh my word --- No! --- Inner turmoil aside, all she could croak in response was, “What about my son? What about Paul?”

“Take him with, won’t hurt, and you can drive up there in that ridiculous foreign puddle-jumper of yours. Mind Jeanne, I don’t want too much fuss around this. Your official position up there so far as outsiders are concerned will be Government Psychologist studying its intellectual condition.”

“I haven’t been involved much in Psychology since I left Uni.”

“Wing it girl, wing it. I’ve told you why you’re to be there. You can build a team as needs require understood?”

Not really, but... “Yes sir.”

## The Creature

Aberdeen. Scotland

April 2011

The room measured no more than four metres square. Everything was white, pristine white. Breaking up the colourless uniformity was a neat pile of clothing topped by a pair of dusty tan boots. A low shelf with a plastic covered mattress served as a bed. In one corner a white water closet protruded from the wall evidencing no visible means of support. Above it, recessed a chrome flush button; to the side at waist height a diminutive, matching sink.

He sat in the centre of the room, on the tiled white floor, cross legged.

The lighting was harsh in its all-enveloping brightness. No shadows were cast, not even in the corners. Outside, from behind a one-way observation strip, they watched him. Every breath he took. Every movement he made. Every test he was subjected to faithfully recorded. The digital data compressed and transmitted to London to be analysed, byte by byte.

He spat again; the fifth and final time that hour. Exactly twelve minutes since the last time, and exactly twenty-four minutes since the time before. Every twelve minutes since assuming his position on the floor three days beforehand he'd spat, the ball of saliva splattering onto the same spot each time, his target a tiny blemish.

When initially placed in the room, he'd been wearing a hooded, long sleeved jacket and tight fitting pants, both made from a soft, unidentified hide. His knee high boots were crafted from the same substance, only dried, and to some extent stiffened for durability. The plain clothing was handmade, the stitching peculiarly neat and precise.

He had been in the room for little more than a day when he stripped off his clothing, folded it and placed it in a pile. He then resumed his position, which he assumed again and again after being moved for numerous investigations and tests.

~

Silently, Dr. Jeanne McLennan watched him. --- Thinking.

She and Paul her twelve year old son were comfortably ensconced in a company house in Blackburn; a 'dormitory town' north of Aberdeen. Jeanne had slipped easily into her new position as Team Leader and Chief Psychologist at ANS (Aberdeen) - The Academy of Natural Sciences, a pseudonym for a branch of National Security - although she'd been living in Essex and working in London for six years, she had retained her Scots' accent. Paul had picked up the Thames estuary twang. Might being back in Aberdeen return my son's latent accent. Just as it's bringing back uncomfortable memories I'd rather avoid?

A number of years had passed since the Holborn incident. The backlash from that horrifying event had almost brought the UK government of the day to its knees, and was responsible for her secondment from a comfortable but boring desk job in Scotland Yard to the hurly-burly life of an MI5 operative. Oddly enough, it had also brought her back to her roots, for the strangeness of this creature had set off warning bells all through ANS that chimed loudly; "Holborn, Holborn." Whether or not this creature had anything to do with that terrible day remained to be seen; it was her job to study him and figure such things out.

He spat. Precisely twelve minutes had passed, and again his aim was perfect.

For the thousandth time, Jeanne ran her eyes over him.

Such a strange specimen..... Specimen.

It seemed a cold word, but whoever, whatever, he was, he appeared in many respects more specimen than animal. Besides, I'm supposed to be a scientist, thinking in factual, less than politically correct terms. In all honesty specimen, animal, or human, I can't tire of looking at him. Where on earth - or not - has he come from?

No-where known; that was for sure.

His skin colouring, a light grey with stripes and swirls of dark olive. His hair, the colour of steel, flecked with black grew uniformly not only on his head but also down his neck and across his shoulders resembling a mane. Bizarre - but what wasn't about him? Apparently, the grey was his natural colour, not caused by advancing years.

Their best tests and guesses put him in his early twenties; so old age couldn't be a colouring factor. His build, that of a youth in the prime of life supported the theory. His shoulders were wide and powerful, complimented by muscular arms. His trim torso boasted a ripped stomach, sprinkled with coarse, wiry hair. His hips, though, were slim, and his legs slender, bowed, they look capable of having problems supporting his powerful upper body. Is he gangly? Are his movements awkward?

Besides his spitting, Jeanne hadn't seen him in motion long enough to tell.

Her eyes hesitated a moment on his genitalia, large for his body size, before quickly skipping on. In her head, she ticked off fact after fact. His head's a little disproportionate, a bit too big for his body. Large brain, she mused but then he's got small feet, puts paid to that myth. She gave a tiny smile at her own internal joke but it melted rapidly. Unfortunately, the creature was no joke, nor was it a laughing matter that communications were as yet not established with him.

He'd made no sound since being carried into the Institute - or even before, (so the computer printout from the RAF claimed.) Not surprised he can't talk, she observed from behind the surveillance window. His tongue is more like a lizard's or a snake's than a human's. The member in question was, indeed long, slim, and forked. He used it like a reptile too, flicking it continuously through his split top lip.

Testing, Tasting, Testing, Tasting.

For a moment she considered the way a snake places one fork of its tongue into each of the two holes in the roof of its mouth, sending a smell signal to its brain. This creature had two deep indentations in the roof of his mouth, just behind his large canines. Might they serve the same purpose?

Is he, she wondered, like a reptile? Tasting the air with that gruesome thing?

He'd been quiet and compliant, without protestation at the many (sometimes decidedly personal) investigations they'd carried out on him. Only once had he become wildly animated waving his hands in front of their faces and clicking his fingers in obvious distress. That had been yesterday the first time they had drawn blood from his arm. The needle had caused him no unease, but the sight of his blood being drawn upward into the syringe had clearly troubled him.

I wonder what his DNA will reveal ... the results are overdue.

As if by magic, a technician from the lab appeared and passed her a report on the creature's saliva. On a whim Jeanne had requested a sample be taken from the wall, she ran her eyes down the list of ingredients.

Odd... It's like he's filtering out every impurity in the room, as well as from each person with whom he's come in contact. I wonder how he copes with the investigations they've performed on him. Each person who comes close must exude a flood of chemicals - perfumes, soaps, and scrubs not to mention the fluoride in the water and the chemicals in the foods he's offered.

~

"Where'd they pick him up?" a male voice asked from her elbow, startling her although Jeanne restrained a reaction. Beside her stood the American anthropologist, Dr Tom Pinkerton, just up from London, on the Red-Eye this morning.

Good looking, she mentally assessed, even if he had seemed a bit 'geeky' when they were introduced earlier. Around my own age, mid-thirties, probably married, even though I can't see a ring. Taller than me but not by too much, dark, curly hair just flicking off his collar. Blue eyes, hmmm... not too bad, probably be a seven if I was to rate him. Shame he's a Yank and a bit full of himself.

Actually, she modified an instant later, he's a bit like my hubby Mike, well, when he was my hubby, years ago. But I really don't care to think about that.

"In the Cairngorms, North Slope of the Spittle of Glenshee near the standing stones" she replied, in answer to the Yank's question. "He was seen by an off piste skier. The RAF was called out and picked him up about an hour later. The chopper must've scared the

crap out of him.

"Speaking of that," she continued, "he hasn't completed a bodily function since he arrived. Not that he can't," she laughed at her new colleague's upraised eyebrow. "He's got all the necessary equipment."

"And some," he noted dryly. "It's been what, five days?"

"Seven, to be precise." She shifted resting a hip against the window ledge opposite the obbo pane. "I was brought in five days ago."

The doctor's good humour burst through, "So, you've been standing here five days, doing nothing but staring at him?" he grinned, "a guy should be so lucky."

"Maybe if you'd been found up at the Spittle and maybe if you had grey, zebra-like skin and a silver mane, I'd stare at you for five days too," she quipped, turning back to the Institute's latest inmate, patient, specimen.

Whatever he was.

"I'll get to work on that," promised the anthropologist with a half-chuckle as he edged closer to the glass. "You know," he said next bantering gone, "I've spent my time studying many so-called primitive tribes around the world. Seen a lot of strange people -- by our standards at least, places, customs, and things. But I've never seen anything like him."

"I know." Jeanne joined him at the glass, resuming her observatory post. "Me neither. I've been racking my brain and our computer files ever since I got here. Nothing. Nada. Zilch. No known human race shares this guy's qualities besides the obvious: two legs, two arms, a head, etcetera."

"You think he's human?" he asked.

She wrinkled her nose. "Looks human enough ... in some respects..." She couldn't blame the American for his obvious scepticism. In plenty of others ... he didn't.

"Maybe he's in some unstudied stage of evolutionary development."

"And maybe he's the Missing Link," she shot back. "Look, Doctor Pin---"

"Oh, call me Pink. Or, better yet, Tom," urged her companion with a more-than-friendly wink. "None of this 'doctor' stuff. We've been assigned to work this case together. Don't you think first names will make everything easier?"

Right, she thought, on guard. Drat but he reminds me of Mike, even down to that mischievous wink, which isn't necessarily a good thing; 'though I know I shouldn't judge on so short an acquaintance.

"Fine, I'd already thought of that." Although I can't bring myself to call him Pink, Tom, sure, but Pink? "And maybe, maybe, there's something in what you say about the evolutionary development I mean. But I've studied all the charts 'the anoraks' have come up with. He doesn't fit in anywhere; just doesn't fit any pattern. And if we've overlooked something, and he is the next stage of evolution for mankind...." Her voice faded as the thought struck home.

"Ouch." Her new colleague winced. "That'll put a crimp in the dating game."

In spite of herself, Jeanne struggled to hide a smile. "Exactly."

"So if he's not the Missing Link and if he's not some relic from evolution's past just now turned up," Tom spoke up, smoothly bringing the topic back on course, "just what is he?"

Once more, on the other side of the glass, the creature spat. Jeanne didn't bother glancing at her watch. She'd given that up days ago. His timing was never off.

"That's just the trouble," she sighed, leaning her forehead against the cool pane looking directly at the little creature. "You know, I haven't the foggiest idea."

## The Accident

Blackburn, Aberdeenshire

April 2011

"Paul, you up yet?" she called for the third time. "I swear that lad's a teenager already," she muttered under her breath. "Last chance laddie! Its round to your Nan's this morning. I know its Saturday but I gotta go into work for a couple of hours. I'm away in ten minutes!"

Hoping the threat had worked, Jeanne hurried back into the kitchen. Time for a quick top-up of hot-n-strong, stand-a-spoon-up-in-it. She placed her mug on the rack, popped in a capsule and pressed the pour button on her Nespresso --- "Mmmm." 'Perfect cup every time, no more pots to juggle with.' Her mind replayed the advertising jingle while her beaker filled with piping hot, strong black coffee.

After a satisfying sip, she shuffled up onto a barstool, and with the mug hanging from her bottom lip scanned the array of photos before her.

Pictures of him. Even after over a week, I still can't bring myself to think of him as an it, a mere creature.

The local radio station began playing the mushy old hit by Robbie, 'Millennium'. Studying the images, she tapped along with the beat on the granite worktop. Every which way but up, she mused.

It was her job to pick a couple for an inevitable press release. "Can't keep it under wraps any longer; we need to release something," the Commander had said. With a smile she chose two of the waist-up shots. Poor old dears would have apoplexy if they opened the Press and Journal and found that on page three, she thought looking at the others.

“What’s for breakfast mum?”

“You’ll have to grab some cereal hon, there’s a fresh carton of milk in the fridge, but not too much sugar now. I’ve been watching.”

“What you got there?” Seating himself beside her, Paul picked up one of the photos and stared intently at the print. He was silent for a moment, and then with a sad expression asked, “Is he a prisoner mum?”

“Well, ummm, not really. But ... well, actually... Maybe he is I guess...” Jeanne’s voice faltered as she considered her son’s question.

“Will I ever get to see him?”

“Sorry son. I shouldn’t think so. Why?”

“I know him.”

“What? Don’t be daft lad. How could you?”

“Not personally but I know him,” Paul declared adamantly. “He’s a Cryptid.”

“A what?”

“A Cryptid like in my book.”

Jeanne, suddenly interested pushed herself off the stool. “Go grab it for me.”

“You said we’ll be late.”

“Doesn’t matter,” she replied. “Just nip and grab it please?”

Obediently Paul dashed upstairs to his bedroom, and came clumping down a few moments later carrying a thick hardback. A birthday present from his dad a couple of

years previously. Jeanne thought, recognising the book. It was a bound set of drawings by a local artist specialising in fantasy art. It had cost Mike a pretty packet.

Paul lay the book on the work-surface and began to leaf through the pages. Intrigued, Jeanne leaned over his shoulder to watch. Forgot how vivid and lifelike these pictures were, she thought wonderingly.

Her son stopped at a full page print and tapped it. "There you go."

Glancing from one to the other she looked hard at the print comparing it to the photos. "Good grief," she said aloud, "you're right. It does look like him!" She thumbed back to the front flysheet, looking for the artist's name and bio. He was indeed a local, John Wilson with a studio in Aboyne, not forty miles from where the creature had been picked up.

"This guy knows a bit more than he's saying," Jeanne muttered, half to herself. I feel a trip to Aboyne coming soon.

The presenter on Northsound cut short the fadeout on Robbie's old hit with a local traffic bulletin. Still intent on the remarkable coincidence before her, Jeanne only half listened. 'An incident on the A90 at Muchalls'. Traffic at a standstill.' A petrol tanker had jack-knifed on the northbound carriageway.

Ouch, she thought remembering the times when she and Mike lived in Stonehaven, and the hours they'd spent on the cliff-top road, staring out to sea waiting for traffic to clear. Good job it's not a weekday.

Muchalls' bend was a nightmare, an accident black-spot. The snaking road dipped down into a valley with a gut wrenching curve followed by a steep climb from the bottom. They'd filled in a good portion of it when they dual carriage way-ed the road but it was still a nasty spot.

Jeanne was jerked out of the painful memory by her ringing mobile, the particular ring tone announced her Commander. The head of ANS and OWP (Off World Phenomena), the agency set up after the Holborn Circus Incident, was a blunt talking, no nonsense ex MI5 senior operative brought out of semi-retirement.

“Sir?”

“Mac, get your butt to Muchalls’ ASAP. There’s another one there for you; been hit by a truck but it’s still alive. Pick up Pink on your way. He’ll be waiting in the Asda car park near the petrol station. It’s a code red so toot-sweet. Speedo, speedo. Oh and forget what I said about going public with the little manikins. Wrap it up tighter’n a duck’s. Not a peep from now on.”

“Okay Guv, I’m on it.”

Flipping the phone shut she killed the connection. Damn! What to do with Paul? No time to drop him off at Mike’s mum’s place now. Guess he’ll have to tag along.

Out loud she ordered, “Let’s go lad.” Paul didn’t have to be told twice.

Shutting off the coffee machine Jeanne picked up the keys to the black Range Rover, her company car. She’d intended to use her own little Fiat that morning, but code red meant Blues and Twos and the little bubble car wasn’t fitted. She gave a tiny smile at the idea, her mind a whirl.

Another one! Where are they coming from? Then; I hope it’s a female this time.

Paul climbed into the rear, after ensuring his seatbelt was properly fastened Jeanne backed the four-by-four from the drive. Mentally, she planned the swiftest route: from her home in Blackburn. Cross the Brig o’ Don, hang a left and down the Boulevard. Briefly, she thought of the times she’d been ‘Boulie Bashing’ with her brother in their souped-up Nova. All the fun and buzz had been taken out of it now, with speed bumps and chicanes all over the place. Necessary, though. There’d been three deaths in the two years that Alan and I used to race up and down the seafront road.

Now here I am, blue lights flashing and sirens wailing, pushing a V8 monster down the same route. She grinned enjoying herself despite the urgency of her mission. No need to worry about the Bobbies. I’m one of them. She pulled a left at Mount Hoolie roundabout and was soon clattering across the cobbles on Market Street passing the big orange Rig Support craft, looking incongruous in the picturesque harbour. Hard right at the end of the road and along North Esplanade West past Duthie Park she sped.

The swings and slides were quiet at this time of the morning; the boating pond hut, shelter to two bedraggled ducks. To her left the Dee was in spate. She hung a left at the end of the road up and over the Brig o' Dee, finally letting the V8 have its head as she negotiated the roundabout and turned onto the A90 dual carriageway. Climbing the long hill out of town the Rover's motor growled contentedly while houses up the bank flashed past. Before long, she was in the countryside, dry stone wall bordered fields on either side. Within ten minutes she turned off the A90 into Portlethen.

Tom/Pink was waiting by the petrol station. Her heart gave a little skip as she caught sight of him. Opening the front door he slid in with a simple, "Hey," his voice rich and deep. Jeanne refused to acknowledge what that did to her insides.

"Hi," she replied, gesturing towards the back-seat. "This is my son Paul."

He turned, extending his hand. Paul shook it tentatively. "My name's Tom, but call me Pink if you like" he offered. Turning back to Jeanne he smiled and said, "Go, Go, Go" in a pathetic Murray Walker impersonation.

Grunting, Jeanne gunned the V8 and roared out of the car park taking the slip ramp back onto the A90. "It's only about six miles or so."

Tom nodded, settling himself for the remaining stretch of road. Traffic had begun to build up but it moved aside in response to her siren and flashing blue lights. They swiftly gained the crest of the hill overlooking the valley. Here the road was blocked solid; no slip road on this bit she remembered. Nothing coming from the other direction, the northbound carriageway must be blocked at the accident. How to get through?

Jeanne spotted the break in the Armco barrier just as he did.

"There," Tom said pointing.

She swung the vehicle through the gap before continuing on the wrong side of the road towards the accident. The road was indeed blocked at the point where a side road from Muchalls' joined the dual carriageway, in short order they were there.

Jeanne's came alive with excitement, her hands trembling on the wheel. Pointing the

car's nose through a dangerously small gap between two other vehicles she pulled to a squealing stop that had Tom grimacing and clutching the Ape hanger handle with both hands. Jeanne hid a smirk. Wanna ride with me, pal? Get over yourself.

To the man's credit, he kept his mouth shut, refraining from any obnoxious comment. The local police and a couple of big traffic cars were already at the scene along with a fire tender and an ambulance. A petrol tanker had indeed jack-knifed, the same one the radio announcer had been spitting about over the airwaves earlier, and she could see through the surrounding official legs, just a few paces from it ... Jeanne's pounding heart almost stopped in her chest. Tom leaned forward while Paul swiftly unbuckling himself, crept up between the two of them for a look.

"Look at that tanker mum," he breathed awestruck. "Wow, check that out!"

"I am, I am," Jeanne whispered but her gaze was fixed on a tiny figure rather than the massive Volvo. Throwing off her seat b she opened the door and dropped lightly to the damp roadside. It had been raining; it was usually raining this time of year. Could the rain have brought this - what did Paul call them, Cryptids, out? Hardly likely, but currently the best explanation I can see.

"Mum, can I come too?"

"Honey, stay in the car while I see what's going on," she called back over her shoulder. Sure, I know Paul is a good kid and not likely to get in the way. The other officials at the scene don't however, and the last thing a load of cops, firemen, and medics at the scene of a crash, especially one involving a petrol tanker want, is a twelve-year-old milling around.

Confidently she approached the scene, thankful for the official ID which she'd slung around her neck before leaving her home. She hadn't taken more than a few steps before a pimple-faced policeman, fresh into uniform tried to stop her. Jeanne flashed her card. The Home Office emblem, along with the official photo which she secretly liked, identified her. Letting it be known this was her business, and she wasn't going anywhere except closer. Clocking her badge the rookie didn't dare argue, and even hovered at her elbow as she pushed her way through the little throng and up to the front.

She turned to address her self-appointed escort. "Get yourself around this lot. No photos are to be taken. Any that have been; get deleted, and make sure you check every mobile too. I don't want any pictures or videos popping up on 'YouTube' before the government's ready. You got that?"

"Yes, ma'am," he replied, and sped off to comply with her orders. Gonna be a lot of annoyed amateur paps, she thought.

On the tarmac, near the slip road where it had been flung, lay a creature curled in a foetal position. The only things moving were its eyes, darting from face to face, and a long forked tongue, flicking in and out of its split upper lip.

April 2011

Without a doubt it was another one, Jeanne saw at once that her wish had been granted. It was unmistakably female. Heavy, full breasts visibly announcing her gender, her proportions rivalling that of her male counterpart's insignia. Something about the shape and swell of the creature's chest struck Jeanne as noteworthy. She tucked away the notion for future analysis.

If the male was short, the female was tiny. About three-one, three-two, Jeanne guessed. She wore a hooded jacket and tight-fitting pants similar to the male, although unlike his plain tan clothing, hers boasted fantastic embroidery: vivid green and blue swirls and sprays intertwined with intricate inlaid stitches of red. I guess females all over have a love of colours and clothes in common, Jeanne thought, amused.

The creature's boots were a soft, lace-up affair, comfortable and practical looking. A small haversack was slung across her shoulder. Around her neck was a carved necklace, matching the baubles dangling from her ears and wrists. Her hair was less abundant than the male's mane but equally long and thick. Silvery grey like the male's, Jeanne noted, but with copper streaks instead of black. Coarse and wiry, it fell from her head like a human female's and was swept behind her shoulders, bound in place by a simple leather cord.

"She's scared," a female paramedic to Jeanne's left stated softly. Blood spotted her plastic gloves, and her dark hair was slipping from its no-nonsense ponytail. She looked frazzled and frustrated, mixed with an unhealthy dose of anxiety.

"Lots of vehicles and cars," Jeanne pointed out. "Commotion, sirens, noise: I'd be scared too if I were her."

"Point taken, but we ought to get her in the ambulance. She's been lying down there for

nearly half an hour. She doesn't appear badly hurt, not that I can get close long enough for a thorough examination. Touched her once, and she freaked out. You can see she's got a head injury, although it appears superficial. Still, we really need to get her inside where we can strap her down and check her over."

As the paramedic had pointed out, blood was visible on the female's head, even from where Jeanne stood. Already it was drying on her grey zebra-skin. Some had crusted in her hairline, and even the hair itself. Appears to be a scalp wound, they always bleed the most.

Noting the thickness of the creature's arms, Jeanne thought, you try to strap her down and you'll likely have a big fight on your hands. She refrained from saying so aloud. Instead, she asked, "Do we have a witness? Did anyone see what happened?"

"Umm..." The paramedic rotated her head to the left in a peculiarly owlsh gesture. "There was a woman here who claimed she saw everything. Oh there she is."

She singled out a trim blonde wearing a coat too heavy even for the chilly morning, clutching it around herself like a talisman to ward off evil. Across the distance Jeanne could see a haunted glaze in her pale eyes; what, exactly, had she seen?

"Okay, thanks." She clapped the paramedic on the shoulder. "Keep everyone away from her for a minute, will you? I'll talk to the witness; try and get some idea of what she saw. Then I'll see to her." She nodded at the creature.

The medic nodded, turning to her partner on her right she instructed him to keep back and pass the word. Help had arrived, and someone - meaning Jeanne - knew what to do. Overhearing her comment Jeanne stifled a laugh. I must put on a pretty brave front, because I sure don't feel like I know what to do.

"Excuse me, madam?"

The blonde turned at her approach, her address. "Yes?"

About my own age, and well-preserved. No sign of wrinkles and 'well coiffured' too, Jeanne quickly assessed.

"I'm told that you witnessed the, um -"

"Accident?" the woman supplied helpfully. "I did. I was coming up from the other direction. Saw a lot more than just the tanker jack-knifing."

Somewhere near the Midlands. A bit of a Brummy burr in there, Jeanne thought hearing the woman's accent and continuing her rapid mental assessment.

"Can you tell me what happened?"

"Why? Who are you? A reporter or something?"

Odd. Jeanne could've sworn the woman's posture suddenly turned defensive. However, when she flashed her credentials, the woman calmed down.

"Right," she said. "Well, here's what happened. I was heading south towards Stonehaven. It was raining and pretty misty as well. Made it kinda hard to see.

"Just as I rounded the bend at the bottom, I spotted that tanker coming towards me on the other carriageway and just as we were about to pass, out of nowhere - and I mean right out of the freakin' rain - that thing appears. Whatever it is. It obviously wasn't paying any attention to where it was going. Too busy staring down at a bundle it was carrying, I guess. Anyways - "

"Wait, it was carrying something?" Jeanne was quick to jump on that detail.

"Yeah, couldn't tell what it was. -- Anyways, so it's like it had just run up the gully from the railway tracks down there and it darted out crossin' the road right in front of my car, and then it leaps the central reservation and runs slap bang in front of the tanker. We both slammed on our anchors at the same moment."

The rest of the story was easy to work out. Both vehicles had swerved, the woman's car ending up in a ditch facing down a bank, while the creature had been clipped by the skidding tanker. The witness had hardly stopped talking before Jeanne thanked her and edged away heading back towards the creature.

Still in its supine position, the Cryptid now had both arms wrapped around herself and was softly keening in a high staccato wail. Had she been human, Jeanne would've sworn it was crying but no tears dampened her cheeks. Human or not the worry stamped on her round, grey face, flat broad nose, and dark split lips was very real.

Poor little begger.

Something sharp and empathetic pierced Jeanne's chest. For all the world, the female appeared to have lost something terribly valuable, her grief almost like a mother bemoaning a lost child. Any woman can identify that.

"Ma'am, I wouldn't go too close if I were you."

Another cop, not the pimple-faced rookie touched her elbow gently. "She's well agitated tried to attack the medics when they went to check her out."

"Apparently she didn't try very hard."

"Ma'am?" The officer was clearly taken aback.

"Look at her arms and shoulders. She's strong. If she'd wanted to do damage she could have. I'm sure she was just reacting out of fright, not malice."

"Hmmm." The man wasn't mollified. "Well, I recommend you stay a safe distance away. Besides, we don't even know what that thing is."

"I do."

"Beg pardon?"

"I said, I do," she repeated louder. "And I'm going in. Maybe I can calm her down."

~

"Might want to take this with you."

Tom's voice, less than a pace away snapped Jeanne's head around. When she saw him standing beside her grinning freckled son, saw what Paul was holding her eyes widened.

"What the ...?"

In Paul's arms, bundled tightly in a coarse brown blanket, like a wee cloutie dumpling was the tiniest baby she'd ever seen. This explains everything! She realised. The female's swollen breasts and forlorn look. She's a nursing mother and thought she lost her baby. Of course!

She reached for the infant; Paul slid the teeny youngster carefully into her arms.

"Isn't it great, mum? Tom - ah, Pink, told me I could get out so long as I stuck with him. We were poking around, just to make sure nothing got overlooked, when I found it. Isn't it great, mum? Isn't it? Isn't it? I found it - I mean, we found it. Pink and me, a real baby Cryptid, just like in my book!"

How is this possible? Wondered Jeanne. It's just too bizarre for words.

She glanced again at the little bundle, opening the blanket slightly. A hasty inspection revealed its sex - male, with its umbilical cord still attached. A few specks of blood dotted its head. This is a brand new model if ever I saw one, she thought with a matronly pang. The mother must have given birth within the last few hours. Her practiced eye darted over its extremities, finding all its bits and pieces in place. Nothing untoward, just so very tiny.

As she stood staring down into the baby's large, oval eyes, Jeanne felt another pair of eyes upon her. She looked up. The female was watching her closely, fully aware of what she held.

Soon as their eyes met, the creature came up from the tarmac in one fluid movement and stood with her arms out, obviously begging for the infant. When Jeanne didn't immediately comply, the female began to click her fingers loudly, almost insistently. Gently, Jeanne passed the precious bundle back to its mother, who immediately opened her top and clasped it to a breast. The infant responded by taking the nipple in its mouth.

The babe now in her arms, the female became as quiet and as compliant as her male counterpart back at the Turner. Jeanne was able to guide the little creature and her offspring to the back of the ambulance, aiding her up the steps and into the interior. There, the waiting paramedics swiftly set to cleaning the wound.

"It's not too bad," said the medico with whom she'd spoken earlier, turning to Jeanne who stood at the rear door. "We'll patch her up and take her to ARI."

"No!" Jeanne responded firmly. "Not the Infirmary, the Turner Institute building. You know it? Far side of the main car-park."

"Aye, ken't," acceded the male medic in a thick Aberdonian accent. "Yon secret placie."

"If you say so," Jeanne replied darkly, making sure the guy clocked her ID, adding weight to her orders.

Outside, the traffic cops were in the process of getting the opposite carriageway moving, waving the crawling eye-ballers past with angry gestures. Probably set up a two-way filter on the southbound side, which meant loads of overtime looming. The road would be slow running until the tanker was recovered. They began shepherding the rubbernecks, who had wandered from their vehicles to the front of the holdup for a looksee back to their cars and trucks.

Jeanne watched for a few moments as one of the policemen directed a tow truck to hook up to the back end of the witness's Renault Laguna, pulling it up the bank. The vehicle was a W Reg, year 2000, in showroom condition. Or was... Crying shame... She shook her head. Got some scrapes and dents now.

Jeanne turned back to the job at hand. "I'm going to take the back road to Netherley, and jump round this holdup. It'll be an hour before I get to Stoney through this lot. My mobile's not secure and I need a line pronto. The only place I'll get one is the local cop shop.

"Tom, can you ride with them in the ambulance. Make sure they get to the right place."

The Yank didn't protest, and with a nod climbed in the back with the creature and her

baby. The doors shut, hiding him from view. Within moments the ambulance was on its way, yodelling off towards Aberdeen, blue lights flashing.

Jeanne flicked open her phone and tapped the screen icon, speed-dialling her Commander in London. "On its way to the office," she said, and closed the connection.

She strode back to the woman in the coat, who was watching the final recovery of her vehicle. "I'm going to need your name and address, madam. Please give them to the officer over there." She singled out the rookie.

"Make sure you pass her details to Stoney Nick soon as," she murmured to the young officer, who came quickly at her beckoning.

"Yes, ma'am," he responded, pleased to be recognised as having some worth.

Eddie Thomson

Stonehaven, Aberdeenshire

April 2011

The Netherley road a well known rat-run, was full of knowledgeable locals making their way around the blockage; even so Jeanne made good time to Stonehaven. The picturesque little town had not changed much from when she and Mike lived there. Speeding down the hill past the cliff top golf course and the outdoor swimming pool she rumbled over the Cowie Bridge and was soon in the town.

She passed the market square on her right with its encircling brown sandstone buildings. Nowadays the square operated as the town centre car park, and, she noticed was already filling.

She almost missed her favourite 'take away' the Harbour fish bar as she crossed the little stream at the far end of town. The 'chipper' was renowned as being the ancestral home of the infamous deep fried, battered Mars-bar. It had been a couple of lads during her last year at Mackie who had first conceived of the bizarre delicacy. Once over the bridge she turned left towards the harbour then immediately right and pulled into the Police Station car park. Nosing her way into a slot between a pair of Trannie vans she hopped out, and with Paul in tow made her way inside.

The desk sergeant looked up lazily, and then sprang to life as he recognised her. Ouch, it had to be Eddie Thomson, Mike's friend and his one time partner when they were together in traffic. I haven't seen him for at least five years. He hit the button to open the glass security doors.

"Morning ma'am to what do we owe the honour?"

"I need a quiet office and a secure line to London."

"Won't be a moment. Hi Paulie, how you doing? - Gad you've grown since I saw you last," the burly man's voice softened, "Seen your dad lately."

"Not since last month," replied Paul, "he's in Manchester now."

"So I heard. --- This way ma'am," he was decidedly chilly with her. Ach, so what, it wasn't her that had caused the break up, but it seemed men always stuck together in these things. Easy to blame her job and her ambitions, not the fact that he had strayed off the straight and narrow.

"Can Paul stay out here with you, Eddie?"

"Sure Je... ma'am no probs."

Almost slipped up there, she thought sarcastically.

Once she was alone in the office, she dialled the Commander in London and gave a full verbal report logging times and events. Nipping back to the front desk where Eddie was in deep conversation with Paul she broke in, "Have you received the name and address of the witness to the accident yet?"

"Aye, it's just come in I was all set to bring it through to you."

Yeah, sure, when you'd finished jawing.

He passed her a piece of paper she ran her eyes down it; Aboyne, now why did that ring a bell, ah yes, - that was where the fantasy artist had his studio, 'curiouser and curiouser' she mused, and Wilson, wasn't that also the artist's name?

"Funny thing - they've arrested the woman be bringing her in soon," Eddie commented, "her car hasn't been taxed or insured for ten years, and it's never been MOT'd either. She swears black is white that it's brand new, and she's only just picked it up from Anderson Cars' in Tullos."

"That's ridiculous; didn't they go belly up in oh one?" Mike and I bought our first car from the Langstracht branch a couple'a years before Paul came along, and that was years ago.

"Aye."

She went back into the office, picked up the phone, passed the name and address across and concluded her call with; "I'm off back to the Turner soon, I'll give you another report later."

She made her way back to the front office where Paul was still chatting to Eddie, "I was just telling Eddie about me finding the Cryptid baby, Mum."

"Eddie, you got live feed from the cameras at Muchalls?"

"Aye, all three working fine, I was clocking the shenanigans as you came in."

"Can you download me everything on to here please," Jeanne passed him a slim memory stick. "Don't worry it'll have enough space, its two TaBs."

"Two TerraBytes, Sheoot! - Where'd you get this? Sorry Ma'am," he said as he realised his expletive slip.

"Never mind, give me everything from half an hour before the accident up to now."

"Take a few minutes," the burly Sergeant said.

"No probs I'll wait, I'm taking the Slug back to Aberdeen," she said, once the data transfer had begun giving the rat-run its nick-name, and passing him a card "Here's my number, give me a call if that woman comes up with anything interesting."

Little did the blonde witness know but her entire life was about to be turned inside out, and scrutinised with a very fine toothed comb.

~

"C'mon Paul, let's go," Jeanne said pocketing the memory stick.

"'K mum."

"Don't forget; gi'us a call if that wifie comes up with anything out of the ordinary."

The sergeant responded with a curt "Ma'am," and triggered the inner door release. He then turned his attention back to the monitor screens and his paperwork. Jeanne closed the large double outer doors, she and Paul walked across the car park towards the Range Rover.

"Can I sit up front, mum?"

"Sure honey," Jeanne responded absentmindedly her thoughts on the female and baby. Should be at the institute by now, that Yank better look after them, or I'll have his guts for garters.

The road out of town was fairly busy. Jeanne remembered all the twists and turns as though it had been only yesterday that she had last driven along the 'Slug'. Before long they were on the tree lined South Deeside road following the banks of the River Dee back towards Aberdeen.

"You hungry?"

"Yeah, I didn't get to finish my breakfast you rushing out of the house like that," Paul said accusingly.

"Okay, I quite fancy a couple of Rowies. Let's go see if that baker is still there," just off Union Street, they used to do real bramers in there.

"What's a Rowie?"

"It's a type of pastry you'll see, we loved them, your dad and I. Mind you I guess my arteries will start screaming in protest when they see that much cholesterol heading their way." Jeanne chuckled and concentrated her attention on the twisting road.

Paul pressed the radio ON button, music pumped out from the wrap round speakers, it was a current top twenty hit with a heavy drum and bass line. Jeanne glanced at the digital clock readout on the dash, only a couple of hours have passed since we were listening to this station.

What a weird couple of hours it's been.

## The Cryptids

Turner Institute, Aberdeen

April 2011

The bakery was exactly where it had been when she used to frequent it almost daily. Jeanne picked up a bag of six, first making sure they were well buttered and spread thickly with strawberry jam.

As they sat and munched on the delicious flaky pastries she planned her route from Rose Street to Nan's. Smiling at her recall of the street names, she took time to look around as they ate their Rowies. Rowies aka Aberdeen Butteries, 'Butter' and that said it all, she thought, still they tasted absolute fine.

Everything looked the same, but it wasn't; not now it wasn't. Things are never going to be the same.

"Like them?"

"They're nice, funny though, the salty and jammy taste together, did dad like them?"

"He could never get enough of them," she replied with a pang, more memories flooding back.

Perhaps it hadn't been such a good idea after all. She licked her fingers and then brushed flakes and crumbs from the front of her jacket, "we'll save the rest till later, I'm needing a cuppie to wash that lot down. C'mon then, buckle up. I'll drop you off at your Nan's."

Jeanne stabbed the start button and the big V8 thrummed into life, following her pre-planned route she soon deposited Paul at his grandmother's. Minutes later she was through the security gates and turning into the Turner Institute car park. She pulled into her allotted spot, even though being a Saturday, there were plenty of other empty spaces to choose from.

The front desk was manned by a young armed serviceman, he watched closely as she pressed her badge to the ID slab. When satisfied with the monitor feedback of her credentials and image, he motioned her to a set of double glass doors, Jeanne approached and waited, as the first set opened she stepped forward, the doors swished shut behind her, - a scanner hummed. The doors in front of her opened, sliding into recesses on either side. As she cleared the second set, with a further hiss they closed and locked behind her. Bloody Star Trek, she thought not for the first time, I wonder when James T is going to appear.

As she turned the corner she saw the American talking to two guards outside the male Cryptid's room. The anthropologist looked up and smiled, he raised his hand in a mock salute to Jeanne. "Hi, you got here then."

The creature stood up and walked to the viewing strip directly opposite to where Jeanne had stopped. There was no way he could see her through the one way glass and the wall below it, but he seemed to be inspecting her. After a minute he turned, and stood in the middle of the floor, still looking in her direction.

"He's looking right at me," said Jeanne in a shocked whisper, Tom moved behind her and put his hands on her shoulders. "That's the first time he's taken an interest in anyone or anything since he's been here," she gasped. Excitement, or is it his hands on my shoulders, tingeing her voice, and causing a visible shudder to run down her spine.

The Cryptid stood as though he was watching them intently. Tom moved to the door, keyed the combination and stepped inside. "Hello, I'm Tom," he said and held out his hands palms upwards.

Jeanne's heart was in her mouth, she held her breath.

The Cryptid dipped his head slightly, almost a bow; he then flicked his long forked tongue suddenly into Tom's face. The gruesome appendage darted around Tom's

features, touching, sensing, and probing. Tom stood frozen, his hands still outstretched. The creature then investigated his hands. As quickly as he had stood, the creature resumed his position, on the floor.

Tom stepped out of the room. Jeanne let her breath go in a loud puff.

The Cryptid spat.

“He’s very hot.”

“What?”

“I said he’s very hot, that’s why he’s taken his clothes off.”

“Makes sense,” said one of the guards.

Jeanne walked to the other side of the doorway and looked at the readouts, “Its only 25 degrees in there, that’s not too hot.”

“It might be for him,” observed Tom, “imagine how an Eskimo would feel at those temperatures.”

“What do you think then Mr Anthropologist?” Jeanne said feeling a little put out that she hadn’t worked out the reasons behind the creature’s naturist tendencies.

“Turn it down to 10, see what he does.”

Jeanne picked up the phone and spoke to the ops room, “It’ll be about half an hour before it gets chilly in there, let’s go and check out the little mother.” She spun on her heel and set off down the corridor. Tom fell in alongside her, leaving the guard to stand watch over the male.

“You could get in big trouble calling her that in the States,” remarked Tom with a chuckle.

"What? Oh, ha, ha." Jeanne smiled and mocked laughter as she realised just what she had said, this guy brings out the worst in me.

The little female was at least sat on the bed, her baby lying beside her. The little bag that had been strapped across her shoulders, next to the baby, open. Jeanne could make out that it contained the tiniest, cutest little jacket she had ever seen in her life, among other items.

Jeanne phoned ops again to have the temperature regulated, and entered the room alone. A small group of scientists were lined up along the observation strip. She knew cameras were monitoring and recording every movement the female made. The on-line audience included observers in many parts of the country.

The female looked up at her, and what could be classed as recognition flickered across her strange, flattened features. She raised her left hand and made a quick set of movements with her forefinger and thumb, giving a little click to complete the sequence.

Her tongue flicked disconcertingly towards Jeanne's face. Jeanne spread both her hands out as Tom had done to show they were empty, and that she meant no harm. The female flicked her tongue against each hand before settling herself alongside her baby.

Her tongue isn't even wet, thought Jeanne in surprise. She sat on the bed on the other side of the child and gently opened the rough covers to take a better look. The female watched her closely, her eyes tracking every movement.

The baby was much like the two adults, olive skinned, with variegated darker markings and swirls all across his body. Very obviously male, and with a thick mop of silver hair extending to his shoulders, be a fine mane one day.

Jeanne rose from the bed and washed her hands in the basin, making sure the female saw every movement she made. "I'm not going to demonstrate how to use the loo for you or anyone," she said aloud to the creature which jumped slightly at the sound of her voice.

"That's a pity," quipped Tom from the door. The female spun her head towards his voice and whistled once, loudly.

"Too right girl, my sentiments exactly," said Jeanne with a chuckle.

"Can I come in?"

"Aye, just for a minute then."

Tom slipped into the room and walked up to the female. She looked him up and down, and then flicked her tongue against his outstretched hands. She then looked immediately at Jeanne and began a low crooning sound. The little Cryptid stretched out both her hands taking one each of theirs. Her little hands are quite rough, used to hard work. The female brought their hands together until they were touching.

Without thinking, Jeanne took Tom's hand into her own; the creature immediately placed her hands over theirs and squeezed. What the heck is she trying to say? The female Bogart grimaced, was that a smile? I'd like to think so. Jeanne and Tom both responded with huge grins.

They left the room together, still holding hands. As they approached the door, Tom quickly wiped his eyes on the sleeve of his jacket. "That was one of the most moving things I have ever experienced," he said, his face beaming, his voice catching, full of emotion.

Jeanne reduced the brightness of the lighting in the room until it was no more than a dim residue around the walls. "Let's do the same for the wee laddie shall we? Too hot, too bright, poor kid."

They made their way back, leaving the second guard with the little pack of observers outside the female's room.

"He's just now started dressing," the first guard ventured.

The Cryptid was pulling on his boots.

Jeanne was in a great mood, she must have been to have taken her next move. "Let's introduce them," she said.

"You sure?" Tom was momentarily hesitant.

"Any reason why not?"

"Not that I can think of, and you're the boss. - I'll get him," he continued.

"Go on then."

Tom strode confidently into the room. The Cryptid looked up at his entrance; Tom spread his hands the way Jeanne had done to the female. The creature's forked tongue flicked across them, lingering where the female had held him.

At a gesture from Tom the creature rose to its feet. He is just a bit shorter than my boy was at five, thought Jeanne comparing the Cryptid to Tom in height. She followed the two along the corridor.

At the door to the female's room, the little male became quite excited, shuffling his weight from one foot to the other and making huffing noises. Jeanne increased the intensity of the lighting and opened the door.

The male stepped inside; the two humans took up positions at the door.

For a while the two Cryptids stood just looking at each other. The female hesitantly raised one hand, and began to make a series of movements with her fingers. The male responded in like manner.

"They're talking with their hands," said Tom, "my niece has been doing deaf and dumb signing for a couple of years at school. It's just like that."

The two Cryptids then sat either side of the baby; they brought their heads close together and extended their tongues into each other's mouths. They held the pose, eyes closed for at least a minute. Breaking off with a flurry of finger clicking and gestures. The male stood and walked towards the door, obviously ready to leave the room. Jeanne held the door for him. He exited without a backward glance and strode swiftly to his own room. Reaching the door he waited until it was opened by the guard. Once back in his room he sat, this time on the bed, and began staring into space.

Jeanne watched him go, disappointed that he had not spent more time with the little female, who in turn, had remained sat on the bed, and was now feeding her baby, her tongue flicking in and out, touching the child's face with obvious tenderness.

Taking an opportunity to check the little female's injury, Jeanne could see that it was little more than a scrape and would soon heal. The female stood her probing without a glimmer of concern.

They are so trusting; I just hope we can keep it that way.

As she left the room her mobile chirruped, taking it from her pocket she checked the incoming number, 'Stoney' code, could only be Eddie.

"McLennan," she responded.

"Eddie here Ma'am, we've been questioning the witness, I'm afraid there are some serious inconsistencies in her statement, and she now has just refused to speak to anyone other than you."

"Have you charged her?"

"Yep, driving a vehicle without valid tax and insurance, she'll be in front of the 'beak' on Monday week. And she's on the missing persons list too, computer flagged up a crazy message as soon as we entered her name and address."

"Okay, I'd like to interview her, can you arrange for her to be brought to the Turner Institute, it's just off Foresterhill road."

"I know where you mean, I'm on my way to Aberdeen in a few minutes, I'll pop her on board, and we should be with you in less than an hour."

"K, cheers Eddie."

She cut the connection and continued to her office, Tom following. Dialling the front desk, she informed Security of the impending arrival of the woman.

"Now before 'Blondie' gets here, let's get that cup of coffee, and scoff off the rest of these Rowies," Tom raised his eyebrows in question, "Wait 'n' see, you'll not be disappointed," she continued.

"I'm entirely in your hands," he said in a dark voice, the innuendo was not lost on her; she flashed a glare at him.

Behave Mister.

Slightly more than half an hour later a call came through from the main desk informing them of the arrival of the blonde witness.

"I'll go fetch," said Tom.

Yvonne Wilson

Turner Institute, Aberdeen

April 2011

The woman entered the office looking distressed and totally exhausted. Jeanne sat her down and offered a cup of tea. She muttered her thanks and sat with her eyes flickering about, taking in all the objects in Jeanne's office.

"The police keep telling me that it's not 2000, please tell me that I'm not going crazy, it is isn't it?"

"Let's all start at the beginning shall we, first off, what's your name and address?"

"Craigdendarroch Farm, Rhu-na-Haven Road, Aboyne, my name is Yvonne Wilson, we've been staying with my brother-in-law and his wife for the past six months while my divorce goes through."

"You said we, who else?"

"My two daughters, Annie and Linda, Annie's twelve and Linda fifteen. I said all this to the Police; do I have to go through it again?"

"Sorry, but yes. Where were you living before Aboyne?"

"In Kidderminster, with my ex."

"Address?"

"Bewdley Road," she gave a number which Jeanne noted down.

"His name?"

"Brian ... Brian Wilson - yeah, I know, like in the Beach Boys."

"Just a minute," said Jeanne, let's pump this lot in and see what we get. She turned to the computer alongside her and opened up the government's 'Big Brother' page; she entered the given information and hit the search button with the mouse.

The PC's speakers gave a sharp buzz and the screen changed. A red band filled the top inch of the screen with the words 'MISSING 2000, PRESUMED DECEASED' flashing, in sharp contrasting white.

Yvonne, who had full view of the screen, gave a tight scream and slumped in her chair as she read the words. Clamping her hands to her mouth, she began to moan. "What's happening, please help me, I don't understand."

"I've an idea," ventured Tom, the first words he had uttered since they sat around the desk. "It sounds crazy, but it's the only darn explanation I can see."

"Go on," said Jeanne.

"Your car is in showroom condition."

"I only picked it up this morning," Yvonne interjected.

"It was licensed, insured and plated in 2000. Everything you have on you, your clothes, your diary, makeup, the whole kybosh points to the beginning of the century, millennium, call it what you will, it's all from the year 2000 agreed?"

Yvonne looked on in dread, her eyes wide, her breath was coming in gasps, "Yes, that's right," she yelped.

"But it's not 2000 now. Look around you, this desk diary, the wall calendar. The

computer equipment in here, and look here at my cell, seen anything like that before?" he paused, letting the woman compose herself. "This is no hoax Yvonne, what reason would we have to try and kid you?"

Yvonne's eyes were even wider now, her lower lip was quivering and she looked on the point of collapse, her body began to shake as the enormity of what she was being forced to accept was thrust upon her.

Jeanne came round the desk and cradled the stricken woman in her arms as Tom concluded his theory. "I somehow think you have been catapulted into the future, you've been thrown forward in time."

As Tom finished speaking, Yvonne gave in to her pent up emotions. Letting her whole body slump into Jeanne's arms she began sobbing; dragging great gulps of air into her lungs.

"Get her a drink Tom. Just outside in the corridor, the cooler bottle."

Tom hurried to do as she bid, and in moments was back with a paper cone filled with chilled water. Yvonne sipped gratefully at it, composing herself. "How can I get back home?" her voice was a whispered plea.

"I really don't know sweetheart, but we'll do everything we can to see if we can find your family," said Jeanne.

"Will they all be older?" her eyes were wide as she grasped the enormity of her own question.

"I think you can be sure of that," said Tom gently.

Yvonne buried her head in her hands for a moment, then with a deep breath she sat up straight, and with the strength of character of one who has suffered much and borne it stoically, she said, "So what else does your computer thingie say about me then?"

"I'll have a look."

Jeanne moved back to the screen and began searching for information. As she found references to Yvonne or her case, she spooled them to the printer in the corner of the room. Quite a pile had accumulated by the time she finished. Yvonne sat silently, watching Jeanne as she worked, sipping on the paper cone of water, and then crumpling it into a soggy mess.

Tom picked up the printouts and began to scan through them. "I think you better get this little lady's court hearing quashed if you can. It looks like she has been telling the truth and my theory is right after all," he said his voice hushed and unsteady.

Jeanne picked up the phone, tapped a number, and after a short while began speaking to the on duty desk sergeant, at the little police station in Stonehaven. "Is that Eddy? No... not back yet? Have you sent off the charges on Mrs Yvonne Wilson? - No, well hold them, in fact bin 'em please. Authority? - mine - Home Office, MI5. Yes it's that important. Thank you." She replaced the receiver with a sigh. "Small town cops, so full of their own self importance." Oops - shouldn't have said that, but it's true, get on my wick sometimes.

Tom was smiling widely, "Love it when she gets angry, - turns green and throws trucks about."

Yvonne was totally bemused.

Ignoring Tom's feeble effort at some sort of humour, Jeanne said, "Tom can you take a look in on our 'little' family members, I've a call to make. Yvonne, I think you better come home with me, you're going to need a decent night's rest before we try and sort out what's going on."

"Can't I just go home?"

"And if they aren't there anymore, what then, and if they are, what type of a reception do you think you'd get just turning up on the doorstep?"

Yvonne's face crumpled as she realised Jeanne was right.

"Anyway, what difference are a couple of days going to make after all these years?"

Jeanne said with a tight grin.

“And hey, I did only see them this morning anyway,” said the blonde woman, looking straight into Jeanne’s eyes and forcing a twisted smile of her own.

John Wilson

Aboyne, Aberdeenshire

April 2011

"Hello?" The voice was warm, deep and decidedly Scottish.

"Hello, - John Wilson?" Jeanne asked as the phone was answered.

"Mmm, --- yes, who's calling?"

"My name is Dr. Jeanne McLennan; I'm with the ANS in Aberdeen. I'd appreciate the opportunity to meet with you as soon as possible, it's very important."

"What's it all about?"

"I'm sorry sir; but it's not something I care to discuss over the phone."

"Who'd you say you were with?"

"The ANS - Academy of Natural Sciences."

"Oh," there was a pause before he spoke again, "when?"

"Today, it'll take us about an hour to get to you is that convenient?"

"Yeah, I guess so, is it important?"

"I'm afraid it's very important, sir."

"Okay, see you in about an hour then, I take it you know how to get here?"

"Yes, if we can meet in the Lobby of the Huntly Arms, any problems with that?"

"Err, no, see you there then."

Jeanne thanked him and replaced the handset, she turned to Tom, "we can pick up Yvonne from my place on the way out."

"You taking Paul?"

"I was thinking of dropping him off at his Nan's."

"Why not bring him along, be a treat for him to meet the artist who put that book together."

"I've been thinking more about the strange coincidence of how Yvonne happens to be the sister-in-law, of the guy who draws pictures of the creature she almost wipes out. I think there's a lot more going on than we know about, and I intend to get to the bottom of it."

"I agree, anyway about Paul?"

Jeanne nodded, hmm, she thought, nice that he gets along with Paul, but why? What ulterior motive has he got? Don't want to see my lad disappointed if he drops us like a couple of hot potatoes. - What am I thinking? He's just a work colleague, not a clandestine lover. I'd prefer to keep it that way, but he keeps shooting out signals, what's a girl to think?

"Okay, be a nice ride out for him too." She muttered. Stop being stupid.

They left the office together, Jeanne walked alongside the anthropologist down the corridor, every step they took drove his nearness into her being, she caught a whiff of

his aftershave, mmm, nice. They soon reached the double doors. She pressed her ID card to the pad; Tom followed suit; they then waited for the security guard to permit their exit.

As they left the building, Jeanne flipped her mobile open, and thumbed the teddy-bear icon to speed-dial Paul's mobile; he would be mortified if he knew of my choice of icon.

"Hi mum."

"Get Yvonne for me please, darling."

She heard him call out and a few moments later the woman spoke, "Hi Jeanne, what's up?"

"Fancy a trip to Aboyne?"

"You bet, try and stop me."

"Okay, stick Paul back on please."

Her son came on the phone, Jeanne gave him a few further instructions on locking up the house and closed with, "Be with you in a bit, lovie."

The journey to Aboyne was uneventful. The picturesque drive along the North Deeside Road was only slowed as they negotiated the main street through the beautiful town of Banchory.

The houses and villages lining the A93 to Ballater at the foot of the Grampian Mountains were mostly built from granite, and all had a common look of strength and character about them even though in design they were quite different.

"How come these properties are all built of granite, and yet most of the traditional buildings south of here are all red sandstone?" Tom asked, almost reading her mind.

"I remember this coming up at school, it's something to do with the Highland Boundary

Fault - often referred to as the Highland Line - it's a geological rock feature running diagonally across the Scottish mainland from Helensburgh in the west to Stonehaven, well Muchalls to be exact, in the north east. Granite hills and mountains sit to the north of this fault, and to the south of it everything is of red sandstone. Take a look at the dissimilarity between the older properties in Aberdeen and those in Dundee or Edinburgh, local stone was always used for building, hence the differences." Jeanne replied.

"I often wondered about that, but never had the courage to ask. Bad enough being an in-comer, without being classed as a thick one," Yvonne laughed.

"There's a theory that Scotland is made up of a number of totally different pieces. North of the Highland line including the Grampians, was once part of Scandinavia and believe it or not, Maine in North America too, whereas everything below it, including England, drifted north, having broken away from Europe. They came together or split apart, or whatever, and have been floating about all over the place for some four hundred million years or so."

"You make it sound so simple," said Tom, "so are we cousins then?"

"Not me kidder, I was born south of the dividing line, in Edinburgh, I'm a Sassenach, a lowlander."

Tom chuckled, "I'll never understand you Brits and your tribal games. For a little bitty set of islands you really have a lot of strange divisions."

"You better believe it," said Yvonne.

The conversation ended as the outskirts of Aboyne, with its beautiful granite buildings and homes loomed up on them.

"We're meeting John Wilson in the Huntly Arms hotel - I thought it best to keep on neutral territory for starters," said Jeanne to Yvonne, "You two make yourselves scarce until the guy's got his head around things, okay?" Yvonne and Paul nodded.

"We can have a look round the shops. See how things have changed since I was here a

couple of days ago.” Yvonne sounded excited, her voice raising an octave as she realised the enormity of what she had just said. Her eyes were flicking left and right, taking in any differences as they drove into the town.

“Much changed?” asked Tom, watching her.

“A little, but not as much as I expected, mostly things like trees and bushes, new properties, where there were empty fields. And the horse sanctuary on the North Deeside has changed quite a bit, the girls and I used to help out there... I had some very good friends who ran one of the shops in the old Railway Parade, can I look them up?”

“Remember eleven years have passed, don’t go scaring the life out of them if they are still about. I’ll give a call on Paul’s phone when we’re ready for you.”

“Okay, see you in a bit.”

Jeanne and Tom walked across a wide green to the hotel. Jeanne felt quite anxious for her new friend and the forthcoming meeting with her family. She had taken to the blonde, and empathised with her and her predicament much more than she had ever expected to. I can’t imagine how painful it would be losing touch with Paul for a week, let alone eleven years.

They stepped from the bright April sunshine into the cool, dark interior of the hotel lobby. As her eyes adjusted, Jeanne looked about for a face which matched the bio photo on Paul’s book. Her man sat by the window, and had been watching their approach as they walked from the car park. As they locked eyes he rose from his seat, “I ordered up some coffee... is that all right?”

“Sure, thanks,” Jeanne said, and put out her hand. His handshake was firm and confident. They settled into the big Chesterfields as he poured a cup each for them. Ex forces, probably the Guards.

“This is Dr Tom Pinkerton, a colleague of mine.”

“Hi, - John Wilson.”

Reaching across the table, Tom shook hands with the tall rangy Scot.

Pushing his late forties, a bit twitchy. Why?

"Call me Pink," he said.

"I'm intrigued. Your phone call has left me wondering all sorts of things, none of which seem to connect me to your organisation; which I checked out on line after your call. I thought you were based in London. Some sort of government investigation agency. Spend your time looking into all sorts of weird happenings."

"We are - but I've come out here for two reasons, I really don't know which one to begin with, they're both pretty heavy." - God, I had this all planned out in my head, now I just can't seem to get the right words together.

"You have a sister-in-law, Yvonne - correct?" said Tom, picking up the lead.

"Ummm, yes... she went missing without trace years ago. You're not telling me you've finally found her body," his left hand went to his mouth, his eyes wide.

"In a manner of speaking, we think so, yes," Jeanne interjected.

John's face fell.

"But not in the way you think, she's not dead; in fact she's very much alive."

"What...?" his demeanour changed instantly, a flicker of anger crossed his face, "alive, the witch, where has she been hiding all these years?"

"I think you better cool it until you hear the whole story, sir." Jeanne said tersely, annoyed at the way John had immediately assumed the worst without hearing any explanation.

"Sorry, I guess I could have forgiven her if ..." his voice tailed off.

"Go on ..." said Tom.

"Well abandoning the girls, the way she did. My wife Laura did her best, but she wasn't strong ... the stress of it all didn't help. She passed on eight years ago. Cancer. The girls had to go back to my brother; I couldn't keep them when he demanded their return. Even though I'm sure he and that tart of his didn't really want them." He dropped his head, "loved them she did, but it was too much." He sat up straight, took a deep breath and reached for his coffee.

Jeanne had been watching him closely, analysing. Sipping on the hot brew - not bad, got a bit of taste at least, she took another sip, waiting for the right moment.

She drew the pack of photos from her handbag, and passed them to the artist, "Have a look at these first, I'd like your opinion, and before you ask, I think they have some relevance."

Wilson opened the pack and began leafing through. After looking at the first couple, he scanned through the remainder quickly. He then went back to the beginning and looked long and hard at the top photo. His face was stiff as he struggled to control his emotions. But his eyes told it all, flicking about the picture, drinking in every detail. Fear, dread, shock, amazement, but riding high was recognition...

"You have a book of fantasy art drawings published, he looks pretty much like one of your Cryptids, don't you think?" said Tom.

"Is that a crime?"

"No, but it's very interesting, don't you think?" Tom shot back at him.

"So... I've got a good imagination," he hedged.

"Or - you've seen something like that before." Which I think is more likely the correct answer. Jeanne cut across them.

"Where did you get these?" he asked.

"I took them," said Jeanne. The Scot sat quietly, still looking at the top photo. His shoulders fell and he gave a big sigh.

"I thought you were here to tell me about Yvonne," he said, laying the photos on the low coffee table.

"We are, but we also think the two are connected. Only you know how you managed to get such a life-like painting of your Cryptid, and I mean 'life-like', but we'll talk about that later. I'm going to tell you what we think has happened. In fact Tom is going to tell you, it's his theory. Best if you hear it firsthand. Before he does though, everything you hear is covered by the Official Secrets Act, do you understand?"

At her words, John looked up with surprise; his mouth began to frame a question, she drew out her MI5 ID and passed it across. He ran his eyes across it, and handed it back, nodding.

She refilled her cup from the pot on the table, and leaned back in the big comfortable leather settee to watch, sipping at the hot, dark and bitter brew.

Tom launched into his version of the story, Jeanne interjecting as necessary with additional pieces of information, filling in any gaps that the American left out, or was unaware of. John sat quietly through the entire story, sitting bolt upright as Tom reached the part about Yvonne, he rubbed his chin, "She did go off to collect her new car the last morning we saw her. We just assumed that once she'd picked it up, she took off and just kept driving."

"To her, she took delivery of the car just two days ago, to you she disappeared eleven years ago, somehow you are both going to have to get your heads around that."

"Are you saying she has no memory of the intervening years?"

"Not only no memory, but she hasn't lived them, she is just two days older, nothing else, and she has spent those two days with us."

"I don't understand," he buried his head in his hands and pulled a deep breath into his lungs, letting it go in a long drawn out exhalation. "So she is still thirty five?"

"Yes."

His face threw up another shocked look and he muttered "Annie is twenty two, and Linda twenty six, and she has a six year old girl of her own, how is this going to work?"

"God knows, but somehow it will; it has to." Jeanne responded quietly. "Are you ready to meet her?"

"As ready as I will ever be." The Scot sat straight in his seat again, ran his fingers through his hair, knuckled his eyes, and took a deep breath.

Jeanne thumbed Paul's icon, "C'mon over hun, we're in the main lobby."

As they waited, Jeanne asked the Scot, "Ever in the forces?"

"Err, - yes, Coldstreams, RSM."

"Explain later," she said to Tom.

John Wilson stood and watched as the pair crossed the road, his hand went to his mouth as they came closer; "It is her," he said in a whisper, slumping down on the big leather Chesterfield staring at the back of the seat opposite.

"Hello John," Yvonne's voice brought him from his trance.

He looked up, Jeanne watched as his face crumpled, "We thought you were dead," he sobbed, "dead ... we even had a service of remembrance, and all the time you were alive ... now Laura is dead, and you're alive - how ...?"

"I don't know John, I don't even understand it myself, I just know that the day before yesterday, I was here, and it was eleven years ago."

She took the sobbing man into her arms and looked up at them, "Can we have a bit of time together?"

“Sure, we’ll give you a chance to catch up. Then we’re heading back into Aberdeen. Got a few more tests we have to run on you this afternoon. I’d like you to come in tomorrow afternoon John, introduce you to our Cryptid family, see if you can rack your memory and shed any more light on them.”

“Okay, I’ll be there,” he said quietly.

Time Slip

Turner Institute, Aberdeen

April 2011

"Tom, this DNA printout on the wee laddie is a pile of what-sits. The lab has come back and reckons it resembles a Harp seal."

"Let me see."

As Jeanne passed him the report she said, "Its rubbish, basically what they are saying is they haven't got a clue. If that's the case why don't they just come out with it?"

Tom spent a minute reading the report, at one point he gave a little grunt of surprise, he then laid the single sheet on the desk with an incredulous hiss.

"So, the most up to date DNA testing Lab in Europe pulls a 'No Idea' on us. Have we had the report back from the States yet?" Jeanne was on a serious strop.

"Nope. But its due today," he said, "Don't fret, If Blue Book had got hold of this, they would probably claim he was a fish."

"Didn't they close back in '70."

"If you say so."

"What you mean, is it still going?"

"A rose by any other name, my dear. Isn't ANS or your parent org. OWP, A kind of Blue

Book in disguise?"

"We weren't set up to debunk everything, our job is to investigate. How do you know about OWP, sunshine?"

"There were over seven hundred verified reports out of nearly thirteen thousand investigated by Blue Book, which ended up being classified as unexplained or inexplicable." Tom said ignoring her question.

"Okay, let's have a think about something that's been niggling at me for a few days now; for virtually as long as mankind had been able to daub blotches of colour on his bedroom walls we have had fantasy creatures. But these fantasy creatures have been found to follow pretty much the same shape all over the world. Long before we had jet aircraft, or in fact anything more than Shank's pony, paintings of strange creatures were being produced by Mr and Mrs Neanderthal," said Jeanne.

"Right, I think I'm following you so far."

"What if - those paintings were recordings of actual sightings?"

"How so?"

"Don't interrupt, I'm thinking - now -- consider one of the most common Fantasy creatures of all, - The Dragon. From the red dragon of Wales through virtually every country in the world to China and back around again, it's shown in an easily recognisable form and is embedded in almost everyone's folklore."

"Sort of like a racial memory?"

"No, you plonker. Gad, for an intelligent bloke, you are a seriously thicko."

"Thank you, I'll take that as a back-handed Celtic compliment."

"What if - all our folk lore and fairy tales, all our fantasy creatures and suchlike were based on actual sightings? If the RAF hadn't picked up the male, or the tanker hadn't hit the female, would we have them as house guests? Or, would they simply have

disappeared back to where they came from? So, instead of us having an actual couple of alien creatures, we would have had a load of crazies claiming they'd seen 'Bigfoot' roaming around Scotland. Or Sasquatch in the backwoods of Northern California, or Yetis in Tibet, or whatever, and wherever, you want to see them? We're only calling them Cryptids 'cause that's what Wilson labelled them as. - Talking about John boy, he's due in this afternoon, better let the front desk know to expect him."

"Phew, that's some theory, who's gonna buy that?"

"I don't know."

"And if what you say is true, where have they been coming from - and going to - since time began?" asked Tom with a twisted smile.

"Going to is also a good point, maybe it's not just one way traffic; think about the Bermuda Triangle before you scoff."

Tom was quiet as the concept of Jeanne's idea began to make some sort of crazy sense in his mind, "You might be on to something, but we still have to prove it before we start shouting it from the rooftops."

"That my dear is what I fully intend to do."

She picked up the phone, tapped the keypad and spoke to the main desk.

"Any word back from the shrinks on Yvonne?" he said as she replaced the handset.

"She's as sane as you or I, mind you, after hearing your theory, probably saner. The powers that be want her to sign fifty million copies of the Official Secrets Act, promise never to speak another word, and then to disappear. Not much more they can do with her, so they say."

"How's she expected to integrate back into society?"

"Not their problem, - hand washing time."

"So the first time-travelling case in history is classified as having never happened?"

"Aye, would take up too much time and resources for no viable or repeatable benefit, officially being classed as a non event."

"What a crock of shit," said Tom.

"Well, I for one am not about to dump her, even if I have to find that elusive twenty-fifth hour in the day, I'll make time to help her get sorted."

The desk phone rang. "That'll be John., "I Must have been thinking about him as he pulled up."

"Do Do, Do Do ... Do Do, Do Do" she hummed the first few notes of 'Outer-limits,' as she picked up the receiver. Tom gave a condescending grimace. "Your turn, hey?" said Jeanne aside to Tom, "I could murder a decent coffee."

"Mac!"

Damn, it's the Boss -- "Yes Guv."

"Its hit the fan, some pillock has posted pictures and video of the crash at Muchalls on YouTube, hits are climbing by the thousands. The Home Secretary is threatening to gnaw on my left nut if I don't give him some answers. The video is pretty grainy, not that clear, but there is a full face shot of you handing over a bundle or something. It's obviously taken from a car on the opposite carriageway, but I'm seriously miffed young lady. This is gonna take a bit of squashing. I thought you got rid of all the pictures."

"Sorry Guv, so did I."

"Just to let you know is all. Found out where our little pals come from yet?"

"Wherever it is, it isn't on Earth."

"I guessed that, even before I saw a copy of the DNA, the Yank report is on its way to

you, same result, Harp seal - that's given me an idea, I remember the story of a little seal that made its way some twenty miles inland in East Sussex in December of '09? .... I'll catch you later."

"Bye" Jeanne said. - "oh, he's gone. Bet you he releases an official statement backed up by irrefutable DNA evidence, and historical happenings, that our female is nothing more than a poor little lamb, sorry seal that has lost its way."

"Probably - see, I told you Blue Book wasn't dead."

The phone rang again.

"I'm going for coffee, can you get that? - Want one?"

He nodded and picked up the phone.

Thankfully he's got a similar coffee-holic habit. That's at least one thing in his favour. She thought, as she juggled the brimming polystyrene cups back along the corridor. The office was empty when she returned from the coffee machine with the two big cups of espresso.

Tom returned, not with John Wilson in tow, but with a middle aged woman; she was of medium height, thickening a little around the middle. Her hair was mousy brown and cut in a nondescript bob and balancing a pair of half rims on her nose. Jeanne's first impression was typical 'School Ma'am,' but this was dispelled instantly as the woman smiled, her face lighting up with warmth and caring, she put out her hand, taking Jeanne's in a firm grip.

"Hi, I'm Amy Rand."

"Amy is a finger signing expert sent up from London," said Tom.

"Hi, - Jeanne, - good to have you on board, how much you been briefed?"

"Pretty much everything, I think."

“You got your ID badge yet?”

“Yeah, it was issued to me down in the Smoke,” her London accent was quite pronounced, making Jeanne feel almost at home.

“Good, last thing we want is you being dragged off to the local nick. Come on, we might as well go and meet your new pupils, pick you up a tea or coffee on the way. Do you want to chuck your stuff over there?”

Amy laid her coat and bag on the spare chair. “Great,” she said.

“We’ll come back and have a serious natter after you’ve seen them.”

The little male stood up as Jeanne and Tom approached. At least he is dressed now, and looks quite presentable. Wouldn’t have been quite PC, to have met his new teacher in the buff. Nodding a greeting to the guard, she keyed the door combination and stepped confidently into the room. Amy followed, Tom waited outside, watching through the observation strip. The Cryptid glanced in his direction and gave his grotesque grin, his tongue flicking out at the same time.

“Hi,” said Jeanne, holding out her hands, palms upward. The creature touched her hands with his tongue and then looked at Amy. Jeannie could have sworn he was asking to be introduced.

“Put your hands out the way I did.”

Amy complied, the gruesome tongue flicked around her hands, and then he switched and looking up at her, investigated her face with it. Amy stood still and endured his ministrations. She then tapped her chest and signed the three characters of her name, saying it at the same time.

The little male stared hard at her, raised his hand and gave three clicks. Amy tapped her chest again and repeated the sequence saying her name clearly in time with the characters. The Cryptid repeated her characters perfectly and tapped her on the chest. Amy broke into a massive smile. She signed ‘good bye’ and the two women turned to leave. The creature watched them closely. On a whim Jeanne beckoned him to follow,

and with Tom in the rear, the four, three humans and the little alien walked the corridor together.

The female had been away from her room, a complete body ultrasound scan just completed. She had borne the noise and confines of the hour spent in the chamber without a murmur, collecting her baby from the doctors as she left. She was sat on the bed feeding the child when they approached. She looked up and flicked her fingers at the male; he responded with a quick movement of his index finger. They brought their heads together and reached inside each other's mouths with their tongues, holding the pose for a moment.

When the male stepped back, Amy opened her palms to the little female. The female touched each palm once with her tongue. Amy was then rewarded with the three letter sequence of her name and a tap on the chest. She almost staggered back in shock.

"How'd she learn that?"

Jeanne smiled, "I don't know, but I'm starting to get an idea."

The female tapped Jeanne on the chest with her free hand and looked enquiringly at Amy.

"Can I?"

"Sure, go ahead."

Amy spelled out the characters of Jeanne's name, and said it aloud as she did so. She began to repeat it, but the female and the male both interrupted her and repeated the signings perfectly. They both simultaneously tapped Jeanne's chest. The female looked askance towards where Tom was standing hidden behind the wall and the black glass.

Amy asked, "What's Dr Pinkerton's first name?"

"Pink," said Jeanne, with a giggle.

Amy made the characters and said Tom's nick-name out loud. The Cryptids responded

exactly as they had been shown.

“Jeez,” said Amy, “I need to sit and get my head around this.”

She watched mesmerised as the two creatures held a conversation, their fingers creating a multitude of swiftly differing shapes, accompanied by clicks and whistles of different lengths, intensity and pitch.

“Grief!” she exclaimed, “if each hand movement, click and whistle is a character or has a special meaning, they are communicating faster than you or I could ever talk.”

They waited until the male made to leave the room. Tom opened the door. With a quick ‘goodbye’ to the female, Amy was the last to leave. The female repeated the symbols, with a grin-grimace and added a flurry of her own, ending with a sharp click.

She returned to the interrupted task of caring for her baby.

“Where’s Yvonne?”

“Back at my place, why?”

“Front desk just reported that we are under siege,” replacing the phone Tom turned to her, his eyes wide confirming his words.

“What?”

“The press are at the main gates, demanding to see the alien.”

“Oh, sheoot, - any word from John Wilson?”

“Nope, I guess he hasn’t been able to get anywhere near. Security has closed us down tight.”

“How long has it been building?”

“Just the last half hour, then all at once it started going mad out there.”

Jeanne picked up the phone and keyed the ops room number, “Have we an eye at the gate? - Great, can you patch it through to my desk? - Thanks.” She pressed a keyboard combination and her swirling screensaver morphed into a live video feed from the main gate.

The world’s press and his brother were clamouring around the outside of the chain link gates, three armed troopers stood resolutely behind the flimsy barrier, weapons in hand. As Jeanne watched, four others tumbled from the guard-house and assumed positions alongside them.

Three long blasts sounded on the internal comms system, followed by a metallic recorded voice; ‘Lockdown One, Lockdown One, military personnel to your Lockdown One positions, all non military personnel, remain at your place of work.’ The message repeated once more then cut off with a long blast.

Jeanne picked up the phone again, her face drawn. “I’m gonna have to get Paul out of this.” She dialled a number, “Hi Mike, it’s me - I know you’re not due to have Paul until next week, but something pretty dire has come up, and I’d like to get him out of here soon as. - Where is he? - At your Mum’s.” she listened to him for a moment before cutting in... “No, I can’t bring him down to you, - and no, I can’t explain, - watch the news and work it out for yourself. Can you take him a bit early? - Good; I’ll call Paul and let him know; give me a shout when you can get up here. - Thanks, Bye.”

Jeanne swore as she replaced the receiver, “Why does he always succeed in winding me up? - don’t answer that.”

Tom had sat quietly through the exchange, “I wasn’t going to say a word.”

“Good.”

Jeanne phoned Paul and explained her predicament to him, he seemed happy enough that his father was going to pick him up a few days early, “Nan’s doing roast chicken and chips tonight Mum, wants to know if you’ll be stopping for some?”

"I don't really know darling, - pop your Nan on, I want a word. Love you."

She explained as much as she could to Mike's mother, and thanking her for looking after Paul, closed the connection.

"That was probably monitored by at least half the world's press, but who gives a ....."

"Only half?" Tom laughed.

"I wonder if we can get a chopper to bring John Wilson in. If the paps find out about him, they'll hound him to death."

"I'll get on it." Tom picked up his own extension, "Secure line please," he said to Ops.

Jeanne plugged her memory stick into her PC, "I'm gonna get to the bottom of this," she muttered.

Tom was on a secure line to the RAF at Lossiemouth. After a while he looked up and smiled at Jeanne, "Got one. Be about an hour, now all I gotta do is find our elusive Pimpernel. Get him to meet with them."

"Come, look at this," Jeanne said suddenly. She rewound the screen images until she reached the approximate time, "Here we go, you can see the top of the hill, this is a couple of minutes before the accident, no vehicles, now watch, - there! See that mist building up? You can still see the hill top, nothing enters it, now, watch closely, see there's the Tanker, and here comes Yvonne in the opposite direction, out of the haar. There see! Wait ... there - there's our little lady, leaping onto the road in front of Yvonne. She brakes - the female hops the Armco, smack right in front of the Tanker, - whoa, that was close, good job that driver had his wits about him or we'd've had squished Cryptid," she looked up at him, leaning awfully close over her shoulder; close enough mister. ... "What you think?"

He said nothing, holding his position for a long moment, Jeanne could swear he was drinking in the smell of her hair; she gave an involuntary shiver of delight.

"I'm going to access archives, might take a while, have you had any luck getting hold of

John yet?" the moment dissolved.

"I'm on it, don't fret." He moved back to his workstation, his voice brusque, his movements stiff.

Jeanne logged onto the Grampian Police safety camera site, searched until she found, then scrolled through the Grampian Police entries for Muchall's bend. Keying in January 2000, she moved the date on to the twentieth; the day Yvonne claimed to have been travelling the road, and selected a time span between 2:00 and 3:00PM. Double clicking to open the video file she chose double speed and allowed the recording to play. The pictures were rough and grainy.

Nothing like the crystal clear piccies of today.

At two-twenty-three she saw Yvonne's car approach the top of the hill, disappear into a mist bank and not reappear, she ran it back and played again at normal speed, exactly the same result.

"Gotcher!" she shouted.

Tom returned to her side for another look, this time he kept his distance. Oops, I must have bruised his ego.

"So that proves something happened to transport Yvonne, eleven years into her future, our present. I think whatever it was that time-slipped her. Did I just invent a new phrase there? Anyway whatever it was, it also allowed our little lady to come through from wherever it was she came from."

"I'm still with you, and it sounds plausible, and no, someone else invented it already."

"Alright, smarty-pants - anything to add?"

"Not right now, I need to sap my head around this whole thing. It's getting crazy, I guess if I wasn't so closely involved, I'd say it was seriously unreal. - I'm going to the roof, pick Wilson up, he should be here soon," said Tom.

“Okay, take it easy up there.”

“Why, you care now?”

“Of course I do, take ages to bring someone else up to speed.”

“Is that all?”

“Aye.” And that’s all I’m letting you know for now, Mi-lado.

John Explains

Turner Institute, Aberdeen

April 2011

“Let’s go and see our visitors.” Jeanne couldn’t contain herself any longer; the chit-chat over coffee was getting them nowhere. John was holding something back, clearly apprehensive about something. His voice hesitant, his hand massaging a little too pronounced; his ankles crossed and locked.

She ushered the two men out of her office and along the corridor, John’s bearing clearly told of his military background, his back straight, his steps measured, his head held up. She walked behind them, observing the Scot as Tom led the way.

He stood silently for a moment at the observation panel, watching the male who had resumed his place, sitting on the floor.

“Can I go in?” he asked Jeanne.

“Don’t see any reason why not, might give him a bit of a lift, he’s been a bit quiet for the last hour or so,” she looked hard at the little male who unusually, hadn’t even acknowledged their presence.

John and Jeanne entered the room, Jeanne sat on the bed. The little male looked up at John standing in front of him, and then towards Jeanne. He gave a quick flick of the fingers of his left hand.

John replied with a three click sequence.

The little male sprang to his feet. With a flurry of gestures, finger shapes and clicks he looked deep into John's eyes.

John responded with a flood of his own, he then sat alongside Jeanne. His eyes were sparkling with excitement.

"His name is Finn, he is fifteen years old, and he's from the Tirnano caves."

"How the devil...?" Jeanne was dumbfounded.

"I lived with his clan for four years."

"Now, we are going to talk, Mr. Wilson - long and hard. You have information and knowledge that is of national importance."

"I guess."

"Can you give a running commentary when you talk to him from now on?" Jeanne's voice was shaking as the impact of what he had said hit home. "Did I hear you say you had lived with them for four years?"

The tall Scot nodded. "I did, and, believe it or not, I kept a journal to prove it. If you like, when we're done here, I'll fetch it for you." He smiled awkwardly. "I never mind sharing with a pretty lady, and the insights you may glean about these little guys might be helpful. Sound good?"

Catching Jeanne's grateful nod, he then turned back to Finn, speaking aloud as he signed, 'My name is John. You may know me as Madder John. I greet you Finn. How is it that you came to be away from the clan caves?'

The little creature sprang to a position of attention and fisted his forehead in a strange salute, John replied with a like salute of his own. He spoke the words as they conversed.

'I was on my trial, crossing an ice field, to check a trap I had set for deer, when I was chased by many humans in a huge yellow flying creature, I thought I was to be eaten. They captured me and have kept me inside this cave.'

'Why had you no weapons with you?'

'It was the third day of my trial, on the second, I had to hide from a Vamp attack; they found my camp and took everything I had.'

'You have heard of me, how?'

'Our history tells of how you led our people to the caves.'

'Your history?'

'Yes, our history tells us of Madder John.'

'How long ago were the caves first lived in?'

'Nearly two hundred years'

"Good God," exclaimed John, his voice had been hushed as he relayed all that passed between them. He took Finn's hands into his own, and quietly allowed the Tirnano youth to investigate his features with his long tongue. "They have no concept of lying or untruths, so will accept everything they are told as being the truth."

"Why?" Jeanne asked.

"Because to an extent they can read each other's thoughts, they join tongues; well, they place their tongues into each other's mouths and can then communicate intimately."

"I guess that would wipe out lying," said Tom through the partly opened door.

"I was sure that's what he was doing with the female," said Jeanne "is Amy with her?"

"Yes, Ma'am," cut in the uniformed guard, standing beside Tom.

"Thanks, shall we take a little stroll. Find out her name, and what they are calling the

baby.”

John made a number of signs to Finn, and then spoke to the others, “I knew you had a female, Yvonne told me about her, but I had no idea of a baby.” John sounded shocked, almost as shocked as he had been when Finn had informed him of the time difference.

Finn signed.

“He says the female’s name is - let me work this out - I think it would sound something like ‘Kesha’ or ‘Casha.’ They have no name for the baby.”

“Wow! - God, I sound like Paul, but I’ll say it again - Wow! - This is just wonderful.” She turned to the guard, “Are we still on Lockdown 1, Corporal?”

“Yes Ma’am, crowd is even bigger now that a load of civilians are joining the press, it’s getting a little nasty, and we might be upping it to Lockdown 2, if it gets any worse.”

“Damn, - sorry John but I think we better postpone our visit to see Kesha and the baby, I need to speak to London, Tom will show you where to drop your stuff and get something to eat. I’ll be in my office. Give me about twenty minutes.”

Both Tom and John watched as her trim figure made its way down the corridor, her high heels clicking on the hard flooring.

“Husband must have been a damn fool,” said Tom, “that’s one sweet little cutie. - C’mon let’s go and eat something greasy.”

John signed to Finn, the young Tirnano replied with a number of clicks and finger shapes.

“He says they need to get outside, or they are going to be seriously ill, he would also like some meat, cooked on an open fire, if that’s possible, the little lady is more used to fish, he says, baked.”

Tom picked up the phone and dialled ops, he passed on all that John had said about food, the on duty operator laughed when Tom mentioned going outside, “Take a look at

the monitor down the corridor from you," he said.

"Why does he need to go outside?" Tom said to John.

"To take a dump, they are both in serious pain."

"Can't you explain the intricacies of the loo to him?"

"I'll try." John returned to the room. With a number of finger signs and gestures, and finally a demonstration of urinating, and sitting on the toilet pan, which had Tom and the guards in hysterics, John convinced the little creature that he could 'go' inside 'the cave'.

"Perhaps a little modesty screen for them both, might not go amiss, he says he needs to tell her what to do."

"Okay, I'll sort that," said the guard.

"Finn also needs to converse with the female on another matter, can you arrange for them to have a few minutes together - in the absence of Dr McLennan, I'm authorising it, is that okay?"

"I guess so Doc, but I'll still have to run it past ops."

"That's fine, but it must be soon."

The two men, deep in conversation, made their way to the little in-house restaurant.

## The Decision

Turner Institute, Aberdeen

April 2011

Jeanne was in a heated dialogue with her Commander in London when they returned. She waved her free hand, motioning them to sit and continued; "So that's your final word, no one cares about the condition this woman is in, or how her life is going to pan out. No assistance to mentally prepare her for the traumatic reunion she will have when she finally meets up again with her children - well I think it stinks!"

With a curt "Goodbye," Jeanne cut the conversation.

"I guess I've seriously blotted my copy book now, still it was worth a try," she said to the two men who were watching wide eyed.

"Remind me not to get her riled," Tom said to the tall Scot.

"So John, what do you think about, what was it - Finn? You called him, what do you think of him?"

"He's a courageous youngster, but then they all were. I've never known any other creatures that are so prepared to face extreme danger and terrible adversity, without ever once turning away. What gets me though, is the time difference of two hundred years that Finn mentioned."

The phone on Jeanne's desk rang; it was ops. "Okay, good, how long before they are cleared? - That's great! Let me know when we can go home, - no probs thanks." Her disjointed conversation made little sense to the two men, however from her expression it was good news.

"A press release from London has gone out, the story is that it was a variation of a harp seal that had made its way inland a few hundred metres," she raised her eyebrows in disbelief, "and independent DNA analysis from both Europe and the States confirms it."

"Area 51 all over again," said Tom wryly.

"Anyway, ops will let us know when we are free to go home, it seems the crowd is dispersing, I better phone my ex and let him know the panic is off, he's gonna be slightly miffed, but I really don't care."

"Can I go to see the female?" asked John.

"Sure - Tom?"

Tom rose with a compassionate look at Jeanne who was about to pick up the phone again. "You alright?" His voice echoed his look.

"Aye, I'm going to pick up my wain and then see if I can find the bottom of a bottle of red."

"Okay, see you in the morning, sleep tight."

Jeanne didn't notice Tom's lingering backward glance as the two men left the room.

Wintergreen Evans

Evan's Farm, Oklahoma

April 2011

"Macy! Macy! Macy!"

The twins' cries were shrill, loud. Obnoxious. Enough so that on the third try, with a particularly piercing shriek; they finally managed to penetrate the fog hovering around their older sister's head. It was no actual fog of clouds and mist, but a fog comprised of bloody swordfights, daring knights, vile trolls, and feisty princesses. A fog inspired by the book sixteen-year-old Wintergreen Evans, or Winn, as she was more commonly known, sprawled belly-down on her bed to peruse.

"Now what are those kids up to?" the teen grumbled to herself, flipping page 48 to reveal a stunning watercolour illustration of Sir Terrance, the book's hero, about to impale Reegiss, the chief hunter troll, on his lance.

"Macy! Maccyyyyyy!"

Try as she might to ignore them, the twins were not letting up. Miffed, hating to be torn from her novel's imaginary world, Winn finally pushed herself off the red and white Hawaiian print coverlet, closing 'Once Upon a Troll' with a snap.

"Macy's on the phone with Chad," she hollered in the general direction of the open window.

"Maccyyyyyy!"

They hadn't heard.

"Dang them kids."

Rising, she dropped her novel on the bed and stomped barefoot across the wooden floor.

"Hey," she shouted, leaning on the window frame to put herself closer to the screen. At the cry, identical red heads belonging to the twins, Emma and Andrew, snapped her way. "What's the big idea, you two? I'm trying to read."

"Winn, Winn, get Macy!" Emma shrieked jumping up and down, flapping her arms in a hysterical imitation of a scrawny, red-headed, overgrown bird.

"Yeah, get Macy, get Macy!" echoed Andrew.

"Why, what do you need Macy for?"

"Be-because," Emma panted, finally ceasing the flapping and hopping and coming to a halt. "We seen something in the woods, Andrew and me."

"Fudge saw it too!" chimed in her brother. "Look, see?"

Winn's level brown eyes tracked her younger sibling's lead, following his finger to the shape of their chocolate Labrador, Fudge, crouched low on her belly in the tall weeds framing what used to be the garden. Spine stiff, teeth bared, the Lab kept a close eye on something in the tree line. Winn squinted, but couldn't tell what it was, or if anything was even there.

"What is it?"

"It's a-a-I dunno what it is," Emma hollered back, "but it's big and scary and mean looking, whatever it is. You gotta get Macy," she finished up. "Tell her to bring the gun."

"Yeah, yeah, big and scary and mean looking," grumbled Wintergreen, shutting the

window. I'm so sure. Like a rock would be big and mean and scary looking to two seven year olds with overactive imaginations. It's probably just a deer the dumb dog's growling at.

Still, for the sake of peace in the household, she left her upstairs loft, slamming the door behind her, and tromped down the wooden steps calling, "Macy? Macy? Can you hear me? The twins are outside, yelling for you to bring the gun."

No reply.

Frustration growing by the minute - I hadn't even gotten to study the watercolour very close, and Sir Terrance was, like, totally cool - Winn swung off the bottom step and around the beam supporting the staircase, giving the living room a hasty scan for her oldest sibling. Macy was nowhere to be found, meaning she must be happily ensconced in the study... "Flirting with that idiot she calls a boyfriend," muttered Winn.

She didn't like Chad very much. On his last visit he'd teased her about her new red-rimmed glasses, saying if she didn't read so many trashy novels she wouldn't have to look like Ol' Four Eyes MacCallister, Fort Gibson High's geeky science teacher. Wintergreen had bristled at that. Her novels weren't trashy, and her red-rimmed glasses were fashionable; definitely not something Ol' Four Eyes would wear. Since Chad had yet to be forgiven, the pleasure of interrupting Macy's chat with the jerk was nearly enough to offset Winn's annoyance at the twins' disrupting her precious moments with Sir Terrance.

"Hey Mace," she whispered loudly, poking her head in the study door. "Get off the phone. Something real big and important is happening outside."

Swivelling about in the black desk chair, her petite blonde sister shook her head. I'm on the phone, she mouthed. Chad.

"I know you're on the phone," Winn answered, trying-and doubtless failing-to hide her glee. "But the twins are kicking up a storm outside. And if you don't want those two going into conniptions and calling Mom and Dad, you better get out there."

Macy sighed. "Just a minute, baby," she cooed into the phone. Covering the receiver with one hand, she hissed, "What's their problem? And why can't you handle it?"

Smirking, Wintergreen shrugged one shoulder. "Can't."

"Why can't you?"

"Because," she grinned, turning and sauntering away. "The twins said to bring a gun, and you're the only one allowed to handle it. Remember?"

Macy came, toting the gun, and clearly unhappy about the situation. Winn, following her big sister, heard Macy snap, "Why on earth did you two want me to bring the gun? For Pete's sake, if it was just a snake all you had to do was get away from it. We can't shoot every copperhead in the woods."

"It ain't a snake, Macy," Emma protested, lips trembling. Up close, even cynical Wintergreen could see the child's face was pale, and that her emerald green eyes, usually glinting with mischievousness, were dark with worry. "It's something else. Something big and mean and scary."

"Yeah, something - "

"Something big and mean and scary, okay," Macy interrupted her brother, eyes scanning the tree line. "So where is it? What is it?"

"Don't know."

"You don't know?"

Winn could tell her big sister was about to go over the edge. Macy proved it by rounding on the two seven year olds, gun held in a safety position, down and away from all humans present.

"Look, do you two see this thing? It is not a toy! You don't mess around with guns. You don't even touch guns unless you need 'em, got that? I was busy in the house, and you called me out here because of your wild imaginations and told me to bring a gun - well, that kind of stuff just isn't going to fly, you hear me? I can't come waltzing out here every time you think you see something -"

"Macy -" Andrew tried to interrupt, but his big sister's bout with word vomit was not to be assuaged.

"Especially when you see something all the time. Like last week, when Emma saw the monster in her closet, and last night when -"

"Macy!" Now Emma tried her turn, with as little luck as her twin.

Winn, who'd been ignoring the whole tirade - familiar scene, played one too many times - had been watching Fudge, the chocolate Lab instead. Her keen, probing - even fanciful mind - was quick to note the dog had taken no notice of her and Macy's advent, and even less notice of Macy's fit. If anything, the Lab, focusing intently on the shifting shadows beneath the trees, was growing more and more intent. In fact, Wintergreen was not mistaken to think she heard the dog's growl amp up a notch, even as the hair on the back of her neck rose. Winn's eyes narrowed. The dog rose, along with its hair. Crawled forward a few paces. Stopped. Lowered herself. Raised - crawled - lowered.

A chill crept down the teen's spine. Clearly, the dog had seen something. Which meant chances were good the twins' imaginations weren't simply running away with them again ... as Macy continued to accuse and they kept right on denying. The approaching twilight played funny tricks of shadows and shapes, yet Wintergreen, drawn by the annoying, insistent urge inspiring her to know the unknown found herself being tugged forward, following the dog.

"What is it, Fudgie girl?" she said quietly to the animal. "You see something there? What do you see?"

No answer, except the Lab now rose up on all fours and began to bark. This proved enough to hush Macy's fit. Attention fully arrested, eyes glued to the trees, Winn narrowed her eyes, staring intently and there...

She gasped.

"Winn? What is it?"

"I - I don't know."

She shook her head, rubbing her eyes once, twice, to make sure they weren't playing tricks on her. Impossible! That grey shape, familiar and yet not, - it couldn't be, could it? Surely it was just a coyote, perhaps a wolf or stray dog. That was what was setting the dog off - for the normally calm, complacent Lab was going wild now, lunging forward, stopping, growling, barking, and slavering ferociously by turns.

"Winn?" Macy, edging up beside her, expertly flicked the safety on the pistol with a snap. "You see something?"

"Don't you?" She pointed. "Tell me my eyes aren't playing tricks on me."

Macy, studying the scene, was silent for a long, tense moment. Winn turned wide eyes to her sister. Macy's delicate features were grim, set in those determined lines that spelled trouble for any coyotes, copperheads, rattlers, water moccasins - or unruly twins - foolish enough to cross her path.

"I see... I - I don't know what it is, but I don't like its looks. That thing isn't natural. Step back, Winn."

Winn's already widened eyes opened further. "Macy, you can't-"

"Step back, Winn!" Macy snapped. "With Mom and Dad gone, I'm the adult here. I'm the one who has to make the decisions. I have to protect us. So step back," she ordered, "and you two get in the house," she threw over her shoulder at the twins. "They don't need to see this," she added quietly, almost to herself.

Winn's eyes swung back to the scene. Desperate, she ran a few steps ahead, ignoring the infallible, unbreakable rule ingrained since childhood - never, ever stand in front of a person holding a gun.

"Wintergreen Evans, you get back here," Macy hissed, careful to keep her voice low so as not to spook the creature. "I'm going to shoot that thing and..."

Winn stopped. A final stare. Yes, she knew it! She was right - she hadn't been mistaken. The...creature, was what she thought. It should be impossible but it wasn't. So fairytales really do come true, her mind whispered. Triumphant, she swung back to her sister.

"You can't shoot it Macy," she announced with a tone of happy finality.

"And why not?"

"Because," the teen announced, eyes lit as if with a 4th of July punk, "I know what it is!"

## That Phone Call

Bucksburn, Aberdeenshire

April 2011

A shrill, obnoxious sound disrupted Jeanne's pleasant sleep, and even pleasanter dreams.

4:37, she thought grumpily, peeling her eyes half open. Why the devil is the clock going off at this hour? I don't remember setting any alarm for 4:37.

A moment was required for the truth to penetrate her sleep-dazed brain. No, she hadn't set any alarm, nor was it an alarm going off at the unearthly hour of 4:37 rather; it was her mobile on the nightstand beside her bed.

Unearthly, she thought with a wry chuckle, reaching for the phone. That's a good one. What about this whole affair has been 'earthly' from the start? - Nothing, that's what.

Picking up the phone, and cradling it between shoulder and chin, she croaked a sleepy, "Hello?"

"Mornin' glory," answered a decidedly chipper - and also decidedly male - voice at the line's opposite end.

"Tom," Jeanne growled, slumping against the pillows. "Why am I not surprised that you're calling me before five in the morning?"

"Oh, did I wake you up?" her colleague inquired innocently.

"Wake me up? Of course you woke me up! Don't you know better than to call people before the sun's even thought of waking up? Don't you know - ?"

"Jeanne," Tom broke in seriously, cutting off her tirade.

"What?" she snapped, not in a mood to be placated.

Lucky for him, he knew the magic words. "Another one's been found."

Dead silence. Silence for so long, in fact, that Tom had to prompt her. "Jeanne? You still there?"

"Aye ... still here. Are you on a secure line?"

"Of course."

"Okay," she answered faintly. "Where, Tom? Where was it found?"

"Little place across the ocean, back home in the States. Oklahoma. Ever heard of it?"

"Just the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical," she retorted rolling her eyes. "Of course I've heard of it. Buffalo, Cowboys and Indians, and oil, right?"

Tom chuckled, provoking Jeanne's insides to perform a funny flip. Settle down, girl, she remonstrated. It's just the lack of sleep.

"I wouldn't say that to a full blood Okie, but yeah, that's pretty much all there is."

"Okie?"

"Short for Oklahoman; that's what they call themselves. Now look, Jeanne," he continued, leaving the explanation brief, "wierdly enough, our newest guest was found by some friends of mine. Or, rather, by their kids. Dr. Sam Evans and his wife Michelle, also a doctor, are archaeologists working with the University of Oklahoma - great football team, by the way. Their kids live outside a tiny little town called Fort Gibson; the

oldest, Macy, looks after the brood while Mom and Dad are off on assignment.

“Seems the twins, Emma and Andrew, saw something mysterious in the woods and raised cane until their older sisters came out to look. It was then that Winn, - middle child, sixteen - recognized the creature. Winn’s always been into fantasy and fairytales - shares some of Paul’s same interests, actually - and she labelled the creature a troll, or a Cryptid, as Paul likes to call them. According to Michelle, who phoned me this morning from their dig somewhere in Canada, Winn coaxed the creature out with food. Who knows how long it had been in hiding, but it was thin and apparently starving. The kids called their parents first off, who, after they were convinced, told them to keep the whole matter hushed up until someone trustworthy could get down there to check the situation out.”

“So they called you?”

“So they called me,” Tom concurred.

“Why you? You’re an anthropologist, not an archaeologist,” Jeanne pointed out, still trying to wrap her brain around not only the excitement of yet another Cryptid, but the realization that one had been found across the pond, and by a teenage girl who recognized it from some fantasy novel she’d been reading.

Again, Tom laughed. For four-something-in-the-morning, the man was in an exasperatingly cheerful frame of mind.

“Believe it or not, the two aren’t incompatible. We’ve worked together off and on through the years, mainly in digs in the South American region. While I explore the living cultures, they uncover secrets of the past.”

“Ah. So...they call you, and then what?”

“And then I’m flying out in less than hour. Catching the red-eye down to London. Then Heathrow to the States and onward to Oklahoma, check out the little guy. Hopefully we can get them all together. I’m interested to see how this newest visitor will react to meeting some kinfolk from across the big water. Aren’t you?”

"Well, of - of course," she stammered. "But where is it now? I mean, isn't the U.S. government stepping in? Aren't..."

"Naturally, they would if they knew," Tom drawled, unconcerned, "but they don't. Everything's real hush-hush for now. At present, the Cryptid is staying in the Evans' barn. Winn, apparently, has made friends with it. She's been the creature's main caregiver for a day and half. According to Michelle, she's real friendly with it."

Tom's voice softened. "That's my girl. Winn has such a bright, inquiring mind. She's not like other teen girls, obsessed with boys and makeup and shoes and I-phones and the latest Hollywood scandal. This world has never been enough for her. She wants something more - why she's always reading fantasy and fairytales I guess. Finding this Cryptid must be making all her dreams come true."

Propped against the pillows, Jeanne caught the change in Tom's voice and found herself smiling. Clearly, he was not only on good terms with the parents but their kids, too. His fondness for the teen was unmistakable.

He'd make a good dad... she found herself thinking with a dreamy smile. Whoa, where'd that come from? Are you an idiot? Clearly, yes. Thank the merciful heavens the American is no mind reader.

"Anyway," Tom went on, bringing himself back on track, "like I say, I'm going to see if I can't get our friend over here before news leaks. I discussed it all with Michelle and she agreed it'd be for the best. Can you pave the way from this end - make all the necessary arrangements for someone to meet us at the airport, provide transportation back to the centre, and all the rest?"

"Of course. When will you be arriving?"

Tom told her the projected date.

"You've got my mobile number, right? So you can keep in touch while you're gone?"

"Now Jeanne, if you wanted me to call you, you could have just said so. I'd have done it anyway; didn't need to take a trip across the ocean for an excuse."

Jeanne felt her face go hot. "That isn't what I meant, you idiot!" she snapped. "I only meant -"

"I know, I know," her colleague broke in, voice teasing, heavy and warm. "I'm just bugging you. You're so much fun to tease."

To that, she had nothing to say. It wasn't fair! Why did he get to call her at this time of morning when he was already wide awake and coffeed up, drop a major bombshell, and then flirt when I'm still in the process of waking up?

"Jeanne," Tom began hesitantly, after a moment's awkward pause, "when all this is over ... do you think that maybe you and I ..."

"Look, Dr. Pinkerton." Infusing her voice with authority and briskness, Jeanne took back command of the situation, layering the stirrings of her heart beneath a facade of professionalism. "Don't think we have time for this discussion at the moment, do you? Didn't you say you were flying out in less than an hour? Maybe you'd better get going," she continued, not pausing for an answer. "Getting through security takes time these days, and we don't want you to miss your flight."

"No-no, of course not," the Yank agreed, and Jeanne couldn't deny another internal flutter at the disappointment in his words.

"Call me when you're settled. I think the best we can do is, umm; - once you are ready to leave, I'll try and arrange for a private flight to take you up from Oklahoma and over the border into Canada. The British government's got a little more clout up there, and we should be able to get the little fellow through without too much problem. If I remember rightly there's a RAF section based in Gander."

"Yes, ma'am," Tom replied, joviality back as if the fleeting moment of tenderness had never been. "I'll take good care of our baby."

Our baby? Don't even go there! "See that you do," she shot back smartly and hung up.

Jeanne tossed and turned for a while, thoughts screaming through her mind, that man is screwing up my head. Unable to go back to sleep, she picked up John Wilson's journal.

See if this can send me off.

## Central Plains

Hindsight they say is a wonderful thing, but they also say that we should not look back in anger. Whoever came up with those two remarks I have no idea, in the end it matters not, but they collide with my experiences in many strange ways. They call me Mad John, hopefully not because I am mentally unhinged but because my first name (which I never use) is Madder and my middle name John, what my last name is has no relevance.

I was once married, but my wife passed away over five years ago. Four years ago I walked out of my front door, drove my beat-up old Land Rover to my place of work; the beautiful Spittal of Glenmuick overlooking breathtaking views of Loch Muick.

My occupation in that idyllic landscape was game warden. My responsibility; the well being and security of the highland deer on the royal estates. A markedly different profession from that which a few years earlier, had seen me in the fore front of battle fields in 'hot spots' throughout the world.

I have decided to place on these parchment pages a short and hopefully concise record of the early days when and how I came to be in this place. I look back not in anger nor praying for hindsight but simply to record some of my deeds and those of the wonderful creatures (people) with whom I have come to live these moments of my life.

I know not whether I am on another planet, in the far distant future, or in some unfathomable past long before the beginning of time.

To create this paper upon which I am writing, I have attempted to reproduce a method used by the ancients of my world. I have used young reeds which have been split, flattened, woven together, pressed and dried, and as you are reading this; you can see the result is functional. For a pen I carved a shin bone of one of our beasts, long since passed into many full bellies. For ink, I dip into a mixture of dried blood mixed with milk;

the result is pungent but practical.

But to make things right and in the correct chronological order, I should start at the beginning and tell my tale so that all may understand what became of me.

I was eighteen years old in 1973 when I joined the British Army as a regular soldier. Signing up for nine years, to serve my Queen and country. Being tall, I was accepted into and was proud to wear the uniform of the Coldstream Guards. I had longed to be a soldier for almost as long as I could remember. As children, my brother and I would play - there had always been wars somewhere in the world, those wars had heroes, we pretended to be those heroes.

My brother when he grew up however had not followed my example of joining the forces.

I retired from the regular Army in 1998, after serving in the warzones of Bosnia and the Middle East, my military career was long and varied in content...

I followed the hooded, buckskin clad man through my binoculars, the sight of his little bow and quiver full of arrows concerned me, but I was carrying my shotgun so was not overly worried. Moving quickly across the ground which was familiar to me I closed on him; he seemed unaware of my presence even though he had glanced twice towards my concealed position.

I followed him through what appeared to be a tear in the fabric between our worlds. I don't understand what magic was used. Suffice it to say some Brosynans have the ability to move from their world to ours with no more difficulty than I would have, say, pushing through one of the plastic curtains seen at the warehouse doors of large department stores.

I walked straight into an ambush. The hunter had been aware of my presence, probably even before I clocked him. As soon I moved through the curtain I was his prisoner, I managed to resist for a while, but when the remainder of his party arrived, surrender seemed my best option.

They allowed me to follow them to their camp, without even bothering to restrain me. Knowing that I had nowhere to run, they seemed confident in their ability to recapture

me should I even attempt it.

They were short, the tallest amongst them not even reaching my waist. But they were all powerfully built; even the females who were obvious in their sexuality, had muscular frames. They wore similar clothing and each carried the deadly looking short bow that I had perceived earlier.

Our pace through the tall grass, was swift, they moved as though they would at any moment fall prey to an unseen predator, their eyes constantly scanning the sky and the horizon. I took it upon myself to crouch as low as possible; they seemed to appreciate my efforts.

I heard no words pass between them; however they appeared to be communicating through the use of hand and finger shapes, augmented with finger clicks and snaps. For distance communications they employed a complex series of whistles and hoots. They were well rehearsed in their actions, which appealed to my military mind. On our trek we passed vast herds of fierce cattle with long horns and shaggy coats, herds of wild horses and many hogs rooting in the grasses close to streams.

In the distance I could see a range of mountains, towering over them was a volcano, smoke issuing from its summit. I named it Benachee, after a mountain in my homeland, what the group of creatures called it, at the time I knew not.

It took five days to reach the foothills of Benachee, it had been like a beacon calling us onwards, I felt as though we were coming home. By the time we reached its foothills it filled the southern sky, however it still took us another three days to make our way around the snow capped mountain.

That was when we came upon a tribe of like creatures. From the welcome the warriors received I could only guess that they were returning from a sortie.

There were at least five hundred individuals, some in a sorry state, at least ten of them badly injured. Being versed in field medicine, I could see those with the worst injuries were in mortal danger. With gestures and signs I managed to get them to allow me to treat those worst cases.

I cleansed and bound horrific wounds, using soft hide and compresses made from the

grass heads. The injuries were reminiscent of claw marks, and horror of horrors, of viscous sharp teeth, although what manner of beast could have inflicted such wounds was beyond me.

It was not long before I found out.

Once I had tended as well as I could to the injuries, though with the limited resources I had available, other than perhaps making them feel a little better, I felt my ministrations had not been worth a great deal. I took time to inspect the camp. All around me were low tents almost filling a wide hollow in the ground. I was not surprised to see guards posted all around the camp, hidden in the grasses.

The tents looked as though they could be erected or collapsed in moments. Everything including the clothing they wore, created from the animals they followed across the plains, even the fires they built in front of each tent were fuelled by dung, collected and dried.

The fires were both for cooking and heat, at night the temperatures fell below freezing. The snow showers which fell before dawn and the strong winds which blew across the plains continuously were reason enough for the camps being built in natural dips in the ground.

The tents were low and dome shaped, primarily used for sleeping. The creatures, for they were not truly human, slept in hide bags. There was a lack of cleanliness in the camp, they were all seriously unwashed. Even though I had not washed properly for over a week, my nose wrinkled at the pungent aromas which wafted at me from all directions. Any rubbish that accumulated was disposed of by burning. Bodily waste disposed of wherever they chose, both sexes hunkering down in a squat in the high grass whenever they felt the need.

They were difficult to age, although I noticed quite a few babies and young children amongst them. There were none though who showed signs of middle or old age, I was at pains to discover why, perhaps their lives were too harsh.

It was a short while later when a group of them came towards me, I expected the worst. What looked like a shaman or witch doctor led like the group, he circled me, sniffing and prodding at me with his fingers. Then, horror of horrors he shot out a long forked

tongue and began flicking and touching me across my face. It took all my self control to stop myself from recoiling from the gruesome appendage.

He turned and clicking his fingers moved to a fire which had been set in the middle of the camp. One of his entourage beckoned for me to follow, this I did. All around me I could feel eyes on me, a curiosity or an enemy, I knew not at this stage.

The shaman's two followers seemed intent on keeping their status at the top of the tree, and were free with kicks and blows aimed at any who were lower in the social ladder, and those foolish enough to get their way.

I was motioned to sit by the fire, a platter fashioned from a shoulder bone and piled with roasted pork and small onion like vegetables was handed to me by a young female. Although the hunters had given me food to eat on our journey, I admit I was famished, and disregarding the obvious remnants of a previous meal eaten from the platter, I wolfed the succulent offering.

I watched as the older members of the tribe devoured the meal with their hands, tearing the meat from the bone and throwing scraps at youngsters behind who fought over them, they must have been starving.

I noticed that behind me stood a couple of youngsters waiting expectantly for anything that I should deem to gift them. In disgust at the practice I turned and passed my plate to them. "Share," was all I said, they seemed to understand and indeed rather than fight over the meal, shared as I had bid them.

The shaman and his minions were outraged and two of them leapt up, their intent, either beat the children or me; or both. I stood up, I was easily taller than the tallest of the lieutenants, towering above them, but they were stocky and obviously strong, but they fought as bullies do, with fear being their greatest weapon. Little did they know that I had an intimate knowledge of incapacitating or even killing an opponent with my bare hands.

"I challenge any man here to a fight, anyone who can beat me can keep this knife," I shouted my voice dripping with sarcasm; I drew my knife from its sheath and stuck it in the ground, whether they understood me I could not tell. My stance and the obvious challenge should have been universal.

The challenge was not lost on the shaman, who whistled at the two approaching me. He clicked his fingers loudly, the entire group around the fire fled to the safety of their huts, leaving just the bullies and the leader who had a strange grimace on his face; I assumed it was a grin.

I noticed from the corner of my eye, arrows being notched by some of the hunters who had accompanied me for the last few days. They watched closely as the pair rushed at me. It would seem the bullies had decided that one to one hand fighting was not to be their chosen form of combat, bone knives appeared in their hands. I saw little bows being raised, whatever happened I was determined to sell my life dearly. The remainder watched as they stoically waited for me to die, it was obviously not an uncommon happening, dissenters could expect no less from their leader and I had usurped the shaman's position by practicing healing.

I stood my ground as they came at me hooting, if they expected me to run they were mistaken, I disarmed them easily and threw their unconscious bodies on a nearby rubbish heap. I picked up my knife and began to walk determinedly towards the leader who whistled in fear and clicked his fingers loudly. Not one member of the tribe moved, the hunters were training their arrows on the Shaman.

Without his lieutenants to protect him, he took to his heels and began to run. There was a whistling sound and he fell on his face, an arrow protruding from his back. Any other followers were herded from the fire, collecting the two bullies from the rubbish heap, they were chased from the camp, hoots of derision, who could mistake that sound, and a hail of thrown missiles, mostly dung, followed them as they were banished.

I discovered later that 'my' group of hunters had been away from the settlement for over three months, scouting for a permanent home for the tribe. In that time the shaman and his cronies had seized power violently from the previous leader.

It has been three years now since I arrived in this place, so much has happened; I feel I must record a few memories lest they be lost forever.

It was but a few days after the shaman had met his end and his lieutenants had been banished, that the next nightmare unfolded. We were attacked by a new set of horrors. They came just after nightfall, snorting and snuffling around the perimeter of the camp. Making prisoners of us from dark to dawn, howling and shrieking as they patrolled, initially the open space outside of where the hunters stood their spears constantly

ready.

Sleep was impossible in those days; the clan took to snatching moments during the daylight hours. We attempted to move as far as possible during the day, before preparing as secure an encampment as possible for our overnight stop.

But the horrors found our camp each night; for I'm sure it was easy enough for them to follow the scent of five hundred. We were unable to travel at night, or for many nights after that. The first night, there had been but a few of them, but after that, they came in ever increasing numbers.

On the fourth night they attacked, breaking through the outer ring of sentries, killing and mauling, eating and spoiling everything. Personal belongings that had been lovingly carried were ruined. Any stored food spoiled or eaten, spare buckskin clothing ripped apart, and everything fouled with their evil smelling urine.

The clan had no response; the hunter's arrows were in the most ineffective, unable to penetrate the massive shaggy pelts. Deaths amongst the weak and young were many.

After the first appearance of the horrors, I tried, by waving my arms, pointing and demonstrating, to communicate with the clan leaders, initially they took little notice but by the fourth night, in desperation for any relief they endeavoured to take notice of me. Unable to communicate I did the next best thing, with a stick I drew in the sand.

My drawing of a stockade with sharpened stakes facing outward was quickly agreed upon and implemented. It took three days of hard work, with the nights spent fending off the bears with long spears.

I say Bears; for that is the closest I can get by way of an attempt at identification. But these were larger and more ferocious than any grizzly. They were nocturnal in their habits, thankfully disappearing as the sun rose. Hopefully the sharpened stakes would dissuade any climbers, for we angled them outwards, with luck they would pierce any climbing creatures. It was obviously effective for the Bears made no attempt to climb them.

I began to learn as well as I could the sign language with which they communicated. The two youngsters who had stood behind me at the feast had assigned themselves to me,

taking on the role of teachers.

The only problem that my plan threw up was that now we were under siege; the nomadic clan were forced to remain static behind our protective walls, whilst the herds they had traditionally followed moved on. Food became short, but thankfully the creatures, now unable to obtain easy pickings moved on after five more nights. The first night without the cacophony of screeching and hooting was pure bliss.

As part of our settlement daily routine, teams would inspect the inner and outer stockade walls to ensure that the Bears were not tunnelling to gain access, or had been able to damage the posts in any way. One morning after the hunters had moved out in the direction of a passing herd of cattle, we came across six new creatures; they had fallen into a ditch which we had dug around the camp, they could only have come from the river which flowed to our south. They seemed incapable of climbing out of the ditches.

With eight long spindly legs, waving two in front of their heads, which were armed with the sharpest most dangerous looking pincers; each snapping pincer was almost an arm long; one snap of those huge blades could easily cause serious damage to an unlucky recipient.

We were quick to attack, rushing round the bewildered horrors, stabbing at them with long spears, initially our thrusts were ineffective, the spears unable to pierce the hard carapace which covered most of the creature's upper bodies. A blow to one in the middle of its circle of eight eyes proved to be the answer. In moments all six were dispatched.

With much effort we pulled and pushed the creatures from the trenches. The creatures were a bright pink in colour, they reminded me of lobsters, but these were no small scuttling creatures, these stood taller than I, and considerably taller than the clans-folk.

On an impulse, hoping against hope that I was not about to poison myself, I drew my knife and cut a piece from the soft under abdomen. Placing it on a sharp stick, I grilled it over a nearby fire. I took a taste, it was delicious, gesturing my enjoyment to my two teachers, they tentatively tried a small piece each, and immediately began hooting and whistling in extreme excitement to others who stood watching in interest.

Once they had tasted and approved, they became, what could only be described as a ravenous pack, falling upon the four creatures, tearing off lumps of flesh, and stuffing their mouths full of raw succulent pink flesh. To many who had been on an almost starvation diet since the Bears' appearance, It was truly manna from heaven, well the river anyway. The six creatures were enough to give most of us a small meal; it was good to feel food in my stomach again.

Somehow we had to discover where they came from, for capturing them in sufficient numbers would provide us with a suitable and sustainable food source.

We kept watch on the river for three nights before we discovered the pink creatures came from a distant stream, discernible only when the moon was overhead, we could see it in the distance, it flowed close to a large clump of flat topped trees

It seemed they only moved at night, and then not every night, they followed the stream, moving with it towards the north, we noticed the Bears too, but they moved in the opposite direction to the lobsters, when they met, the ferocious creatures would viciously attack the pink ones killing and eating them with impunity, the pink creatures scattering.

Occasionally if they became totally confused, some would make their way towards our settlement, sporadically if luck was with us, it would be blindly towards our trenches.

Although the Lobsters were an occasional welcome addition to our diet, the clan's hunters were forced to travel further and further afield to obtain sufficient meat to feed our hungry mouths. By now I had become quite proficient in the signing language and suggested that we should move to a new location. A tall volcano in the distance, surrounded by a range of foothills was agreed as our final destination.

Under my guidance the clan's hunters practiced with spears until every man and woman could throw one with amazing accuracy. We made targets from the Lobster heads, aiming for the small gap between the circles of eyes where we knew they had a weak spot. Most clans-folk could accomplish a killing strike from a distance of fifty paces or more. Missing could mean the difference between life and death.

Once more we began our trek towards the volcano, the sea to our backs, abandoning the protection of the stockade. The Brosynans moved across the plains with more

confidence than ever before.

We have found a valley in the lee of the tall smoking mountain, which has numerous deep and expansive caves in the hillside, it is an excellent location and we have fortified the valley entrance against the Bears.

The clan has begun to be blessed with children. I eventually took one of the clan women as a companion, though I was loathe to do so, memories of my dear Laura were still strong, but there were many volunteers for the position. It was also intimated that it would be classed as an insult to the young females to refuse them all, in the end I acquiesced.

The clans have elected me as their war leader and I have built my regime based upon that which I knew best, military discipline, the little Brosynan people have taken to it well. I feel it would be wrong of me to assume the position of supreme ruler as they asked, and therefore instigated the appointment of twelve elders who would be democratically elected.

I remember one of my most exciting episodes. I accompanied the hunters. The troop leader I had named Jax, his name, a couple of gestures and a click did not translate too well. They had begun hunting the Bears, the fur coats we created from their thick coats were a welcome addition on our trips to the ice fields.

On the plains under the darkened sky, we quickly formed up into a phalanx, with spears pointing outwards. It wasn't long before we came upon a pair of Bears which were close to a river, surrounding the formidable looking creatures was easy for they showed no fear, Jax himself made the first kill, thrusting his spear down the throat of a charging creature, his lieutenant a huge bull of a hunter, dispatched the second just as quickly.

The team, swiftly stripped and skinned the creatures, and then proceeded to drag the carcasses the fifty paces back to the river. Within moments eight others drawn by the smell of blood came dashing up to claim the bodies. Others appeared out of the dark, approaching us with obvious menace. They showed no fear of our spears, never having known resistance and expecting none. They were eating machines, and anything that existed was fair game.

The pungent smell of blood was enough to spur them into claiming their share of the

bounty, a fierce fight broke out amongst the creatures as they jostled their way to be first to the free meal. We turned to face the charging beasts, our spears taking down two more of the monsters, thankfully as each one was killed those nearest would turn on it and begin tearing lumps off the still twitching body, this gave the rearguard opportunities they hadn't expected, the creatures were more interested in eating their own fallen than they were in attacking the small band of fierce hunters.

By the time we had made our way back to the skins there were at least fifty of the creatures, screeching and hooting as they ripped the bodies of their own fallen apart.

The skin was soft and pliable, and could be worked into wonderful soft leggings and jerkins, the bones when boiled gave us a useful glue which when dried was impervious to water, we used it to coat the outside of our clothes and boots making them warm and snug, albeit a bit smelly, but we soon got used to it.

From the above you can gather that we made frequent forays, we also made noose traps which we baited during the daylight hours with rancid flesh, this way we caught many of the creatures, leaving them ensnared until daylight when their fellows sought the darkness of their burrows. They were dispatched in the daylight, providing us with a multitude of useful items and utensils, their bones apart from the glue they provided, were tough and strong. Using flint knives we carved them into smaller bone knives, needles and many other items. The stylus I have used to write this journal is but one example; these items became useful to us, that the crazy exercises seemed well worth the effort.

Bear tooth necklaces were prized by the females, showing off the prowess of their men folks. A hunter who was prepared to risk life and limb to make a kill and claim the teeth had prestige, for even though the creatures hated the sunlight, and would squint their eyes against it, almost blinded they were still a fearsome foe, even with a limb caught in a trap, they would fight until the last moment.

The youngsters too, loved these hunting trips, and would tease the Bears, running up to them, hooting and striking their heads with sticks, distracting the creature until the hunter could make his kill. More often than not a Bear would break the restraining rope and charge at the hunters, the youngsters scattering in all directions away from the lumbering, almost blind beast. It soon became a symbol of prowess to kill a charging monster single handed and the eye teeth were worn with pride. The teeth of a full grown bull were the most sought after. The fearsome creature on four legs stood as tall

as my chest and could cover the ground at a fantastic rate.

The preferred and most courageous (some would say crazy) method of killing them was to face the charging beast with a spear driven into the ground and aimed at the snarling mouth, the impetus of the beast's charge would drive the spear into the creature's brain, killing it instantly. However a creature which weighed easily twenty times that of the Brosynan facing it, at full charge was not easily halted. If the spear had not been placed exactly right, or the hunter did not dive in the right direction, either scenario could end in certain death.

Either way the young 'stags' had to learn quickly, or another burial would be taking place. Thankfully not too many of the intrepid youngsters were killed, although some were injured quite horribly, and had to retire permanently from the sport.

Blackburn, Aberdeen

April 2011

Jeanne put the manuscript down; dawn was beginning to break through her bedroom window. I'll be fit for nothing today then, she thought covering her head with a pillow.

She lay waiting for the alarm to sound.

## The Feds

Tulsa OK Oklahoma International Airport

April 2011

Tom knew disaster had struck the moment he cleared the temporary hallway leading flight passengers from plane to secure airport sections beyond. Down the short hallway, through the revolving doors, he could see Wintergreen and Macy Evans, minus the twins, encircled between three dark suited men and one capable looking, likewise clad woman. Admittedly, the youngest of the men in black was keeping more of a silent watch on slim, petite Macy than their surroundings, but his three companions bore an intimidating, eyes-straight-ahead stare warning others to keep back.

Inwardly, Tom groaned. Great, the Feds have stepped in. Just what we need... However, his annoyance at this latest loop of events was temporarily shattered by Winn's joyous squeal.

"Uncle Tom," she shrieked upon catching sight of him. Breaking a ring of dark suits, she dashed forward, stopping just before the invisible line, the airport security guard with the tazer ensured nobody crossed.

Tom felt an answering smile break across his face. His pace quickened, belying the fatigue brought on by hours of flying and three delays in the international air voyage. Despite his affections for the twins and Macy, Winn held a special place in his heart - always had. Something about that haywire red hair, those silly red-rimmed glasses, and that bright, eager mind: always inquiring, always hoping, and always dreaming. Were it channelled in the right route, she would make a fabulous scientist. Girl like his Winn would never give up, not until all the facts were right there in her hands.

Or, so he used to think, back in the days before Cryptids, time travelling, and fairytales come true. Now... Maybe Winn was the smart one all along, he thought, even as he

crossed the line to envelope his honorary niece in an embrace that lifted her clear off the floor.

“Uncle Tom, you came!” the sixteen year old cried, voice muffled by his shirt collar. “We were so excited when Mom and Dad said they’d called you. I was fixing to go right out of my mind!”

Setting her down, Tom brushed her cheek with a quick kiss. “Not half as excited as I am to see you, hon,” he laughed.

Now if only Jeanne would show even a fraction of this enthusiasm, maybe we’d have a chance.

Shoving away the unbidden reflection, he looped an arm around the teen’s shoulders. “Let’s go see Macy.”

Despite her new grown-up persona, and the attention from the young black suit, the college sophomore couldn’t restrain her own wide, groundbreaking smile.

“Uncle Tom,” she laughed, permitting herself to be enfolded in his embrace. “So good to see you.”

“How’re you, sugar?” Tom inquired, allowing himself to be swept back into his Midwestern roots.

“Good, you?” Macy leaned back to study him. “You look tired.”

“I am. You know how flying can be.”

“Yep. But you still got an hour’s drive before we make it back to the house.”

Both girls giggled at his exaggerated groan. “Remind me again why your parents decided to raise you kids way out in the middle of nowhere?”

“They probably hoped to dig up some spectacular Indian artefacts,” Macy quipped, “but

all we ever found was a couple of arrowheads and a piece or two of equipment on that old cavalry trail in the woods behind the house.”

“Well, that’s better than nothing,” Tom remarked absently, focus already switching to the girls’ companions.

“Dr. Tom Pinkerton,” he announced by way of introduction, extending his hand to the nearest of the group - who happened to be a tall, broad shouldered African American with a gold earring and a snake tattoo squiggling its way down the side of his neck and into his shirt.

Former snake-eater? Tom wondered.

“Case,” the fellow offered, along with a brief, bone-shattering squeeze and a terse nod of the head.

Noting Tom’s inquisitive glance at the rest, ‘Case’ took the hint. “Shelby, O’Rourke, and Johnson,” he offered, nodding his shaven head at the other black suits in turn.

Tom noted the names, adding mental classifications: Shelby, group’s one girl. O’Rourke, muscle bound ex-linebacker, and Johnson, Macy’s latest admirer.

“Nice to meet you folks,” he said aloud.

“I don’t think it is,” Winn mumbled next to his left elbow.

Even Tom was shocked by that. The dreamy teen wasn’t typically prone to rudeness.

“Winn!” Macy hissed. “Shut up.”

“Well you said as much or more too. Remember?” Winn glowered.

Macy’s cheeks turned a shade so bright nobody would’ve ever suspected Maybelline. A colour that high had to be real.

Interesting, Tom thought, noting the young woman's swift glance at 'Johnson,' whom for all intents and purposes she'd been ignoring. Interest returned? Whatever happened to Chad?

He'd no chance to ask. Case, apparently the group leader, took over.

"Histrionics aside," he rumbled with a stern warning glance for Wintergreen, "the young lady's boyfriend was right to call us in. Secrets like this shouldn't be kept from the government."

Winn's glare was absolutely, uncharacteristically rebellious. "It wasn't the government's secret," she snapped. "It was ours! We found it. I've been taking care of it. I--"

"Okay, okay, that's enough." Before matters got wholly out of hand, Tom figured he'd better step in. "Winn, you can tell me the whole story on the way back to the house, okay? We'll figure out what to do," he added in a clandestine whisper. "Trust Uncle Tom, 'k?"

"Okay," she relented, but her glare at Case didn't diminish.

In awkward silence, the seven left to retrieve Tom's baggage and head on out to the parking lot and the black suits' waiting van.

Ny-mo

Cherokee County

April 2011

Shelby drove. Case took shotgun.

It was Macy who called the back seat, then manoeuvred for both her little sister and adopted uncle to sit with her. Johnson didn't appear happy with the situation, but Tom noted the Fed managed to wrangle his way into the seat just above and across from her, where he could steal sly glances from out the corner of his eye.

"Now," he said quietly, once the van was speeding down 69 and the roar of the road mostly covered the sound of their talk. "Tell me everything, starting with the finding of the Cryptid."

"Cryptid?" In the intermittent orange and blue flashes of passing street lights, Tom saw Winn's nose wrinkle. "It's not a Cryptid, it's a Troll."

"Troll is another word for Cryptid," he clarified.

"Says who?"

"Says - says -" she'd have no idea who John Wilson or Paul, Jeanne's son were. "Never mind. Just tell the story, please."

Macy, generally the bigger talker of the two, took over. In quiet, clipped sentences - and several glances at the black suit who was pretending not to be listening, she relayed the twins' finding of the creature and Winn's identifying of it. Calling their parents had been

her idea; Winn, she conveyed scornfully, had been against the idea, wanting to keep the discovery all to themselves.

"Which I should have," Winn leaned around Tom to fire at her sister. "If we hadn't told anybody, your dumb boyfriend would never have found out and these guys -" A significant glower at Johnson and company - "wouldn't have interfered."

"It wasn't my fault Chad leaked the news," Macy remonstrated, also leaning around Tom, who was feeling decidedly uncomfortable at being placed squarely - and literally - in the middle of their sibling squabble.

"It was your fault! If you hadn't had the jerk of a boyfriend in the first place -"

"Well, pardon me for being a normal human being and wanting some romance in my life!"

"Now ladies..." Deciding enough was enough, Tom interposed himself between the sisters. "Whose fault it is - that's neither here nor there. The fact is, we've got the creature and now we've got them." He nodded towards the Feds occupying the seats up ahead. "What we need to figure out now is what we're going to do."

Winn squinted at him in the darkness. "I thought that's what you were here for, Uncle Tom," said the teen innocently. "You're the grownup. Aren't you supposed to know?"

Again, inwardly, Tom released a little groan. Drat. She's right.

Sometimes being the grownup in charge wasn't much fun. Now that the Feds were here, Tom felt as if he were in over his head. Navigating high profile, top secret waters had never been his specialty. Luckily though, he realized with a silent little chuckle, I know somebody perfectly capable of stepping in to assist. We might be an ocean apart, but she is just a phone call away...

"Here he is, Uncle Tom," Winn announced, dark eyes sober. "When we approach, be real still and quiet. I don't want you scaring him."

His honorary niece's uncustomary seriousness was almost enough to make the

anthropologist chuckle aloud. This was not his dreamy-eyed, nose-stuck-in-a-book Winn. Just like that, she'd assumed a new persona, almost a maternal aspect, physically blocking my entrance into the barn's hayloft in order to make me swear I'd do nothing to upset her friend.

"You don't have to worry, hon," he reassured the teen. "Uncle Tom's not an idiot, okay? And let's not forget I was called in by the British government from the first when they discovered the other Cryptids. I know my way around, alright?"

Winn's dubious expression told him she remained unconvinced. Maybe informing Wintergreen and Macy about his work across the ocean hadn't been the smartest idea he'd ever had. While Winn was sceptical that his creatures could really be the same as hers, Macy had gotten upset.

"You mean there's more of these...things...running around?" she'd practically shouted.

Should've asked Jeanne first, he repented. But he'd hated to bug her. After all, I'll have to call her soon enough to inform her of this latest twist: involvement by the Feds. If she doesn't already know...

And while the idea of speaking to his attractive colleague put a twist in his stomach - a good kind of twist - the notion of letting her know the way the cookie crumbled back home didn't. Jeanne had enough of her plate without handling this too. Unfortunately, given her position in the case, if she wanted this newest Cryptid to unite with Finn and Kesha, it would be up to her to pull strings and make it happen.

"Are you sure you're ready for this?"

Winn's quiet question broke into Tom's stream of thought. Pulled abruptly to the present, he recognized with a jolt his surroundings - metal pole barn, musty straw beneath his feet, a chicken cackling in the nesting box to his left, the ever present drone of insects harmonizing with melodic birdsong from outside.

I forgot how noisy nature is out here in Indian Territory.

"Sure, honey," he answered the girl, flashing a quick smile. "I was born ready."

That wasn't exactly true. Arriving at the Evans' spacious log home set deep in the heart of an Oklahoma forest last night, the first thing he'd wanted was a bed. Thankfully, the girls were tired too; catching up and visiting the Cryptid could wait till morning, all agreed. What the Feds did for the night he neither knew nor cared. Undoubtedly, Johnson would've liked being assigned Macy's personal bodyguard, but Case, the team captain, was having none of that.

After Tom went upstairs to the guest bedroom, he'd seen nothing more of the black suits until tromping back downstairs this morning to find Shelby in the kitchen, making coffee. "Morning, ma'am," he'd greeted the cute, twenty-something agent. To which she responded with a very pleasant, very cheerful grunt. That was the most he'd gotten out of her. From his observations, Case was the only one allowed to talk. Not that he did a fat lot of it. Mostly gave orders.

O'Rourke, the former linebacker, accompanied them now. According to Case, somebody had to be on hand whenever 'the visitor' - as he termed the Cryptid - was being seen. Probably, knowing the Feds, they wouldn't have let any outsiders' visit the little guy at all, except for the fact that it'd kicked up such a fuss when their doctors and scientists tried to examine him. Nobody except Winn could get close to him, he refused to eat for anybody but her, and so now the team of 'experts,' fearing the Cryptid would cause itself harm, were content to jealously hang back and watch Winn work her special magic.

Tom was excited to watch her work it now. Unlocking the padlocked wooden door, missing enough slats to permit daylight and fresh air, Winn called a soft greeting - "Hey there, Ny-mo. It's me, Winn. How'ya doin' this morning, huh?"

When she moved aside enough for Tom to edge in and take a look, he did. A moment for his eyes to adjust to the semi-darkness, then he spotted the visitor. The anthropologist blinked. Did it again. Clearly, although related, this Cryptid was no blood brother to those he and Jeanne had met across the sea.

More like distant cousins, he thought.

For one thing, this Cryptid had to be at least a head taller than either of his and Jeanne's. While it shared similar zebra-striped skin, its hair was long, coarse, and a shiny, unnatural black that gleamed in even the barn's murky light. Its eyes glowed a soft gold.

Like the female Cryptid in Aberdeen, Kesha, this one's hair was swept behind its shoulders and tied with a simple leather cord, even though a male, it showed no signs of having anything like Finn's beautiful mane.

Strange, bone earrings pierced its ears - four pairs to each ear and around its neck was some sort of bone carving dangling from a leather cord. Clothing was a suit of buckskin, reminiscent of American 'mountain men' or the Lone Ranger's sidekick, Tonto, in the old western movies. Fringed and decorated with gaily coloured beads, the clothing was completed by soft moccasins on the creature's feet and a flint hunting knife strapped to its waist.

Why didn't they remove that? Tom wondered, aghast. Could the weapon be putting his Winn in danger?

Unafraid, the teen went right up to the creature who sat, feet crossed at the ankles, comfortably on a bale of straw. Halting a pace away, she stretched out both hands, offering them for the Cryptid's inspection. Tom's jaw dropped to see the Cryptid - just as had Finn and Kesha - extend a long, forked tongue that glided over Winn's palms, knuckles and fingers. Tom's jaw dropped further to see his niece - whom he'd never suspected of having too much ability - then start flashing her fingers and waving her arms, while simultaneously twisting her lips: mouthing words in silent communication.

"Well, for heaven's sake," he muttered, shaking his head. "So it takes us days to realize we needed to send for a silent speech specialist, and here Winn's figured out all on her own how to communicate with them."

Specialists and scientists, my foot. We should've called in the fantasy-loving kids from the start.

## Part 2

### The Assignment

#### A Serious Task

Turner institute, Aberdeen

May 2011

Jeanne walked back to her office from Finn's room. The little Brosynan was picking up signing so well that Amy was having trouble keeping up with him. Amy found that she had no need to teach Kasha; for during their frequent times together, Finn would download all that he had learnt.

John too, had blended into the team beautifully, helping the two little creatures to grasp the minutiae of some words and concepts that were totally alien to them. Given his military background and detailed knowledge, permission had been given for him to join the team.

The two creatures were also beginning to understand human speech, and although they could not articulate any words, their grasp of spoken language was almost as fluent as their ability to sign.

It had been over a week since Tom had left for the States, Jeanne couldn't believe how much she missed that damn Yank. Annoying though he was, she couldn't get him out of her thoughts. It was crazy - after Mike, she had promised herself that she would never get involved with another man, and here she was day-dreaming like a love struck teenager.

Her thoughts drifted back to the day before; she had been on a little stroll down Union Street when she glimpsed a man coming out of the Disney shop. He was a ringer for Tom; she had to hold herself back from shouting out his name and chasing after him. The pained loss she felt stayed with her the whole day after the guy turned towards her, and she realised her mistake.

She sat at her desk, tapping a pencil mindlessly on the edge of the keyboard. Her phone chirruped, with a start she brought herself out of her reverie and picked up the handset. "Hello, McLennan," she said.

"Jeanne, our cousins from across the water have been in touch. As you know we have been sharing info with them since the start." It was The Commander.

"Aye."

"It would seem they want to get more involved with the little people, they want you and Wilson to go across, to someplace out in Indian country, you know where Pink disappeared to last week - yep, I do know exactly where and why he went."

"I thought you would be up to speed on it, you know more than I do. I haven't had a peep from him since he left." Jeanne replied.

"It would seem the FBI is involved now, along with a whole pile of doctors, trick-cyclists and general pen pushers. They want to start sticking things in him to find out what makes him tick, but it seems the little guy goes spare if anyone other than a sixteen year old girl, - Pink's niece, goes anywhere near. They seem to be petrified of being seen to be treating an alien like a laboratory specimen. Some sort of hang over from the flying saucer years, when stories were rife that they were chopping up little green men."

"Did you say you wanted me to go across to the States," Jeanne's heart was doing flick-flacks in her chest. The fluttering was creeping down to her stomach. God sakes what's up with me, he's just another bloke. - Well maybe not just another bloke.

"Yep, you're on a RAF flight late tomorrow, alright? Instructions be coming via secure email."

"Okay, Guv I'll be there."

"Don't forget to take Wilson in your mad dash to get there."

"What?"

"You think I'm daft or summat."

"No, I just didn't think I was so obvious."

"Ahhh you see, nothing gets past me," his voice softened, "Just take it easy girl. Not saying don't get your boots wet - just be careful."

"Don't worry, I will."

She had no sooner dropped the phone back on the cradle when it rang again.

The outside line light was flashing.

"Dr Jeanne McLennan," she responded.

"Jeanne, its Mike, I'll be up about noon tomorrow to pick Paul up."

"That's fine; he'll be at your mum's."

"Everything okay?"

"Sure." As if you care, creep. "He's looking forward to seeing you. It seems that I will be up here for quite a while, so I'm going to change his school after the holidays."

"That's okay, my mum says she loves seeing him again, thanks for involving her."

"No problem, why shouldn't I? He likes being round her too, she's got his daft love of fantasy, they spend hours talking about strange creatures."

"Alright, will I see you tomorrow?"

"Nope, I got to work." What you want to see me for, your love life growing cold? Well tough, you ain't coming back in this direction, sonny.

"That's a pity."

"Why?"

"No reason, just haven't seen you for a while. Thought we might catch up over dinner or a drink some time."

"Mmmm. Well sorry, I'm too busy, maybe next time."

"I look forward to it. Bye."

Jeanne gave a grunt, and replaced the receiver with a wry smile on her face.

Bubbling with excitement, Jeanne pulled her mobile from her bag, flicking it open she quickly found the icon she had assigned to Tom, she displayed his number on screen and picking up her desk phone, keyed ops.

"Can you give me this number on a secure link, and make sure the country of origin is not the UK," Jeanne reeled off the number.

"Just a moment Dr McLennan, - there you go." Jeanne looked at the clock 9:30AM, good, I'll get you back. She listened to a number of clicks and then the dial tone came back to her. The phone rang a number of times.

"Hi," his voice was full of sleep, croaky and a bit confused. Her stomach did little jumps, behave, she remonstrated to herself.

"Hi honey-chile, I hoid yous was back in the good ole US of A. Whens y'all a comin to see me."

"Who, what?" He mumbled, - then "Hi, Jeanne, you alright?"

"Mmmmm, how'd you know it was me?"

"Because that was just about the worst attempt at an Aberdonian trying to sound like Scarlet O'Hara, that I have ever heard in my life. - And I'm sure Mary-Loo wouldn't have a secure line, at least she didn't have when I spoke to her yesterday."

"What?"

"Ha, gotcher."

"I phoned to let you know that the powers that be have decreed that John Wilson and I are to join you, we're on a flight to Canada tomorrow, so probably be with you the day after."

Tom's reply was interrupted by a banging on his door, it burst open to reveal Case and the line-backer, both toting large black handguns.

"What are you doing?" Case demanded.

"Speaking to my Boss lady in Scotland."

"Why are you using a secure line?"

"Because I can."

"Don't get funny with me Doctor, I am responsible for security on this site, which means I get to know exactly what is said in and out. What authority have you for access to a secure line?"

"MI5, as I'm sure you already know. That was a call from Aberdeen in Scotland to let me know that my boss and an expert in these creatures are on their way, and if you have a problem with that I suggest you have a word with your superiors."

"Did you say MI5? What have the Brits got to do with this?"

"Would you believe ... three of them?"

"Sheeoot, I'm gonna have to speak with the office. You got MI5 ID or something?"

"Sure." Tom reached for his wallet and slipped out his ID card. Case inspected it closely, probably never seen one before thought Tom with a smile. "That enough for you."

"I thought you was just the kids' uncle, nobody told me you were working for the Brits."

"Just happens that both are correct."

"Okay, sorry about the interruption, I'll speak to you later." With a bemused look on his face, Case ushered the line-backer from Tom's room, closing the door quietly behind him.

Tom raised the phone to his ear, "You still there?"

"Aye, that was a wee bit of an eye opener." Jeanne's voice was subdued.

"Yeah, a real case of one hand not knowing what the other is doing. Did you catch it all?"

"Every word, I'm going to have a word with the Commander, make sure there are no more hiccups. So I'll see you in a few days."

"I look forward to it Mary-Loo."

"Ha ha, - bye for now."

"Bye, - missed you," he said and closed the connection.

Jeanne sat for a long while looking at the handset, "Missed you too," she said to the

dead phone.

## Ny-mo's Theory

Evans' Barn, Cherokee County

April 2011

As she did every morning, Winn began her talk with Ny-mo inquiring into his welfare.

'Good,' he clicked back. 'Here, I am safe. Ample water, ample food. The shade of your structure prevents too much exposure to sunlight.'

"Structure," Winn mumbled. "Structure, structure."

Darn it, she'd tried to figure out how to sign the word 'barn' so that Ny-mo could understand, but the term was apparently missing from his people's vocabulary.

Uncle Tom, behind her, overheard her mutterings. "Structure, Winn?"

"Yeah, that's what he keeps calling the barn. I've been trying to figure out how to get the word barn across to him, but it's like he don't know it."

"Winn," Uncle Tom asked softly after a passing silence. "Where did you learn to communicate with our friend, here?"

"Huh?" She threw him a glance over her shoulder, blinking owlshly through red-framed glasses. "Oh that. As you know, I've been tutoring special needs kids after school for the past couple of years. Dad thought it would be good for me: help me live in the real world, I guess. I had to learn sign language so I could talk to the ones who're hearing and speech impaired."

“Yes I know, but how - how did you learn how to talk to ... Ny-mo, did you say his name was?”

“Yeah,” Winn murmured, returning her attention to the newcomer. “Ny-mo. Well, I dunno. I just kept seeing him move his hands around and I thought it looked kinda like what I do, so I thought I’d try it. And it worked.”

Perched upon his bale, Ny-mo gazed at her with intelligent, golden eyes, awaiting an introduction to the latest stranger she brought before him. During the past several days, she’d learned at least one thing about the Troll. Or, Cryptid, as Uncle Tom called him. Croninn, he called himself and his tribe. Whatever the title, Ny-mo was possessed of extraordinary patience. About some things. Others...

After figuring out his strange finger clicking was a novel form of communication, Winn had decided to try her skills with signing on him. Though their talks were rather primitive at this point - both of them had to repeat themselves often - the two methods of hand communication were similar in their most basic motions and meanings. Happily, each day it seemed she and Ny-mo’s skill at sharing information grew. Of late, she’d also begun speaking to him verbally as well as moving her mouth to shape words when she signed. Winn was pretty sure he was picking up a few things. He’d pick up more if he’d apply himself a little more, but the guy’s patience was limited when it came to verbal speech. Hand signs were good enough for him and it was by hand signs that early on, he’d expressed his desire to speak with her “chief.”

That was one of the first things she got out of him. ‘Chiefs, we do not have,’ Winn had attempted signing back. However, going into a discussion of the Judiciary, Legislative, and Executive branches had yielded no fruit. Ny-mo just got more and more antsy.

‘Your chief, I must speak with your chief!’ he kept insisting.

Finally, Winn realized to him a “chief” was whoever happened to be in charge. Ny-mo refused to give up his story to anyone but the chief, which had cemented Macy and her decision to call their parents. When Chad leaked the news and Case and team showed up with their snoopy, overbearing doctors and scientists, she could’ve legitimately passed one of them off as a chief and had Ny-mo share his tale with them. However, something held Winn back. This was her find, her friend. Mistrustful of others, he believed whatever she told him. And she didn’t trust Case and team; she trusted her parents and Uncle Tom. When they said Uncle Tom was coming, that had been good

enough for her.

Excited, she'd dashed out to the barn, informing Ny-mo in a series of rapid signs and clicks-improvised from his own method of communication - 'The chief is coming! He's coming!'

At this point, Ny-mo's former restless prowling about the barn had ceased. Plunking down on the same bale of straw on which he rested now, he'd scarcely moved a muscle except to eat, drink, and go outside for necessary visits. Always, he returned to the same spot where he sat motionless and mute, just as he was now. Except now, she could see the gleam in his golden eyes as he appraised the man standing behind her. The slightest tremor shook his hands as he lifted them to sign: 'Is this your chief?'

'It is,' she signed back. 'This is Tom. He is - brother of my father,' she stumbled then chose to say. Not that "Uncle" Tom was really her father's brother, but the explanation was good enough. She wasn't sure if Ny-mo and the Croninn knew anything about adopted relatives or not.

'Brother of your father - and he is chief?'

For you he is, mister, she thought, but only signed, 'He is. You may entrust your story to him.'

Hmmm. Though she couldn't actually hear the creature saying it, his body language expressed his appraisal.

Rising off the bale, Ny-mo leapt lightly to his feet and strode up to her uncle. As always, Winn admired the grace with which the fellow moved. He was a bit shorter than her petite sister, meaning he stood considerably shorter than Winn herself, yet his movements were as lithe as any professional dancer. To her mind, his feline grace, the practical suit of buckskin, and the well-honed knife he'd allowed her to examine, established he must be a warrior or fighter in his tribe.

All warriors move like that, she thought. At least they do in my books.

Next to her tall uncle, Ny-mo was positively dwarfed. This didn't stop her new friend

from flicking out his tongue in a bold offer to 'read him,' as Winn thought of the Croninn's peculiar form of greeting.

"Uncle Tom, you have to stand real still, stick out your hands, and let him lick them," she started to say. But to her amazement, before she'd uttered more than a word or two, the man was already lifting his hands, holding them out for Ny-mo to examine. Winn's eyes widened to see her uncle stand frozen as a statue while Ny-mo's warm, rough tongue flicked lightly across his fingers, fingertips, palms, and knuckles.

Where did he learn to do that? she gaped.

Naturally, she remembered his story of the "Cryptids" somewhere in Scotland that he was studying with some lady doctor. At the time he'd told her, Winn had been interested but not entirely impressed. Uncle Tom hadn't even seen her troll yet. How could he know if the whatevers in Scotland were the same as hers? Now, well, she couldn't deny being impressed. Either her honorary uncle had seen her do it and was a quick study, or else he already knew about the Croninn's unusual form of investigating newcomers.

Either way, she had to admire his bravery. Shelby had refused the scrutiny outright. Johnson had been hard pressed to submit. O'Rourke had grimaced. Only Case had yielded without any sign of repugnance. Oddly enough, when Ny-mo was finished he had stepped back and hawked a perfect spit ball into the corner of the room.

'Bleah. This one tastes of blood,' he'd signed.

Whatever that meant. What would he say about Uncle Tom?

Completing his quest, Ny-mo withdrew his snakelike tongue. Turning to her, he lifted those miraculously fast hands.

'Integrity,' he signed and clicked. 'Some degree of power. He is not the most powerful of chiefs, but he possesses a willingness to aid my people.'

'Then you will tell him your story?' Winn signed back.

'I will,' Ny-mo replied.

'Excellent.' Smiling at her uncle, she said aloud, "Looks like we're all set."

'This land, your land, is like mine,' Ny-mo's story began, his fingers spelling out the words. 'Yet it is not.'

Winn saw Uncle Tom's puzzled expression as she translated out loud, but he, restraining himself, did not interrupt. Ol' Uncle Tom was pretty cool for a grown-up, Winn had to admit. Not snooty and stuck up like Macy could be, like Chad was, or condescending like Johnson - that Fed who had his eye on Macy. Yeah, she'd seen the signs. Even being as short as she was, Macy possessed a certain something that most men didn't overlook. Even Ny-mo had recognized her appeal, clicking days earlier, 'This one could be mate to a chief.'

Mate to a chief, Winn had thought, tossing her corkscrew red curls. My foot. - Macy would drive him up the wall.

That was her basic opinion of her older sister. Clearly, lots of guys didn't agree. Nevertheless, all that was beside the point. Wintergreen took secret, selfish satisfaction in the fact that Macy could never have communicated with Ny-mo like she was doing now. Surely that meant she'd found her own niche; that she, too, had some worth.

That worth was proved as she tracked Ny-mo's hand movements from behind her glasses, repeating aloud everything the little fellow signed.

Ny-mo's story was long and detailed; he described his people, their ways and their interaction with the humans of his world.

'For many years the Brosynan stood together, side by side with those tall sons of the plains. Both they and the Brosynan were warlike, and after initial bloody skirmishes they came together in harmony. The tribe that the Brosynan met with had many men, but amongst them not as many females. So it was, as they had need, they took Brosynan females as their mates, from those unions came my people, the Croninn.

'The pure blooded children of the warriors, suffered a terrible time of dying, almost

thirty years after they were born, which devastated their numbers. Many of their old folk died too, as would be expected, the cross bred children however were not affected. So it was that they moved north, leaving us the cross breeds alone, blaming us of mixed blood for the great death, from that day to this we have grown apart and have little contact with the old people.

‘We settled the plains and built permanent settlements, villages and farms. Then arrived new people from the East, yellow skinned, harsh of speech and manners, we fought many wars with them. My great-grandfather and his brother battled with them and eventually were successful in driving them from our lands although at great cost. That was many generations ago, we have grown strong, our lands are our own once more, our beasts many. But now ...’ he paused and seemed to struggle with himself for a moment or two.

‘The Chin have returned, and we have found it necessary to take up arms against them once more, but that is not all. My people in the extreme south of our lands are being ravaged by a terrible foe,’ he continued, ‘the Enemy; they are giants who wear armour crafted from stone.’

Tom’s jaw dropped as his mind clicked to the Holborn Circus incident.

‘For scores of years we have used magic to hold them at bay, creating a wall of force that they have not been able to breach. Now, however, our magic-wielders grow sickly and perish. The Enemy have devised methods of breaching our defences, and of harming our magicians in the doing. Without their protection, our warriors are hard pressed to defend our homes. We are,’ the Croninn signed grimly, ‘in grave danger of losing our fight.

‘Now our Shaman have discovered that the Enemy have learnt to break the fabric that separates our worlds, they have been coming here, to your world - to your time.’

The look he turned on Tom was piercing, sober.

‘Your race too is now threatened. In my world, we once lived in peace - the Croninn and the Plainsmen, sadly no longer. Although you, and she’ - Ny-mo paused to single out Winn herself - ‘bear different eyes and manes to your kinsmen, you share similar hides. You and the Plainsmen are brothers of different breeds.

‘Long have we made war upon our enemy, the Chin, but daily their might strengthens. So few’, he mourned. ‘We are few and they have become mighty. In order that we perish not, for truly now we know that we share the same blood. The wisest of our chiefs and the strongest of our magic-wielders who remain, chose to send me from my world to yours. I have come to seek aid, to supplicate for help.’

Grimly, slowly, he signed, ‘I ask you now, Chief - brother of my heart-sister’s father, for your assistance. For we have concluded that if we perish, so will perish many of your people too.’

‘For there are many places in our world where your kind live, they have fallen or come through the tears that the Enemy make. Their lives have been hard, difficult, but they have survived, like our forefathers they are hardy and have survived through their strength and tenacity.’

‘Our Shaman have told us, that they have seen in their dreams, in far off lands, many white eyes that have not come through the fabric. Some are primitive, scrabbling for nuts and berries, others following behind the beasts of the field, as they wander across the plains.’

‘There are tribes of our Brosynan ancestors too, ones who have not intermingled with your kind, they are a wild, but gentle people, without too much magic. They live far to the north of our lands. Soon the Enemy will be past our defences’ ... he stopped and sunk his head into his hands in despair. Such a human gesture, thought Tom poignantly.

Later, alone in his room and with the privacy of his thoughts, Tom paced restlessly back and forth. How did I get into this? He kept wondering. Then, Can it be real? I mean, finding one creature out of a storybook was fine. But now they’re popping up on both sides of the Atlantic, and this one’s got a tale to tell that’s enough to freeze anyone’s blood.

Well, anyone except Wintergreen Evans. Tom could only marvel over his niece’s composure during the entire affair. Throughout the Croninn’s fantastic, oft times disturbing tale, Winn had maintained her cool. Of course, kids these days tend to be desensitized, Tom thought, what with the violence in video games, books, and movies. Yet Ny-mo’s astonishing tale of gigantic beings swooping down unexpectedly to gather up Croninn and humans alike - as food - was enough to send chills down Tom’s spine.

Can this be real? He wondered again. What the devil am I going to do?

What they were going to do depended heavily on the veracity of the tale. Which, he very much feared, considering Holborn, had a great deal of merit. There was the fantastic, storybook creature right there, before his eyes, garbed in clothing and carrying weapons definitely from another age.

Over the following days Tom took the opportunity to have numerous conversations with the little warrior, asking about his life, his people, and especially the mysterious plainsmen and the Chin. His knowledge of ancient civilizations accorded perfectly with everything Tom knew about pre-historical tribes, both American Indian and the Mongol hordes who had followed Kublai Kahn.

A studied historian wouldn't be capable of making all that up, of making it so real. He knows everything from what food they grew to the beads on the chief's moccasins. Again, Tom ran through the evidence in his mind. He knows their weapons, their religious practices, their methods of making dye and paint. ... All of the knowledge that we've only gleaned the barest basics from using archaeology, he talks about as if he knows personally.

So does that mean he does?

What a conundrum! Tom was shaken up - and he didn't mind admitting it. More than the fact that a storybook creature from another realm had abruptly appeared, was the conclusion Winn had drawn before Tom could. Pausing on one of their return trips from barn to house; his niece had turned to him, squinting slightly through her red-rimmed glasses.

"Uncle Tom," she'd said very seriously, "you know what this means, don't you?"

Tom's mind had been racing with a multitude of things it could and might mean. What was one more added to the list?

"What's that, sweetheart?"

"Basically, it means that if Ny-mo's story is true, and he really does come from a world

parallel to ours ... if he really was somehow shot here through time or space or whatever ... and if his people and the local human tribes really are being devoured by some kind of monster ... you know what that means, don't you?"

Slowly, Tom shook his head, not entirely sure of the point the girl was trying to make.

"It means," Winn continued soberly, "that if we don't help them stop these things and save their lands, we could be next."

"How do you figure?"

"Think about it. Nearly everybody in Oklahoma has some Indian blood. I realize a lot of the tribes were brought here from over the trail of tears, but who knows how the people here may have married and intermarried throughout the centuries with people from out of state? In other words," she summarized, "what Ny-mo's tale means to us, boils down to us. If we don't stop those things from killing his people and the humans back then, soon, none of us are going to be here today."

Tom's heart froze. "You mean..."

"Exactly." The teen nodded her head wisely, pleased to see him catching on. "Whoever has the slightest connection with any of those people back then - which I guarantee is a large number - will just ... wink out of existence. Not to mention, if it's happening here in Oklahoma way back when, who knows where else it's happening? Could be happening all across the States..."

"And across the ocean as well," he murmured aloud.

Dear heaven - Jeanne!

"Jeanne," Tom now murmured aloud. He sat alone in his room, rubbing his hands absently over his forearms to lower the bumps raised on them. "Jeanne, what does this mean? If Ny-mo's people are being threatened by these monsters, are Finn's? And if they are, are the humans in our age also being threatened? Could you - or I - be next?"

The faces of those he loved - Macy, Winn, the twins, Sam and Michelle, his parents, his

sister in Kansas, and last of all Paul - and Jeanne, raced again and again through his mind. Groaning helplessly, Tom lowered his face into his hands.

How did I walk into this nightmare?

## Another Attack

Turner Institute, Aberdeen

May 2011

Jeanne's phone rang, she lifted the receiver.

"You watching the box?" it was the Boss.

"No Guv, what's up?"

"Switch on News 24, its breaking in Brazil."

Jeanne pulled the remote from her desk drawer, within moments she was watching a report from the Interlagos Raceway, just outside Sao Paulo.

The female reporter was almost hysterical, "... from the corner of the stadium, just over there," the camera panned away from her.

The scene was like something out of a horror movie. The stands were broken and buckled, the roof ripped off in places, pieces lay across the track and the seats. The camera zoomed in.

"There are bodies just scattered everywhere," her voice broke as the horror of what she could see became too much for her, she gave a choking sob, "It was huge, we were following the Friday morning free practice just half an hour ago, when a giant monster appeared, it began to smash the roof over the seating area, - then it started snatching people who were in the seats, stuffing them into a large bag. As you can see from the damage and the bodies which it either dropped or injured as it reaped its grisly harvest,

it had no cares about the deaths it was causing.”

The report switched back to the studio. “We have a video report which has just been made available to us of the attack which occurred earlier, we advise our viewers that the scenes are extremely graphic and viewer discretion is advised.”

Jeanne had seen every minute of every piece of the CCTV footage of the Holborn attack, this creature was its twin, she watched in horror as it rampaged around the stands, filling its bag with screaming motor racing fans. It turned, and in exactly the same way as the Holborn monster had done, waved its arm in the air, stepped through what looked like a tear, and disappeared.

“We have early reports that over one hundred and fifty people have either been killed or taken by the creature, the Brazilian authorities have placed a blackout on all news reporting, these pictures and the reports were transmitted prior to the blackout.

“In 2008 the same creature or one just like it attacked a busy intersection in London; this is the first time the creature has been seen since.”

An archive clip of the incident in Holborn played behind the announcer.

The news report began again, repeating all she had previously seen. Jeanne killed the power to the set and sat quietly for a while, then on a whim phoned Tom.

The American picked up, “Hi Jeanne, to what do I owe the honour?”

“Have you seen the news?”

“If you didn't know, I'm out in the sticks here, it takes a few weeks for the carrier pigeons to get through, - joking aside, I haven't had much chance, why, what's up?”

“There's been another Holborn incident, this time in Brazil, pretty much the same MO? I suggest you have a butchers at any news bulletin you can get hold of. Gad I've just realised I might have to cancel my trip.”

“Don't you dare missy.”



## Tom's Concerns

Canada, Gander Airport

May 2011

Jeanne's first act, soon as the RAF transport was safely on the ground, and it was permitted, was to pull out her mobile. Turning it on, she saw three unread texts from Paul, a missed call from The Commander, and what concerned her most-seven missed calls from Tom.

What the dickens?

Hastily, she hit the dial button. It wasn't Tom who answered, however; it was a young woman's voice, an unexpected flash of jealousy surged through her blood, shocking and warming her at the same time. Nevertheless, Jeanne held her cool.

"This is Dr. Jeanne McLennan from Aberdeen," she announced crisply. "I am trying to reach Dr. Pinkerton?"

"You mean Uncle Tom?" chirped the female voice. "Sure, hang on a sec and I'll go get him."

A rush of relief. Whew. It's no secret American girlfriend. Just one of the nieces he's mentioned before.

As soon as she became cognizant of what she was doing - actually experiencing both pain and pleasure over a 'full of himself, backwoods, American, virtual stranger!' - Jeanne gave herself a mental slap. Idiot!

When he picked up the phone, the rush of pleasure she tried to deny at hearing Tom's voice was short-lived when her colleague said, "Jeanne? Jeanne, are you alone? Can we talk? Is this line secure? Are there people around?"

"Wh-what?" Jeanne stuttered, stunned. "What's the matter with you, Yank? Never heard you so discombobulated."

Nor had she. Tom sounded downright panicky. Far from his usual teasing, gusty demeanour.

"Jeanne, honey, listen to me-we have to talk, and you need to be able to listen very closely. Can you do that? This is a matter of life or death."

Matter of life or death...

So shaken was she by the statement, by Tom's grimness and fear, the fact that he'd slipped and broken all professional decorum by calling her a term of endearment never even registered.

"Well, I'm still on the plane at the moment..."

"Are there people around?"

"A few. Some crew. John Wilson, too. Why?"

"No good," Tom muttered, evading the question. "Look, here's what to do. When you get off the plane, find a place where there's no eavesdroppers, and call me back. Pronto. Got it?"

Pronto? Jeanne pulled the phone away, frowned, then stuck it back to her ear. "Sure, Tom. Whatever you say."

"It's very important," he reiterated. "Matter of life or death."

A black chill skittered down her spine. "So you've said. Tom - what is it? Can't you tell

me?"

"Call me back," was all the American replied. Then came the click of a dying connection.

"What was that all about?" mumbled her seatmate, John Wilson, just now stirring from the cosy sleep he'd enjoyed for nearly the duration of the flight.

"What? Er, nothing. Just Tom?"

"What'd he want?" Wilson covered a yawn. "Something up?"

"I-I'm really not sure," Jeanne faltered. "He seemed pretty uptight, but wouldn't come across with anything. I'm supposed to call him back."

"Better do it, then," directed the artist needlessly, then turned to observing the world outside his window as the plane came to a gentle halt.

Don't worry. I will.

The time it took to exit the plane, locate their baggage, then get John Wilson situated guarding it while she searched for a secure area in which to call Tom, felt an eternity. Jeanne's stomach roiled; not the good kind of roiling, as when she'd woken Tom and heard his sleepy drawl. But a bad kind of roiling, the anxious kind, like the time Paul had been sent home with a note saying his English teacher wanted to meet with her the following afternoon.

Despite her outward calm that day, Jeanne had fretted and stewed right up until the moment she was actually sitting across from the woman, hearing her say Paul had a bright imagination and a knack for writing; all he needed was to focus on something more cheerful. Lately, his writing had assumed a depressed, morbid tone. Getting to the bottom of the situation, Jeanne had discovered he was upset about his dad not being there for his birthday party a couple of weeks ago—well, what kid wouldn't be? But they'd worked out the issue, got Paul's writing back on track, and now all was fine and dandy. Or, as fine and dandy as a kid being brought up with divorced parents could be.

The issue wasn't Paul now, or even Mike and her divorce. The issue Jeanne currently

faced was calling Tom and finding out what was the matter. She figured the roiling wouldn't cease until she actually got Tom on the line. What she didn't count on was his story being bad enough to cause her stomach to go from roiling to downright nauseous.

"Are you kidding me?" she whispered weakly when he finished, sinking against the nearest wall.

"I wish I were. Normally, I wouldn't take the word of a teenager on something like this, but Winn's a really bright kid and, besides, it just..."

"Makes sense," Jeanne whispered, completing the thought.

Drawing a deep breath, she pinched the bridge of her nose between two fingers, seeking to relieve the pressure mounting in her skull.

"So you don't think there's any way this - this Croninn could be mistaken, then?"

"None, Jeanne. I've done some archaeology on our local natives here in the area. Everything Ny-mo says is not only accurate to the best of our knowledge; it trumps the best of our knowledge. He makes us look like first graders trying to do algebra. I'm telling you, I just don't see any way he's not legit. His story has to be on the money."

"Oh Tom..."

Whatever she'd been intending to say trailed off helplessly. What was there to say? From the dead silence on the other end of the connection, she assumed her colleague felt likewise.

"A pretty pair we are. Two of the world's alleged leading scientists, both of us doctors and professionals in our field, and neither of us has the slightest idea what we're going to do. Maybe we should just ask Paul, or Winn. Those two kids have provided some major breaks in the case: Paul with his recognising Finn as being from Wilson's book, and Winn with finding Ny-mo, figuring out how to communicate with him, and now putting the puzzle pieces together."

At first, she was tempted to laugh at the notion: the kind of weary chuckle drawn from a

soul pushed so far there's nothing to do but laugh at how ludicrous, how ridiculous, how hard life can be. Yet, strangely, the more she considered the idea, the more merit she saw.

Well, and why not? They're just kids, but they're far from stupid. I mean, what could it possibly hurt?

Deciding she'd call or text Paul at the first opportunity, she initiated the new scheme by breaking the silence between herself and the Yank.

"Well, Tom, I'm fresh out of ideas, and I don't mind saying so. I'm just wondering-what does your niece...Winn, did you say her name was? What does she think we ought to do?"

From Tom, she got the very same chuckle she'd repressed; only there was the slightest bit of humour to lighten the dreary sound.

"Funny you should ask. Winn's got our next move all figured out."

"And what is that?"

"Winn thinks Finn, Kesha, and Ny-mo need to meet."

"That's pretty much my thinking too. Okay, we'll be with you this time tomorrow. I want to see how Ny-mo gets on with our own Brosnyan head of clan. I know they aren't from the same tribe but there is no-one on earth who knows more about the little people than John. You would be blown away at how much Finn and Kesha have come on. Rather than them learning from Amy, she is learning from them, and putting together a book with a set of signings which are easy, and simple communication finger movements which anyone can use."

Tom sounded a little distant, more preoccupied with his own problems than her news as he replied, "Yeah, we'll talk about all that lot when you get here."

"Okay, see you tomorrow then."

"I'll see if I can get the Feds to arrange for your pickup. ... Bye."

"That would be great. See yer," she signed off with a sigh, the moment of closeness had slipped away, - again, and went to look for John. Crazy thoughts were buzzing round her head; my interpretation of Winn's theory, or was it Ny-mo's, is so wild, so impossible, or is it?

Bearing in mind the recent debacle in Sao Paulo I'm inclined to think otherwise.

Jeanne and Tom

Evans' Farm, Indian Country, OK.

May 2011

The big Ford Explorer pulled into the yard trailing a plume of dust. Tom stepped forward to it and slid the rear door backwards; putting out his hand he took Jeanne's in his and helped her down the step. She stumbled slightly, falling forward into his arms. He held her for a moment then bent and kissed her lightly on top of her head. Jeanne froze. Oops, thought Tom, not only have I crossed the line, I've jumped clean over it.

Slowly Jeanne raised her head until she was looking him straight in the eyes. Tom winced, expecting fire and brimstone from the depths of hell to pour out spewing over him. Jeanne did no more than smile, her eyes sparkling; she reached up slightly and kissed him full and hard on the mouth. "Missed yer hun," she said in her best Mary-Lou impersonation. Stepping back with a laugh, she looked deep into his eyes.

Tom could not have been more surprised. He stood with his mouth wide open.

"Catching flies now?" she joked, "Where's the kitchen, I could murder a decent cup of coffee."

"Follow me, Java in this direction; you can meet the crowd too."

John was helping the young Fed, who had elected to pick them up from the airport to unload their bags from the back of the S U V. "Is naeb'dy gonna gie's a hond?" He said in the thickest Aberdonian accent he could muster. The two Feds, snake-eater and line-backer looked at each other in askance.

Tom stepped across and picked up two of the bags, "I had to take a course in colloquial

Doric before they allowed me into Scotland,” he said to them. Jeanne laughed.

In the kitchen Tom introduced the two to his family, the two older girls looked Jeanne up and down intently, sussing me out as a worthy Uncle Tom’s partner no doubt, the twins were a little shy, but soon warmed to the male Scot, before long they were sat at his feet inundating John with questions about the Loch Ness monster.

“Speak some Scotch, Mr Wilson,” said the carrot headed girl.

John regaled them with the first verse of the Bard’s - To a mouse.

“Wee sleekit, cow'rin, tim'rous beastie,

O, what a panic's in thy breastie,

Thou need na start awa sae hasty,

Wi bickering brattle!

I wad be laith to rin an chase thee,

Wi murdering pattie! - and its Scots not Scotch,” he concluded. The twins were in hysterics.

They sat around the big table, sipping at hot mugs of coffee, Jeanne obviously found it to her exacting taste, “Mmm,” she said, “now that’s good.”

Winn was the first to break the moment, “I’m going to see Ny-mo,” she said, and stood with a loud scrape of her chair on the stone floor.

John rose, “Is it alright if I come too?”

“Sure, you know anything about Trolls?”

"A bit," he responded with a wry smile.

"C'mon then, do as I say and do and you'll be alright."

Macy gave her excuses and mooched from the kitchen looking for her own personal FBI agent, the twins sat opposite Tom and Jeanne, watching the two adults in uncharacteristic silence. Fudge grunted in disgust at the disturbance, and climbed to her feet, following Macy out the door.

Tom took Jeanne's hand in his and gave a little squeeze. She made no attempt to pull away. "Are you sure, Tom?" she looked deep into his eyes, her lower lip quivered.

"I sure am, you?"

"I missed you like crazy, - so I guess the answer is yes, but....."

"If you two are going to get all mushy, I'm off to find Winn," said carrot top.

"Me too" echoed her brother. The twins scooted out the door following the chocolate lab.

Tom and Jeanne were at last alone; taking her in his arms he drew her close, mouth hovering over hers for a brief moment...

Making me want it, Jeanne warned herself before all rational thoughts fled, and she acting on impulse, chose to meet him half-way.

Their earlier kiss had been nothing but a precursor for this. She was quickly lost in the motion, the taste, the sensation. Jeanne hadn't been kissed that way in, - well, years. Judging by the American's shaky breathing when she finally pulled back neither had he.

"Well," he said, voice having assumed a husky quality that made Jeanne tingle all over, "I guess it's a good thing the twins did decide to scoot."

Grinning, Jeanne allowed herself to drift forward, relaxing against his chest. "Mmmm,"

was all she could say, burrowing her nose in his shirt front, enjoying the combined scents of man, cologne, and spicy deodorant.

“Maybe so.”

How long she snuggled against him like that, his hand gently stroking her hair, she didn't know. How long would she have kept it up? Maybe forever. Unfortunately - or rather fortunately, depending on one's point of view, interruption came in the form of Case, the huge African American Fed.

“Dr. Pinkerton, Dr. McLennan?” rumbled the giant's bass voice, startling them both. He'd made no noise entering the house, offering no warning. Jeanne's eyelids, since when had they drifted closed? snapped open. Simultaneously, she bolted upright from Tom's chest, narrowly missing a painful collision with her colleague's chin.

“Y-yes?” she stammered, nervously running a hand over her hair to smooth it down. Her cheeks aflame.

Blast you Tom! Here I am acting like a guilty schoolgirl caught canoodling with a forbidden boyfriend after dark, but the darn Yank looks as relaxed as can be. Not the slightest hint of guilt or discomfiture on his countenance. Rather, he seems to be enjoying her flushed cheeks as only a male could. Long legs stretched out before him, he folded his arms casually over his torso, favouring her with a slow, teasing, sexy wink before switching his focus to the intruder.

“What is it, man?”

The Fed's tight, grim expression gave nothing away. “Your niece, Wintergreen, sent me up here to ask if the two of you were ever coming.”

“To the barn?”

“I believe that was her meaning.”

Tom chuckled lightly. “We'll be right there. Thanks, Mr. Case.”

“Anytime.”

Without a backwards glance, the giant turned on his heel and departed.

“Errr, he gives me the shivers.” Jeanne rubbed her forearms theatrically. “So cold and distant.”

“Who, Case?”

“Aye, Case. Why must he be so……” Sentence flagging, she searched for the right word.

Tom took up the slack. “Dour? Dismal? Grim?”

“Any of them would work.”

“Hey now,” Tom chuckled, “you actually just saw Case at his most light-hearted. I think he’s taken kind of a shine to the kids, especially Winn and Emma. Seems he’s got a couple of girls of his own.”

“And you know this, how?” Jeanne queried dubiously.

“He told me.”

“He told you? He doesn’t seem like the type to be very chatty.”

“Told me more than that,” Tom confided. “Just as I guessed, he’s also a former snake-eater.”

Jeanne wrinkled her nose. “Snake-eater? Sounds a bit creepy. What on earth is that?”

“Delta Force,” replied Tom, standing. “The elite of the elite, so far as U.S. Special Forces go.

“C’mon, lady fair,” he offered, extending a hand to pull Jeanne to her feet. “Duty, and

my niece, has called. Shall we answer?"

Jeanne meets Ny-mo

Evans' Farm, Indian Country. OK

May 2011

Out at the barn, Tom tugged on Jeanne's arm until she leaned close. Mouth next to her ear, he whispered, "Don't say anything yet. Just watch Winn at work. You'll be amazed."

Jeanne nodded assent. The door to the hayloft was open, but Tom stepped back, placing a hand on the small of her back to usher her in first. The small, chivalrous act left her wanting to purr like a kitten.

A gentleman. I like that.

Once inside, though, all fluttering feelings and girlish fancies fled. Before her was the new Cryptid, and he was everything Tom had promised. Roughly, he was about the same shape but a bit taller than Finn, her own male Brosynan. Hair differed, he had no mane. His clothing though was similar, but the most spectacular difference was his golden eyes. She could see how his story of their tribe intermingling with the local natives' years ago could be true; the little guy bore characteristics of both races. Those golden eyes were sharply intelligent, alert the instant she entered his space, and quick to look her over from head to toe, sizing her up.

Winn's back was turned as Jeanne and her uncle approached, for she stood before the creature, signing to it with amazing rapidity. John Wilson crouched next to her, occasionally adding his own brisk finger motions. At their entrance, however, and the shifting of Ny-mo's attention to them, Winn also turned.

"Uncle Tom, Dr. Jeanne," she said softly. "C'mon in. This is Ny-mo. Ny-mo," she said, turning back to the visitor, "this is a friend of my father's brother. She is chief of her own

tribe.”

The teen spoke aloud, but flashed her hands and fingers at the same time. Not only, Jeanne realized, was she kind enough to translate out loud for them, she had also latched onto something else very quickly; she was attempting to teach the Croninn to understand speech ...and may well succeed, given the little creatures’ aptitude for learning.

“Please tell him I’m honoured,” Jeanne requested, stepping close behind Winn and Wilson.

Winn’s hands flashed, her mouth also working as she repeated the words. A beat in the conversation as the Croninn’s gaze flickered from Jeanne to Tom and back again. Then, lifting his hands, moving them with that lightning fast dexterity no human could ever fully replicate, he clicked something that made Winn snap, “Ny-mo!” in an affronted tone of voice. John Wilson chuckled, highly amused.

Jeanne frowned. “What did he say?”

Glancing over his shoulder, the artist grinned. “He asked if you two were mating, and said it would be a good thing if you were. We need powerful alliances between tribes in dangerous times like these.”

“Oh my...”

Jeanne felt a bit light-headed. Is the chemistry between the Yank and me that obvious?

In response to the question, Winn’s hands were moving faster than ever-agitation-while her normally open features were twisted into an irritated scowl. Jeanne felt like scowling herself. The urge only deepened when her colleague leaned in to murmur, “Maybe ol’ Ny-mo’s got something on the ball, eh Jeanne?”

“Be quiet,” she hissed back, embarrassed that the professionalism she’d maintained throughout the years he was managing to vanquish with a few choice words, teases, hints, glances and kisses.

It was all she could do not to start kicking something. Mainly, herself.

What's the matter with me? Here I've got the opportunity of a lifetime to study creatures recorded history has never seen. I'm across the ocean in a place I've never been before, and never thought to see. If Tom and his niece are correct, we face a worldwide disaster that we're going to have to come up with some kind of solution for. And I want to let myself get all distracted and muddle-headed over some man? Get over it!

It was a nice little sermon; she was proud of her own delivery. At its conclusion, maybe the chemistry between the Yank and herself hadn't vanished, but at least she had stiffened her spine enough to shift away from him and closer to Winn. For now.

"Ask him," she said, clearing her throat. "Please ask him if I might put some questions to him."

Winn's fingers flashed, her mouth moved. Ny-mo lifted his left hand to make a simple gesture, a single short click.

"That's an affirmative," the teen said seriously, her mannerisms so adult, so conscious of the responsibility she held that Jeanne wanted to smile.

In another time, in another place, she and Paul would probably be good friends.

"Very well. Would you ask him to tell me, please, about how his people and the natives of his land are related, as well as the threat they face and the power their magic-wielders exert?"

"He's already told us all that," Tom's niece let her know. "Why don't you ask him something new?"

Luckily, Tom stepped in. "Sometimes it's good for a fresh pair of ears to hear a story, honey. Jeanne and John need to hear what we've heard firsthand. They might pick up some details we missed, or think to ask some questions we haven't asked."

"Oh alright," Winn huffed, with a typical teen sigh.

Jeanne's lips twitched. That's Paul all over. The lad's ahead of his time.

She may've been minutely disgruntled, but Wintergreen Evans was not one to sulk and pout. Her fingers took to flashing, her mouth working as she translated aloud, and soon Jeanne found herself caught up in the astounding tale.

'The world was in darkness,' began the Croninn, Winn translating aloud, 'then came the light. The light came from Those Beyond, who dwell in the Higher Realm, and in the light was life. Those Beyond created the beasts, birds, and all two-legged races: you humans with your divisions, the Brosynan with theirs. Seeing we were weak in comparison with our fellow beings, those-who-were-merciful granted us also means to protect us: the Anakim with their steeds, the terrifying Gurts.

'In the course of time, as a number of Those Beyond grew greedy and others weak, they who were meant to protect both the humans and the Brosynans turned instead to slaughtering and devouring them. The Anakim became our Enemy, arrayed in their stone armour. At this time, those who favoured the Brosynans and those who favoured the humans granted our races special portions of their powers, in order that we might make war and defend ourselves.

'I have told you earlier of how the Brosynan and the Plainsmen intermingled, creating the Croninn. We were long shunned. Yet now, in times of terror and sadness, come Brosynan and human alike to seek the Croninn's aid. I do not boast when I proclaim my people the strongest magic-wielders of all.'

"Because you are a combination of human and Brosynan," observed Tom aloud.

Winn flashed her uncle a glance of slight annoyance for interrupting, but John Wilson took up the slack, flashing a translation for Ny-mo.

'Indeed,' Ny-mo answered, Wilson speaking aloud. 'As we are both human and Brosynan, so our powers are both human and Brosynan.

'You,' he said, the tale now picked up once more by Winn, 'call these powers magic, I believe. We have another name, yet names and titles bear little weight at this point. What matters is that they do exist.'

"But how?" broke in Jeanne, standing at Tom's left elbow. "With all of our technological advances we've never discovered anything that couldn't be explained by the laws of science. Magic just doesn't exist."

"Like trolls don't exist?" Winn asked quietly.

Jeanne's eyebrows rose. For a moment, she didn't know whether to be annoyed or pleased by the teen's astute inquiry, but chose to concede the point.

"Touché. Maybe some things do exist that we can't explain."

Winn, offering her own smile-luckily free of triumph-turned back to her unusual friend.

"Tell them about the nature of your magic," she signed, speaking aloud.

Ny-mo nodded. 'Our magic, then, comes from the light, which emanates from Those Beyond. Humans use the power of this light for fire and for weapons of fire. Brosynans use the power of interchanging light and darkness to move backwards and forwards-swiftly-through the days. Both of these skills my people claim, but our Shamans have further devised how we might use the power of the sun during the daylight hours, and that of the moon and stars at night, to erect shields about our homes.

'For scores of years longer than our eldest tribe members have lived these were successful. Now, in the twilight of the ages, we fear Those Beyond have begun to lose their power as you humans-' His glance at Jeanne was sharp, accusatory, making her wonder if already he understood more English than they'd given him credit for. '-Give more credence to natural laws which you call science than you do to Those Beyond.'

Jeanne felt her cheeks warm but refused to be drawn into the centuries old debate of science versus religion. The Croninn has his beliefs? Fine. She had hers too. And she wasn't quite ready to concede them all, despite the fact that science was ever changing and was going to have to change a lot more what with these recent startling events in which she, herself, was centred.

Maybe there's room for magic, religion, and science to coexist, she admitted inwardly, grudgingly. I guess we've got to progress with the times. And clearly, this mess isn't

going to be explained away by science alone.

‘Either that,’ Ny-mo went on, heedless of Jeanne’s private compromise, ‘or else the Enemy have found magic of their own. Because of their great stature and prodigious strength, as well as their mighty steeds, Those Beyond did not initially grant them a measure of their strength. They wielded no magic. Now, however, the Enemy destroys, slips past, or shatters our shields. They invade our camps. They devour our tribes. More and more difficult becomes the task of the magic-wielders who seek to forestall their attempts.

‘Nor is this all.’ Ny-mo’s grey features compressed grimly. ‘With each attack upon my people, the power of the magic-wielders weakens. It is as if a taint is spreading upon all magic, cursing those who wield it.

‘Furthermore, in years past, the Brosynans wrapped the Enemy in their magic, transporting them to another time. Yet, as I have told this brother of my heart-sister’s father-’ He nodded first at Tom, then at Winn, his translator. ‘The Enemy have learned to rend the fabrics of time. They come to my time.’ His golden eyes dimmed with sorrow, pain. ‘They come to yours. Great will be the sorrow of the world throughout the ages of time when the power of Those Beyond, as well as the power of the Shamans and magic-wielders finally ceases, as-in due course-it surely must. The Enemy will devour all, and their evil, ravenous race will stand supreme.’

Jeanne shivered, throwing Tom a helpless, worried glance. The Holborn Circus incident, as well as the more recent debacle in Brazil, added emphasis, weight to the creature’s otherwise fantastic tale.

“Tom,” she whispered faintly. “What if it’s already started? What if they’ve already figured out how to make their way into our world?”

In response, the Yank slipped an arm around her shoulders, pulling her close. “Then we’ll find a way to stop them,” he promised, squeezing her tight, brushing a kiss across her hair.

Ignoring both protocol and the others’ presence in the barn, Jeanne allowed herself to lean into his strength. “Well ... we’ve got humans,” she said slowly, mind racing - and not just from the Yank’s touch. “We’ve got Brosynans. Now we’ve got Croninn, as well.

"Tom," she said soberly, lifting her face to his. "What if this is no accident? What if Those Beyond, or those-who-are-merciful - providing they exist - are handing us the tools to right this wrong? We've got the three races from different time periods. We've got somebody here with sound knowledge of the Enemy who may be able to wield magic and ferry us back and forth through time. We've got Case and his Feds, here- we've basically got access to the best soldiers and weapons modern-day humans have to offer. What if it's no freak accident? What if Somebody - or Something - is planning this out? And has chosen and brought us all together for its own ends."

"Planning what out?" the Yank frowned, a bit mystified by her line of logic.

Jeanne drew a deep breath. "Planning for us to eradicate the Enemy. For good. Permanently."

John Wilson, listening from his corner, spoke up. "How can we do that when we don't know how, when, or where they'll strike next?"

"Only one solution for that," piped up Winn.

Three pairs of adult eyes, and one of Croninn, switched to her. She shrugged. "Isn't it obvious? We've got to take this war to the Enemy's home turf."

"The sooner we get our three incomers together the better. Do you think the American agencies will agree to work with the British?" Jeanne said as they arranged themselves in a circle.

"Only one way to find out, I'll have a word with Case."

"I don't want to throw a damper on this little plan," it was Wilson, speaking from where he was still kneeling on the floor. He climbed to his feet as all eyes turned towards him. He continued, signing to Ny-mo as he spoke; "As you know, I have been to the 'other side.' It was a year after my wife passed on, and the girls had gone back to their father. I used to walk with my memories a lot back then, my favourite spot was in the woods behind above Loch Muick. I had my 12 bore with me, hoping for a pheasant or two.

"Anyway, this time I spied a little fellow in buckskins and followed him thinking he was a

bit suspicious, a few deer had been disappearing. I later discovered he was a Brosynan hunter; He disappeared almost in front of my eyes; I moved to where I had last seen him. I discovered a tear, a rent in the air exactly where he had disappeared. It was, and still is beyond my comprehension, the edges were beginning to knit together, I wonder why I did, but I stepped through before it closed.

"I was tripped, and a bone knife pressed to my throat, accompanied by a grunt and rapid finger clicking. I lay as still as I could for a moment, then my military training clicked in, I know I told you that I was an RSM in the Coldstream's, but that was before I served in the SAS, not something that I generally broadcast.

"I bucked and threw him off, I guess I caught him unawares, suffice it to say, we stood looking at each other, sizing each other up, he was short but powerfully built, in a straight wrestle I probably wouldn't have stood a chance. I took a chance, both barrels were loaded, if I discharged one it might startle him, frighten him off, I raised the barrel, pointing at the sky and pulled the trigger.

"Nothing happened.

"I pulled again, firing the second chamber, nothing happened, I could hear the pin fall, but that was all. I popped the gun open and from my pocket reloaded with another two shells. Again I fired, both barrels were dead. The little creature stood watching me, his face questioning my sanity.

"I placed the useless shotgun on the ground and held out my hands to him in a gesture of friendship. He approached me confidently; without warning, from his mouth slid a long forked tongue. It took all of my self control to stop myself from cringing away from the gruesome appendage but I managed it. The tongue flicked about my hands, and then across my features, again I flinched internally.

"He turned and with an unmistakable gesture for me to follow, moving away from me. I had my first opportunity to look around. The terrain and the vegetation were unlike anything I had any previous experience of in Scotland. If I could believe the possibility of it, I would swear I was in a different land, or horrors of horrors on a different planet. I picked up the useless shotgun and with a deep breath followed the little creature.

"My reason for telling you of that first encounter with the Brosynan is to let you know

that any modern appliance is rendered useless by the magic in that land. I had with me a torch, it too would not work, I carried it with me right up to when I returned to this time when it immediately began to operate.”

“So, basically what you are implying is our weapons, and all our modern paraphernalia is totally useless?”

“Yes, Jeanne, if we are to take any weapons they cannot be dependent upon modern technology.”

“Where does that leave us?” asked Tom.

“Bows and arrows, spears, swords, I even thought of catapults and slings, siege engines like the Trebuchet and of course our own magic - ‘fire,’ any of that lot will work just fine.”

“What about vehicles?”

“You missing your Rover?” asked Tom with a grin.

“Aye, it would be useful if we could use vehicles, I always believed if the good Lord wanted us to walk everywhere, he wouldn’t have allowed us to invent the motor car.”

“Nope. Vehicles of any kind are a no, no.”

“Mmmm you might have something there,” Tom responded to Jeanne with a big smile, changing tack completely he asked John, “What about horses, could we take them?”

“Don’t see any reason why not, there were horses on the plains. The Brosynan didn’t use them though.”

Ny-mo had been silent through the exchange but he clicked, attracting their attention; ‘Horses are our brothers on the plains, we have many head, and the humans too use them. Many full moons past, we observed a patrol of Brosynan hunters, they ride a creature from the northern plains, it is like a serpent that stands on its hind legs like a man, it is almost twice the size of our horses. We observed these creatures for a long

while, they are meat eaters and are fearsome to behold, but they are close companions to the cave dwellers.' Winn translated, John nodding in agreement.

"They must have formed this alliance after my time," he said.

"After your time?" Winn said, her shock creeping through her normally controlled demeanour.

"Somehow I slipped through time; my period with the Brosynans was over two hundred years ago, or so Finn tells me."

'Finn?' it was a question from Ny-mo.

"Finn is our male Brosynan, the female we have is called Kesha, she has a newborn child of just a few weeks old," Jeanne's voice was soft as she spoke of her charges, for she had grown fond of the little female and the tiny baby.

'I must speak with them, they must know the danger that threatens the northern lands, for we in the middle cannot hold much longer without their help.'

"Okay, I suggest we close this little pow-wow, and give Jeanne an opportunity to set the wheels in motion, I think perhaps the Commander better start earning his salary and get us outta here. Do you think you could find your little tear again John?"

"No, but Finn could find his."

Jeanne spun towards the SAS Guardsman turned artist, "Finn could?"

"Yep, some of the Brosynan have a built in ability, magic, power; call it what you like, they are able to manipulate the divide between their time and ours. How do you think I got back to a point in time just a minute after I had disappeared, but four years older?"

"The Brosynans helped you."

"Correctomundo."

“Okay, so we know it can be done; now let’s get it done.” Jeanne stood decisively. She looked up at the camera which had been monitoring their every word and movement, “Got that lot, now act on it, your top brass get in touch with mine, I want a special ops command of company strength, that’s one hundred and twenty men and women, equal numbers American and British, two forty in total, you now know what weapons are compatible, each member mounted, with one spare mount each. I want your American contingent ready in three days, we will move across to the UK then.”

Winn had been silently translating all the while; Ny-mo nodded his approval as the commands were relayed to him, enhancing his blossoming understanding of their spoken words.

Without waiting for a response from whoever was monitoring the camera, Jeanne said good night to Ny-mo and left the barn with a muttered comment “I’m nacket, an I needs a coffee and ma bed.”

The others trooped after her, leaving Winn with the Croninn warrior.

‘It is good, she is a powerful leader, I have much hope of success.’

Paul and Winn

Craigdendarroch Farm, Aboyne

June 2011

"I'm bored," Paul whined for the thousandth time, tossing his electronic-gaming-gizmo onto the couch. "When are my mum and your uncle getting back?"

If I have to listen to him bellyache about being bored one more time...

More than a little fractious, Winn felt like tackling Dr. McLennan's son and tossing him onto the couch, just as he'd tossed his game. Nevertheless, mindful that Jeanne McLennan was Uncle Tom's good friend, and that Uncle Tom before leaving had urged her to be good and act like an adult - mindful also that Paul was just a guy and probably couldn't help himself - she gritted her teeth, striving for patience.

"I don't know," she finally said aloud. "They'll be here when they get here."

"That's what you always say."

Paul's look was accusing - as if it were her fault his mom and Uncle Tom were delaying in Egypt!

"Well, what else do you want me to say?" she snapped peevishly. Rising, she threw her own book onto the couch - well, it was Paul's really. That volume of John Wilson's artwork his bum dad had sent him for a birthday gift. Amazing how John, the artist, had managed to keep the trolls a secret for so long.

"Look, I'm going to go take a nap. Why don't you start doing some more research

online?"

"What for? It's not like we're going to find anything."

One, two, three, four... Winn counted.

Gritting her teeth, the teen forced a tight smile. "Well, you never know about that, do you?" she asked almost pleasantly. "C'mon, Paul, I really don't feel very good."

"Huh. Yeah, it's probably cause it's your time of the month," the boy muttered under his breath, turning away.

Heat, from the tip of her toes to the crown of her head, raced through Winn. "What did you say?"

"I said," Paul drew out snottily, "it's probably your time of the month. That's what usually gets women upset isn't it?"

No, it wasn't. For his information, what had her upset was guessing the adults wanted to leave her behind - with Paul - while they slipped off to the netherworld to fight monsters. What had her upset was knowing Ny-mo had been her find, was her friend, and that she could communicate with him better than anybody else. Above all, she had a right to go...a right she was being denied because of her age. That had her upset.

Worsening matters, what also had her upset were the headaches she couldn't get rid of; steady, dull aches that had begun about the time she set foot on British soil and which wouldn't let up. Even in her sleep she hurt, making true rest difficult to find. What had her upset was the heat in her stomach and, oddly enough, the soles of her feet, as if she had incessant heartburn and had walked for dozens of miles in ill fitting shoes. She couldn't sleep, could hardly eat, and couldn't concentrate on anything for long periods of time, including the research she and Paul had been conducting. Overall, she felt just plain awful.

What had her upset was all this, plus Paul himself. Her time of the month or not, the kid should have stopped there. He couldn't feel the heat building, rising inside her like she could. He couldn't feel the headache increasing, the burn in belly and heels deepening.

"I know, because I live with my mom," he continued, still in that snide, snotty tone that made Winn want to smack him over the head with the binding of his own book. "Whenever it's her time of the month I always have to tread lightly. She can be a real witch, and maybe if your Uncle Tom knew that he would quit sniffing around her like a nasty dog."

This last he levelled at her like an accusation - like it was her fault, again, that her adopted uncle obviously had more interest in his pretty mom than as a mere colleague. Well, Winn didn't like it any better than he did. No better, in fact, than the kiss she'd seen Johnson giving Macy right before their party stepped on the plane bound for London. A kiss the Fed had thought was inconspicuous, but which the dumb head didn't know was pretty hard to miss what with Macy gasping loudly and returning it vigorously like she had.

Grownups.

Sometimes the whole lot of them made her sick, but the anger they could inspire was absolutely nothing compared to the wrath mounting, mounting, and mounting as Paul kept on. Her uncle and Dr. McLennan had thought they'd be great friends, what with their common interest in fantasy. Little did they know how pesky, aggravating, and downright annoying Paul could be - especially when it was just the two of them, like it often was these days ... the adults in charge being too busy with their top secret expedition to pay either Paul or herself much mind.

"And if he thinks," Paul was concluding self-righteously, his words sounding suspiciously like someone else's, "he's going to take the place of my dad; he's got another thing coming. If there's one thing I don't need it's some upstart Yank from a backwater, no-name place like Oklahoma trying to step into my life and tell me what to do."

Ooooooh, that did it. Everything he'd said up to this point was bad enough, but when he slighted her beloved home state...well, Winn just couldn't take it anymore.

She didn't have to say a word. Paul must've read by face or body stance that he'd pushed too hard, stepping across the line. His mouth dropped, face paling. Just as Winn sprung, he let loose with an almost feminine shriek, whirled, and took off running.

"Case, Case!" he shouted at the top of his lungs. "Somebody help, Winn's trying to kill

me!”

The heat was exploding now, a purple mist before her eyes, mountains of amethyst lava erupting in her brain, sliding through her veins, intensifying both her wrath and her headache, spurring on the need to fight. White-hot, ultra violet fire consumed the teen; the strange slow burn cooking in her for days refused now to be repressed. The only way to satisfy it was to feed it, releasing tension with a good fight.

Unaware, now, of what she did, Winn gave chase, careening wildly through the corridor and around a corner, arms outstretched, hands fashioned into claws like a living parody of some corny black and white horror movie.

“Get back here, you little twit,” she snarled. “I’m gonna pummel you, I’m gonna beat you, I’m gonna kill you. You can’t mess with me and get away with it. You can’t -”

Paul’s, “Help, help!” drowned out the rest of her tirade.

Seeing daylight, the boy pushed open the sliding glass door and dashed out onto the garden Winn in hot pursuit. He made for the group of men and women, no-nonsense Shelby was instructing out on the lawn. Perhaps he thought the female black suit would protect him from her wrath. Ha! An unnaturally wicked grin crooked Winn’s lips. Little does the brat know...

An unexpected burst of energy inspired her sudden burst of speed. Three speedy, giant steps and she leapt, catching her enemy about the ankles and bringing him down.

“Gotcha, jerk!” she cried triumphantly.

Paul squealed, bucking under her. Just as they hit dirt, the writhing kid somehow managed to turn. Arms and legs flailing, fists flying, he probably didn’t mean to smash her right between the eyes like he did. Probably, he was merely trying to stave her off. Unfortunately for Winn, the blow came out of nowhere, catching her by surprise. Combined with the raging, rampant, uncontrollable tongues of violet flame leaping inside her chest, licking at heart, core, centre, brain, the crack was like a thunderclap. One moment she felt the insane wrath, the pulsing pain in her skull; the next Paul’s fist cracked against her forehead.

A bolt of purple-white lighting. A thunder crack so loud and dizzying Winn toppled off her enemy, falling to the ground into the foetal position, moaning, and her hands clapped over her ears. Then there was nothing, nothing but blackness. Merciful blackness and merciful silence.

Bes

Luxor, Egypt

June 2011

Jeanne lay on her back looking up at the clear blue sky, not a cloud in sight, the sun was a ball of molten lead hanging in the void. The riverboat manoeuvred sluggishly towards its mooring.

“Act like a tourist, and don’t make any bloomin’ waves, but find out what you can outside the official claptrap that’s leaking out,” were the Commander’s final words.

“You coming?” It was Tom, breaking into her thoughts.

“Aye,” she stood from where she was laid on the sun-bed, chance for another swift, free bronzie, she had thought as she took a last opportunity to catch some rays. “Gad it’s hot.”

“We can get dressed and go ashore with the crowd.”

“‘K, see you in a bit.” She grabbed her towel, slung it around her waist like a sarong and threading her toes into the pink plastic flip-flops, schlepped off towards her cabin for a shower.

Tom watched as she disappeared down the nearest stairway, his heart heavy. Jeanne had been so distant, almost aloof since their return from Oklahoma over a month ago.

He put it down to the pressure of work, preparing for their trip into the unknown. Not knowing if they would return, not knowing outside what they had gleaned from Ny-mo,

what they could expect, if and when they arrived in his time. Not knowing if she would ever see Paul again.

Finn, Kesha and Ny-mo had spent what seemed like hours with 'locked tongues' - 'downloading' Jeanne had named it. Those times of deep concentration, thought mingling, were way beyond human comprehension, even so Ny-mo had to be re-introduced to the practice, for the technique had dwindled to no more than deep loving exchanges between mates amongst the Croninn.

Every member of the rapidly put together military force, American and British had spent the time becoming conversant with finger speech; some like Winn took to it easily. Case found it difficult and even with personal tuition from Amy could still be heard cussing in his deep rumble as he struggled with the intricate finger shapes. They were more adept at employing effectively the air powered rifles, modern longbows, crossbows, lead shot slings and catapults, issued to the special-forces troopers.

The expeditionary force moved to John Wilson's farm. Tented accommodation sprouted in the fields close to his farmhouse. Sufficient fine horses 'borrowed' from the British Cavalry regiments were delivered and corralled in adjacent fields; it seemed that no expense was to be spared. The Holborn and Interlagos incidents had put paid to any financial restrictions that might have reared their heads. There they had spent many hours, practicing with swords and knives; their ability to attack and battle with diverse mêlée weapons from horseback was awesome to observe. They all wore custom fitted, lightweight modern armour, tough enough to withstand a light calibre bullet or even an arrow shot from ten yards.

Six large, four wheeled trailers adapted to be pulled by horses in harness appeared one morning, they were packed full of equipment. Ny-mo was impressed, he had requested that one hundred shields made of the same lightweight material, and as many modern versions of the weapons, with which Finn and he were becoming exceptionally proficient, be included in the equipment they were taking.

Kesha and the baby had remained in the Turner Institute for the sake of peace and security, although she was kept up to date by frequent visits from Finn, Ny-mo and Jeanne.

The Commander had scrambled Jeanne and Tom to Luxor in Egypt.

Ny-mo and Finn were returned to the Turner, both were fascinated at the speed the vehicle was able to move without visible means of propulsion. Finn however found it necessary to continuously spit out the pollution as they travelled; it was obvious he had enjoyed his time in the open; Ny-mo though was not affected.

A street urchin had been knocked down by a speeding taxi on Nile Street in Luxor, not an uncommon event, but this one had a twist.

The body lay in the city morgue under armed guard.

This little beggar was unlike any seen in any part of the world, outside of Oklahoma and Aberdeen that is. A digital image of the little corpse had landed on the Commander's PC desktop, courtesy of a well placed and well bribed mole. That had been just over five days previously. To give a semblance of normality, at the request of the Egyptian government, the pair had enjoyed four days of gentle cruising on one of the floating hotels that plied their trade up and down the river.

As the boat made to dock in Luxor, Tom knew their enforced mini-break was over, a mini-break that he had hoped would rekindle the exquisite time of affection that they had shared in Oklahoma, but it was not to be, Jeanne had insisted on separate cabins, and so it was.

An appointment had been made for them to view the little body at 5:00PM that day. The Commander had spent the previous four days of their 'holiday' pulling multiple strings and calling in favours from high up in the Egyptian government to facilitate it. Even so their time was limited to a single viewing, no photographs and under strict secrecy and security.

It seemed that the last thing the Egyptian authorities wanted was adverse publicity depleting their already waning tourist industry. If it became public that strange creatures were lurking under niqabs in the streets of Luxor, incalculable damage could be done.

It was just 4:30PM local time when an official looking black sedan drew up outside the hotel they had booked into. Jeanne and Tom were ushered into the rear seats. From behind the darkened windows they watched in amazement as the driver who seemed to have a death wish, whisked them along Nile Street, with much horn honking and cursing

at the ancient blue and white Peugeot 504 taxis and horse drawn carriages, which were touting for trade from the tourists strolling along the Corniche.

A guard lazing in the shade of a large parasol at the rear entrance of an austere building made no effort to hide the bulging outline of the automatic pistol under his grubby T shirt. A few swift words from their driver and the door was opened, they stepped into the cool dark interior.

It was without a doubt a Cryptid, a Troll, a Brosynan or whatever. The little creature looked almost pathetic in death. It was thinner than the three they knew, and almost black skinned, although the grey stripes and swirls were still much in evidence all over his body; yes again, unmistakably a male, thought Jeanne.

Tom stole a look at their driver, who was staring at the little creature with wide eyes and open mouth. "Okay, we can go now," Tom said. The man snapped out of wherever he had been, tearing his eyes from the little corpse, he turned to shepherd them through the door.

The drive back to the hotel was silent; the driver seemed to have lost his intention of joining the elite band of Hollywood stunt drivers making their way through the crowded streets, and hardly used his horn. Jeanne reached across and took Tom's hand, giving a little squeeze. It was almost as though the sight of the creature had brought home to her once again how important a task they had on their shoulders, she needed his strength to give her support.

They pulled onto the slip road in front of the hotel.

"I take you to airport quarter past one tomorrow," he said, his accent thick, his words precise and clipped.

"Shokran," (thank-you) said Jeanne.

"No speak of this," he continued, "is forbidden, never happen, understand?"

"Yeah, we got it," Tom drawled sardonically.

"I serious, speak -" he drew his forefinger across his throat in the ancient threat, raising his eyebrows at the same time.

"Okay, understood," Jeanne interjected quickly before her colleague said something to antagonise the man. She took Tom's arm and almost pulled him from the car and through the security gate. The duty guard looked at them quizzically but as they had stepped from an official car, decided against any further action.

It was a short while later, Tom knocked on her bedroom door, "Do you want to take a trip into the Suq, see if we can pick up a couple of souvenirs for the kids?"

"I was told it's all been cleared out as part of the re-building of that part of the town."

"Yeah, but most of the market is still there, it's just under cover now."

It was an hour later they were sat in a little café sipping on cold Stella beers when a diminutive figure in a niqab approached them. All Jeanne could see was a pair of eyes regarding them closely; a little hand appeared and made a begging gesture, bringing its fingers to where its mouth would be.

Jeanne looked deep into amber eyes. This was no dead pan expression of utter despair that she had already seen from other child beggars. The kind of look which cut through to your heart, and automatically opened your purse. This was a highly intelligent appraisal being carried out by a very clever being.

On a whim Jeanne raised her hand and made the Brosynan greeting sign. The amber eyes flashed and a little hand signed back 'Who are you? Why came you to this place?'

'We came to look for you.'

'Why have you been to see our dead brother?'

Jeanne was shocked but responded with; 'to find you.'

'Slaves have not looked for us since the time of The Watchers, why look you for us now?'

‘Have you not come through?’ asked Jeanne in surprise, ‘have you not come through from the time of The Watchers?’

‘I understand not what you mean, we live many days from here, following Mother River south - but I must move, if I stay in one place too long the slaves will come with sticks.’

‘No, wait, we want to know more about you.’

‘Tomorrow, this hour, be at the place of the Pharaoh Queen and find the statue of Horus, there you will learn that we, the children of Bes have always walked hand in hand with the Watchers.’ The creature turned and melted into the crowd.

“Damn, she’s gone, we better compare what she signed to get it dead right, then sequester it back to the Commander. I guess we’re gonna be here longer than expected,” said a hushed voiced Tom.

“I wish we had Winn or John here, perhaps they could have persuaded her to stay. I just didn’t have all the right signs for it.”

Jeanne’s mind was buzzing at this unexpected twist. In a hastily hailed taxi she re-ran the brief encounter over in her mind, it couldn’t have taken longer than half a minute and no words had passed between them. None of their gestures would have been understood by the security men standing conspicuously on street corners and doorways around them. To a bystander she could conceivably have been waving a particularly insistent beggar away.

It was to the pair of them half a minute of exquisite mystery - Brosnans living undetected in the Egyptian deserts for untold millennia, it was just too impossible to believe.

Later that evening they sat together on Jeanne’s bed, Tom had his laptop open, he plugged in the USB dongle, and made satellite internet connection, he opened Google’s search page.

“Look for any reference to something called Bes, if there is one; I hope I got it right, I’ve never heard of it before.”

"I think I have, seems to ring bells" said Tom, "Winn's parents could probably give us chapter and verse on it. Anyways, here goes."

He keyed in 'Bes Egypt' and was immediately offered a number of web links. Clicking on the first opened a site giving information on the mortuary temple of Hatshepsut. Tom scrolled through the information, Jeanne hanging over his shoulder.

"There," she said, "Hatshepsut, the only female pharaoh, we're on the right track, - STOP!" She shouted, almost a screech. "Go back up, there's the name, - Bes, 'the dwarf god, - protector of women and childbirth' It's a link Tom, click it!"

"Oh my Lord, look at that statue, how could we ever have missed this connection, it's a Brosynan, a bit stylised, the tongue is stuck out and it's a human tongue, but other than that it's almost spot on," she said in a hushed voice.

"So the god, Bes, and there are loads of pages about him, was one of our little friends, I think we better keep that rendezvous tomorrow. I'll wrap all this info up and sec-blast it back to London. Do you want a drink from room-service, we have quite a few hours reading here?" asked the American.

"Yeah, and something to eat too, where'd I put that menu?"

"Here, hiding under the laptop," he produced it with a flourish.

"Mmmmm, a Yankee funny man hey? Rare breed, pass it here, - what you fancy?"

"I'll have a look in a mo, - I know now why that driver was so freaked out; this little guy is still venerated today," he said finally looking up from the screen.

"What?"

"Yep, as a fertility god, - there are fertility gods all over the world that follow the same depiction, a large erect member. If you're thinking what I'm thinking, that these little guys have been hiding just under the surface, almost everywhere, then you'd be right, In my job I've come across carvings and statuettes like these many, many times, but never thought to make a connection until now. In New Zealand, Bes is still a huge part of their

culture, just clock the 'All Blacks' before a Rugby game, or the way they greet a visiting dignitary. "

"Why should you have?"

"I guess not." He said pouring over the screen again.

"I'll get us an extension on the rooms, what do you think, a week?"

"Yep," he muttered, deeply engrossed in the Wikipedia page on Hatshepsut.

"I'll make it six weeks then."

"Whatever you think," he mumbled. "What?"

She laughed, "A week then," she flicked open her mobile, "better get the boss to postpone our flight out too. Telling the locals we're extending our holiday; might work. If not, and they find out what's really going on, I guess they'll throw us onto the first plane out of here, or into jail." She finished, laughing at the expression on his face

## Valley of the Kings

"How hot do you reckon it is?" Jeanne gasped, taking another slug from the plastic bottle of luke-warm water.

"Dunno."

They had been sat in the sliver of shade cast by the ramp leading up to the temple for almost an hour. "Don't think she is gonna make a show." Tom grunted, "Might as well high-tail it outta here, I can't stand much more of this. You wanna share that bottle?"

"Nope, where's yours?"

"I think I left it over by Horus," he said pointing in the direction of the statue, "but it will have either walked or evaporated by now."

"I couldn't find a thing about Bes near the statue, but we found more than enough on the web last night. Bes was supposed to be associated with Horus when he was a child, so maybe that's why we were pointed to come over here."

"Aye, and that statue over there of the cow goddess, Hathor, who Bes is also linked to is supposed to be Horus' mother or wife, or both," Jeanne finished with a strange grimace.

"Yeah, but they were both heavily involved, so far as the ancients were concerned with childbirth and generally having a good time."

"Shush, someone's coming," Jeanne put her forefinger to his lips cutting him off, impulsively Tom kissed it. "Stop it for a minute," she hissed.

Tom turned to look around, not seeing anyone or anything close to hand, he said, "Where, what you on about?"

"She's here." Jeanne was still whispering.

"I can't see anyone."

"Well just shut up then." Tom decided to do just as he was bid, he knew that tone, and knew that it brooked no argument.

Jeanne became involved in what Tom perceived as a one sided finger and hand signing conversation, following only a part of the conversation was too difficult for his limited ability and he concentrated on trying to see the creature; without success. Frustrated he leant back against the yellow sandstone ramp and picking up Jeanne's water bottle took a long drink.

"Oi! You, leave me a bit --- now, give me your hand." She stretched out her right hand away from them and her left towards him.

"Ahh Jeanne, I didn't think you cared."

"Stop messing, give me your hand."

Tom reached and took hold of Jeanne's outstretched hand, giving a little squeeze as he did.

The scene around them immediately blacked, Jeanne felt a leap in her insides, reminiscent of driving fast up and over a hump in the road.

She was aware of the feather like touch releasing her right hand. Her left hand was still clutching Tom's in a vice like grip. She opened her eyes and took a deep juddering breath. It was not quite dark, light was coming from somewhere, where was difficult to discern.

"You Okay?" it was Tom.

"I think so, what's happening."

"I haven't a scoobie."

A series of clicks broke the silence following his statement; Jeanne was unable to recognise more than just a few of the clicks that the Brosynan's used to communicate in the dark, and certainly not to the extent with which she was now being assailed.

"Steady down, not so fast," she said aloud, at the same time signing, 'Stop, I need light.'

There was a scrabbling sound to her left and a broad beam of light lanced through the room, dust motes dancing frantically through it, Tom stood with a plank of wood in his hand, and a smile on his face, "Is that enough?"

In front of her stood one of the dwarf creatures, it was a male.

'Why do you seek the children of Bes?' it signed without pre-amble.

'Information,' replied Jeanne.

Tom came and stood alongside Jeanne; the little creature did not seem at all fazed by his height and continued, 'we have retrieved the body of our brother.'

"That'll annoy the powers that be... as long as we don't get blamed. I'd like to get home this year if poss." Tom said.

'How can we find you again, we have many questions, but I have not the words to speak clearly to you.' Jeanne signed.

'Like all slaves you have lost the joy of mind-speech'

"What does he mean Tom?"

"I think he means telepathy."

"Well he's right," to the creature she signed, 'it is something we have lost,'

'Too much have you slaves learned to trust solely in those gabbling sounds that your kind have always made.'

'It is our way, my name is Jeanne, and this is Tom.'

'I am named Bes.'

'Was not that the name of your god?'

'And they called me Bisu and Aha as well.'

'Was that not your ancestor?'

'I am who I am, my name is Bes, I have known many lifetimes.'

"My God," said Jeanne "is it possible?"

"What?"

"Immortality," her voice had dropped to little more than a whisper.

"Dunno," he looked at the creature, it stood confidently waiting for their muttered conversation to end.

'You, the woman slave, come closer and kneel before me.'

"No way mister, I dinna kneel to onybody, well maybe ma Boss, but sure as hell is like, nae to you buddy boy." In her anger her Scots accent made itself apparent.

The creature raised one hand and beckoned, at the same time it clicked the command 'Now.'

Unable to resist Jeanne moved forward and knelt in front of the little male. Tom tried to intervene, but found he was fixed to the spot, try as he might he was unable to even

twitch.

The creature flicked its forked tongue around Jeanne's face for a moment or two then forced it into her mouth. She understood then what it was Bes wanted to do and opened her mouth. His tongue tasted vaguely of almonds. Forcing herself not to retch, she allowed the questing forks to probe her mouth. She felt them lock onto the roof.

Tom unable to do anything other than watch saw her stiffen, hold the position for about a minute, then with a low cry Jeanne fell backward, her eyes wide open and staring. The creature walked forward and stopped between the two humans.

Stretching out with his hands Bes placed one on Jeanne's ankle and with the other touched Tom's hand which was still frozen like a grasping claw in front of him.

Everything went black, Tom's stomach lurched.

Tom opened his eyes to the harsh glare of fluorescent lighting. Jeanne was lying on the floor in the same position; she scrambled to her feet and launched herself into his arms sobbing uncontrollably. Tom held her tight. They heard a tramp of many booted feet clumping down the corridor outside Jeanne's office. The door flew open and three armed soldiers burst into the room, and stood with barrels pointing at the two frightened and bewildered scientists, still clasping each other tight.

## Winn's Surprise

Craigdendarroch Farm, aboyne

June 2011

Moaning at the unwelcome sensation of something squishy, cool, and wet on her skin, Winn jerked her head, trying to rid herself of whatever it was.

"Lie still, honey," a worried voice, male, and positively not Paul's, - encouraged.

"U-Uncle Tom?" she croaked, as yet unable to open her eyes for the nausea tossed her innards like ocean waves. "When did you get back?"

"Yes, baby, it's me, and this morning to answer your question." Fierce relief pierced his voice. Winn felt the creak of the bed as he shifted, gathered the sensation of something, him, undoubtedly, hovering over her. "How you feelin'?"

"Ugh."

"What's that?"

"Ugh," Winn grunted again, a bit more emphatically.

"Aw, poor little thing," Uncle Tom sympathized, but she could hear his grin at her cynicism. "Paul really socked you a good one, huh?"

"Double ugh."

The cool, wet, squishy thing on her brow was still aggravating her. Somehow, she found

the willpower to lift her hand and prise the object away. Ah. It was a wet washcloth. Well, she didn't need that.

Winn would've dropped it, but her adopted uncle intervened, snatching it away. "Hey, kiddo, you should leave that in place. Jeanne thinks it'll be good for your head. Help the headache, if you've got one, and also clear your senses."

Jeanne can put a sock in it. She wanted to say it, but prudently held her tongue. Despite the fact that it was Jeanne who'd basically convinced her uncle that she and Paul should remain behind. Despite the fact that Jeanne stole far more of Uncle Tom's attention these days than was fair. Despite that fact that it was Jeanne's son who'd driven her to this state.

"Actually," she spoke up, finally opening her eyes, "my headache is gone." The observation surprised her more than him. How was it that a wild blow between the eyes could cure a headache?

"And my stomach feels..." She paused, checking the situation out. Now that the nausea from waking had subsided, she was able to take better stock of her state. Amazingly, the slow burn smouldering in her guts for the past few weeks had gone as well.

"...fine too," she concluded, wonderingly, sitting up.

One last thing to inspect. Uncle Tom was forced to reposition himself on his edge-of-the-bed-seat when his adopted niece leaned over to jerk the covers off her feet. "Hey, now, what're you doing? Just hold your horses until Jeanne can come have a look at you."

She decided to ignore that. Once her feet were bared, Winn pulled one ankle up over her thigh, craning her neck to examine her sole. "What're you looking at?" Tom couldn't refrain from asking.

"My feet," she mumbled, curious as to the change.

"Yes, I can see that. I mean, why are you looking at your feet?"

No response. The teen was too engrossed in her scrutinizing.

“Winn?”

“Huh?”

“Why are you studying your feet?”

“Remarkable,” she breathed.

“What’s remarkable? Besides the fact that you’re the only sixteen year old girl left in current culture who uses words like that?”

“Look!”

Excited by her discovery, she thrust her bare foot towards her uncle’s face, who, with a dodge and a grab, managed to snatch it out of the air. He gave it a cursory glance. “So what am I supposed to see?”

“Look, Uncle Tom,” she demanded, giving it a shake, forcing him to tighten his grip.

“Look at my heel. See that?” Tom lifted his eyebrows at her, and then obediently switched his focus to her heel.

“Alright, I’m looking, I’m looking, and I see...” His flippancy vanished. “Some really major calluses, Winn, girl, where’d you get those?”

“I don’t know, but both my feet burned for days, aching as if I’d walked hundreds of miles on them. Weird, huh? And look-” Snatching away the one foot, she twisted to levitate the other. “Check this out: I got ‘em on this one, too!”

“Wow.” Uncle Tom was bemused. “Those are definitely some major calluses. I’m impressed.”

“Uh, yeah, me too,” Winn snorted, “seeing as how I did absolutely nothing to get them.”

Her uncle blinked in astonishment. "What do you mean? Calluses like that don't just pop up out of thin air. You had to be doing something to get those babies."

"No I didn't, swear I didn't," the teen persisted, reclaiming this foot and repositioning herself cross legged on the mattress. Pulling the blankets up to her waist, she looked her uncle in the eye, returning his dubious expression with an adamant stare of her own. "Really, Uncle Tom. The headaches, the burning ache in my feet, the simmering in my stomach-it all started practically as soon as we landed here in Europe. You and Dr. McLennan were too busy with Ny-Mo, Finn, and Kesha - not to mention helping put the team together - to notice. After you left, things just got worse."

Perhaps the fact that she was shrewd enough to make the accusation without making it sound like an accusation tempered her uncle's response from defensiveness to apology. "Baby, if you were feeling bad, you know you could've interrupted me - or Jeanne - at any point to tell us. Why didn't you?"

Winn shrugged. "Didn't think it was important, at first. Figured it'd probly go away. But it didn't. After you left, when it really started getting bad, there was nobody left to tell."

"We have medics on the team. You should've let them in on your secret."

"Oh yeah, and what would they've done? Given me kiddie aspirin? Told me to take a hot shower, drink some milk, and soak my feet? I tried all that. Nothing helped."

"Baby..." Her uncle reached out to brush the hair from her face. "I'm so sorry you felt bad and nobody knew." Again, Winn shrugged off his sympathy. Outwardly, she had to be an adult, mature, but inwardly she couldn't deny it felt sorta nice to be coddled.

"I survived," she stated matter-of-factly. "Besides, I thought if I made too big a deal of it, they might decide to send me home."

"And you didn't want that," her uncle observed.

"No," she returned firmly, "no, I didn't want that."

Uncle Tom took the point, she could tell. She wanted to go on this expedition, thought

she deserved to go, and he knew it. A silence fell as he weighed whether or not to address the issue. In the end, he decided against it. "Well..." This time, it was his turn to shrug. "Changing the subject, I still think we should have one of the medics examine you. All of those symptoms had to happen for a reason. And nobody gets thick calluses on their heels like that just out of the blue. You had to be doing something..."

"Nay, she did not." The new voice, a strange one - feminine and heavily accented - captured both their attention. In a simultaneous movement so alike a bystander might've sworn the pair were actually blood related, Winn and Tom twisted to the right, towards the bedroom door. There, having just entered the room stood Jeanne, behind her stood a young woman as tall as she.

The shocked expression on Jeanne's face, realising someone was behind her, was nothing compared to the strange clothes the woman wore: leather pants of some sort, a fur trimmed vest laced up the front - Winn's fantasy novels would've classified it a jerkin - over a full-sleeved leather blouse, and tall, dark boots that came up over her knees. Strapped to her back and peeking over her shoulder was an amazing broadsword - huge, with a snarling wolf's head pommel. The woman's hair was shoulder length, dark, pulled back from her face and tied with a leather thong. Her skin was a healthy, glowing tan, her hands calloused but capable, her entire posture and bearing self-assured, assertive. Her eyes were the most striking violet imaginable and unless Winn's eyes were deceiving her there were hidden streaks of purple - a very un-natural looking purple - hidden in the depths of her dark hair, as well.

Winn had never seen anyone like her outside descriptions in novels, or perhaps the occasional medieval/fantasy type movie. Transfixed, she watched the woman with lips parted in awe, Uncle Tom's expression mirrored his adopted niece - funny, as if he didn't know who she was, who he was, or quite what to think of it all.

"She needed do nothing," the young woman affirmed, leaving Jeanne's side to step into the room. "For the deeds were all mine."

For a moment, silence reigned. Then Winn, with typical teen irrepressibility, burst out, "Who the heck are you?"

"I second that," said Jeanne ominously.

Winn's outburst conjured a smile from the newcomer. "You know me not, Wintergreen Evans? Strange, is that. Why, I am your -"

Whatever she'd meant to say was cut short by Paul - Jeanne's son - burst into the room from a side door. He was shouting before he ever entered the room, talking so excitedly, so fast, his words were strung together like pearls on a line. "Winn, you're-never-gonna-believe-what-I-just-found-out-about-your-ancestors, it seems..." Seeing his mom, her colleague, and most of all, the young woman by his mom's side, he pulled up to a short stop, like a car putting on its brakes.

"Oh," he said simply, peering at the young woman through the glasses he wore for reading and computer work. "It's you."

His pronouncement could not have generated greater shock waves. His mother, Jeanne, was the first to let loose. Arms akimbo, she stalked towards him, "Oh, it's you? Paul Michael McLennan!" she snapped. "What do you mean, Oh, it's you? Do you know who this is? Because if you do; I'd like to know too, if you please." Paul, retreating from his mom's impressive ire, opened his mouth to defend himself, but like a charging bull she ploughed on, not affording him the chance.

"Jeanne," Tom spoke up quietly from the bed.

Winn watched in amazement as his one word brought Dr. McLennan to a standstill. She still looked angry, but her uncle's calming effect on the woman was incontrovertible.

"I just want to know the truth," she said, cutting Tom a sideways glance.

"I, too, desire an explanation," put in the strange young woman, edging around Jeanne for a look at her son.

"Maybe he'd give you one if you all let him alone for a minute so he could talk." Far be it from her to weigh in on Paul's side, but even Winn could see the kid looked like a mouse cornered by a hungry cat. She could also see he'd never get anywhere if they didn't shut up for a minute so he could get a word in edgewise.

Grown-ups. Want to know the whole story but won't keep quiet long enough for you to

tell it.

Paul's quick glance in her direction showed gratitude, but Winn sloughed it off. Sticking up for him was, she supposed, the least she could do after that maniacal attack.

"Well," he began, "Winn and me had to have something to do while you and your boyfr... - oops, I mean, while you and him," he nodded at Tom, "... were off in Egypt. The other day we started talking about how Winn's ancestors went to the States from Europe, and we thought it'd be sorta cool to, you know, do some genealogical research online and see who they were and if we were related or something neat like that.

"So, anyway, Winn's been having lots of headaches and her stomach's been hurting and stuff, so I've been doing most it on my own." Thankfully, Winn noted wryly, he left out that chauvinist accusation of all of her problems being related to her period.

"After the um, the incident, day before yesterday..."

Winn winced, both at the thought of her unprecedented loss of sanity, and the disclosure that she'd been out of it for so long!

"I just had to keep busy, what with you guys being away and all, so I....."

"Paul, luvvie, come to the point!" directed his mother, sounding as exasperated as Winn felt with the longwinded explanation.

Paul looked a bit put out. "Yeah alright, don't rush me..."

Winn snorted in amusement, caught Paul's reciprocating glare, but ignored it.

"I found out Winn and her brother and sisters are related on their mum's side to a German knight who was in Bulgaria in the 13th century. This knight was under the command of a Baron named - "

"Baron Daniel von Felden," the newcomer supplied.

Winn, along with her uncle and Jeanne, looked at her in astonishment, but Paul wasn't rattled a bit. "Yeah, and this Baron was this great warrior who fought in the Crusades, I think. There's all these legends about him - mostly fantasy and folktale type stuff, don't know how much of it is true."

"You would be much astonished," the strange woman supplied, amused.

"But anyway, I found a very obscure legend about him, and it seems he had this magical sword, which he gave to a young boy who was his body servant, when they were attacked by vampires."

"Ulrich," she interrupted again.

"Is that what it was called? The stories I read didn't preserve the name. Anyways ..."

The woman reached behind her back and drew her blade from its sheath. Winn gaped. The weapon was beautiful in its deadly craftsmanship. A blue light glinted, running up and down the razor sharp edges.

Paul paused, his mouth scribing a perfect O, after a moment as he struggled to continue, his eyes wide at the sight of the blade, he said, "I found one legend about a woman who also carried the same magic sword," his voice almost cracked as he realised the enormity of his words, and the proximity of the stuff of legends within his reach.

"Aye, some of what you speak is truth, mayhap distorted muchly, so forgive me if I interrupt your story young master, for all here must know the truth. Your destiny depends upon your understanding. Baron Daniel was indeed my master, and indeed we did fall foul of a terrible creature, Queen Darcia of the Strigoi. The Baron pressed Ulrich into my hands that I may escape and protect the weapon. I admit that in fear I removed myself from that place, leaving him with the Strigoi Queen. It has been my companion ever since."

Paul looked closely at the young woman, "There was stuff about how she had violet eyes, and lived with dragons, and she was a great warrior and never used any weapon but Baron Daniel's sword.

"I thought it was all really cool when I read it," he concluded, almost sheepishly, his eyes fixed on the woman with a look bordering on hero worship, "then I found a link and discovered that she was the daughter of this Scottish knight."

"The knechte, Jacob Witt."

"Yes that's him, it was then I got all excited. I figured Winn would be too, 'cause she's a descendant of that Scottish knight too. I rushed in here to tell her and, well... there you were. You're really her, aren't you?"

The woman smiled at the tiny seed of doubt in Paul's voice. "Aye, lad, I am. I am Mira Witt, I am really her."

"Wow," Winn breathed.

The others stood; mouths open in amazement their faces mirroring Winn's.

"I beg a favour that we may now assemble in the open, for I have one more introduction to bring you, but I pray you... be not afraid, for my beloved is pure of heart and of good intent towards you." She looked straight at Winn as she spoke.

Jeanne led the party to the large rear garden, the special services troops were in the barn, at their evening meal, tended to by Yvonne who had swiftly taken up the reins of 'Camp Cook'.

Mira stood for a moment to one side of the little group, she clapped her hands once in front of her body, and a beautiful creature, standing at least three times her height appeared behind her accompanied by a blast of displaced air. The creature laid its head on Mira's shoulder, its colouring matching perfectly the streaks in her hair and her beautiful, entrancing eyes. She raised her arm to embrace the massive head. "This is my beloved companion; this is Lady Alushamenta, Purple Queen of the M'ntar." She said, her voice echoing the love she felt for the huge creature.

"Go you back beloved, I will call you when all is ready." She whispered.

Winn staggered for a moment as the M'ntar queen disappeared, Tom leapt forward to

steady her, "What's up baby?" he said voice full of concern.

"She spoke, I heard her speak, inside my head it was, she said 'You, will I see again soon,' and she called me Red child." Winn gasped the words, unable to believe what had happened.

"You are brave of heart and quick of mind, Red child, Lord Dominie will love you greatly, of that I am sure." Mira placed a hand on Winn's head. "Why wear you and the boy these strange things on your noses?"

"Cos I'm short sighted, I can't see too clear, things which are a long ways off."

"And the boy?"

"He needs them for reading," said Jeanne.

"And watching telly," the boy shot in, not wanting to be left out of the discussion.

Mira beckoned Paul to her, and placed her hand on his head too, "Children should not suffer these ailments, for surely they are for those advancing in years?"

Both Winn and Paul closed their eyes for a moment.

"Take you off those strange glasses from your faces; you have no need of them now."

"That's impossible," said Jeanne.

"No mum, it's not, I can see properly, everything is so clear."

"But..."

"He's right Dr Jeanne, so can I," the teenager added.

Mira stood and watched as the two youngsters and their respective adults marvelled at

the miraculous correction to their charge's sight.

"Thank you," said Tom to the young woman, "What you have done here, small though it may be, for us has been a great thing."

Mira turned to her with a smile. "I have journeyed long to meet you, Wintergreen Evans. We are of the same blood, you and I. And we, both of us, have vital tasks ahead of us."

"We-we do?" Winn gulped.

She'd always wondered what characters like Frodo felt when they, just common little folk, discovered they were going to be pivotal players in a race against time, evil, and fate. She had a feeling she was fixing to find out.

Ever since she could remember, Winn had wanted excitement, craved adventure. She'd always day-dreamed of how cool it'd be if her fantasy novels were proven real. Now this - this stranger appearing out of nowhere, acting as if she knew some big secret about her that was going to change the course of her life and even history itself, this was a little too much, even for Winn.

"We do," Mira affirmed. "I have known since I was but a child, a knowledge burning deep inside my heart that a time would come that one of my descendants was to play a part in a terrible battle, a battle which will surmount all others in the history of this world. I knew not 'twas you, until you laid a foot on the soil of Cruithintuait, this, my father's homeland of Alba. From that moment your blood called loudly to me: restlessly, incessantly, disturbing even my deepest slumber. The forces of prophecy, magic and destiny convalesced about me, drawing me through time and distance to you."

"Those marks on your feet" She gestured down to Winn's bare soles and heels. "Those are symbols of my journey to reach you. So closely linked are you and I that distresses to my body, will oftentimes emerge on yours."

Tom and Jeanne approached as she was speaking. "Wait a minute-that sounds dangerous!" Tom interrupted. "I don't like the sound of that. Obviously, you're some sort of...of..." speaking to Mira, he searched for the right description. "...Warrior. Your life is a dangerous one. I don't want my niece being threatened by what happens to you..."

"Have you any choice in the matter?" Mira's violet stare was direct, piercing. "Destiny chooses us all, Master Thomas. Who she selects and what she directs, who among us can challenge?"

"The rider of the Red," she went on, "has a role that none but she can play. You look upon her as a child, I know." She took in both Tom and Jeanne with that indictment. "But she is not. Her years are but a few less than mine. What I can survive, so can she. What I can do, so can she."

"Which is ... what?" Jeanne inquired carefully.

"I am the Purple Rider," the girl stated confidently. "As my descendant and one now so vitally linked to me, Wintergreen has been named and she will be the companion in battle of Lord Dominie the Red, - she is the Rider of the Red. Together we shall join with the other M'ntar, and lead the children of light in the battle against the Anakim and the other creatures of darkness, the evil spawn of The Watchers."

"Lea-lead into battle?" Tom sputtered. "Now you listen here, young lady. I don't know who you are or what you're up to, but my niece is not going with us to the other side. She's not fighting in any war. She's staying here where she's safe."

"Tom."

This time it was Jeanne who spoke up, silencing the American's tirade with a single word.

"Well...well, she can't," he protested weakly. "I mean, look at her. Mira may be a warrior of some kind, but Winn is Winn. She doesn't know how to fight or handle a weapon or defend herself or..." his voice faded as he knew he was already losing any argument that he was trying desperately to raise.

"I beg to differ," Paul muttered. Winn shot him a sour glance. Mira ignored them all.

"The skills are latent in her blood," the young warrior declared. "And she will go not into battle untrained, or unarmed. She will have her M'ntar Lord and she will have me. Together we will train her."

"You?" two voices, Tom, and Paul questioned in unison.

Jeanne, who'd kept her own counsel up to this point, held up a hand. "Wait, that's not such a bad idea. Mira is obviously from another time, likely quite close in arms and fighting style as to that which we hope to be journeying. We have Finn and Ny-mo to teach us their style of fighting, but can you imagine the added bonus of having Mira instruct us in the nuances of medieval warfare? She could make the difference between life and death, victory or defeat. That is, if you'll help us," she added almost humbly, looking to the newcomer for some sign of agreement or disagreement.

"I can't believe you're even thinking of this, Jeanne... She's just a kid!"

"No, Tom, she's not," Jeanne declared firmly. "In our society, maybe. But not in Mira's. She's young, but she's no child. Look at Mira, obviously, she's fought and killed. Even more obviously, she's survived. If she can teach us to do the same, what are you griping about?" This silenced Tom. Clearly, he didn't like it, but he was too smart to argue with this line of logic.

Mira, turning now to Winn, asked - "Are you willing, my child? Willing to learn what you must? Willing to fight, to lead, to become a M'ntar Rider?"

Winn still had no real idea what that meant, or what it might entail. But when Mira put the question to her, she felt a pull in her blood, a confidence, a strange knowing that this was right. "Yes," she said aloud, eyes never leaving the stunning violet ones locked with hers. "I am." So it was, the matter settled.

"I wish now to speak with the plains warrior and your two Brosynan, can this be arranged?"

"How...?"

"Wintergreen told me."

"No I didn't."

"You told me with your heart, my child, for a long while now have I searched to find you,

since we once connected for a moment, mind to mind when you were but a child. I fear the yearnings you have had for all things magical and the malady you have suffered these last few weeks has been my fault, as I sought to make a true connection with you.”

Winn nodded, understanding showing on her face, her eyes twinkling with excitement.

Wow! I’ve seen a real purple dragon.

“Do you want to go to the place where the Brosynan are, or would you have me bring them here?” asked Jeanne her head and senses still spinning, almost unable to comprehend the massive changes taking place in her life. As if it hasn’t changed overly much already.

“I will to them.”

“I’ll see to it,” she turned towards the house, “Just let me get my keys.”

Tom followed. “Want me to come with?”

“Yep, and the two kids, we’ve left them out of too much, do Winn good to catch up with Ny-mo.”

“Wow,” Winn breathed, alone with Mira and Paul for a moment as they waited for the two adults to return. They had just re-appeared, when Mira turned to Winn, “Take thee mine hand.” Winn did as she was bid.

Tom, Jeanne and Paul a few feet away heard a loud pop from behind them.

Winn and Mira had disappeared.

## The Gods Of Light

### The Northern Plains, Clan Caves.

It was midday. The sky an upturned bowl of burnished brass, the heat reflecting off the dark green obsidian rocks around her. It seemed like ages since she had been able to relax, her eyes felt as though they were clogged with grit as she scoured the shimmering distant horizon from her vantage point.

Shasa flicked her gaze down to the sheltering company, her eyes searching for her beautiful companion, Hei-tiki. The dapple grey mare was crouching at the base of the cliff, eyes fixed on her young rider, her long hind legs tucked under her, ready at any moment to spring to her companion's side should the need arise.

There was a hoot from her right, fifty yards away Bodan signed 'It's beginning'. She passed the message back down the cliff face, and smiled as the well drilled machine that was her brother Pavel's company sprang into battle readiness. Hei-tiki reacted to the silent commands being issued around her, and bounded up the almost vertical cliff face to Shasa's position.

The young trooper vaulted onto the mare's back, gripped tightly with her knees as the dappled mare leapt back to the valley floor in a single sinuous bound. Bodan on his big golden mare was a heartbeat behind her.

'Move out' Pavel signed over his head. The company separated into three troops and galloped from the valley without raising a puff of dust. Once they reached the plains they split into Patrols, each with a lead rider and tail-enders, and assumed line abreast.

~

The sky above them exploded, as two huge creatures appeared, and with powerful

beats of their wings settled onto the plains in front of the company. The plains runners as one began to trumpet a strange chorus, almost as though they were singing a welcoming hymn as the two massive winged mounts discharged their riders. Mira and Winn walked towards the Company who dismounted as a single being, and stood to attention alongside their still chanting mounts.

The Purple and the Red raised their heads towards the sky and responded with a massive bellow, the Purple then discharged a tongue of flame that blasted a full one hundred paces into the sky. The Company of Brosynan troopers fell to their knees and as one gave a single loud hoot. With a clicked command from Pavel the Runners fell silent, and the troopers re-mounted bringing their long spears to a salute.

Mira with Winn a half pace behind came to a halt before Pavel.

The Purple rider and her Red haired companion both raised their left hands, and gave the greeting signal. As one the Company responded, the silent greeting belying the massive welcoming mental shout that slammed their inner ears.

"Whoa, that hurt," said Winn staggering slightly, raising her hands to the sides of her head.

"Raise your guard, filter out the pain, you must control what you allow through, just as I taught you back in the M'ntar caves."

"It was easy there. Okay, I got it under control now, it's just I wasn't expecting it."

Pavel fisted his forehead, Mira responded in like.

"Well met Company commander Pavel, I welcome your escort, please lead us into the Clan valleys."

At a single click the entire company spun on the spot and moved once more into Patrol formations, and began a slow high stepping military march towards the north. To their right, Benachee, mountain home of the hated Gargoyls smoked gently. Winn and Mira returned to the two M'ntar, and once mounted followed, their two mounts looked ungainly in comparison to the well drilled and sleek plains runners and their riders.

Lord Hoolie was waiting as the Tirnano Company in full battle order, with the two M'ntar and their riders towering above them, marched into the valley. The heights surrounding them full of Brosynan youngsters watching silently as the parade approached. The sides of the valley floor were lined by mounted hunters from the hunting patrols.

The Company came to a halt in front of the cave mouth and dismounted in perfect precision. Lord Hoolie and the remainder of the council elders came to attention and snapped fists to foreheads in response to Pavel's. Mira with Winn behind her dismounted and approached the leaders. Dominie and Lusha both assumed miniature size and trotted alongside their riders.

The council members turned as one and walked ahead of the four into the cave, like little tic-toc soldiers, all of them, thought Winn. Reaching the council area the leaders moved to their allotted spaces and sat cross legged on the rugs. Lord Hoolie motioned to Mira and Winn to be seated, the two M'ntar squatted in-between them.

'Welcome to our caves, -- when Company Commander Pavel returned from his patrol, it was told that you would be visiting with us soon. From all of us, we give thanks for the assistance you rendered to our patrol.'

Mira acknowledged with a nod.

Over the next hour she was assailed with a vast number of questions on the weapons that Pavel had returned. Winn was amazed at her ancestor's knowledge, and her ability to speak to the Brosynan council, each of them understanding her words as though she were conversing using finger speech. Throughout the conversation the M'ntar remained silent, although Winn was aware that telepathically they were following closely.

"Our companions wish to meet with your runners," said Mira following a silent request from Lusha.

'Lord Alion will be pleased to accompany them,' clicked the council leader.

The two M'ntar followed Alion from the council area, pushing their way through the thick leather screens.

'Lady Mira, our spiritual leaders have requested that you and the Lady Winn join them in prayer at sunrise in the morn.' signed the council leader. 'Would you do us the honour?'

Mira turned to Winn and a silent message passed between them, "I got no probs with that, Mom and Dad brought us up to be believers, we always went to church as a family when they was home."

"The honour will be ours," said Mira aloud.

The sky was beginning to lighten, but the chill of the night still clung to the ground. The air was crisp and cold as the twelve leaders and the two humans all riding plains runners, made their way deeper into the maze of valleys behind the Clan caves.

"I have not had contact with my beloved this morn, I feel the separation most greatly," said Mira.

Winn riding alongside her was quick to respond, "That big Red galoot hasn't said a word to me either, I wonder where they gotten to."

"I would hazard that wherever they be, it will be not far."

'OF THAT YOU MAY BE ASSURED, BELOVED' came Lusha's mind speech, 'WE COMMUNED WITH OUR DISTANT KIN, THE PLAINS RUNNERS, DEEP INTO THE NIGHT, MUCH THAT WE KNEW NOT OF THEM, HAS BEEN MADE CLEAR, NOW THEY WISH TO SPEAK AS WE DO.'

'How would you help them to accomplish that task?'

'IT IS NOT THE RUNNERS, FOR THEY ALREADY HAVE THE ABILITY,' it was Dominie who now assailed their minds, 'AMONGST THEMSELVES AND TO US THEY CAN CONVERSE OVER SHORT DISTANCES, BUT THERE ARE AMONGST THE LITTLE ONES SOME WHO HAVE THE GIFT BUBBLING CLOSE TO THE SURFACE, IT WOULD TAKE BUT A TINY OPENING, SUCH AS WE PERFORMED UPON YOU BOTH, IT WILL BE UP TO YOU TO CHOOSE WHO TO GIVE THE GIFT, BUT BE SURE YOU CHOOSE WISELY, FOR AS YOU KNOW IT CAN BITE BOTH WAYS. QUEEN LUSHA AND I GO NOW TO FEED, WE SHALL RETURN THIS EVENING TO GIVE YOU ASSISTANCE SHOULD YOU HAVE NEED.'

"I gave a partial mind tweak to two of the Tirnano when I met them a few days ago," said Mira.

"Is that where you went, I did wonder, sneaking out of the cave in the middle of the night."

"I was sure you were yet still asleep, for the noise you made was reminiscent of an old warthog with his nostrils stuck in a mud hollow."

"I do not snore!" said Winn in mock anger, "If I weren't spending all my effort trying to stay on the back of this lizard, I'd show you."

"I'm sure you would try, but it will be a long while before you can best me at sword play," taunted Mira.

"Ha, it won't be long grandma, and I'll be whuppin you real good."

"Grandma, grandma, huh? I'll teach you..."

The two were forced to break off their banter as the group came to a halt in front of a crack in the face of a cliff.

Mira gasped in horror, "I know this place," her face had paled, "This is where the Baron and I met the evil one."

"Are you sure?"

"Truly, through this cleft is a beautiful enclosed valley, and directly across is the mouth of a cave where an evil devil resides, you will see."

"I hope not," Winn responded, she had never seen her companion so affected, the normally stoic and unflappable Mira was visibly moved, and not in a nice way.

The Brosynans dismounted and began filing through the cleft; the two girls followed hesitantly, Winn almost having to drag Mira. "C'mon, that was another time and place,

surely you can't think she will be here," she said. In her shock Mira had dropped the shield which held the memory hidden, in an instant Winn knew intimately all that had happened to her ancestor.

Unlike the rich and verdant dale that Mira had expected, the enclosed space was an expanse of blackened earth and twisted rocks. A strong smell of sulphur hung in the air, wisps of acrid yellow smoke issued from a narrow crack less than a hundred paces to their left. The Brosynan council leader beckoned for them to hurry. They sprinted as quickly as they could across the broken ground towards an obsidian tower which stood almost in the middle of the crater, a crater, Winn thought, that's what it must be, and it's still active, God, what if it decided to blow right now?

'FEAR NOT BELOVED, IT HAS NOT ERUPTED IN OVER A HUNDRED YEARS, IT'S NOT LIKELY TO DO SO NOW,' a powerful impression from Lord Dominie formed in her mind.

"I hope not, my mom would be a bit miffed if my boots got spoiled."

"Your Grandma wouldn't be too pleased either; it took me a long time to make them."

The two sprinted after the Brosynans, surprised at the speed the little people managed to attain.

"Phew, they can't half shift when they need to," Winn gasped.

The two girls followed the last of the council members into an opening at the base of one of the slim standing rocks. A rough stairway cut into the rock led downwards into a vast cavern. The dark was heavy, hot, oppressive, and all encompassing; the only light came from high above at the top of the staircase. The floor of the cavern was flat, covered with a light dusting of fine sand, reminding Mira painfully of Darcia's cave. How long ago was that, she thought, a life time, or less than a year?

The walls of the cavern began to glow with a pale green fluorescence. In the dim light the two humans could make out a group of young Brosynans seated in a circle on the floor of the cave. They began humming a low continuous note, the pitch constant and unique, to Winn's ears it sounded off key, but how should I know, everyone says I'm tone deaf anyways, she thought. The note began to waver, rising and falling, rising more than it fell, before long it was almost a high pitched call, it stopped suddenly. Against

the wall of the cave stood a number of figures, figures that moments before, had not been there.

To Winn the figures were the stuff of nightmares, some easily fifteen foot tall, some were human in shape, but some were definitely not.

Mira gasped at the sight of them, for to her they were not strangers, to her they were well known, she had seen their images many times as a young child, drawn, etched and painted on the walls of every ancient monument in the land of her birth.

"Ra, the god of the sun. Sekhmet, Horus, Thoth, the god of wisdom with the long beak and head of an ibis. Others are standing amongst them, Nut, dressed in blue, Ma'at with the feather in her hair. Standing behind them is Anubis, god of the dead. And there at the front, the dwarf god Bes, we know that shape and stature well, for he is the ancestor and protector of all Brosynans." She named the gods, pointing them out to Winn.

Ra strode majestically towards the prostrate Brosynan priests, totally ignoring the council members and the two human girls.

"BEGIN!" he said, his voice thundering around the cavern.

The priests stood and clasped hands in a circle, their minds rose as one.

'Homage to thee, O thou who hast come as Khepera, Khepera the creator of the gods, Thou art seated on thy throne, thou risest up in the sky, illumining thy mother Nut, thou art seated on thy throne as the king of the gods. Thy mother Nut stretcheth out her hands, and performeth an act of homage to thee. The domain of Manu receiveth thee with satisfaction. The goddess Ma'at embraceth thee at the two seasons of the day. May Ra give glory, and power, and truth-speaking, and the appearance as a living soul so that he may gaze upon Heru-khuti, to the KA of the Osiris the Scribe Ani, who speaketh truth before Osiris, and who saith: Hail, O all ye gods of the House of the Soul, who weigh heaven and earth in a balance, and who give celestial food to the dead. Hail, Tatun, who art One, thou creator of mortals and of the Companies of the Gods of the South and of the North, of the West and of the East, ascribe ye praise to Ra, the lord of heaven, the KING, Life, Strength, and Health, the maker of the gods. Give ye thanks unto him in his beneficent form which is enthroned in the Atett Boat; beings celestial praise

thee, beings terrestrial praise thee. Thoth and the goddess Ma'at mark out thy course for thee day by day and every day. Thine enemy the Serpent hath been given over to the fire. The Serpent-fiend Sebau hath fallen headlong, his forelegs are bound in chains, and his hind legs hath Ra carried away from him. The Sons of Revolt shall never more rise up. The House of the Aged One keepeth festival, and the voices of those who make merry are in the Great Place. The gods rejoice when they see Ra crowned upon his throne, and when his beams flood the world with light. The majesty of this holy god setteth out on his journey, and he goeth onwards until he reacheth the land of Manu; the earth becometh light at his birth each day; he proceedeth until he reacheth the place where he was yesterday. O be thou at peace with us. Let us gaze upon thy beauties. Let us journey above the earth. Let us smite the Ass. Let Us slit asunder the Serpent-fiend Sebau. Let Us destroy Aepep at the moment of his greatest power. Let us behold the Abtu Fish at his season and the Ant Fish with the Ant Boat as it piloteth it in its lake. Let us behold Horus when he is in charge of the rudder of the Boat of Ra, with Thoth and the goddess Ma'at on each side of him. Let us lay hold of the tow-rope of the Sektet Boat, and the rope at the stern of the Matett Boat. Let Ra grant to us a view of the Disk the Sun, and a sight of Ah the Moon unfailingly each day. Let your Ba-soul come forth to walk about hither and thither and whithersoever it pleaseth. Let our name be called out, let it be found inscribed on the tablet which recordeth the names of those who are to receive offerings. Let meals from the sepulchral offerings be given to us in the presence of Osiris, as to those who are in the following of Horus. Let there be prepared for us a seat in the Boat of the Sun on the day wheron the god saileth. Let us be received in the presence of Osiris in the Land of Truth-speaking - the Ka of Osiris Ani.'

The young priests prostrated themselves before Ra and the other gods.

"SO BE IT!" said Ra, and the gods began to fade as one, as they did, so did the blue light, until once more the only illumination came from high above them. The young priests sat again on the floor, and once more began to hum gently.

'We may now leave,' clicked Lord Holbie.

"Oh wow," said Winn, when they were once again mounted and on their way back to the Clan caves, the first words she had spoken since before the gods of Egypt had made their appearance. "If I never see anything again in the rest of my life, that will be sufficient."

"That is for sure my dear heart, I too would never have believed such a happening could

come to pass, had it not been mine own eyes that beheld it."

It was back at the caves that Winn sought out Shasa, 'I bring you greetings from Finn,' she signed.

'From Finn, but he was lost on his trial,' the diminutive warrior replied.

'No, he passed through the veil between your world and mine. Shortly will he be returning, with him will come many of our warriors to battle the Watchers and their children.'

'My brother Pavel, has told us that we move out soon, our destination is the middle plains, the lands of the Croninn.'

'That is true, my very good friend is one of their warriors, his name is Ny-mo.'

'I too have a Croninn friend, he is collecting chai right now, but he will be accompanying us as one of my brother's troopers.'

The two girls, roughly the same age, could easily become fast friends, Winn wondered how the feisty little warrior would take to life in dear old Oklahoma, not too well I'd hazard a guess, my past life would be so restricting for her, wow, and it'll be a tad restricting for me too, now.

A mental call from Mira broke into her thoughts, taking her leave from Shasa, she quickly made her way back to the cave mouth. The council members were talking to Mira as she approached. The Purple Rider spun round to her. "Time to go, the M'ntar wish to return to their caves, I guess we should go too."

Taking their leave of the little people, the two M'ntar riders then clasped hands and with a pop of inrushing air, transported themselves back to their cave, arriving moments before their two giant companions.

## Another Attack

Aboyne, Aberdeenshire

June 2011

“Good grief, where have they gone?” Tom said as they returned from the house, Jeanne and Paul a few steps behind him.

Almost as he spoke, he felt a puff of air, and the two girls appeared close to Paul, whose mouth once more formed an almost perfect O.

“What happened, where did you go?” Tom’s voice had raised almost an octave,

“To the other side,” said Winn, I have been to meet with my beloved.” She ran forward to embrace her uncle.

“What! -- I don’t know what you are talking about,” said Tom extracting himself from her arms.

“I’ll tell you all about it very soon Uncle Tom, so much has happened.”

“What do you mean, so much has happened, you only disappeared for a moment, and where did you get those clothes?”

“To you it might have been but a moment Master Thomas, but for us it has been six months,” interjected Mira.

Winn was dressed in an outfit similar to Mira’s even down to wearing a sword strapped behind her back.

"Where did you go?" asked Paul.

"With Mira, and to meet my beloved, Lord Dominie the Red."

Both Tom and Jeanne looked closely at Winn, "Your hair is longer, you have a deep tan, and you are standing up much straighter, almost as though you have somehow been given an injection of adulthood,--- I believe her Tom, this is not the same Winn we were talking to just a minute ago, that's for sure."

Tom stood staring at his niece, taking in the differences Jeanne had noted. Paul had not moved, his mouth still wide open, his eyes staring in shock as he realised that all his senses were confirming everything that had been said.

"Can we now to see the Brosynans, I have words for them from their Clan." It was Mira, bringing some semblance of normality back to the situation.

Jeanne backed the Range Rover from the garage. Mira, flanked by Winn and Paul, watched with eyes wide the vehicle's manoeuvres.

"How many horses are required to pull this wagon?" she asked once it had come to a halt, circling to see if it was being pushed from inside.

"Somewhere around 503, if Jeanne is to be believed," put in Tom.

"Why can we not believe her, is she prone to untruth?" Mira glanced up, puzzled.

"Howsoever, a caravan of that many beasts would truly be cumbersome if not ridiculous. So I believe you to be the one lacking in truth - eh, Master Tom?"

Ouch, thought Tom, we're gonna hafta watch how we talk around her. I guess they didn't do much wise-cracking back in the 13th century.

"It's a mechanical vehicle, lady, my mum's pride and joy," Paul spoke up reassuringly.

"No big deal. It's fun, actually."

"Just wait and see," echoed Winn. Taking Mira's hand, she led her to the rear door and helped buckle her into the seat behind Jeanne. Paul took the centre with Winn behind

Tom. "Hold on tight."

Jeanne took off in her usual fashion; there was a loud yelp from behind her. Mira, warrior and companion of a dragon, sat with her hands across her mouth, her eyes huge with fear.

"Witchcraft, it is witchcraft," was all she could say.

"Oh c'mon," Tom teased. "A girl who can ride dragons and transport herself back and forth through time is afraid of a simple modern machine? I don't believe it."

"At least dragons are flesh and blood creatures, not beast-less chariots of Satan," quipped Mira, but the jesting insinuation on her courage shored her up. The determination to show no fear, as well as the calm of her fellow passengers - especially Winn - soothed her jangled nerves.

If young Wintergreen can survive all of the changes I have brought upon her, and absorb all of the lessons I have taught, surely I, in turn, can endure the stranger facets of her world, Mira scolded herself.

A few minutes passed however before she fully relaxed, Winn and Paul spending the first half-hour of the journey explaining, as well as they could, the minutiae of the internal combustion engine and the modern motor vehicle, aided in her acceptance of this beast-less chariot, albeit she comprehended little of their chatter.

"I think you've successfully confused the young lady, because you've completely baffled me," put in Tom with a chuckle.

"Put the radio on please, Tom," said Paul...

"Tom? - Tom? --- Have you no respect?" Winn hissed at the boy.

"But, but... that's what he told me to call him," Paul spluttered.

"Huh, I bet."

"It is sugar," said Tom, "the Brits don't go in for loads of formality like we do."

"Well, maybe they should."

Jeanne switched on the radio from the control on the steering wheel.

It was the news.

Horror of horrors it was a report on another giant's appearance, this time from an international football match in Russia. The report was sketchy, incomplete. Jeanne pulled into a lay-by to listen.

She killed the radio and thumbed the phone button, the sat-nav screen lit, and using a little scroll wheel on the dash she selected the commander's link.

"Yes."

"Just heard a snip on the news Guv, what's ado?"

"Another of those blasted giants, about an hour ago, same type of attack as before, over two hundred abducted, another three hundred or so dead. I tell you girl, this is going to put paid to mass gatherings if we get another one, God forbid." The commander's voice flowed from the wrap round speakers. Mira, aghast at hearing a disembodied voice held her tongue, her eyes though spoke volumes.

"You any closer to being ready to have a go at sortin' this out yet?"

"Almost Guv, we have a wonderful ally who has just joined us, we're on our way to the Turner at the mo, give you a full report when we get there."

"Get something moving fast, I've had the PM on the dog 'n' bone already, wanting to know what we are doing. As far as he's concerned whatever you need you can have, in fact he offered the rest of the SAS regiment."

"Don't think we'll need that many, training's almost done, I'll buzz you in about half an

hour.”

“I’ll be waiting.”

Jeanne closed the connection at her end and put the audio system back on, this time she chose a digital music track.

Paul went back to giving Mira a 'Tour Guide special' for the remainder of the trip, explaining everything he could. Mira had been intrigued when they reached the point where the road followed the River Dee. “This is indeed a place of wondrous beauty,” she said quietly.

“Yeah, but you ain’t seen nothing till you clocked the Oologah Lake from the top of Coody’s Bluff. Isn’t that right Uncle Tom?”

“How did you ever get up there?”

“That would be telling,” she chuckled.

Before too long they pulled into the car park, Jeanne chose a spot as close to the main entrance as she could, photographs of two beautiful, buckskin clad, sword wielding girls, was not what she wanted appearing on tabloid front pages. Telephoto lenses were the least of her problems but the interest they could generate was not.

## Jeanne's Agony

Craigdendarroch Farm, Aboyne

July 2011

The days may have dragged by for Paul, who was anxious to be off on what he considered a great adventure. Winn had joined with Mira and proved to be an able assistant to the warrior woman.

However, they flew by for the adults, aware of how much there was to do and how brief the time to accomplish it.

"Maybe youth isn't wasted on the young," Jeanne grumbled to herself, "if they can treat a matter like the balance of the world's future, as a lark. Maybe we adults should learn to lighten up some too."

Problem with that was, kids didn't know all the behind-the-scenes work required to get such a diverse group as theirs prepped and on the same page. There had never been such a task force, in the history of the world - there had never been such a task! The abject diversity of the peoples comprising their task force only added to the epic weight of its job.

First there were the Cryptids, both Brosynan and Croninn, who had assured Jeanne, Case, Tom and Mira that more of their kind could be rounded up to assist once they passed to their world. Then there were the modern day Special Forces from both sides of the ocean, Yanks and Brits, who were having to style themselves in not only Mira's formerly outdated methods of warfare, but in the Brosynan and Cronin's, as well. Last was a female warrior from medieval times. Not only that, but one who had accompanied a very eager Winn to meet her own great Red beast.

Jeanne gritted her teeth when she thought of that. She didn't mind taking Mira with them, in fact was happy to have the young warrior along. The girl's clear headed, steady confidence was a valuable asset to their squadron, but nothing was as much of an asset as her knowledge of warfare, battle tactics, and camp life. The suggestions she offered were quietly spoken, but pointed and direct. And always very, very first-rate.

Mira knew how to assume command without seeming to assume command: Jeanne would've sworn Case would never surrender control of his American Special Forces group to anyone, but somehow Mira had taken over the instructing of Case, his company, and the British Squadron of SAS troops without seeming to try. Nobody resented her. Even the Cryptids, now that they too had moved to the farm, looked up to her, while virtually worshipping the visits of her purple dragon. Lusha would frequently appear, much to Mira's delight, but she did so in her diminutive form (no larger than a German Shepherd.) Mira was the type of person one felt you could depend upon in any sort of crisis, she was not the problem.

Or, she was, but not in that way.

Mira wasn't the problem but could be considered the root of the problem. Before her advent, both Wintergreen and Paul had initially been unhappily resigned to staying behind in the relative safety of earth and contemporary time zones. Now that Mira and Winn were accompanying the group there was no reasoning with him, no forbidding him either. Especially since Mira brought her magic, in which Winn, shockingly, was now heavily involved.

Winn's own companion the mighty Red, bigger though less powerful magically than Mira's purple beloved, added weight to Paul's arguments. If Winn was the Rider of the Red, just as Mira was the Purple Rider, there was no way he was going to be left behind. Mira herself swore it was so, that Winn was every bit as vital to their fight as she, herself. Once Paul had heard that...

Therein lay the rub. Once Paul had heard that, he wouldn't be denied. Jeanne had always prided herself in her discipline over the lad, but he was currently displaying a stubborn wilfulness not to be denied. "Just like his father," Jeanne had griped to Tom, who laughed boisterously at her complaint.

"That side of him doesn't make me think of his old man," the Yank teased, risking her wrath. He barely avoided the cup of ice she tossed at him.

Well, maybe Tom was right, Jeanne admitted secretly, hurrying out towards the training fields for a final scrutiny of soldiers, arms, and equipment. Maybe she was a wee bit stubborn, but she didn't like taking her son along on such a dangerous mission. In all fairness, she knew Tom similarly disliked conceding to Mira's wishes and allowing his adopted niece to do the same, even though he knew she had already visited their destination. After all, they were just kids.

Furthermore, despite what Winn and Paul had pleaded, age had nothing to do with it. In spite of her youth, Mira was no child. Kids just grew up faster back in her day. No question about that. Winn and Paul were from another time, another world, practically. No way could they be compared to Mira. Tom could feel his argument fizzling out in the light of Winn's new deportment and strength of character.

Unfortunately, when the argument had been raised in Mira's presence, and Jeanne was pretty sure Paul had picked that fight deliberately, the Purple Rider had, as usual, taken control of the quarrel, ending it with her customary calm reasoning. "He will mature," she said, looking directly at Jeanne, "much faster than you will believe. Let him come. It will do him much good.

"Moreover," she'd added, "should this mission fail, the world in which you have left him will be no safer than that to which we travel. Would you leave him in a time and place soon to be utterly demolished by the Watchers without you to safeguard him, or would you rather take him where you and I and Master Thomas and the best warriors from three races may defend him?"

There was no arguing with that. Although she loathed herself, Jeanne had been forced to comply. Paul was coming, much to his delight, much to her secret sorrow. Mira was unconcerned: Mira, to all outward appearances, was always unconcerned. With her, you'd think their chances of winning were as equally certain as the sun rising each day. Jeanne, like the others in their task force, knew better, but somehow Mira made them believe. Was it part of her magic as the Purple Rider?

Confidence was key to any military victory, she knew. So even if the serenity Mira radiated was slightly deceptive, she was grateful for it. Just as she was grateful the Purple Rider was there at the "leaving spot," as it had been designated. Beyond the training grounds stood a circle of stones. Looming large, it topped a perfectly low hill that sported trees across its entire face except where the apex had been denuded by the ancients to raise a stone circle. Finn had discovered the spot, saying the currents'

pulls were strong here. Kesha had agreed, 'An excellent choice,' she approved.

Mira, Jeanne, Shelby, and Yvonne had spent the better part of the last two days ensuring that all necessary weaponry and supplies had been moved to the spot and stowed in the trailers in good order. Women really were better at assessing minor details, and Jeanne was fairly confident nothing had been overlooked. She may have had a million and one things on her running mental list, but it never hurt to have a final look over before departure date.

The day after tomorrow.

Her stomach twisted at the thought, but there was no time for dwelling on fear. *Que sera, sera*, she thought to calm herself, in her angst not realising she was quoting her ex-husband's favourite maxim.

"Well met, Jeanne," Mira greeted her as she approached. The young warrior was crouched over a pile of backpacks, cinching one closed. "I have been examining our packs, ensuring all is correct." Pausing in her task, she set back on her heels, squinting up at Jeanne. "Are you aware we are less two than our number?"

Jeanne frowned. "Are you sure? I counted yesterday and came up with the right number."

"Nay, we are less two, I am quite certain."

"Hmmm, how could that be? Case, Shelby, O'Rourke, Tom, me, you..." She began ticking off names of the non military personnel on her fingers. "... Finn, Kesha, Ny-mo," she concluded. "That's twelve. You sure there's not twelve packs?" she asked, crouching across from the girl.

"There are twelve packs," Mira agreed, "but our number is not twelve. All told, we are fourteen. Therefore, I say we are two less our number."

"Oh that. Well, I didn't figure the kids - Paul and Winn - needed to carry packs. I didn't have any made up for them."

Mira's busy hands stilled. Draping one arm over her knees, she cocked her head in a manner Jeanne had come to think of as almost reptilian; in the way a snake's movements are lithe and graceful. Perhaps she'd acquired it from her bond with her dragon.

"Lady Jeanne," the girl said, softly but firmly, "no children save Kesha's offspring are to accompany us on this venture, and that is only because it is a nursing infant unable to remain behind."

"But Paul and Winn ..." Jeanne started to say. Mira broke her off.

"Paul and Wintergreen are not children. They are young persons, aye, but not children. Soon, they will have matured far beyond their years. This does not bring you joy, I read it in your eyes. But the world we enter is no world for children. Soon, neither will your world be."

Jeanne dropped her gaze, uncomfortable at being so easily read, uncomfortable with the truths Mira presented. Her voice gentling, Mira reached out, laying a warm, calloused palm on Jeanne's arm.

"You are a good mother, desiring solely to protect your youngling. There is no shame in this. But now you must think beyond your mother's heart and of the world itself - earth and humanity will not be well served by children, but by warriors." Removing her hand, she stood. "Allow them a burden to carry. Sharing the load is a healthy step for them as well as you. Therefore, by your leave, I will go now and make certain that packs are made up for them, like the rest of us."

Jeanne didn't raise her head, but she nodded. Next thing she heard was Mira turning on her heel, tramping away through the tall grass. Left alone with her thoughts, Jeanne dropped her face into her hands. No tears came, but still her shoulders shook.

"I can't do this," she whispered aloud. "Why me, why me?"

"You talking to yourself?"

Her head snapped up, and she levelled an irritated glare at Tom for disturbing her, more

for seeing her in such a weak moment.

“What do you want?”

The instant she uttered the words, she hated herself for how catty they sounded. Tom hadn’t done anything, not really. She just, oh, she was just confused. First Paul, then Mira, now this. Nobody could make her melt like Tom, but nobody could get her back up like him either. Maybe, she admitted in a moment of painful honesty, maybe she really was in love with the Yank.

That would explain everything: the need to lose herself in his arms, counterbalanced by an equal need to maintain her independence. The need to seek his counsel weighed against the need to prove herself his equal: when, actually, there was nothing to prove, nor had he ever done anything to make her feel that way.

She just, she just didn’t want to be in love: not now, not at this time. Look what love had done to her with Mike, leaving her open and vulnerable. Mike had definitely taken advantage of that vulnerability too: with his affairs, his drinking, his constant haranguing, and his streams of verbal abuse. In the beginning, of course, it hadn’t been that way. But then, beginnings were rarely bad. Just endings.

Deep down inside, Jeanne acknowledged that she feared the vulnerability loving Tom would bring, because some time in the future he could use it against her. Just as Mike had. And if there was ever a time she needed to be strong, it was now, when she faced a mission upon which the earth’s entire future hung.

To his credit, the object of her reflections neither flinched from her stinging question, nor retreated. In a show of manliness and gentleness, rare to be found, he knelt beside her, placing a hand - all too comforting - on her shoulder.

“You okay, Jeanne?”

She shook her head.

“Wanna talk about it?”

Again, she shook her head. No. What was there to say? I think I love you, but it scares me to death and, anyway, this is a terrible time to be falling in love with anyone?

“Well, now...” Tom shifted his hand, began rubbing her back in soothing circles. “Dare a thick-headed farm boy like me hazard a guess?”

His self-abasement drew a reluctant chuckle. “Thick-headed farm boy? You’re anything but that.”

His fine mouth, oh, that mouth! - quirked up in a dangerously kissable gesture.

“Many thanks for the compliment, m’lady,” he drawled, “but apparently there’s a lot you don’t know about me.”

“I know enough to know nary a thick-headed farm boy would rise to your position in the world and be called upon to joint lead an expedition like this.”

“Funny, and here I thought you were leading it. You and Mira. You mean I could’ve been out in the forefront, and instead I’ve been content to sit back and be pulled along by the ladies in charge like a bull with a ring in its nose? Sad.” He shook his own head. “Really sad.”

Cocking her head, Jeanne frowned at him. “Are you serious? You don’t really see yourself, and us, in that light. Do you?”

Now the Yank’s grin broke through in full, infectious force. “You, no. Me? Yes.” He touched a fingertip lightly to the end of her nose. “But if I am, Jeanne, it’s only because I enjoy it.” Leaning closer, he murmured in her ear, “There’s nobody I’d rather have lead me around.”

Abruptly, Jeanne thrust off his hands and stood. “Dr. Pinkerton, I think it’s time we were getting back to our respective rooms.”

Tom stood too, puzzlement written all over his face. “Something eating you, Jeanne? What, do I smell bad or something that you suddenly can’t stand to have me near you? What happened to you after we left the Evans’ farm in Oklahoma? Did I do something,

say anything? Whatever it is, I'm sorry for it. You know I lo ..."

"Don't say it!" she cried, putting her back to him.

Her heart pounded like horse hooves on a race track. Unspoken or not, his meaning hung there, quivering in the air between them. I love you. He'd been going to say it. I knew it as surely as I know my own name. I love you. Tom loves me. So why does that make me feel like laughing and crying simultaneously?

Respecting her wishes, Tom kept his distance, but after a moment said quietly, "Not saying it won't make it go away, Jeanne. Just like this threat we're leaving our world to combat: ignoring it, refusing to face facts, won't make it vanish. Sometimes, we have to look our problems in the face." He paused. Firmer he said, "And if I'm your problem, if you don't want anything to do with me, maybe you better turn around, look me in the face, and tell me that.

"I'm no stalker. If you want nothing to do with me, if you can honestly look me in the eye and say you feel nothing for me, then I'll leave you alone. I swear I will, Jeanne. But before you do, I think you should know I consider you the smartest, sweetest, brightest, most beautiful, hardworking woman I've ever met. The best mother, aside from my own, and an incredibly brilliant, dedicated scientist who handles both stress and authority with grace and wisdom."

Wow.

Mike had said a lot of things, but never paid compliments like this. Somehow, Mike's compliments had never held such a ring of sincerity, either. Still, there was something not quite right about a man who had nothing except good to say about you. Maybe distrust of her ex had taught her that. Regardless, she waited pensively for Tom to finish, for her to have to turn around and tell him, "I'm not perfect, we both know it, so either you're completely deluded or else trying to deceive me. And I don't need either kind of man."

She never got the chance. Tom's big spiel ended with a real humdinger: "You're pretty and capable and fashionable, but...well, Jeanne, along with all that, you're also the meanest, most stubborn, gritty, strong-willed, pessimistic, aggravating, irritating, touch-me-not of a mountain cat it's ever been my misfortune to encounter."

"What the ..."

Furious, she whirled to confront him, but was confronted instead by Tom, hands plunged into his slacks' pockets, rocking back on his heels, a very self-satisfied, teasing smirk on his handsome face. "Liked that, didn't you?"

"Why you, you ..." she sputtered, unable to forge an insult bad enough.

Her hands were balled into fists. For an instant, she considered striking him. Then Tom saved the day, and his life, cooling her ire just as easily as he'd roused it. Daring a blow, he snuck a hand from his pocket and used it to cup her cheek.

"Hey now, cool off. I didn't mean it as an insult. I happen to like mean, stubborn, gritty, strong-willed, pessimistic, aggravating, irritating, touch-me-not mountain cats. After all, I can be pretty irksome myself. I may be a lion tamer, but it seems I need a mountain lion to tame me down too."

Her emotions had fluctuated wildly the past few days. They did so again, flip-flopping so fast it left her breathless. Or maybe that was the slightly scratchy warmth of Tom's palms and fingers on her cheek, as well as the mixture of love and desire in his eyes. She just stood there, staring up helplessly like an idiot, wishing there was something to say but for all her efforts finding her tongue lashed down tight.

"Jeanne," he whispered, now framing her face between both hands, "if I wanted to kiss you, would you object?"

Yes, yes, the formerly abused wife thought.

"N-no," the reawakened woman whispered. Maybe it was his touch, his proximity muddling her self-realizations and logic of a few minutes back, but, after all, how evil could someone risking his life to save the world be?

"That's good," Tom grinned, and bent down to take advantage of the offer before it expired. He kissed her sweetly, tenderly, passionately, like she was his last meal and there was no tomorrow; both of them fully aware that, for the two of them, there may not be. When the kiss finally ended, Jeanne felt her eyes burning with unshed tears.

"Tom..."

Pulling her close, he wrapped her up in his strong arms. "It's okay, Jeanne."

"No it isn't," she complained into the solidity of his chest, voice muffled by the thick weave of his sweater. "What are we going to do? We're more than likely setting off into a death trap. Thing is, though, that if we don't succeed we'll surely invite destruction upon earth. So, either way, we're going to die. This is a terrible time to fall in love!"

The Yank chuckled, smoothing her hair from her face. "No time's a bad time to fall in love, Jeanne. Katrina Elam, an Okie country singer sings, 'I'm gonna love you like there's no end in sight.' And that's just what I intend to do. - Jeanne ..."

Carefully, he eased her away from him, tipping up her chin with his free hand while fishing around in his pocket with the other. "I have something very important I want to show you. But before I do, I need to know: can you keep a secret?"

"Absolutely," she confirmed, eyes searching his face, noting the worry lines crinkling about his eyes-lines that had deepened since Mira's decision to take Winn along.

Someone who loves kids like he does, kids not even his own, can't be that bad, can they?

"Well, then..."

Slowly, he raised his hand from his pocket to her line of sight. Trapped between thumb, forefinger, and middle finger glittered a shiny golden band, diamond side up.

Winn and Paul

Craigdendarroch Farm

July 2011

“Where do you suppose my mum and your uncle have gotten off to?” Paul inquired of Winn. The two were seated in the dining hall, finishing up a final evening meal of earth food as Paul had termed it. Though he’d said it with mock consternation, there was no way he could disguise his excitement at being allowed to accompany the group. Future hardships meant nothing to him; not yet anyway.

“I dunno,” she answered, spearing a slice of melon and bringing it to her lips.

“They’ve been gone since early morning.”

“Just busy, I reckon.” Shrugging, she lifted a napkin to dab the excess melon juice off her lips.

From the corner of her eye she caught Paul’s suspicious stare. “What?”

“You’re different,” he frowned. “You don’t get uptight like you used to. I mean, we haven’t had a single fight since you left with Mira and came back. What’s with you?”

Winn hid a smile. What wasn’t with her? Meeting Mira had been the single most incredible event of her life. From a dreamy-eyed teen, always lost in fantasy and the surreal, she’d become a real live warrior with a dragon; imagine that, a dragon companion of her very own. It was too incredible to be real, but meeting Lord Dominie, her dragon, had confirmed every secret hope, wish, and desire she’d ever entertained. Dragons were real: even if, in this case, they called themselves M’ntar rather than dragons.

Perhaps her Red wasn't as slender, delicate, and beautiful as Mira's Purple, but he was taller, stronger, and capable of even greater endurance. Just one look at the gorgeous scarlet beast, one meeting of their eyes, and she'd known, she loved him with the fierce love that was reserved for a lifelong battle companion.

'GREETINGS, LADY WINTERGREEN,' the dragon had spoken into her mind, golden eyes unblinking, mouth never moving, and just like that her destiny had been discovered. She wasn't meant to be an archaeologist like her parents, nor an anthropologist like Uncle Tom. She wasn't meant to be a writer and invent fables of her own. No, she was meant to live out fables, to battle darkness, and most of all to bask in the special bond with her new beloved.

The six months she'd spent among the M'ntar, learning their ways, learning to mind talk, were difficult but pure pleasure. Sure she'd missed her parents, her siblings, her adopted uncle, and even her beloved state, when she'd had the chance to think of it. In all truth, little time had been allowed for homesickness or thinking of anything besides training, training, training. Not only was she schooled in M'ntar skills, in deepening her bond with her Red, and in M'ntar mind speech, she also trained every day in fighting tactics with Mira.

Mira, Winn permitted herself a tiny smile. Besides the Red, the young medieval heroine was her best friend and closest confidant; they would speak mind to mind, sharing each other's most intimate thoughts. Due to their similar lots in life, Purple Rider and Rider of the Red, they shared an understanding no other human could hope to match. Besides, it was because of Mira all this change had come about: Winn being named the Rider of the Red, meeting her beloved Lord Dominie, and also getting to accompany Dr. Jeanne and her uncle on their mission to defeat the Watchers and their allies. Mira was her hero, Winn admitted it freely. To that end, she schooled herself as much as possible to be like Mira: confident, unflappable, and unassuming.

Perhaps these outward changes were what Paul saw in her. But it was more than that. Since her bond with Lord Dominie, she'd felt different too. Different inside, in her core, her personality. Parts of the old Wintergreen Evans had been stripped away. Like gold refined in a fire, she'd emerged a stronger, braver, and hopefully wiser, and better person. Much of it was thanks to her dragon she was sure. Lord Dominie feared nothing, except, perhaps, injury to or loss of her, Winn; Mira's Purple, his daughter; or Cherandilla, the beautiful Gold Queen Mira had first rescued, his mate.

She was pretty sure some of the dragon's calm temperament must've been imparted to her. And his fierce battle bloodlust? Well, they'd yet to actually fight together, besides hunting expeditions, but Mira assured her it would more than likely come. To that end, the Purple Rider had worked hard to instill self-discipline of steel in Winn, so she wouldn't give herself over to bestial excess that would do more harm than good in future battles.

Certainly, although she was learning, changing continually, she no carbon copy of Mira, and she said as much to Paul who smirked.

"Mira, huh? I should've known. You two get more alike every day."

Winn tilted her chair back on two legs, dropping a hand to the tabletop to maintain her balance. "You think? In what ways?"

"Well." Dr. Jeanne's son used his fingers to tick off a list. "Your whole attitude, posture, and outlook have changed. Remember how you used to spend all your time reading? Now you're more concerned with fitness and exercise and training."

"Further, when you do train, your style is getting to be so much like Mira's that it's scary. Pretty obvious to all of us that she's your mentor. When you two train together, it's almost like, - like seeing twins out there, and what with your matching clothes and all. Although her hair has purple streaks and yours red: not to mention her eyes are violet and yours are turning kind of a dusky rose-red."

"That's a nice way to put it," Winn chuckled.

To tell the truth, she'd freaked out a little when she'd seen the physical changes bonding with Lord Dominie had wrought. Mira's deep purple hair streaks and violet eyes were unique but lovely. When she'd figured out her hair would have red streaks, and - heaven forbid - her eyes turn red as well, Winn had worried. Might she look like some sort of alien freak? Fortunately, as Paul had said, instead of a bright orange-red, her hair streaks were a deep rosy hue that complemented, in an odd way, rather than detracted from her appearance. Her eyes were the same, rarer than Mira's unquestionably, but still pretty, in their own way.

"You even talk kind of like Mira. Not that you use her word choice, although you do talk

a little more old-fashioned than some of us. But your voice is changing, getting deeper and firmer than it used to be. Plus,” he concluded, “you know how some of Mira’s movements are a little, um, a bit dragon-like?”

“The bond between Mira and her purple carries over in strange ways,” Winn agreed, nodding wisely.

“Yeah, well, you’re starting to do that too. Not near as obvious as she does: I guess you haven’t spent enough time with your Red to pick up that many of his traits. I mean, it’s really subtle, but I can see traces of it. I’m pretty sure in time it will be pronounced, just like it is with Mira.”

“I can’t say that’s an unpleasant thought.” Winn pushed back her chair with a scrape, rose. “I’ve got to be running out to the training fields. Supposed to meet Mira out there. We leave in the morning, you know, and I think she wants to get in a final practice session.”

Paul stood too. “Hey Winn ...”

“What?” She threw a glance over her shoulder.

“Well,” the kid shuffled his feet, “I’ve just been wondering something.”

Winn stopped. “Oh yeah? What’s that?”

Paul stopped his squirming to look her in the eye. “When do I get to meet your dragon, huh?”

Winn smiled softly, warmed by the thought of her beloved, waiting for her on the other side. “Soon, Paul, I promise. When we all meet up, you’ll be the first to get a real introduction.”

“Way cool!”

He pumped his fist in the air, making Winn laugh. “Glad you’re so excited.”

“Oh I am. I’m gonna go find my mum and tell her right now.”

“You do that.”

Grinning, she watched Paul dash away, then turned, heading for the doors leading out of the mess hall and walked confidently to the training fields beyond.

## One Easy Step

Craigdendarroch Farm, Aboyne

July 2011

Day dawned: bright, crisp, chill. Mira, warm in tunic, leggings, breeches, and jacket, weapons and pack skilfully strapped about her person in ways guaranteed not to restrict freedom of movement, surveyed the group. Gathered on the knoll were Winn, Paul, Jeanne, Tom, Case, Shelby, O'Rourke, Finn, Kesha, Ny-Mo, and the remainder of the non military contingent, fourteen, including her.

A lucky thing, she smiled inwardly. Thirteen was a bad number: hopefully her added presence would dispel any clouds of ill luck overhanging the mission. If there were any. But then, on a mission so strange, so spectacular, so susceptible to failure, surely there had to be. Well, if it so occurred, mayhap the diversity of talent, race, and age would aid in counterbalancing it.

Technically, Jeanne or Case should have been standing here in her position, fronting the group, apex of the people assembled in a loose triangle on the hill's crown. Neither of them had seemed particularly eager, however for the honour. Instead, Jeanne pressed close to the Tom's side. Unless her sharp eyes deceived her, Mira judged that they held hands, the action hidden by the proximity of their bodies. Nor was that all they shared.

Last night, she had glimpsed them returning late. Late at an hour when both should have been acquiring the rest required for such a dangerous mission. This morning, as she and Jeanne checked the packs a final time Mira espied a glittering chain peeking out from beneath Jeanne's tunic. At one interval, it had swung free, catching rays of fading starlight. Insufficient light to judge with any sureness, but the Purple Rider was near certain swinging from that chain was a simple golden band, a ring, supporting a round diamond.

Well, if they had found love was not of her concern. So long as the need to protect one another did not interfere with duty to their remaining comrades, it might even prove an asset. As for the ring and late night arrival, it was obvious the two wished to maintain their secrecy. Mira was not one to deny them. For the present, what they did and shared was their own.

And, as for the issue of leadership, Mira understood. Experienced in the ways of their own world with its fantastical machinery and inventions, the notion of being transported through the dimension of time nevertheless left them uneasy. Leadership, at least for this day, had fallen naturally upon Mira's shoulder. The dragon-bonded warrior had assumed it as nothing less than her duty, just as she assumed the task of addressing them all before departure.

The military personnel seventy five American Special Forces and an equal number of British SAS were either mounted or sat behind teams of horses, pulling the equipment loaded wagons, drawn up behind their leaders. They would follow through the tear as soon as the fourteen had opened the link.

Though they were not heading into battle - yet - she imagined it felt so to those whom she would lead across the divide. Save for Ny-mo, Kesha, and Finn, all of whom had some experience in this unique method of transportation, radiating from each stalwart warrior-traveller she sensed an undercurrent of rioting nerves. Up to her, then, to say something to allay those fears: just as her former master, Baron Daniel, had oftentimes addressed his men before leading them into an exceptionally hazardous mission.

She was no minstrel with centuries old ballads of heroism embedded in mind, throat, and lyre strings: therein lay the difficulty. She was no historian, well-versed in deeds of courage from ages past. Nor was she truly a leader of men, by birthright or skills. No, she was but a woman whom time, destiny, magic, and the M'ntar had thrust into the position of Purple Rider. Due to this standing, her fellow warriors seemed to look upon her as she had once esteemed the Baron.

Her unworthiness aside, Mira allowed her violet eyes to travel slowly across the assembly, meeting each pair of eyes, silently transmitting words of comfort, encouragement, and hope into each heart. Only Winn could reply in similar fashion, but she was confident each person - if not hearing distinctly - then at least understood the sensations her words were meant to evoke.

At last, opening her lips, she said, "The day dawns, and the sun rises. I need not speak aloud of the gravity of our task; we bear its weight upon our shoulders, in our hearts. What I will say, therefore, is this."

Ears were tuned to her every word, practically pricked like those of attentive horses.

"Obey your leaders." With a nod, she singled out Jeanne, Tom, Ny-mo. No need to signify herself; they had placed her in her position, and would not soon forget that. "Trust your fellow, leave no comrade behind. Fear not to give your lives in defence, but take no risks that place your life in unnecessary peril.

"Remember," she concluded, "each of you has been chosen for a specific skill or purpose. We are, each of us, vital to this army, to this cause."

Almost, she added, "As we fall, so falls the world," but decided against it. After all, she'd promised not to speak of the depth of the mission's gravity.

Instead, she nodded curtly. "No more need be said." Mira swung her gaze to Jeanne. "Lady, It is time we were off."

Jeanne, as Mira had known she would, left Tom Pinkerton's side and stepped forward to take over. "Right. Case, you and Shelby over there with Mira; Ny-mo goes with you. Tom, Winn, Paul, and Finn, with me, please. Mira--"

Receiving her orders, Mira obediently fell in with the others. Jeanne's ability to organize was a rare asset, one that would serve their unit well. When all were assembled, including the military personnel, according to Jeanne's directives. The MI5 agent studied their formation, nodded to signal she approved, then glanced once more to Mira.

"Ready?"

The Purple Rider smiled softly. "Indeed I am."

Are you?

"Very well." Jeanne reached out to clasp Paul's hand with her left, Winn's with her right.

Mira followed suit: O'Rourke on her right, John Wilson on her left.

Without being told, the remainder of the group fell in with the example set until all fourteen, in two separate groups of seven, were linked by hands-and minds, for each had been thoroughly trained by both M'ntar riders in this next step. Splitting their full consciousness between the persons whose hands they clasped had come easier to some than others, noticeably the Cronin and Brosynan more than the humans, - but Mira would not consent to this step before all were sufficiently linked. This would ensure a clear, even step through time.

Once she discerned with that level of consciousness through which filtered slim shafts of the perception of others that the seven in her group were sufficiently focused, Mira called mentally to Winn.

We are prepared.

Same here.

Ready, then?

I was born ready.

Winn's enthusiasm made her grin, but at the same time pricked her mentally with a reminder that Wintergreen Evans, though the Rider of the Red, was still very young and much untried.

Never mind that now. She will do her part, as will we all.

Retraining her focus, she addressed her counterpart a final time. Very well, then. Let us proceed. On the count of three...

She sensed, more than felt, Winn's new mental and magical powers tensing for this spring across time and space.

One...

Steady, she readied herself privately. Steady, focus, steady now...

Two...

John Wilson offered her hand a nearly imperceptible squeeze. Bolstering himself or her?

Three!

As one, both M'ntar riders yielded themselves to the full sway of their powers and stepped forward in union with their group: trained for this precise instant.

Just as the rising sun crested the top of the hill, the leaders of the world's most unique strike force left modern reality behind. The tear opened, the fourteen strode either confidently or hesitantly depending on experience and age through the connection, disappearing into the vivid pink and orange sunrise splashed across the awakening sky.

That was the cue for the enlisted forces who spurred their mounts and followed. The tenuous link between two worlds held open by the combined mind powers of two M'ntar, the two plains warriors; Finn and Ny-mo, and two young girls born almost a millennium apart, closed silently behind the last man.

## Part 2

Baron Daniel von Felden

Obuda and Pesh, Gondolvia. December 1210

It was deep winter when the summons arrived.

Carried by two exhausted young Gondolian knights, the brothers, Frederick and Nicholas von Kitnow, conveyed in a sealed leather packaging and delivered to his winter base, the request; a royal decree; he was expected to attend a secret meeting with the Gondolian Ruler.

A week later, after much deliberation; he left the Schwertbrudern under the command of Michael von dem Wald, his close friend, and the second in command of the Lizard knights.

Michael passionately protested his decision for he was convinced it was a trap. Together they had caused the Gondolian king and his underlings much grief in previous years.

In the company of the brothers, he undertook the arduous journey through the Gustentei hills, from there onto the snowfields of the Tarnavelor plateau. Even though they travelled swiftly through the Gondolian heartlands, it took fifteen exhausting days of hard riding before he was able to present himself at the gates of the twin cities of Obuda and Pesh.

-----

He stood for a moment listening to them ... whispering.

-----

Stepping swiftly to the table in the corner of his room he donned the last piece of his ceremonial dress, his full length white surcoat. Emblazoned across it the symbol of the Lizard Knights; a blue dragon crawling down his chest, its tail curling up and over his right shoulder.

The young squire assigned to assist him and guide him to the King's chambers, stood waiting quietly in the corner of the room.

Under his arm he tucked his helmet with its two distinctive upward curving horns.

The fabulous, double handed broadsword 'Ulrich,' inherited from his father hung behind his shoulders in a nondescript brown leather scabbard. Its silver pommel formed into the shape of a snarling wolf's head sat high over his left shoulder; its point almost reaching the back of his knees.

On his left hip rode an Ottoman sword, a single sided, razor sharp, curved blade. He found it the perfect weapon for close quarter battle against the wiry Shishmanid horse-bowman. Across his right shoulder he slung his war shield. The three black lions of his family insignia were scarred and scratched; each gouge bearing witness to a violent battle.

He was intrigued that permission to approach the King of Gondolvia in full battle dress and bearing arms had been approved, but it had been an irrefutable condition of his agreement to attend the meeting.

-----

He fought, driving the whisperers down, forcing them away, silencing them with the power of his mind; but they would return— he knew they would, he expected them to.

-----

Outside the snow lay thick and deep. The cold creeping into the Schloss, the chill permeating through the thick stone walls, but it was unable to drive its icy bite any deeper into his already frozen bones.

With measured strides he made his way the length of the corridor following the young squire. A damp and penetrating mist followed him along the passageway at ankle level, swirling about the crashing steps of his iron clad boots as his heels struck the rough granite slabs of the floor. The corridor dimly lit by tallow lamps; flickering yellow circles of light creating grotesque shadows that danced on the walls around them. The acrid smell of burning animal fats saturated his senses.

-----

They were following him, as they always did.

Their crouching, crawling, hopping forms were at the periphery of his vision. Swivelling his eyes left and right they would disappear. They were only ever visible in the corners of his eyes.

But they were there; they were always there, following in their hundreds, whispering—eternally whispering.

-----

Daniel von Felden, Baron, Komtur das Schwertbrudern, commander of a battalion of two thousand fighting men, was haunted. His nights were full of nightmares; his nightmares full of their silent screams. Clamouring images of the Whisperers, each captured at the instant of death tore like a spinning kaleidoscope through every moment of his sleep. Awake he was denied relief, for his waking moments too were full of their whisperings. He dreaded the dark. It was then he would hear them scurrying closer to him, whispering. He had not slept from dusk to dawn since the day the witch had cursed Ulrich.

Most times he would lay in a cold sweat, dreading the moment that one of them finally touched him. Even now he could sense them following. The shades of every life that Ulrich had extinguished; each man, woman or child that had died as a result of a meeting with its razor sharp edge, with its needle sharp point...

-----

They were the Whisperers. They followed the sword — their bodies contorted and disfigured by the fatal wounds each had sustained. Those closest reaching out with ghostly arms he could almost feel them plucking the hem of his surcoat, almost feel them pulling at his belt, almost feel the grasping, insubstantial fingers, clawing and groping for Ulrich.

-----

The door to the meeting hall was abruptly before him. He drew his ornate jewelled dagger, with its forearm long blade from the sheath, which sat high on his right hip, the dagger, lifted from the belt of one of Saladin's fierce Mamluk slave warriors some fifteen years beforehand, the moment after he had driven Ulrich deep into his ill-fated enemy's throat.

He swallowed once, clearing his mouth of an unexpected rush of saliva.

The squire stepping to one side gestured for him to move forward. With his left hand, he reached over his shoulder and loosened Ulrich in its scabbard; he then struck the hilt of his dagger three times on the dark oak panels.

With a heavy clunk he heard the latch lifted from inside. The door began to swing inwards, away from him...

April 1210

"What greater love can we show them than by breaking the grip of the Antichrist so they may accept Jesus and be saved?" Prince Andrew II the Jesmopolitan, younger son of King Bela III of Hungary; ruler of the Principality of Halych, petitioned his liege Emperor Frederick II.

The Boyars of Halych, the local ancient aristocracy, had rebelled against his rule, raised an army and had expelled the occupying Hungarian troops of his father King Bela. Hundreds of German settlers were being slaughtered without their protection.

"They have risen, not only against me, but also against you my Lord," he continued, "Whilst I was undertaking my duty to my God, raising a crusade and riding against the Saracens in Outrémar, they have conspired against me. They have caused the death of my queen Gertrude of Merania, leaving our children Bela and Elizabeth without the comfort and love of a mother."

Frederick II turned to his friend Hermann who sat to his right, "Has a fair turn of phrase, this Hun, has he not?"

"Without a doubt my Liege", he smiled. "Perhaps he should go against these Boyars of his alone, for undoubtedly he could lambast them into submission."

"If we progress a crusade against these barbarians what recompense can my knights expect?" asked Hermann, turning to Andrew.

"I will give unto them the region of Burzenland, there they will have the right to build, establish markets and administer justice, and all I ask is that I retain my right to any gold or silver which may be discovered. And I will raise against them, no taxes or tolls," Andrew finished with a rush.

Hermann surreptitiously nodded his agreement.

Frederick II Emperor of Germany, Italy, Burgundy, Sicily and Jerusalem rose to his feet, "It will be done, we will raise a crusade against our brother's barbarians, Hochmeister Hermann von Salza will assign his Teutonic Knights to this task, Baron Daniel von Felden will join with the Hochmeister and supplement his troops," he nodded in Daniel's direction. "May the Lord bless and keep our brave children safe and true to Him."

Schloss Dietrichstein. Wallencia

1218

“Bring to me that young lad of whom you spoke; I need someone to at least hold my mirror when I shave, if nothing else.”

“You mean to eradicate that fungus?” said Michael pulling at his own beard, “Wonders never cease. There was I thinking it were to be a permanent fixture. Without a doubt it shows your age, the grey streaks are most becoming.”

“Are you going to find that boy? Or do I promote Johann to second in command?”

Daniel had been back at the Schloss for less than a week; acceptance of the Gondolian Monarch’s gold seven years previously uppermost in his mind. Preparations to now remove his mercenaries from the present conflict and join a new master, almost completed. Servants, Knechte, and the Lizard knights dashing in all directions, finalising the carrying and packing. Daniel stood like a rock in the middle of a rush of floodwater, watching the proceedings.

“Get those horses over here, lad, c’mon shift it! Do you think we have all day?” Casmir was in full voice. A young lad was struggling to lead four uncooperative carthorses to the front of a large, fully loaded wagon. Daniel stepped quickly to the lad’s side, grasping the traces in his powerful hands he swung his weight towards the ground, bringing all four horses immediately under his control. Handing the leathers back to the lad, he went to turn away.

“Thank you, my Lord,” puffed the lad, his young face red with exertion.

Daniel turned back, “What’s your name, boy?”

"Milo Witt, Lord."

"Ah, so you're Jacob's lad, I was looking to see you. Have you spoken to Sir Michael von Walden today?"

"No, Lord, I just but returned from the stable block with these beasts."

"I have need of a new Knechte, or in your case it will probably be just man servant, for what you know about fighting and horses, could probably be written on my thumb nail, think you up to the post?"

The lad's chin dropped to his chest, and he sighed loudly.

"Speak boy, are you fit for it?"

"Yes Lord," said the lad, dark brown eyes looking straight into Daniel's.

"Good, get those horses delivered, and then away with you to my quarters. I will attend shortly. I need to shave and take a bath. Ensure you have plenty of hot water; it has been a month since I felt soap on my body. It will probably be a month or more until I feel it again. Go on, move it."

"Yes, Lord," the lad fisted his chest, and with a more positive pull on the traces moved off, leading the now calmed horses into position.

"Bit soft, and a little chubby, but I'm sure you'll toughen him up quite quickly," said Michael with a large smile.

"From where did you just spring? I thought I told you to get that lad to me hours ago?"

"Sorry my Lord, I was delayed with problems loading weapons from the armoury."

"Problems?"

"None now."

It was about an hour later, Daniel felt that preparations for the move were going well enough for him to take some time for himself. Leaving his more than capable quartermaster, Casmir in charge, he made his way to his personal quarters.

The lad showed he was adept with a shaving knife, and managed to complete his first duty without causing a single nick. The bath was ready, full of scalding water. Daniel did not notice the lad's eyes widen or the flush that came to Milo's cheeks, as he stripped and climbed gingerly into the large half barrel.

"C'mon lad, get that brush and soap moving, it won't scrub my back on its own."

-----

Ulrich vibrating in its scabbard alongside his sleeping skins woke the Baron. He grasped the sword's hand grip and the buzzing ceased. His mind filled with a powerful impression that he should take a side trip away from the convoy of troops and wagons, deep into the mountains.

Ulrich was insistent. Insistent too, that Milo should accompany them.

-----

Their horses followed a narrow path without guidance, Daniel riding a full length ahead of Milo.

It was almost nightfall when they made camp. Each attended to their horse, Daniel then helped Milo by starting a small fire. The lad warmed some pre-prepared food, and they sat either side of the flickering flames eating in silence.

"Wir werden die Nacht in zwei Teile unterteilt, (We'll split the night into two) you take the first watch. --- Anything out of the ordinary and I mean anything, wake me, scream, shout; but do not try to sort anything on your own. I need a squire not a liability." Daniel spoke in the Randakeel, a language common to them both.

"Yes Lord."

Rolling himself in his cloak, Daniel shuffled as close to the fire as he could without setting the close woven wool alight, and with a sheathed Ulrich in his arms allowed himself to sleep.

-----

They came without warning. In the dark behind his closed eyelids they began to gather; they whispered, he struggled in his dream to hear them. The whispering was too hushed to make out the words, but he strained, knowing they wanted to say something. In his dream he couldn't see them, but he knew they were there.

-----

Daniel opened his eyes.

Milo sat on a log the other side of the fire. Through slatted lids, Daniel lay observing his new body servant. The lad quietly dropped a short piece of wood on the fire, sparks momentarily flew upwards. The face that he watched looked soft and gentle in the flickering firelight, almost like a girl's.

With an imperceptible start he suddenly saw the lad as a young woman, a woman masquerading as a lad. He forced the thought away as impossible; but not before a flush came to his cheeks, as he considered the times over the last few weeks when he had been brazenly male.

"Get some sleep," he said brusquely, angry with himself for his foolish thoughts. "I'm awake now, I won't go off again."

"But it has been merely a few hours Lord, the moon not yet risen."

"Soll ich mich immer wiederholen?" (Am I to always repeat myself?) He snarled.

Milo said nothing, but wrapped himself in his cloak and lay close to the fire, after placing another two small logs on the flames.

Daniel pulled his cloak around his shoulders. He held Ulrich across his knees, his hands

involuntarily caressing the leather scabbard, the sword vibrated gently in an expression of pleasure.

The moon began to lift over the mountains illuminating the bare rocks, reflecting off the snow filled clefts and ravines. A ghostly light fell across the scene, the black fir trees and star speckled sky contrasting garishly with the white landscape. His thoughts drifted to Helga, wondering what she was doing, how she looked in her sleep, the curve of her neck, the swell of her chest.

Gently stroking the nondescript scabbard, his eyes grew heavy; the image of Helga, the only woman he had ever loved grew stronger. His mind filled with memories...

-----

The sky began to lighten, a pale dawn chasing away the night. Daniel roused Milo with a short shake on the shoulder. The lad came awake without hesitation, 'make a good soldier' Daniel thought. Warm wine, and salt beef with flat bread cakes was sufficient to break their fast. Milo cleared away the camp while Daniel made sure the fire was completely extinguished, emptying his bladder across it to be sure.

Milo disappeared into the trees, returning a minute or two later adjusting his clothing, -- reviving Daniel's suspicions of the previous night.

They were a-horse and on the trail within half an hour of the lad being woken.

"Kommen Sie fahren neben mir" Daniel said.

As he was bid, Milo moved up alongside. They rode together along a faint trail for a while; Milo answered questions that Daniel put to him on his childhood in Egypt, where his Scottish father had met his Coptic mother, and what Jacob Witt had been before he joined the Lizard knights as a Knechte.

The track began to climb, it wasn't long before it became too steep to ride abreast, Milo fell in behind Daniel. They continued in single file.

## The Western Carpathians

1218

Ulrich began to vibrate, breaking Daniel from his reverie, he touched his hand to the pommel to quieten the blade, and then following the sword's silent, magical commands, he swung off the track. Following even more silent directions he dismounted.

He led his horse with Milo following, along a faint track to a crack in a rock face.

The gap was too narrow for the horses to pass through.

"Tether here the mounts, we continue afoot."

They made their way the twenty or so paces through the crack, the far side opening onto an enclosed dell, the grass beneath their feet, lush and green.

Ulrich guided Daniel across the basin to a cave opening. Drawing the blade from its scabbard, Daniel led the way through the low entrance.

The sword remained quiet. The cave was dark. As they moved inside and stood up, a smell, so fetid and foul hit them from all around, catching in their throats. Milo coughed and spluttered, bringing up the contents of his stomach. The floor beneath their feet had no substance; the crust crunching and subsiding, as with eyes streaming they walked carefully but swiftly across it.

From above their heads they became aware of a chorus of rustling and scratching. The rank liquid continued to rain down. Unable to restrain himself Daniel ran his thumb

along Ulrich's razor sharp edge, blood welled immediately. The blade absorbed the red flow, Daniel cauterised the cut on its flat edge as the sword came alive, blazing with a bright blue light.

The rustling above their heads grew louder.

Looking up, they could see that the roof of the cave was full of giant bats, their eyes burning malevolently. The sharp teeth in their wolf like mouths chattering as the bats became aware of their presence, they woke in numbers. A few dropping from the high roof, fluttered on their leathery wings around the pair. Screaming as one brushed its wings across his head, Milo almost collapsed to the floor in horror. Daniel caught his servant and drew the terrified lad to him. He raised the blue flaming sword above his head, his intention to make a swift return to the cave exit.

But Ulrich had other ideas. The sword dragged them both further into the cave. The roof climbed upwards reaching cathedral proportions and opening wide to either side. The floor beneath their feet became solid, rock covered with a light dusting of sand.

The bats did not extend their activities to this part of the cave. The size of the cavern was so great that even Ulrich's flaming blue light could not reach its far corners.

As they crunched across the dry sand they could hear the bats behind them, fluttering and screeching, but none followed.

"We must away from here before nightfall, or that lot will make free with our mounts," Daniel said quietly.

"How will we get out? - What is this place? - How is it your sword can light our way?" Milo's voice was rising almost to a falsetto as he fought to control his panic.

"Hush lad, if we pass through this I will make all clear to you."

Milo was shaking in fear, still clinging to his master, tears running down his face, his breath exploding in sobs.

"You're no lad are you?" Daniel said, convinced at last. His arm around her waist was

sufficient for him to determine the feminine softness of her body. "Fear not lass, we will prevail. Ulrich will not only light our way, but also render to us its protection."

They saw them, at the periphery of their vision, a mass of ghostly people; following.

"Grüße , Ulrich, hat es schon lange."

The voice was female, powerful and heavily accented. It came from the far end of the cave, where the roof joined with the floor in massive natural columns. Daniel strained his eyes to discern its source but could see nothing.

-----

Insubstantial hands snatched at his clothing, at his body, at his arms and legs, but they passed through, but he could hear them...

They were whispering... whispering... now he could discern the words... "Ulrich, Ulrich, Ulrich," a chant, a mantra. The words were causing shivers to run down Daniel's spine, Milo was overcome with horror, he could hear the whispers, "Ulrich, Ulrich, Ulrich."

-----

With his right hand the Baron drew his Ottoman, he held Ulrich high above his head in his left, providing illumination. Mira collapsed to the ground at his feet, covering her face with her hands and sobbing. Daniel faced the woman who glided towards him from the shadows. She was tall, taller even than the Baron, her body statuesque, and her face pale; almost chalk white, her lips red and voluptuous, and her clothes dark and all encompassing. Her feet could not be seen, her arms were raised as if to embrace him.

Ulrich's blazing light went out leaving them in darkness.

"Durchlauf! - Erhalten Sie von hier jetzt oder sterben Sie!" (Run! - Get thee from here now or die!) He screamed at Mira, dragging the girl to her feet and thrusting a sheathed Ulrich into her hands.

In abject horror, the girl, clutching the sword ran retracing her steps towards the

glimmer of light at the cave entrance.

~

Mira laid coughing and spluttering at the powerful smell of the acrid liquid which had rained once more over her hair and clothes. Rushing through the waterfall of bat urine had been the final obstacle. She had stumbled from the cave mouth, collapsing onto her face in the lush green grass.

As she laid gasping deep gulps of fresh air, Mira was unable to believe what she had just seen and experienced. She lay petrified, expecting any moment the tall, pale woman would follow; expecting to be dragged back into the cave.

Taking a deep breath, she scrambled to her feet and ran, stumbled through the rock cleft to where they had left the horses tethered. Their mounts stood quietly, cropping contentedly at the lush grass. Back with the familiar horses, Mira's panic began to subside. In a nearby stream she carefully washed the foul urine from her face and hair, whilst still glancing about with fearful eyes, starting at the slightest sound.

Feeling better once she had washed the bat urine from herself, and, uncertain as to her next move, still full of trepidation, she waited anxiously for Daniel.

Remembering her master's sword, Mira lifted it from where it lay and unsheathed it, she examined the fabulous blade, swinging it back and forth to acquire a feel for its weight. Though in size it was greater than any she had previously wielded, it seemed unnaturally light and perfectly balanced. Her father had been thorough in his training, and the competence which the girl had once commanded rapidly returned.

She sat on the grass at the entrance to the cleft with the blade across her thighs, expecting - hoping her master would join her sooner rather than later. The sun was warm and she dozed, exhaustion and the horrendous experiences of the preceding hour, pumping up her adrenalin, had left her seriously fatigued.

The sun had sunk almost to the horizon when she opened her eyes with a start. Disorientated she began searching left and right. Search as she might, she could find no sign of the crevice, the rock face was solid.

No matter in which direction she ran in horror, Mira was presented with the same impenetrable cliff face. There was no way that Daniel could escape, nor could she return to the cave mouth. Mira knew she would have to leave her present location before the sun set, or she would be an easy target for any walking, crawling or flying predator which picked up her scent.

Mounting her bay mare, she made the decision to take Daniel's charger with her. Once night fell, tethered - it too would be obvious prey for wolves or worse. Leading the massive warhorse, she made her way along a pathway, following what she presumed was the route they had ridden on their journey to the cave.

Unable to wear the huge blade on her hip, she strapped Ulrich behind her shoulders in a parody of the way she had seen her master wear it.

A mist rose around her.

Confused, she lost her way; riding from the lightly marked path.

## Part 3

### The Tirnano

### The Brosynan Clans

### Hunting Patrol

### The Northern Plains

Bodan lay on his stomach under the overhang, his senses straining to vibe the source of the thought that had come drifting on the wind, it sounded like a call for help, but it was so faint he could not be sure.

To catch a readable thought out here on the edge of the snow-fields was so rare that it was impossible to imagine. If it was humans they were a long way into Brosynan territory and must be either crazy or have a serious death wish. Involuntarily his hand moved to check that his spike, crafted from the horn of a steer, was close to his grasp.

He lay in the cool shadow, under the overhang for a full hour waiting as the sun passed its zenith. He then backed silently away from the edge of the cliff. The thought had not come again, and his sharp eyes had detected nothing more than the small group of steers that he had been watching since dawn.

The little herd had been making its way slowly through the snow field, from tuft of grass to tuft of grass towards his position. They were cropping contentedly at the exposed

fronds of purple headed grass. He counted two large bulls and their harem of nine cows; there were six youngsters of all ages, from milk-suckers to young adolescents, almost old enough for the older bull to consider covering.

Bodan smiled as he watched the old bull 'chance his arm' once or twice as they moved through the grass. The young heifers were obviously of a different mind and skittered away from his amorous advances, the old bull wasn't too concerned; more than anything he was merely asserting his authority.

The little herd ambled closer. He waited; they were almost close enough. He confirmed his choice, a young heifer on his side of the herd. She was moving forward slightly apart from the others, her attention somewhere far away as she chewed incessantly on her cud.

Bodan knew he would have but one chance to make a strike before the herd would turn on him with a vengeance, seeking retribution for the death of one of their tightly knit family group. Confident in his ability, he silently drew his long spike, his intention to make his kill, then disappear, swiftly making his way back to the safety of his vantage point. The steers would spend a short time keening around their fallen family member before moving off. Leaving the body where it had fallen.

The young bull had already ambled past his position, and was leading the herd towards a small gully; he would never have been able to get near enough for his spike stroke, his favoured method, had the bull been closer.

The heifer approached his hide, 'just a little bit more m'beauty'. She took three more steps, and then began to turn towards the gully entrance passing his position. He could see her clearly, her gentle brown eyes exposing her high level of intelligence. He was almost overcome by the softness, for her long lashes gave her a haunting beauty.

But the clan needed meat, not sentimentality; he thrust the thought aside. The wind was blowing in his direction, and she was now so close he could smell the cud she was chewing. Bodan waited a moment longer. She was almost upon him when he rose from his crouch; slipped silently towards her, taking the two separating paces swiftly. His approach was such that the bulk of her body hid him from the remainder of the herd. In less than a heartbeat he was alongside her, he drove his long pointed spike into her eye, smashing through the socket and into her brain.

She died instantly but took two further steps before she fell in a heap. Instantly he faded back into the grass and rapidly made his way back up the side of the outcrop to his previous vantage point. The other steers were as yet unaware of her demise. She gave a deep grunt as her body went into spasm, and with a loud noise her bowels emptied. The nearest beast, an elderly female, wandered over to investigate, and then with a tremendous bellow of alarm announced the death. The two males stirred instantly into defensive mode, rushing towards the spot, bristling with anger. The remainder of the herd followed. They stood for a moment around her, sniffing at her bloodied eye.

Bodan watched as they spread out from the corpse searching for an enemy, but he had expected just that, and had covered himself with fresh dung which effectively masked his scent. With the powerful aroma that was issuing from the luckless heifer's final offering, there was little chance that they would be able to locate him. If they had discovered his presence though, they would spend forever waiting for him to come down, or linger, waiting for him to die from exposure or starvation, such would be their revenge.

As it was, it was more than an hour before the herd had moved far enough away to enable him to leave his hiding-place, and make his way at a fast sprint back to the Tirnano's outpost. Roza and Jojo were waiting in camp. They swiftly swung onto their waiting mounts and at a rolling gallop followed the now mounted Bodan who had draped two large dragging skins across his mount's shoulders. Experienced hands all, they soon had the heifer butchered, quartered and packed away. Each gave a thankful prayer to the gods that the Gargoyls hadn't picked up the scent of the dead animal, or they would have been in 'deep doodoos.'

For protection each carried a long spear tipped with sharp flint, the fearsome weapons, along with short bows with their equally sharp arrows, were kept close to hand as they worked.

The circuitous route they would follow to the Clan cave the following day would be the most dangerous of the hunt. Even though the Gargoyls were cowardly, the disgusting flying creatures being loath to attack armed riders, knowing the speed at which a rider and his mount could move and fight. They also knew full well the accuracy the hunters commanded with their small but deadly bows. Gargoyl's would attack if the stakes were high enough, and of course stacked in their favour. But the hunters were well versed in all attack methods that the Gargoyls were able to devise, for they had guarded continuously against the creatures all their lives.

'Well done young'un, good job, with what we already got, there's loads to take back to the caves tomorrow,' whistled Weesia as they loaded the butchered carcase on the skins before dragging it back to camp. Their mounts swiftly disposed of the unwanted parts of the carcase.

The hunters had been away from the Clan caves for five days, each day had seen at least one kill added to their hoard. The kills had been packed by Weesia and Mikhail; wrapping the fresh meat in soft skins which were then buried in a snowdrift within the camp's perimeter. The drift was under the shadow of a large rock, and even the mid summer sun could not melt it completely. The snow covering was replenished each morning by a daily snow fall, creating an effective storage spot. They had used it continuously over the years, as had their predecessors before them.

They completed packing the camp before the sun sunk behind the high peak. The remainder of the patrol rode into camp just after, the nine mounts almost silent in their approach across the snow. Across each of their mount's necks were a brace of rabbits, they were a much sought after delicacy. In addition one mount carried a deer carcase draped with the rabbits.

'Where'd ya find them?' Mikhail whistled, generally the only sight of rabbits was after a patrol had visited their southern borders, 'You ain't been gone that long.'

'Bout three thou down, looks like they spreading onto the fields in numbers, much higher than last year,' Radaka replied, her hands and fingers flashing. She smiled at him, he was a handsome lad, nice and wide across his bushy shoulders, and he had proved himself in battle. He might be worth a little tumble, she mused, but the poor lad was so besotted by the frosty Anabee, he probably wouldn't even notice her advances.

She sighed, Oh, well, what you ain't had, you don't miss, and there was always Kallim, the next youngest. She was tall, beautiful and solidly built with cropped black hair and an amazing pattern of green and black variegated stripes criss-crossing her hard muscled body. The hooded hide shirt and long pants tucked into her knee high boots were tight enough to show off all her ample curves. Radaka was never short of admirers and she knew it. She carried the same long spear and short bow as her fellows, and like the other hunters it was not for show. She was no amateur with either weapon, able to hit a leaping deer or a galloping steer with either at fifty paces.

The team broke camp before daybreak; their intention, to be on the move in battle

formation before the Gargoyls were to wing. With four mounts hauling towing skins wrapped around the packed meat, and two others dragging skins with the remainder of the useable parts of their kills; horns, hides and large bones, they would present a key target. If the Gargoyls could force the riders to surrender their towed cargo, they would swoop down and steal as much as they could.

The hunters' only defence against the flying denizens was to fight to protect themselves and the payload. The Gargoyls were inclined to attack in numbers, numbers which would take a whole heap of fighting off, and which invariably ended with substantial if not fatal injuries.

It should have been easy for the hunters and the Gargoyls to have come to some sort of truce, but the Gargoyls had totally ignored any attempt at communication the Clan had proffered. Their singular intention seemed to be to kill as many hunters as they could, with as few casualties on their own side as possible. And to steal whatever they could, which did not exclude abducting any unwary members of the clan.

The Tirnano rode in combat formation. The six lead mounts towing the large hide sacks; the remaining six hunters forming a tight group around the precious cargo. As they set off at a quick walk the snow was falling, their breath rose in white clouds before being whipped away by the keen wind.

Kallim, Jojo and Ames took up the three rear positions, Pavel and Roza flanked each side, while Naum took point. Bodan was in his usual position at tail, his was the most dangerous of their formation; the sun would be rising at his back, and out of the sun would come the Gargoyls.

The Tirnano' haul was more than sufficient to attract attention and the patrol knew it. If the odds were stacked against them, things might not go too well, but they were ready. They had all faced the Gargoyls. Even Mikhail, rookie though he was, had a deep puckered, roughly stitched scar, running from shoulder to elbow on his right arm, evidence of the sharpness of Gargoyle claws. It was an affirmation of his first patrol less than a year before. He was proud of his scar and of the fifteen notches on his spear which proclaimed his subsequent verified kills.

He was fortunate; the wound had been cleaned swiftly, washed out with copious amounts of boiled water. Ames had stitched the wound as well as she could and then wrapped the youth's arm in a clean piece of buckskin. Even so it had taken two weeks

for Mikhai to be back on his feet, and another two before he had resumed his place in the patrol.

He was lucky the wound had been completely cleaned, unlike some wounds inflicted by the Gargoyls, which after a single day would be oozing thick yellow pus, and invariably spelt a slow and painful death.

The Tirnano patrol was well known to the Gargoyls. Counting the number of notches around the group would give a good indication why, for the total tally amongst the twelve was well over two hundred and fifty confirms. To say that the group were experienced, and battle hardened was an understatement.

Pavel was a good leader; his thirty two years of life had honed a powerful body with wide shoulders and muscular arms. He could have his pick of any of the maidens in the Clan caves, but only chose occasionally, to share his sleeping skins with Radaka.

She was a vital member of the troop, a skilled huntress and a vicious fighter. The thirty four notches on her spear, more than any other female member of the troop were testament to her abilities. Radaka held the central position at the point of the A, it was her responsibility to direct the towing group. She could feel the tight rawhide ropes under her thighs. The hunters rode bareback without reins, guiding their mounts with knee pressure and clicked commands alone.

The highly intelligent plains Runners, whom their riders claimed were able to understand every thought; moved and fought almost as one alongside their riders, and observing them one could easily believe that they did understand every single thought or gesture that was made.

The meat sacks were secured by ropes, one to either side of the mount's body attached to a harness around its neck. The harness was the only handhold the rider had available, but most would never use it, relying on their superb riding ability even at full gallop, to keep them safely mounted.

To cling to the harness was almost an admission of failure as a rider, for the use of both hands was essential to handle their weapons. The long spears were supported by a socket sewn onto the side of each of their right foot boots. The spear was held in the right hand, ready for instant use. Their short bows were strung and looped over their

left shoulders. A hide quiver of arrows, dried and rolled straight after heating over slow fires until they were as hard as rock, hung from their left hips. The arrows were tipped with sharp slivers of stone, each one painstakingly chipped from the hard black stones which littered the valley floors around their home caves.

Every hunter carried a horn spike of a similar shape and size to Bodan's. The spikes were expertly carved and shaped for the hunters by the oldsters in the tribe. Each hunter was gifted with his own personalised spike on his acceptance into a patrol.

The hunters were as always, prepared for war.

From an early age they were trained and groomed to be experts in all of the tasks they would call on as hunters and fighters. Acceptance into a patrol required the rookie to pass many tasks, not only in weaponry but also hunting lore. The culmination of their training was a rite of passage at the age of fifteen. The test required them to spend six days and nights alone on the snow-fields, armed with nothing but a bow and just two arrows.

During that time they were expected not only to survive, but to feed and protect themselves. Survival meant acceptance into the Clan; it was a one way ticket. Every member of the Clan had passed; those who hadn't were the ones that didn't return.

Acceptance into a hunting patrol however was only by the total agreement of all the other members of the troop. The youngest age for a rookie was eighteen, but membership was only to be had by filling 'dead man's boots' and the newcomer had a lot to live up to.

The first year, if they survived, was always the hardest.

The patrol rode into the Clan valley just after midday, each of them with their jerkin hoods up and their gloves on. The guards at the valley entrance and along the surrounding heights were made up of fifteen to eighteen year olds, who whooped and hollered their delight at the size of the haul and the obvious well being of the patrol. Their enthusiasm was quickly picked up, and soon there were crowds of excited youngsters from the schools scrambling around their idol's feet.

To be a member of a hunting patrol was the pinnacle of success for the Clan's

youngsters. The more successful the patrol, the higher they stood in hero rankings. The Tirnano were amongst the top three patrols in ranking, only two others held higher hit rates in terms of Gargoy kills, and weight of meat returned to the caves.

The plains Runners were jittery and tired, the boisterous youngsters scampering around their huge clawed feet, chancing death or injury, was not helping.

Rather than stepping high and prancing into the valley as the occasion warranted, for the mounts too were venerated, each known by name and ranked in adulation along with their riders, they took short steps, their claws just skimming the hard packed earth.

A short time later when the meat, hide and horns, and those bones which were useful, had been off loaded and dropped at their respective preparation areas, that Pavel was approached by one of the clan elders.

## A Task Is Set

### The Northern Plains

‘Greetings, Lord Alion,’ he clicked, fisting his forehead in salute.

‘Greetings, Patrol Leader Pavel,’ the older man responded, ‘Lord Hoolie requires you to attend soon as.’

That meant now! For Lord Hoolie to send one of the Elders to fetch him meant something either pretty rare or mighty scary was in the air.

Pavel followed the elder towards the back of the cave and ducked through the hanging skins which were the demarcation to the council chambers. The walls were black with soot from the fat soaked rush torches, which were placed in holders all around.

In the flickering light they gave off he could make out the entire upper echelon of clan elders, including his escort there were twelve. Every group in the clan was made up of the number twelve. It was bad luck to operate a group of any other number. A patrol hated to function if a hunter was killed, and they would always wait until they a replacement had been chosen, before becoming fully operational again.

Pavel stepped to a space that had been left open for him, and when indicated sat cross-legged with the others on the rough rugs. He grimaced, his nose wrinkling at the scent of old people, old rugs and smoking, burning rushes. He had lived in the open air for too many years to enjoy the confines and smells of cave life.

‘Patrol Leader Pavel,’ began Lord Hoolie, the council leader. She was a fine and handsome woman, between forty to forty five years old, and she, like him had once commanded a hunting patrol for many years. The myriad of scars that covered her body bore testament to her meetings with the Gargoyls, her spear boasted ninety three

notches.

She had been forced to retire from hunting after a particularly bad accident six years beforehand, which had crushed her right leg and now caused her to walk with a pronounced limp. Her injury still caused her a great deal of discomfort whenever she had occasion to climb onto the back of her elderly black stallion, 'Cloud killer' but she would never admit to it.

Whilst riding rear guard, she had been attacked by three Gargoyls and the black Runner had stumbled on a loose rock whilst avoiding a set of raking claws aimed at his eyes. Lord Hoolie, or as she was known then, Patrol Leader Anastasia, had little opportunity to roll clear whilst warding off an attack from behind, her with her spear. Her leg was crushed against a rocky outcrop by the mount's weight, breaking her limb in three places.

'We have asked that you attend on us for a specific task,' she signed.

Pavel was not surprised, there were few other reasons he would have been summoned to the inner council chamber for other than for a 'specific task'.

'We require you and your patrol to take a sweep of the northern borders, reports are coming back to us, through the Runners, that Chin are preparing for a raid into our lands, we need to know how many and where. If possible you are to do away with the threat, is that understood?'

Pavel responded with a single clicked 'Affirmative', his excitement pricking up at the directive; it was good, a time off from hunting, time to be warriors. It was fantastic, his patrol needed a break; they had been on hunting duty almost without stop for almost three years.

'You will be joining with the ElPee's, in overall command of the two patrols will be Patrol Leader Albie.'

Pavel's face fell and returned to his previous unemotional mask. Albie was a bully who used his strength and size rather than any leadership qualities to command the grudging respect of his patrol. Needless to say they were above the Tirnano in ranking and as such Albie was ranked higher than Pavel.

‘You will be 2 i/c and your 2 i/c, Naum will take the Patrol Sergeant’s position.’

Pavel’s smile almost returned at that point, but he still rankled at having to ‘bend the knee’ to Albie, still he was 2 i/c and that stood for a lot. Nuam being Sergeant would be a great boost for his patrol. Pavel would have expected Albie’s right hand man Emiloo to be awarded the position; still it tipped the balance of power in his patrol’s favour.

Albie would be hard pressed to force through any stupid or rash commands. Although the patrols adhered to strict military procedures, many of the decisions would be discussed amongst the three leaders and majority rule would be enforced, although the decisions always came from the top three, Troop leader, 2 i/c and patrol sergeant.

‘The two present patrol sergeants will assume troop corporal status and all other members will be ranked as troopers, unless field promotion is necessary,’ she concluded forebodingly, that was first-rate, Bodan would be his troop corporal, he was a great patrol sergeant, Pavel often wondered how he ever did without him.

‘When do we leave?’ he signed

‘Troop Leader Albie is due back tomorrow,’ she signed, according Albie his new rank. ‘You have two days rest following his return, and then you ride out. Each patrol member will have a spare mount to ensure you can get to the border and back quickly if necessary, if you need to send back messages, then no less than a section is to travel openly. If you run into problems and cannot muster section strength, then any travelling must be at night. We must have information on any Chin movements, understood?’

Pavel answered immediately ‘Understood Lord Hoolie,’ he rose to his feet and clicked for permission to leave.

‘We shall meet again when Troop Leader Albie returns, to go through any questions you both may have.’

Pavel fisted his forehead in salute, and slipped through the skins into the relatively clean air of the main cave. The cave was immense. The floor space easily four hundred by three hundred paces, the smoke stained ceiling, with its little vent, many body heights high above his head.

Around the walls smoking torches provided ample light, and he could see the family areas against the wall furthest from where he stood.

He walked towards them; his own family hearth was close to the centre of the line of fireplaces. Each quarter fronted by a stone hearth, fed continuously with dried peat, cut from the earth at the head of the valley.

The hearthstones were black with soot and age. Meat roasting over the open fires added to the overpowering aroma of home. Their meals were supplemented by baking the onion like roots of the ubiquitous grasses which were used for pretty much everything else that could be thought of.

Dipped in animal fat and bound to make torches. Split and woven to create sleeping mats. The purple flowers dried to make a refreshing drink. The fleshy tops were also used as fodder for their domestic animals.

The beasts of the plains too fed and survived remarkably well on the grasses.

~

There were looks of recognition, and even a couple of delighted hoots and whistles from a group of young girls attending the school. All children attended school from the age of ten years. The children were taught by teams of teachers, all of them ex-hunters who were too young to be elders, or too incapacitated to be hunters. Their hard won skills passed on to the following generations.

It wasn't often that a serving hunter, let alone a top patrol leader ventured into the school area, but Pavel wanted to see his young sister Shasa who at the age of fifteen was due to take her final test; 'The Field Exercise.' He felt saddened that he would not be waiting for her triumphant return. Shasa was more than capable of lasting the six nights. She had inherited her older brothers' abilities, and from almost as soon as she could walk, had held a bow in her chubby little hands. Her skill with the weapon even at a young age was widely banded about. Most of the patrols had already earmarked her as a target rookie when she reached eighteen.

She sat with a group of similar aged youngsters listening to his old sergeant Gavrail, who three years earlier had lost an eye and part of his right shoulder following a Gargoy

attack. Their backs were to him and as he approached. At least five of the group of twelve turned to see who was approaching, good 'vibe touchers,' he thought to himself. His approach had been silent for his soft hide boots made no sound, as he crossed the hard flat parade ground towards them.

Good 'vibe touchers' were worth a great deal on the open plains, his own patrol had two vibers, Bodan and Roza, Roza was the more astute of the pair being able to pick up the vibes of most living creatures at a distance in excess of a klick, a thousand paces. Bodan always seemed able to discern the Gargoyls at that distance, but other creatures at a great deal less. His powerful ability to discern the Gargoyls almost unique.

Most Clansfolk had problems being aware of the vile creatures until they were almost upon them. It was more than enough reason for his continued position as rear guard. Bodan was invaluable in that role, and had been the reason for their outstanding successes in the ongoing conflict with the ugly flying, bat like creatures.

Gavril sprang to attention, and fisted his forehead to his old colleague, who immediately grasped the older man in a fond embrace, the two parted and Pavel proffered a return salute.

'Need a chat with my sis, won't take a mo,' Pavel signed.

'Sure Boss, we're just done,' the tough hunter was just as Pavel remembered him, Gavril had been a great sergeant in his time. He was Bodan's predecessor, and like Bodan had a predilection for the 'hairy' post of tail guard.

'Thanks mucker, how's things with you?'

'Mustn't grumble,' Gavril replied. Pavel smiled for he knew that whatever, Gavril never would.

'Catch up soon, gotta buzz for a while, catch you on the flip flop.'

Pavel would often visit his old friend whenever he was in the valley. Gavril could never get enough of the latest gossip and stories, drinking them in with relish. That he missed the patrol life was obvious. By now he would surely be 2 i/c or even commanding his

own patrol. Gavrail laid no blame on anyone but himself, he had failed just one time to see the pair of Gargoyls swooping down on him.

His failure was evident in the scars he wore across his face and head, and the extensive damage to his shoulder. Pavel had killed the creature with a spear throw of easily seventy paces, but not before it had sunk its claws into Gavrail's skull, one of them piercing his left eye, it had also taken a huge bite from his shoulder. The other had flapped away, screaming in frustration.

The sergeant had been in that most venerable of moments when attacked; 'taking a dump' being the colloquial term.

The chunk of flesh that the evil, filthy creature had torn from his shoulder had left an injury that had taken a long time to heal and had ultimately left him unable to move his arm. His head was covered in scars from the creature's claws. All in all, Gavrail was lucky to be alive, and for the first few weeks after the injury it was give or take if he ever would be anything other than a vegetable, but his strength of character won through. Gavrail had been thirty years old when the injury occurred.

'Gotta go away sis, won't be able to catch your passing out.'

'Where you off?'

'Patrol up to border, be away for a couple of weeks'

Her face fell, 'Jojo too?'

'Yep, sorry babe!'

'When you off?'

'First light tomorrow'

They embraced, 'Keep safe,' she signed.

'You too! And good luck on the trial!'

'Piece a piss' she clicked with a smile.

'That's the stuff,' he stepped back and they saluted each other, fists to forehead.

He spun on his heel and walked briskly away, she watched him for a full minute as he strode purposefully, albeit a little stiffly, across the parade ground and disappeared behind a rocky outcrop at the far end. Pride filled her heart and a little tear her eye. Tough as she was, Shasa loved her brothers dearly, and like the other clan folk was not afraid to show her emotions.

Both their parents had been killed whilst she was young, her two older brothers with the help of numerous aunts and cousins had raised her. She was a late baby; her brothers had been seventeen and fifteen respectively when she was born.

The following morning, just after snow fall and as the first rays of the sun were chasing away the morning mist and shadows, the caves' turned out to bid the troop of twenty four riders and their mounts farewell.

Shasa, along with the other the school children and their teachers were in the crowd, ready to holler, whistle and cheer the troop out of the valley. She was delighted when both her brothers rode out of the group lifted her by her armpits, planted a simultaneous kiss on her cheeks. The show of affection was greeted by a loud roar, and the deposited Shasa ran back to her class, her cheeks as red as the rising sun.

## The Croninn Children

### The Northern Plains

The troop trotted from the valley onto the snow fields. As they hit the plains, they moved into battle A formation. The A was led by Tonne, with Bodan taking up his usual position twenty paces to the rear of the three commanders who rode between the two arms of the A. Even though no flight of Gargoyls would dare to attack the troop if they rode in war formation, it was military protocol to always ride the high plains in full battle readiness. It was the norm; neither patrol commander would allow slacking. Military discipline and procedures were at all times in force, and were most important when on the plains, Madder John had taught their ancestors well, his ways keeping them alive many countless times over the years.

Roza and Bodan although ranking officers in their own patrol had been assigned section corporal status, leading each of Pavel's two sections. Albie's patrol 2 i/c Emiloo and his sergeant Yevgeniy were in turn, section corporals in the second patrol. Emiloo holding first option for the troop sergeant's position were it to become vacant for any reason. As section corporals the four were responsible for discipline and good order, freeing the three leaders to look after and instigate the daily planning and overall command of the troop.

It took them four days to make their way to the far side of the mountain that had forever dominated their lives, and turn north towards the furthest border of their land. They pointed the A towards the blue, snow capped mountain range.

They were retracing the route their ancestors, the first clansmen, had taken in their flight from the hated enemy some two hundred years beforehand. A tall human called Madder John led the band west; hoping to meet up with their sister clan, but in desperation and absolute exhaustion, they had made their home in the valleys and caves which they discovered in the lee of the huge mountain peak.

Roza and Bodan swapped positions as the A formation began to leave the Cave Mountains behind. As they crossed the plains with the sun directly in front of them it would be Bodan's special talent that would give them the earliest warning of any pending Gargoy attack.

'One day we are gonna have to take the fight to them, find their stinkin' nest and root the bastards out!' Emilo signed over his shoulder to Jojo who was riding five paces to his right and behind him, in his favourite position at the end of the right arm of the A.

The troopers had sorted out positions for themselves whilst on the march, and had taken those positions which were closest to the ones they held in their own patrol formations and in which they felt most comfortable.

'That would be a great idea 'cept that we'd be climbing a sheer cliff of slippery black rock and they would be buzzin' round our ears picking us off at their leisure,' Jojo replied clicking, 'and we've no idea where in those cliffs and crags they'd be, it would take us a lifetime of searching for starters.'

'I know, but it galls me that they can just come and go as they like, whereas we've to stay on 'constant hot watch.'

'Yeah, true,' responded Jojo, 'maybe we better grow wings and learn to fly, hey Boss?' he clicked to his brother who was riding to his left.

'Summat ahead,' whistled Bodan.

Instant attention came over the entire patrol as the signed conversations that had been going on up and down the two arms of the A ended immediately and they all focused on the point rider.

Pavel nudged his Runner forward, his spare mount which had been following two paces behind him, joined Jojo's spare. Nodding to Albie as he moved, he made his way swiftly to a position alongside the corporal's left shoulder.

'Report,' he clicked.

‘Summat ahead Boss, not Gargoyls and not beasts.’

Pavel motioned Roza forward from the rear guard position, ‘What you got?’

‘Ten, Boss, in those rocks,’ came her silent response.

‘Keep vibing both of you,’ he raised his left arm above his head his hand clasped in a fist, opened his hand twice, and pointed his index finger at the rocks.

His statement was understood by all ‘Ten, ahead, full alert.’

A flurry of movement rippled up and down the two arms of the A as weapons were readied and battle positions were taken up.

If there was trouble it would be the highly accurate, deadly little bows which would be used first. Spears and spikes were for closer combat conditions. At the first signs of preparation their mounts flared their nostrils in anticipation. Mikhail and Ames moved quickly up their respective arms of the A, clicking to the spare mounts and then heading to the rear of the patrol where they fell in behind the two commanders. The spare mounts arranged themselves in a tight group, ready to spring forward if required.

Pavel had maintained his position at point, alongside Bodan. The troop moved forward at a walk, knowing that whatever was ahead would surely be aware of their presence. No attempt had been made to disguise their arrival, after all this was clan territory. It was the intruders who should take precautions.

They angled to the right in perfect formation, then switched to a trot, approaching the outcrop of stones which were twice as tall as a mounted trooper. The outcrops dotted the plains around them and were familiar features, usually offering a suitable location for an overnight camp. The outcrops would frequently have a stream of sweet fresh water somewhere amongst the black rocks, where they could fill their water sacks and stomachs. Although it was not warm enough to be uncomfortable, the days of hard, constant riding still required man and mount to eat and drink frequently.

Approaching the rocks the formation split into two, each arm moving out to encircle the area, the spare mounts halted and stood waiting silently, waiting and watching ready to

join battle if required. As one the warriors turned towards the centre, and with bows at the ready, and with arrows notched they moved forward.

‘Bunched, behind rock’ signalled Bodan, the information was quickly relayed round the troop. Roza confirmed the information from her side of the rocks, as one the troop moved through the outer rocks towards the target area.

As they moved inward they came across a group of filthy, frightened youngsters, none of whom were more than sixteen years old. They were dressed sparsely in roughly prepared hides which barely covered their skinny, almost skeletal, naked bodies; they carried no weapons other than four steer’s thigh bones which they used as clubs. It was obvious that they hadn’t eaten properly for weeks, and probably not at all for the last few days. The youngsters had been aware of the troop’s approach, and had formed some semblance of a defence square with the weakest in the centre. Four club wielders were at the corners.

‘Ho;’ signed Pavel, ‘what we got here then?’

One of the group obviously their leader clicked, ‘Just lookin’ for food Lord, just lookin’ for food, we ain’t doin’ no harm.’ His eyes were slanted more in the human style, but like their own his skin was variegated. The kids were clearly frightened, expecting that the next few moments were to be their last.

On seeing the approaching battle troop riding terrifying creatures, all well fed, well clothed and carrying formidable weapons, against which their four thigh bones would have effect. They had formed a protective square and waited for the end to come. Realising now that all hope was gone, some sank to the ground in absolute misery.

Had the last ten weeks of starvation? Brothers, sisters and close friends who had been taken or killed by the Gargoyls? The deadly cold, and ice of the snow fields counted for nothing?

But along with the dread, there was pride and not a little defiance in their slanted eyes. They had never seen such short but frightening men and women, even Roza the tallest member of the troop was at least half a head below the shortest of them in height.

The youngsters had variegated skins, and eyes of bright gold, their skin base colour was

a light tan. They had dark hair, and the males were without manes. The hunters were confused, for the stories told that the Chin had clear skins. The Chin were of all shades of skin, from the deepest black through to almost pure white. But no Chin had skins like their own, variegated, with stripes and blotches, lines and circles. These children's skins had markings of every colour that humans' could be, and like the hunters' not one of them was alike in their markings. These children could not be Chin; surely Chin were tall, more like Dippy Timmie.

None of the hunters had fought against Chin before. It had been at least thirty years since the last time the Clan had faced the Chin, and none of the reports from that time mentioned that they had variegated skins.

The children had never seen the like either, the trooper's round, almost circular eyes, the strange colourings in their close cropped hair, their grey variegated skins, with only black markings. The hunter's short stature too, was totally alien to them. But more surprising was that they had long forked tongues like their own which constantly flicked from between their split upper lips and the glimpses of the long, sharp canine teeth in both top and bottom jaws was something the youngsters did not have. That they shared a style of communication and the same language was a bonus.

Albie dismounted, he was father of two who were not much younger than the now kneeling group, he looked them over for a moment, and suddenly, showing an unheard of compassion, signed, 'Get them cleaned up, then fed and dressed. We'll set up camp here for the night. When they're cleaned I want to see that one,' he pointed to the youngster who had responded, then spun on his heel and preceded his mount away from the group of children, his nose wrinkling.

The Runners were not as polite as their riders, they snorted and stamped in an effort to clear the scent of the youngsters from their nostrils, Roza, Ames and Yevgeniy one of Albie's corporals led the bunch of youngsters to a large pool at the rear of the standing stones.

From their packs they extracted bars of soap made from animal fat and threw them at the group, 'When you's clean, you get to eat, 'n' that hair is gonna get cut, you could've Gargoyls living in that lot,' signed Ames.

Almost as one they shucked the filthy skins they were wearing and naked as the day they were born and with as much modesty, leapt into the freezing water of the pool.

With gasps and hoots they began to scrub the accumulated dirt from their skinny bodies. The water that flowed from the pool was black with filth.

Yevgeniy had disappeared when the group hopped into the water, but returned after a few minutes carrying spare clothing which she had scrounged from the generous troopers. The clothing would be wide in the shoulder, short in leg and arm, but better than nothing. The youngsters would have to do without footwear, for no one was prepared to part with their soft ankle boots or moccasins, none of which would have fit the children's large feet anyway, 'Cut up their old skins, they can stand on the bits and we'll tie them at the ankle, that should do till we can get them properly shod,' suggested Ames.

The old skins were thrown in with the youngsters who began scrubbing at the filthy hides until some semblance of cleanliness had been achieved. Then dripping wet, glowing pink, and shivering in the cold air, they lined up to receive their new clothes and wrapped the still wet pieces of skin around their feet. When dried, they would surely be warmer than bare feet, and serve them as boots.

Once they were clean, their hair cut to shoulder length, and dressed warmly, more warmly than they had been for as long as they could remember. They were escorted to the camp fires. The troopers had eaten, and stood around watching as the youngsters fell upon the meat and onions like ravenous Gargoyles.

Their clean clothes were soon streaked in fat and gravy, but at least it was clean fat and clean gravy, a few handfuls of water and the impervious leather clothing would be almost as clean as before the meal.

It was some hours later, sentries had been posted, fires were burning brightly and the flickering light illuminated the faces of the youngsters who were relishing the warmth of the fire and the pain of full bellies. Pavel and Albie moved into the light, the group of youngsters immediately assumed a kneeling position, their heads down, eyes looking at their knees.

'You, the leader, what's your name?' clicked Pavel.

'Xjang Lord' replied the boy who then stood, his head bowed.

Xjang answered all their questions with an open honesty, 'Where had they come from? What were they doing? Why were they in clan territory?' And a host of others including, 'how they came to be so far into Tirnano lands?'

The question on clan territory generated great surprise for the lad confessed that they had never heard of the clan, nor did they know that they had trespassed into clan lands.

The final question was the big one, had they seen any other troops, a large band of mounted warriors, mature soldiers.

'Ten nights ago we hid from just such a band, in fact when we first saw you we thought that it was them, and that they had found us.'

'Ten days ago? How far have you travelled since then?' snapped Albie impatiently.

'We only move at night Lord, to avoid the Gargoyls, but we usually cover about three to five clicks a night.'

Pavel did a quick mental calculation, 'That's about a hard day's ride Boss.'

Albie pondered for a moment, 'We need to check it out. In the morning we'll split back into our two patrols, my patrol will head directly back towards where the kids saw the troopers. Your patrol loop round 'n' see if you can cross any trail further along the line the kids were travelling. - If we make no contact we meet back here in six days time, if you see the Chin no heroics, just observe and then come back here, we need to report back to the Clan, not get killed.'

Pavel could see no reason to argue or add anything to the Troop Leader's suggestions and nodded his understanding, fisting his forehead he spun on his heel.

'If you find tracks on the trail, send a spare Runner to fetch us, wait for us to catch up. I mean it, no heroics,' Albie clicked to Pavel as he turned away.

'Affirmative,' clicked Pavel over his shoulder, 'no heroics,' the fingers of his other hand tightly crossed. He turned back to the troop commander.

‘Take half the kids with you, we’ll take the other half, if they get in the way just dump them, but they might come in handy, anyone who can survive out here the way they have deserves some respect,’ clicked Albie.

Pavel couldn’t help but agree; he responded with another clicked ‘Affirmative’ and returned to his own patrol to pass on the instructions, and to get them started on preparations for moving out at first light.

‘Boss says no heroics, so no fighting if we meet up with them,’ Pavel clicked to Jojo as they lay side by side looking up at the scudding clouds above them, the intermittent view of the moon was accompanied by the landscape being lit with its flickering pale light as it peeped occasionally from between the huge clouds on its way towards the horizon.

‘As if!’ responded the big man sarcastically. ‘By heck, those kids stunk,’ he clicked almost to himself, changing the subject.

‘Pretty much how we do on the return from a hunt,’ clicked Pavel.

‘Nah, never like that, they were covered in shite, smelt like people shite at that, must have been to pong that bad,’ he grunted, turned over, farted and like a true hunter was instantly asleep. But like the true warrior he was, he would be instantly awake and active at the slightest, out of the ordinary sound. Pavel listened to his brother’s regular breathing for a minute longer before giving in and accepting the comforting oblivion of sleep.

## Contact

Just before dawn, by the light of the dipping moon, and before the snows began to fall, they were mounted and mobile.

The most difficult part had been loading the five youngsters onto the mounts. Not one of them, no matter how much they were threatened, would mount and ride alone on the spare Runners. In the end they reluctantly agreed to ride behind a hunter, and were lifted up behind the five tallest riders in each patrol. The mounts found it amusing and snorted, swishing their long sinuous tails, slapping the unwary youngsters around the ears.

‘Stop that!’ commanded Roza, as the girl behind her took another stinging slap around the side of her face.

‘Enough of the messing, we got a job to do, all of us!’ her mount a lithe dappled mare, who was more than capable of galloping for hours on end with all five of the youngsters on her back, snorted in disgust but settled down as ordered.

The girl behind her was wide eyed as she witnessed the exchange between the tiny huntress and her huge mount.

They rode hard for most of the day, looking for signs of any passage of a large group, Roza as the stronger viber was in her usual position with Bodan as tail guard.

It was just after they had stopped at a rock outcrop to make camp for the evening, that one of the youngsters began clicking away to Xjang in an excited manner. Within moments the lad ran to Pavel who was tending his mounts. ‘Lord, Lord the other group is under attack.’

‘How do you know?’ demanded Pavel.

‘Winalto can speak with her brother who is in the other group, they are being

slaughtered by attackers, they are ambushed, not far from here in the next oasis to the east.'

Pavel looked across the plains to the east but by now the sun was dropping and the scene was flooded with red and green light; there was no way he could make out any distinguishing features.

'Are you absolutely sure?'

'Yes Lord, they speak to each other with their minds all the time.'

'Bring her here now!' Pavel's clicked command brought instant response for the young girl was within earshot and ran forward immediately; tears were streaming down her cheeks.

'Tell me what is happening!'

'We must help them Lord, they are not far, the attackers have long knives which cut people, my brother has been hurt, he is hiding behind a dead horse, and the Chin are killing everyone.'

Pavel considered for a moment then gave the command his entire patrol expected, 'Mount up! We ride!'

As one, they vaulted onto their steeds and taking up battle formation set off in the direction the girl indicated. It took them more than an hour's hard riding before Tonne held up her right hand. The troop halted immediately and closed around the scout.

'About three hundred paces, there are two sentries, with another two to their right, they are hidden in the grass, we will have to take them out before we can go any further.' She clicked.

'Bodan, Roza, you know what to do.'

'Sure Boss,' Roza replied, and they both passed care of their mounts to their colleagues. The moon was about to disappear behind a large bank of clouds and the scene was

flooded with a pale light; they waited until the last glimmer of the moon had disappeared, before melting into the grass.

Moving in absolute silence, the two guided by their viber senses came upon the first pair of sentries, a hand across the mouth and a knife across the throat were sufficient. The two were clad in thick clothing, the likes of which neither hunter had ever seen or felt before. The little girl was right, they carried long knives with blades at least an arm's length in size. The knives were honed to a sharpness which neither of the hunters could have imagined; as sharp as the best struck flint edge and certainly keener than the bone knives that they carried. Their own bone knives were more like spikes than knives in comparison. Taking up the new knives they slipped through the grass once more towards the second pair of guards.

The second set of sentries was dispatched in like manner. They had no notion of the silent death which crept to within a pace of their positions. Two more knives were added to the hunter's plunder.

The moon was beginning to make its presence known by the time the pair made their way back to the waiting patrol. Within moments the entire patrol crowded around the two, closely inspecting the long blades.

'If they all got these, we are going to have a real fight and none of it can be close quarter,' clicked Pavel quietly.

'In the next cloud over we move closer to the oasis and check out the odds, if there is a fight and it goes bad, Bodan you take your section and leg it back to the caves, we have to get at least one of these weapons back to show the Elders, it could be the end of the Clan if we have to fight against serious numbers armed with weapons like these.'

He continued, 'I think that a good plan would be to keep ourselves out of their reach, we leave the Runners here, the youngsters can stay with them, and we'll go on foot through the gap you have made. Bows and knives only.'

There was a shout and cries of alarm, 'Looks like the element of surprise has gone,' clicked Luie, 'time to party. They'll be streaming all over this place in a moment or two.'

'To war then, but keep away from these long knives, we use bows, knives only if you

have to. Section commanders take your posts, Luie you go with Bodan, I'll stick with Roza's section.'

By now the shouts had doubled in intensity as the second pair of bodies were found, Chin came streaming out of the oasis, some obviously straight from their bedrolls, for they were only half dressed, but they were all waving the sharp shiny long knives.

The first volley of arrows fired by Bodan's section took out six of them, before they could prepare or defend themselves five more fell to a salvo from Roza's side. The sections moved with discipline to new positions, and a few moments later another volley of arrows fell upon the now confused Chin warriors, downing another five. They were obviously not accustomed to being attacked.

With shouted commands their leaders restored some semblance of order, and they ran as one back to the safety of the oasis' rocks. Two of the hunters slipped through the grass and relieved the fallen warriors of their long knives, at the same time dispatching those who were not dead. There were enough knives now to equip all the patrol members. The hunters felt the weight of the weapons and with a few tentative swings began to work out how they could be used. It was not a pretty thought; these knives could cut a man in two.

'Now we're going to get serious, it's going to get real dark before snow and dawn, so we better make it good, I want to know numbers and where they are in the oasis. Bodan and Roza get down closer and vibe them out for me, the rest of you refill your quivers from the from the pack mounts, if you have to use the long knives, improvise, learn from them, but don't get yourself killed while you do so,' they all chuckled at his joke and then sped off to the mounts, moving like wraiths through the grass.

As they reached the Runners the young girl suddenly gave a moan and then a long keening wail. Xjang leapt at her and clasped his hand over her mouth, chopping off the sound.

'What's the matter with her?' clicked Weesia as she ran to the struggling pair.

Xjang released his grip on the girl's mouth and she sobbed as she signed the words, 'They have found him, they found him, my brother is dead, they have killed him,' she collapsed in a heap and with her eyes staring, began shaking and throwing herself about

moaning and wailing.

Weesia and Xjang both leapt on the girl to control her fit and to quieten the noise she was making. In a moment she had stopped struggling and lay still, eyes tightly shut and her limbs stiff, the only sign of life was the erratic raising and lowering of her thin bony chest as she quietly sucked in and exhaled each juddering breath.

## The Northern Plains

Weesia became aware of her almost as soon as she materialised, she looked up at the young human woman who stood not three paces from her, she was tall, with dark almost shoulder length hair, she was dressed simply in hide trousers and jacket with calf length boots, she carried no weapon that could be seen.

'Who are you?' she demanded, raising her new knife and pointing its sharp tip.

'My name is Mira; I have come in answer to the girl's cry for help.' She spoke in the human manner but was instantly understood. She looked at the girl for a long moment her eyes seemed misty in the bright moonlight.

"I grieve with you for your brother, little one," she said to the girl.

"She will be fine now, I must speak with Pavel, this foolishness must end now," her tone, one of obvious command, startled Weesia. She knew refusal would get her nowhere and turned, beckoning to Mira.

'Follow me, - how do you know his name?' she clicked suddenly after a pause, as she realised what Mira had said. They moved through the grass to where the patrol commander stood planning their next move with his 2 i/c.

Tonna appeared with her bow raised and an arrow notched, for she had vibed the stranger's presence as she had moved silently through the grass with Weesia.

Suddenly both Bodan and Tonna put their hands to their ears, and fell to the ground almost together. Instantly they jumped up, looked at each other for a moment and turned to Pavel, 'she's a friend Boss; she won't do us no harm unless we start it.' Bodan

clicked.

‘We got a fight on our hands already if you aint forgot,’ clicked Pavel, perturbed at his sergeant and corporal’s actions, turning to the young woman he signed brusquely, ‘So, what do you want, and why are you here?’

“Time enough for questions later,” said Mira, and turning, walked briskly out from behind their covering rock directly towards the oasis. Pavel made to stop her but Tonna stretched out an arm and caught him by the shoulder.

‘Let her go Boss,’ she clicked with an authority that surprised him; he froze and looked at her in askance. ‘She’ll be alright, don’t worry.’

They watched as the young woman strode purposely up to the ring of rocks, suddenly six Chin soldiers in full armour rushed at her brandishing their long knives. Expecting her to be there to parley, their intent had been to capture Mira and to extract as much information about the attacking force as they could.

As they came to within a matter of paces from her, they all grasped their heads, fell to the ground and lay still. Five of their long knives flew across the divide and stuck in the ground at a very perplexed Pavel’s feet. Mira had retained one for herself; she spent a moment or two turning it over and over in her hands obviously inspecting it closely.

She seemed oblivious of her whereabouts. The Chin were taking no further chances and a hail of arrows zinged from the rocks towards her, Pavel’s jaw fell even further when none of them seemed to even come near their intended target. A second flight quickly followed the first and miraculously these too missed by a long margin. The dark haired woman was no more than twenty paces from the Chin position, and should have resembled a very dead pincushion, for she was surely an easy target even in the flickering moonlight.

Suddenly she raised her hands above her head and disappeared.

Pavel ran forward to where the girl had been standing, his patrol, astounded at their leader’s impetuous action, rushed after him. Bodan and Tonna looked at each other again for a moment and walked after the others.

The others quickly caught up with their leader, and were preparing themselves for an attack, expecting any moment to be enveloped by a buzzing swarm of arrows.

They waited in the lee of the rocks, close to the entrance to the oasis ready for Pavel's command, whatever it was they would instantly comply.

Bodan and Tonna walked calmly past them straight into the oasis, 'C'mon' clicked Bodan.

The patrol as one stormed through the gap, following them.

Of the strange young woman there was no sign, they met no resistance, it seemed as though the oasis was deserted, and it was.

The patrol walked through the empty area where the Chin had set up their defences, not a word was spoken, they were totally dumbstruck.

Pavel found his senses first, 'What the heck is going on?' he clicked. 'Fan out, secure the area, and report back ASAP.' The patrol fanned out, long knives held in front of them in expectation of a sudden attack.

'No need to worry Boss, they all gone.'

Pavel swung towards Bodan. 'Explain yourself sergeant,' he demanded, his nerves and temper shot to pieces.

Before Bodan could respond, the remainder of the patrol began to return.

'Ain't no one here no more Boss,' clicked Ames, the first to return.

'I don't understand' began Pavel.

'They were taken away by Mira, Boss, I'll explain it all to you soon, but there's a couple things I need to get sorted in my head.'

They searched the oasis for signs of life but there were none, the attackers and the young woman had vanished, however everything that they had with them had seemed to have been abandoned. Armour, bows, arrows and spears tipped with the same substance as the knives, and piles of other equipment such as packs with spare clothing. There were sets of thick, leather jackets which looked as though they could easily resist an arrow, there were helmets made from the same material, boots and other items were strewn all around the empty space.

The patrol found a number of horses which were tethered in another round of stones; they were unlike their proud plain's Runners but looked capable of courage and endurance.

They were half as tall as the Runners, but were almost as broad across the withers; they stood and watched the troopers with gentle but knowing eyes.

In another enclosed space they came across the bodies of what remained of Albie's patrol, they had been butchered and hacked in a manner that sickened even the hardest amongst them. There were a number of gagging noises and contents of not a few stomachs ended up being deposited amongst the rocks.

Those who threw up in the surrounding rocks found the bodies of the young plains children hacked to pieces with no regard for age or sex. The hatred they felt for the Chin was never greater than at that moment.

'We'll bury them in the morning!' clicked Pavel his face and eyes as hard as stone.

'It's morning now Boss,' Bodan remarked, and almost on cue the snow began to fall.

'Back to the main circle, we make camp, we need a rest then it's back to the caves as fast as we can, we'll take those horses with.'

'Boss!' clicked Mikhail, running up, 'I found eight of Albie's troops' Runners. They seem OK, a bit anxious, four of them have been killed, and they are mourning the deaths of all their riders as well.'

'OK, get them to come and join with ours, that should make them feel a bit better, take

those horses and put them with the Runners too, see how they get on. Make sure they don't get eaten though.' He turned to Weesia;

'Get a fire going ASAP girl, we need vitals' like yesterday, get those little devils to help you, earn their keep!' he pointed at Xjang and his fellows.

To the rest he clicked; 'We're pulling out at last light, gives us the rest of today to get this place cleaned up, last thing we want is a load of Vamps coming down on us like a rock fall. Luie get a couple of the lads and make a start on digging a trench to put what's left of those poor sods in. I suppose we better bury the enemy dead as well.'

'OK, Boss, will do,' responded his 2 i/c.

It took almost all of the day to complete all the tasks necessary to set the oasis back to some semblance of normality, all the bodies, friend and foe alike were buried with the due dignity accorded to comrades fallen in battle.

Pavel decided to use the Chin horses as pack animals to carry the equipment which had been left strewn around the oasis.

The five Runners and the small herd of more than forty of the Chin horses' were standing in a large enclosure with our own 'plains Runners', the Runners obviously had much information to impart to each other, for had immediately formed a loose circle with heads inwards, with much snorting, rumbling and stamping of feet they remained so for almost an hour.

'Council of War,' joked Mikhail, watching the Runners, for he had never seen the like.

'Don't josh lad, that's just what it is,' signed Anabee who had come up behind him unnoticed. Mikhail blushed to his toes at the close proximity of the object of his undying love. Anabee smiled and turning him to her pulled him close in a hug and kissed his cheek.

'You done well today, I've been watching you.'

Mikhail added another shade of red to his already bright complexion.

'We'll get together when we're back at the cave,' she signed with a cheeky smile, and spinning lightly on her toes walked away from the dumbstruck young trooper, shaking her ass with every step.

It was later that evening when Bodan sought out Pavel and Tonna. After a moments' talking in hushed voices they called a patrol meeting. The troopers sat around the fire, the young Plains children amongst them. The dried grasses crackled and smoked, but gave off a pleasant heat and smell.

Bodan began; 'Mira has just spoken to me, she took the Chin soldiers and dropped them in the middle of their part of the plains, well back inside their own lands. There were about twenty of them left in here. She says she will visit with us at the cave, when we have returned.'

The questions came thick and fast at that point, 'Who is she?' from Tonna.

'She is a companion of 'The Watchers'- she is the Purple Queen's rider.'

'I thought those old scribbling's of 'Mad John's were just a load of old cods,' clicked Weesia.

'No, seems they're true, every one of them, crazy as it sounds, maybe old Mad John wasn't so mad after all,' said Tonna, 'Mira has the ability to speak mind to mind, she can also move herself from one place to another in an instant, using the power of her mind, and can carry items, such as the Chin warriors with her.'

'How do you both know this?' asked Ames.

'Because she has told us,' signed Bodan, 'she has spoken to Tonna and I using her mind.'

Although some of the patrol was still sceptical, they had the proof of the young twins who spoke mind to mind, without whom they would surely have fallen to the same fate as the ElPee's. Further proof had been Mira's incredible ability to tolerate without injury an attack that would have had all of them dead, and the final disappearance of the young woman and the entire remnants of the Chin troop.

They picked up as many of the spent arrows they could find, the Chin bows and arrows were made from a material of which they had no knowledge, the bows were much longer than their own horn crafted items, and had a range of easily twice as far with the arrows they retrieved. Within days they had achieved accuracy similar to that which they held with their own weapons, but at twice the distance.

It took them six days to return to the foothills, six days of hard riding. Each evening they practiced with the new weapons, the sound of blade against blade ringing out across the plains. There were a number of small nicks and cuts acquired in the sparring bouts as they gained proficiency, along with a profound respect for the sharp new weapon.

Geordie suggested that the long knives could be sharpened in the same way as their own bone knives were, by rubbing them with a stone, but all this did was to score the shiny surface with scratches and did nothing to improve the sparring induced dull edges.

‘It must have been a problem for them too,’ signed Jojo, ‘Any chance we can go through their bags Boss? See if they have anything that fits the bill.’

‘Go ahead, but make sure you pack them tight and well, we will be in the caves day after tomorrow, I don’t want no sloppiness, or a poor show, on our return.’

Jojo and Geordie set to, carefully unpacking and then repacking the hide satchels, marvelling at some of the items within, trying to work out usage and function, however in each of the sacks they found a hand sized block of hard stone which was wrapped in a piece of soft skin. Unwrapping the skin, revealed marks and scratches, which were clearly made by the long knives.

Bodan took one and turned it over in his hands a couple of times before squatting cross-legged on the ground with his knife across his knees, instinctively he spat on the stone, and began to run it along the blade, after a few passes he inspected the edge, thumbing it gently.

‘Yep, you got it JoJo, this is how they do it,’ he spat on the stone again to lubricate it and continued to sharpen his blade.

The blocks were passed out amongst the troopers and a quiet hour was spent learning the skills of sharpening and honing the edges of the sharp knives, if anything they were

now sharper and brighter than they had been before.

Slashing at the grass to test the edges didn't even require them to hold the top of the plant, as they would normally do with their bone knives, the blades cut cleanly through anything in their path.

'Sure glad we didn't have to face these in a fight,' signed Mikhail.

'Yeah, but Albie's patrol did, and we might have to in the future,' Jojo clicked, they all considered the sobering thought, the memory of the hacked and bloody bodies that they had buried only six days previously still poignant and sharp in their memories.

'I wonder how they make these knives,' it was Tonna who posed the question.

'Mira might know, its one of the questions I want to ask her, when or if we ever see her again,' signed Pavel.

'We will' clicked Bodan with conviction.

'We'll see, I'm still not sure,' signed Pavel, 'anyway lets get some kip, early start tomorrow, we'll soon be back in the foothills.'

They all brightened, the foothills were their country, their domain. Each of them knew the valleys, the rivers and the meadows of thick, shoulder high grasses like the backs of their hands. They also knew that the threat from the Vamps would increase as they approached the mountains where the horrors had their lairs.

Having to share the mountains with the Vamps was their abiding hate, they all prayed for the day when they could rid the skies of the filthy, evil beasts. The Vamps were obviously of the same mind about them for no love was lost between the two species and the Brosynans' knew that there would never be peace between them. The hatred on both sides ran too deep.

## The Vamp Attack

### The Northern Plains

They had not been riding for long; the sun had burnt off the early morning mists, the snow melting from under their mount's feet. All was calm when Bodan's hoot came, followed by his whistled warning as they spun round to see.

'Vamps. Rear. High. Large numbers. Coming fast!'

The patrol wheeled into their defensive positions, the spare mounts herded the pack horses swiftly into the middle of the loose circle, the young Plains children quickly dropped to ground with spears and knives, ready to defend themselves and the horses if necessary. Spears were loosened and long knives were drawn from the hide scabbards that the Chin had abandoned. The spare Runners took up fighting positions alongside their mounted kin.

The first wave of Vamps came straight out of the sun.

Anabee had been on the left of the diamond shape, she waited, anticipating their swoop. With a single blow she decapitated the leading Vamp, taking its head clean off, then swinging her blade double handed in a return arc she sliced the following Vamp across its stomach spilling the contents of its abdomen across the ground and all around her, it fell screeching in pain. Ignoring it, she was in time to meet the third Vamp with the point of her long knife. It drove deep into the creature's chest as it crashed into her, knocking her from her steed. Her Runner immediately spun around and stamped on the Vamp's head, its skull cracked and it lay still.

Anabee pulled her knife from the creature; she had to use her foot on its chest to give leverage, for the blade had sunk deep.

Immediately ready for further fight, she could see the rest of the patrol had been as successful as she, dead or mortally wounded Vamps lay about them. The remainder of the flight had backed off; over twenty of their number on the ground. The noise of those in the air, and the cries the live monster's on the ground were creating, as they screamed and jabbered at each other, was ear splitting. Jojo and Bodan, ran around the grounded beasts which they swiftly silenced, those in the air still screeching in uncontrolled anger, at the hunter's actions. The Vamps were circling around the hunters, unable to understand how they had been beaten when they were so obviously had a massive numbers' advantage.

Pavel tallied quickly; there were still at least thirty of the creatures flapping above them at a height of about fifty paces, outside normal accurate bow range or spear throw.

'To bow, let's try out these new weapons.' He signed over his head.

The twelve troopers loosed their new bows and each notched one of the Chin arrows.

'Fire at will!' came Pavel's whistled command.

Their arrows flew at the fluttering Vamps. Five fell dead, and four others fell to the ground screaming in pain. Three other Vamps had been hit, but not badly enough to cause them an inability to remain aloft. Suddenly the whole flight broke off their attack and wheeled around the hunters screeching and calling in anger and frustration, a stupid move for three more of their number were hit by the next salvo and fell to the ground, another took an arrow in the rear leg but managed to stay in the air.

With much jabbering and flapping of leathery wings the whole flock took off towards Benachee's peak. Their erratic flying style would have made them almost amusing to watch if they had not been so evil. Bodan dispatched two of the troopers to retrieve the spent arrows.

Some of the patrol had been slightly injured in the attack; Weesia, Tonne and Ames were quickly engaged in cleaning and patching up scratches, cuts and bruises. Pavel and Jojo walked through the Vamps, checking those that had fallen to the arrows for signs of life, and dispatching those that even twitched with a thrust to the throat.

'Glad we had these,' clicked Pavel, wiping dark blood from his blade across a dead

creature's back, 'that could have been real nasty and no mistake.'

'Did you see the kids? I saw them get at least two of the blighters, wow! can they fight, I saw them using just fists and feet, we gotta learn from them, they were amazing. I was so caught up watching them, I almost got jumped myself. If it hadn't been for the girl who lost her brother, hooting, I could easily have been Vamp meat.'

Luie and his partner the little fighting dynamo Tonne stood to one side of the group, he was hugging her tightly, they locked tongues; 'You Okay hun?'

'Yup, six confirms to add to my tally.'

'Aint you got no feelings?'

'Not where those bastards are concerned,' she responded. Tonne had more reason than most to hate the Vamps, her mother and younger sister had been carried off in front of her eyes when she was ten years old. The memory was as clear to her as though it had happened just yesterday, she could still hear their screams at night as she lay in her bedroll.

'Nope,' she signed, 'Not until the last stinking one of them is rotting in the ground.'

They left the Vamps where they lay, a grim reminder to their fellows that the Tirnano had passed this way.

The next time they met, the Vamps would probably have revised their method of attack, the sharp blades and long distance arrows would figure highly. Maybe they would realise they were beaten and sue for peace, thought Pavel to himself, 'Fat Chance!' he clicked aloud, to the surprise of his younger brother and his 2 i/c who were riding either side him.

'Whassup?' whistled Jojo coming instantly awake; he had been dozing.

'You were dreaming' signed Luie.

'It's cold.' Jojo flipped up his hood, and slipped his hands into the mittens hanging from

his wrists,

They rode on in silence; just two hours from the valley entrance.

It had been just twenty days since they left.

Pavel was concerned at how the elders would view the loss of the entire ElPee patrol, the loss of twelve men and women, especially a fully armed and in war mode patrol was unprecedented in the history of the clans. There would be some serious weeping and wailing in the caves tonight. Even his news of the retribution they had inflicted on the Chin (with Mira's help) and the defeat of the Gargoyls would be little consolation. The terrible blades were still a mystery to him, how had they been manufactured? How were they crafted? He knew that the elders would ask him those and many other questions, of which he had no knowledge of the answers, all he knew was that he had forty fearsome blades and a few hundred arrows to show for the loss of twelve fine troopers.

How could they stand against a full scale attack by hundreds of Chin armed with weapons as horrendous as the shiny long knives.

'If they can make them, we can anall' signed Luie, his clicking breaking into Pavel's reverie.

'From what?' interjected Ames.

'From some sort of rock, the stuff's got out by heating it until it melts, then while it's still hot it's beaten into shape,' Bodan whistled.

'How do you know?' demanded Pavel.

'Mira told me, she says we can do it and she will help.'

'Why'd she want to help us?'

'I don't know but we'll find out soon enough, she is returning in five days time.'

The other troopers had been staring at Bodan, none of them had known him string together more than five words; to give a full speech with explanations as he had just done was totally unheard of.

Their mounts walked on in silence, each of the troopers deep in thought. This was not going to be a triumphant return like their last one. This return was going to be a sober, full military affair.

Riding towards them alone, from the mouth of the valley, mounted on her massive charger was Lord Holbie, they could just make out the young, gate and cliff top protectors, standing soberly watching as the lone clan elder walked her once mighty steed through the grass which just reached her dangling feet. She stopped and waited as they approached her. The A shaped formation was immaculate in its exactness; the horses too were in perfect step, each of their hooves striking the ground in faultless harmony. The Chin mounts taking their cue from the Runners had joined in the regular stamping march as the patrol approached the clan leader. The Tirnano rode with their lances at the present, points upright at a ninety degree angle to the ground. Even the five youngsters, who were now clinging to the backs of horses, understood the severity of the occasion and sat straight and respectful.

The patrol came to an instant halt without a single command; Pavel broke ranks and moved forward to the Elder, he fisted his forehead, holding the salute until Lord Holbie responded with her own acknowledgment, which she did after a moment's pause.

'Well met Patrol Leader Pavel,' she whistled, 'Come, ride and report.' She spun her huge Runner with a gentle knee movement, and with Pavel alongside rode swiftly off towards the valley entrance.

Luie assumed charge.

'Walk on' was his only command, the patrol moved forward in perfect battle formation, they walked slowly as befit the occasion. Twelve of their colleagues had died, and they were the bearers of sad news.

Their entrance to the valley was lined by the entire clan who had fallen in to watch them pass, no riotous welcome this, they rode through silent ranks up to the cave entrance, the plains Runners and the Chin mounts keeping perfect step the entire way.

'Dismount' clicked Luie quietly, and as one they swung their left legs across their mount's shoulders, and assumed the position of attention alongside the perfectly still Runners.

'Unpack those horses and get them fed, watered and corralled, leave all the Chin equipment just inside the cave mouth. You may retain one knife, a bow and twenty of the arrows, all others must be placed in the pile,' commanded Pavel, who had just appeared, with the entire Clan Council standing alongside him.

'Bodan and Roza, when you have seen to the captured horses report back to me, you will be attending the Clan Council. Blue you are released from your vow, you and your brothers and sisters have our deepest thanks.'

Mikhail stood alongside his mare watching Pavel's Runner Blue Lightning, he swallowed hard. The massive beast looked at him, gave a huff and walked over to join Mikhail's own steed, throwing a deliberately missed nip at Mikhail's shoulder as he passed.

The watching troopers grinned, Pavel's steed named Blue for short, took no nonsense from hunter, runner or beast, and he was the undisputed leader of a large herd, coverer of a serious number of mares. If his rider wasn't into covering as many females as he possibly could, his mount more than made up for it and took no truck from any other stallions as he conducted his enjoyable activity. There were a large number of blue or grey Runners, colts and foals, around the valleys these days and Blue was intent on increasing their number whenever he had the opportunity. Mikhail's mare was without doubt his next chosen consort.

The Clan did not keep the plains Runners, the plains Runners would come when they were required by the clan, when the need was over the plains Runners would return to the wide open grass savannas.

If a call went out the Runners would respond with sufficient numbers for whatever adventure or task, not as slaves or servants but as partners. The Plains Runners were proud beasts, with numerous herds, each one easily numbering a hundred beasts. They were distantly related to the much larger orange coloured, flying Runners of the far off mountains, although unlike the mountain Runners, the plains Runners were without wings.

There was a strong bond between the Clan and their mounts. When the Runners arrived they would assemble and choose their riders from the presented troopers. No one could figure out how the Runners supplied the exact numbers required nor how they knew when they were wanted. All that was required to call the Runners was for an Clan Elder to stand at the cave mouth and whistle three times.

There was a commotion from behind the Elders, at that moment a tall, white skinned human ran forward, no one took much notice as he began to vocalise in the human fashion; "Samma co manda, eiffa quish il a tash wo missa pulla qua lo ma, lo lo domma samma co manda, shammo dim anno lo la ponda qesh." He fell to the ground in a faint as he shouted the last word.

The clans were used to 'Dippie Timmie' as he was known, from the day he was discovered as a lost child of three or four years old, wandering alone at the mouth of the clan valleys. He had only ever spoken the stream of gibberish, none of his words understood by any member of the caves. He however understood and could communicate using whistle, sign or click. With a bow and arrow he took a lot of beating. He had never joined one of the hunting teams, showing no desire, although he was a permanent member of the hill top patrols and had an impressive thirty four kills to his tally. In times of excitement he would blurt out the exact same sequence of incomprehensible sounds, after many years, the hunters and troopers took no notice, but not so one of the new arrivals, it was the young girl who had lost her twin.

'From far away will come the Purple Queen and her Rider, she will rend the heavens from top to bottom, she will join with the Mighty Rider of the Red and together they will open the stars for the prisoners to be released!' she clicked in a manner that seemed to carry all around the valley.

Tonne spun on the girl, 'Quiet girl, have respect for the Elders!'

'That's what he has just said,' she replied, her face scrunched up, she was almost in tears.

'You can understand him?'

'Of course --- he is a prophet, chosen of the gods, what he has given out, is about to happen, and it will be soon.'

‘What does it mean child?’ it was Lord Holbie, who quickly came to the girl’s side.

The young plains girl fell to her knees, bowed low, her forehead touched the ground before she straightened up and signed quite simply, ‘I know not, Lady, just that is what he said, what it means I have no idea.’

Lord Holbie stood for a moment in thought, then turned and ascended quickly up to the cave mouth, and with the rest of the Clan Elders disappeared into the gloomy interior.

## A Demonstration and a Promotion

The Northern Plains,

Clan Caves.

That evening, Bodan, Roza and Pavel gave their report to the council, each member had an opportunity to examine the long knives and the two troopers gave an exhibition of fighting with the weapons that thrilled the blood of those watching. Since Mira had partially opened the two hunter's minds, they were acutely aware of each other's intentions and could block and parry any thrust or slash that the other instigated. The cave rang with the sound of the two long knives as they clashed. The two sparred for at least ten minutes with neither gaining the upper hand, the speed of their battle, the flashing of the blades and their nimble footwork was amazing to behold and almost too fast to follow.

'I have never seen the like in all my years,' enthused one of the Elders.

'Neither have I' clicked Lord Holbie, 'There is not one warrior in the clan who could stand against either of these two, and you say that all of your patrol has been practicing this art?'

'Yes Lord, but none of them can match this pair; I can't be sure why they have progressed so well, maybe they are just naturals.'

The couple just looked at each other and smiled, they knew, but Mira had suggested caution and they had complied by keeping their newly discovered abilities to themselves. The two then gave a demonstration of the cutting and stabbing capabilities of the weapons which left the Elders in even greater awe.

'You say the entire Chin patrol was armed with these knives, but could they fight like these two?'

'We have no idea my Lord,' said Pavel, 'we did not engage directly with the enemy,' he went on to describe the events from when the young plains girl had first given her cry of alarm, the council interjecting with questions, Lord Holbie seemed especially interested in the mental connection the young girl had with her brother. Most of the time Pavel responded, although when they reached the point at which Mira had intervened, the questions were answered by Bodan who seemed to have a remarkable knowledge of the young woman's origin and intentions.

'She will be with us in five days time,' he concluded.

After a great deal of questions the council seemed satisfied that all had been reported to them. 'Thank you all, Patrol Sergeant Bodan and Patrol Corporal Roza you may dismiss, Patrol Leader Pavel we require to talk further with you.'

Bodan and Roza sprang to attention and fisted their foreheads in unison, the action would have given their drill instructors immense pleasure; it was so crisp and perfect.

When the two left the enclosure, Lord Holbie and the other members sat in a circle on the mats, they motioned for Pavel to join them; he sat cross legged in a gap that had been left for him.

'In a meeting this afternoon, after your initial report, we the supreme council of Clan McAllister who are the representatives of all the clan caves have decided that we will assemble a company which will be dedicated solely to patrolling our immediate borders and will be available to provide a fighting force that can face any threat which the Clan caves could be faced with, from Vamps to Chin and back again. You Patrol Leader Pavel are to be promoted to Company Commander Rank; you will also be given free choice from all the caves to make up your company numbers.'

Pavel could not believe his eyes.

'All of your company will be classed as fighting soldiers, you will be relieved of all hunting duties, so make your choices well," she concluded, "you will be our first line of defence or attack, I have asked Lord Euston to make a call to the Runners for fifty

volunteer mounts, we expect them to arrive around noon tomorrow by then I want you to have at least the officers and NCOs' of the company picked and ready to be joined with their mounts. Those of your patrol who wish to retain their mounts may do so if the Runners are in agreement.'

Pavel's head was beginning to reel with the overload of information and excitement.

'Return in the morning Company Commander Pavel,' she clicked dismissing him.

Pavel fisted a smart salute and left the chamber, almost at a run he made his way to where Bodan, Tonne, Jojo, and Luie were waiting at his family hearth drinking chai. Shasa was in attendance and had a number of roasts at various levels of readiness on spits over the glowing embers of the family fire. The other members of his patrol were not far away and as he approached they left their own hearths and quickly took up position with the others. They waited silently for him to give a report on the council meeting. Pavel embraced Shasa who had been on hillside duty when they returned; he had not had an opportunity to see her. 'Congrats on your trial babe!' he clicked.

Pavel then relayed the elder's instructions; there were gasps of surprise, followed by looks of amazement, when Pavel Promoted Luie to Company 2 i/c with Bodan and Roza to Troop Leaders, Radaka, Tonne, Gordio and Jojo were elevated to Company Corporals in charge of individual patrols. 'Weesia you and Ames are promoted to Sergeant Rank responsible for Admin and Medic duties, Mikhail and Anabee are Corporals, you too will be in Admin and Medic sections.'

There were big smiles from all members of the patrol, Pavel had chosen his deputies wisely, slotting them into the exact positions they would have chosen for themselves, and they were all well pleased with their new ranks and positions.

'We start our new jobs as of first light, Runners will be called, you can ask your existing mounts if they wanna stay or let the new Runners choose who they wish to partner.'

'Can we get Xjang to teach us that fighting technique that the youngsters were using against the Vamps? It would be most useful in close quarter fighting.'

'Good point' clicked Pavel to Luie who had posed the question, 'we can set up a schedule for him to teach all members of the company, talking about that it will be up to

you Patrol Leaders and your Corporals to choose the remaining members of your Patrols, Luie and I will fill in the remaining Officer and NCO positions. There will be seven members in each of the four patrols, Ames get yourself two more troopers to add to your admin group, we have free rein to include any member of the clans from any of the caves if they are prepared to volunteer.

'If Xjang wishes to join us as a rookie, then we can schedule him in to teach the Cung fighting while we are on patrol, rather than having to spend more time in camp than is necessary.'

'Good idea, Boss,' clicked Luie.

'When can we start choosing our teams Boss?' asked Bodan.

'Straight away, there are more'n four hundred and twenty fighting hunters in the caves, we'll be needing some of their finest men and women, some Patrol leaders are going to get a bit hissy, mind you there's also a great group of eighteen year olds waiting in the wings, it might be a good idea to check out some of them, but remember Radaka, we need some experience too.'

They all laughed at the joke, even Radaka, for she had never made a secret of her preferences.

'Right lets get some kip, we'll make a start in the morning.'

The Patrol as one sprang to attention and saluted their new Company Commander, then split up and headed for their own home hearths, the five young plains children had been adopted into families, apart from Xjang, they all seemed a little bewildered by the happenings and their new surroundings.

After their departure, Pavel, Jojo and Shasa finally had an opportunity to catch up and told their stories over their meal and then well into the night. Bodan and Roza disappeared together.

The fire had bedded down to glowing embers, Jojo stoked it up and banked it for the night with damp peat cakes; it would be just right by the time the morning came. After a

trip to 'the pits' to relieve themselves, they retired to their bedrolls. All around the cave torches were being extinguished or replaced, families were turning in all around them.

They conversed quietly for a while, Shasa told them about her trial, how it had been straight forward, she had killed a young heifer on her first day, which had sustained her over the six nights; of the Vamps she had seen neither sight nor sound. On return to the valley she discovered that all but one of her fellow trainees, a boy called Finn, had returned unscathed. It was strange, almost as though the Vamps had been occupied elsewhere.

'Wish she were three years older,' signed Pavel to Jojo, 'I'd have her in the company quick sticks.'

'You keeping Xjang, and he isn't much older, surely you can make an exception.'

'We'll see, if we havin' probs making up numbers, then it's a goer.'

'Let's give her a try out tomorra.'

'K you convinced me.'

Shasa who was still awake listened to the quietly clicked exchange between her brothers, excitement filled her every fibre, so much so that it set her thoughts racing, a full trooper at fifteen, it had never been heard of before, she lay awake for almost an hour, unable to sleep until she could lay there no longer. Her brothers were snoring in their bedrolls; she slipped from hers, pulled on her jerkin and pants, slipped her feet into her moccasins and crept from the family area. Little did she know that at the first sound of movement, both brothers were awake and listening. After she had walked quietly towards the cave mouth, Jojo clicked to Pavel, 'She can't sleep, too excited, maybe we better go walkabout too?'

Pavel clicked something incoherently and turned over, within moments he was asleep.

'Good plan,' Jojo was asleep himself a few moments later.

As Shasa made her way past the hearths a figure detached itself from the darkness and

followed her. Immediately aware of the presence she continued on her way unperturbed, she knew that a single hoot from her would bring the entire cave awake; she had no fear for this was her clan cave, her safe place.

She approached the entrance sentry and exchanged greetings, surprised that her follower held back but still at ease, she made her way towards 'the pits.'

On her return she came face to face with him. By the light of the moon she recognised the young plains lad who had been with the Tirnano, he was not much older than her, but was taller and was as thin as a gnawed rib bone.

'If you're lookin' for 'the pit' it's over there,' she gestured towards the screened off latrine area.

'No, I wish to commune with you.'

'Oh, what?'

'You are the sister of Lord Pavel and Lord Jojo, no?'

'Yep, why?' she smiled at the prefixes she had given her brothers, made them sound like Elders, she imagined them all old and official, Nah Never!

'I am Xjang.'

'I am Shasa,' she clicked before fisting her forehead. So this skinny runt was the lad who had featured in her brother's reports, this tall streak of nothing was going to be in the company, and most of all was going to teach everyone to fight? She was so surprised that all she could click was; 'So you are Xjang?'

'Yes mistress Shasa, I want to ask a most important question of you.'

'Go for it.'

'Excuse? Oh yes, go for it, continue, Yes, I wish to ask Lord Pavel if I can begin to train to

be soldier, I would hate for just to be hanging around being looked after by other people. Do you think it would be allowed?’ he finished in an embarrassed rush.

‘Wait till the morning mister; you got one big surprise coming.’

‘Thank you mistress Shasa,’ he said and turning made to walk back into the cave.

‘Hold up, I’ll walk with you.’

Together they made their way silently along the central pathway between the home hearths. When they reached Weesia’s family hearth, Xjang peeled off with a quiet ‘Good Night.’

Shasa responded, and within moments was slipping through the hanging skins into her sleep space. Stripping off her outer clothes she snuggled down into her sleep skins, and was soon ‘out like a light’.

The morning was like all those that had ever preceded it, cold, misty and damp, but it would soon warm up as the sun rose.

The two brothers and their younger sister had slices of cold roast beef, flat bread made from ground dried tubers and hot chai, made from an infusion of the dried purple flowers and half filled with milk from their domesticated cattle. It was a refreshing drink and the meal was more than sufficient to set them up until their evening meal. Pavel and Jojo left their young sister to her own devices; she said that she wanted to get to know Xjang a little better, having passed on his request. Pavel laughed and Jojo remarked, ‘Beware what you wish for, it may come and bite you on the bum.’

‘Can I tell him he’s in?’

‘Why not, the sooner he joins the company, the quicker he’ll settle in,’ signed Pavel, ‘by the way I want you in Weesia’s section too, you can learn from the cooking fire upwards,’ at Shasa’s look of anguish he continued, ‘I suppose you thought that at fifteen you were going to walk straight into full trooper status? You gonna have to learn in situ girl, believe you me, you gonna find it as hard as the rest, this aint gonna be a stroll for any of us.’

‘Yes Boss,’ she fisted her forehead in a mock effort at dignity and military correctness. For all his straight lace talk she knew she could twist her brothers round her little fingers and had done since she was tiny.

Pavel grinned at her, ‘Go on scoot, muster here after midday.’

Shasa ran across to Weesia’s hearth but was disappointed when the tough trooper now promoted to Company Cook Sergeant, decided to set the two of them tasks which would occupy them in different directions. She had already briefed Xjang, who with a quick nod at Shasa as she arrived, left with Ames to collect fresh grass heads and leaves which would be bound round wounds with thin strips of soft hide. The grass was truly used for just about everything.

‘Nip to the top end of the valley, I noticed that there was a goodly crop of dried grass up there, take a large pack, I want it filled, we’ll make a fine mess of chai from it.’

Shasa picked up the big pack, slung one of the straps over her shoulder and after a quick detour to her sleep space, picked up her bow and a quiver of arrows, she set off at a swift walk towards the valley head.

‘Where you off to?’ clicked one of her year colleagues as she trotted past, ‘Elder gave a call this morning early, Runners gonna be here soon, you wanna wait for them?’

‘Nope got a job to do, with a bit a luck I’ll be back before they arrive.’

Luci her friend since childhood couldn’t believe her eyes, Shasa not interested in the Runners, especially a bunch of new arrivals.

‘Wont it wait?’

‘I’ll be back soon, won’t take too long, keep me a spot on the ‘skinny rock’, they won’t be here for at least an hour or so.’

“K will do.’

It was less than an hour later that Shasa with a bulging pack of grass heads, the flowers

wide open and dried, perfect for chai, climbed up on the 'skinny rock' and plonked herself down beside Luci.

'Nothing yet,' Luci sat, her hand shielding her eyes against the sun's glare, peering off into the distance outside the valley entrance. 'Wait, what's that?'

A movement on the horizon was the first sign, in moments it became more noticeable, in less than five minutes the Runners could be clearly seen, it was a breathtaking sight, the magnificent beasts were approaching at full gallop. All around the valleys their fellows, who were moving about freely, began to trumpet and call. The sound was exhilarating to the clan folk and those who were not already out watching and waiting spilled out of the caves to view the spectacle, joining in with hooting calls.

Never in living memory had so many Runners been called, never before had over fifty Runners responded. Shasa tried a quick head count as soon as she was able, she reached thirty eight as they approached her position, but there were many more following, the herd thundered past her in a cloud of dust. Suddenly one peeled off and galloped directly towards her. It was a little bay mare of at least twenty five hands. She was beautiful, her eyes were as wild as her long mane, she was no more than five years old, quite young to be responding to a call. The beautiful creature slid to a halt at the foot of 'the skinny' rock, and looked straight into Shasa's eyes.

Dumbfounded Shasa clicked 'Me?'

The mare tossed her head and stamped her right rear foot, once more she looked straight at Shasa.

Unable to resist any longer, Shasa slung the pack at the open mouthed Luci, 'Take it to Weesia,' she signed, and slid down the skinny rock to the ground, running the few steps she leapt up onto the mare's warm and sweaty back. Immediately the Runner spun and launched into a full gallop after the herd, catching the tail-enders in moments.

## Part 4

### Lost in a strange land

#### Lost

### The Northern Plains

As quickly as it fell, so the mist dispersed, she found herself in the open, the forest had disappeared, looking all around her, she could see no sign of it.

The sun was sinking fast, the sky a riot of colour; the unnaturally violent display didn't register through her confusion. Mira began to panic, she was lost and she knew she could be anywhere. Without another option she decided to follow the sun as it set.

With startling rapidity the sun disappeared, leaving a pink stain running along the black horizon, painting a bright edge to the darkening sky. Mira noticed a green haze shimmering in the sky, away to her left. In fear she prayed for protection from the impromptu light show, unable to tear her eyes from it.

The horses kept moving. Mira was content to let them amble at their own pace, all the time hoping against hope that wolves were not trailing her. A thick mist rose around her yet again she could see no more than a couple of paces, and allowed her horse to go where it would. She mumbled a swift a prayer to the saints; that her mount would not tumble into a crevasse, or trip into a hole. She held tight to Daniel's charger, feeling as she did some tenuous connection.

The horses began climbing, each step more demanding than the one before it. The air was damp, cold and thin, catching in her throat, causing her to gasp rasping gulps as she

tried to pull her next breath. Surely she could not have climbed so high. The mist thinned and she began to see more of her surroundings.

The temperature was plummeting; her breath and that of the horses' billowed in great clouds, which she could clearly see in the dim starlight.

Before long the moon began to rise. Huge clouds raced towards a mysterious green flickering in the distance. In the now bright moonlight, Mira deduced that somehow she had followed a route that had brought her onto a plateau, far above the tree line.

Moving across a wide field of long grasses she approached a cluster of tall rocks.

Reaching the circle of standing stones, she slipped from horseback. Pulling the well trained horses down; she lay with them out of the wind, behind the tallest stone. Still she shivered as her body heat dispersed. Thankfully she had been wearing a thick woollen riding cloak over her winter clothing. Without it, and the warmth from the horses, she could have frozen to death before the morning. Mira could do nothing but pull the cloak tightly around her and hunker down out of the wind.

Snow began to fall as totally exhausted, she fell asleep.

The sun rose and swiftly warmed the air, melting the light snow-covering. Mira woke, facing the rising sun. Climbing unsteadily to her feet, she stamped in an attempt to bring back circulation, and then stood for a while slapping her arms about her body. Feeling warmer she began to investigate her surroundings, and found a small stream bubbling up from beneath one of the tall rocks.

Lying on her stomach on the damp, cold ground she drank deeply to quench her thirst, and then encouraged the horses to drink. Mounted, she moved out from the rocks, her aim being once more to follow the rising sun. In her mind, heading east should give a route down the mountain, and ultimately to the Lizard's encampment.

Ahead was a low mound. Spurring her horse to the top, she gazed for a while at the vista before her, astounded at the vast open expanse. The plain was covered with unfamiliar purple headed grasses which grew as high as her knees. She guessed they would easily reach her chest were she not on horseback.

A chill wind blew from the snow capped mountains in the far distance. The grass rippling like waves reminded her of the warm waters of the sea where as a child, she had swum with her older brother. That same sea which had so swiftly turned violent, and had taken her brother's life swamping his little boat with huge waves.

In wonder, she watched a large herd of large oxen make their way past her vantage point. They were close enough that she could hear clicking as their horns touched. It was a magnificent sight. She attempted to tally their numbers, but promptly gave up for there were far too many. She could make out other herds in the distance; they too, were travelling in the same direction.

"Now which way?" she shouted, her voice loud and outlandish in this place of almost silence. Her mount flicked an ear at the sound, and then took another mouthful of the strange purple grass.

In the distance stood a tall mountain, towering over the others clustered about its feet; a volcano if the tendril of smoke that climbed from its peak told the truth. She decided to make her way towards the new landmark.

Her horse had taken but a single step when Mira was struck a heavy blow from behind. Unbalanced she fell forward, tumbling from the horse. She rolled down the incline, striking her head on a rock. A dark curtain fell over her. As she blacked out, she was vaguely aware of a harsh screeching and jabbering.

## Captured

### The Northern Plains

Mira had no idea of how much time had passed before she opened her eyes. She found herself being carried face down, rough claws grasping her wrists and ankles, suspended between four creatures, which from her restricted viewpoint looked as though they could only have escaped from her worst nightmare. They reminded her of statues come alive; those same statues that she had seen grimacing their ugliness from the high corners of the cathedral roof in O'buda.

From the way that they carried her, frequently one or other of them almost dropping her, swinging from side to side in time with their erratic, jerking flight, they obviously had little care for her well being. Mira presumed she was fated to be their next meal. They jabbered animatedly amongst themselves as they flew, their diaphanous wings flapping loudly.

They seemed satisfied with their capture.

Swooping out of the sun which had been at her back, they had struck her hard. Mira had no chance to protect herself. Now she swung suspended, the ground some distance below her; she assessed her opportunities for escape.

Not many - she blacked out again.

Her shoulders and hips were screaming in pain from the angle at which she was being carried when next she opened her eyes. She had the mother and father of all headaches. Pain was battering her in pounding waves; waves which were synchronised with the swinging, buffeting flight of the grotesque creatures.

Blood oozed from a gash in the side of her head, she guessed it had occurred when she

struck her head as she fell. The blood had run down the side of her face and seeped into her coat.

If they dropped her from this height, she would be lucky to escape without serious injury or even death, but she felt desperate enough to risk it.

Determined to escape, she began shout and struggle, almost immediately the four creatures began fighting to stay aloft, her shaking and twisting disturbing their ability to fly and carry her at the same time. Their wings began flapping strenuously, striking against their companions'. The jabbering ceased, replaced by what sounded like cries of anger and surprise. After a moment or two, Mira ceased her struggles and waited to see what the creatures' reaction would now be. She wondered what they had said, but they were closed to her. That they had speech and some intelligence was obvious, but it was not a speech or intelligence that she could communicate with.

The repulsive monsters were now hushed, flying carefully, watching her constantly; there was now almost a dread in the grip on her wrists and ankles. They were almost waiting for her next move, or perhaps considering dropping her to bring to an end her games. As they hadn't immediately released her, Mira guessed they preferred that she were alive.

Through her pain, Mira attempted once more to find her bearings. She searched for the smoking mountain. In surprise she realised that she was no longer being carried across grass plains, but was passing over a bleak landscape; a black scar which cut through the countryside as far as she could see. The ground was littered with sharp rocks and deep cuttings through which ancient streams had long since ceased to flow.

Her concern was compounded by an impending certainty that the creatures were about to descend, she could feel that Ulrich was still in its scabbard; her riding cloak she guessed, still strapped to her saddle. She had removed it as the sun promised a day of unnatural heat.

Once Mira had stopped struggling and let her body hang limply, the creatures had settled back into their erratic, bouncing, shoulder wrenching flying style. They seemed more careful, but soon the jabbering began again. All of a sudden they swooped to the ground, dropping her just outside the shadow of a rock formation which they scrambled under. Her head and upper body were in shadow, her legs in the bright sunshine.

Without moving her head too obviously, Mira could see the creatures drinking from a tiny stream under the overhanging rock. She lay where they had dropped her, she had fallen at least a couple of body heights. Her shoulders hurt, but a mound of soft black sand had saved her from serious injury.

The creatures were crouched deep in shadow. Once more they began jabbering animatedly, perhaps discussing her for they glanced frequently in her direction; her struggling had without a doubt spooked them. Presuming the fall and original blow to the head had killed her, their surprise had been evident. Mira stayed as still as possible giving the impression that she was once more unconscious or even dead, hopefully lulling their senses.

They returned to quenching their thirst, lapping like dogs. Mira prepared herself. Leaping to her feet she drew Ulrich and rushed at them; with one swipe she struck the head clean from one of the creatures' shoulders. The remaining three attempted to clamber from under the rock to take to the air, but she was amongst them, the sword slashing left and right, almost with a life of its own.

Within moments the mastiff sized creatures were dead. In her frenzied attack, boiling anger had welled up in her, anger at their cowardly ambush, anger at their obvious plans for her, anger that they had carried her so many leagues from her original position making it even more difficult to find her way home.

Mira had sliced chunks from the creatures; their thick blood splashed around her. The smell and the sight of it seeping into the dry soil were too much to take. In reaction to the previous violence she retched, and then, unable to stop the ensuing gut wrenching spasm, she emptied the entire contents of her stomach, what little there was of it. Bile spilled out onto the ground, mixing with the black stain of the monsters' blood on the dark soil.

Staggering blindly from the scene of carnage, she sat on a nearby rock for a moment in an attempt to bring herself back to her senses. She felt so very alone, the loss of her father, her colleagues and Baron Daniel, cut so keenly that she began to weep. Mira felt as though a vital part of her had been amputated.

## The Golden Queen

## The Desert Sands

Mira rose, and began to walk in the direction of the only landmark that she could still recognise - the smoking mountain.

The heat, even though the midday hour had passed was unbearable; it was like being inside an oven. The temperature was sapping moisture from her body. She staggered on, driving herself. Forcing herself to place one foot in front of the other, for hour after hour she plodded onwards.

Her tongue felt as though it was stuck to the roof of her mouth, it had been many hours since she had last taken a drink. She had been thirsty and in need, but hadn't been able bring herself to drink from the stream under the rock, once it had been tainted with the foul creatures' blood.

She continued stumbling, moving almost without thinking as the sun fell below the horizon. The moon made a dramatic appearance, and the ground around her began to brighten. As the temperature fell, she became aware once more of her predicament. She felt totally bewildered. Her mind focused on her friends, would they be wondering where Milo, Daniel's young man servant, had disappeared to? Mira thoughts went to her dear father, who had fought so long to keep her by his side, while men and boys left to fight their wars, and girls were banished to convents for their protection.

Mira felt as though the whole world had deserted her.

Somehow she managed to keep walking. Her thoughts were becoming fuzzy; she could only concentrate on putting one foot in front of the other.

The night was bitterly cold; the heat which had beat down on her from the sun and up

at her from the sand through the day, disappeared quickly, to be replaced by a freezing cold wind blowing from the snow capped mountains in the far distance.

Mira took frequent rests, sucking on a small pebble to stimulate her mouth juices, a trick her father had taught her. Before long, there was no saliva left to stimulate, her lips were dry and cracked. Her only way to stay warm was to keep walking.

By the time the pre-dawn snowfall began, Mira was so desperate for water that she scooped up the dirty snow and chewed on the ball. It wasn't long before the sun rose and began to melt the snow; as she had nothing in which to retain the melting snow, she ate as much as she could, while she could. In protest, her stomach began to cramp; the pain taking her to her knees.

When the spasm subsided, she used some of the remaining snow to clean her face and neck of the smeared blood; she then held a fresh ball against the cut on her head to alleviate the throbbing and stem the flow of blood that had re-started.

Chewing on the balls of snow had given some relief, but as quickly as the snow had come, it was gone, melting into the dark sand and drying almost instantly. The sun resumed its relentless attack on her almost as soon as it cleared the horizon.

The heat began to build, sapping her strength once more. She considered discarding her jacket and the sword but something caused her to retain them. The shoulder straps felt as though they were cutting into her, it felt as though she were carrying a massive weight on her back. Mira stumbled on, still aiming her steps towards the smoking mountain, which seemed just as far away as it had the previous day.

Before long her eyes began to burn from the incessant glare that reflected from the black rocks as she weaved her way through them. Her tongue was swollen, and once more felt as though it was stuck to the roof of her mouth. Her head was pounding. The wound on her forehead had begun to bleed again; her whole body felt racked with pain.

Through her dulled senses she became aware of a cacophony of sound emanating from the far side of a large mound, she recognised the noise with an explosion of fury as being the jabbering of the Gargoyles. Mira drew Ulrich and prepared to fight to the death, she stumbled around the mound.

To her surprise she saw a huge creature crouching on the ground; it was twice the height of Daniel's war horse even though it was hunkered down. Somehow, Mira knew it was a female dragon. The dragon was slashing left and right with her wide tooth filled jaws at the evil creatures. In turn they were swooping and clawing at her diamond shaped head, aiming for her eyes with their sharp claws. Swooping and flapping at her from behind, trying to find the beautiful golden creature's blind spot. There were six of the foul beasts worrying at her. The dragon had managed to kill two, their blooded, mangled remains lay on the black soil near her head, but even so, they had succeeded in keeping her grounded. They had caused the mighty creature serious injuries, for Mira could see blood oozing from many wounds.

They had succeeded in damaging one of the dragon's eyes, from the momentary glimpse that Mira caught, it looked serious. Blood was flowing down the side of the stricken creature's head. The flying monsters were now concentrating on her other eye, knowing that if they could blind her they would be able to defeat her all the more easily.

The dragon was in imminent danger of being overcome, and Mira could see she was weakening. Without a thought for her own safety she decided to intervene; adrenalin surged through her body, building her strength from some deep source. A gush of saliva filled her mouth.

Mira launched herself with a wild cry at the nearest bat creature, and with a single swipe cut it through from shoulder to hip. Ripping the sword free, she threw herself at another and sliced one of its wings from its back, the creature fell to the ground screaming, scrambling backwards from her on its hooked claws. She took two swift steps and brought her sword down on the top of its head cleaving it in two, its blood and brains splashed over her boots and leggings.

The other creatures turned their attention on her and roaring in their strange tongue attacked. Mira swung her sword again, slicing another of the vile monsters across its body. The creature screamed as its intestines spilled and it fell writhing to the ground. Its three remaining fellows flew backwards, jabbering angrily as she despatched the gibbering creature with a single stab into its ugly face, the sharp point of her sword piercing its eye, she followed through pushing the blade deep into its head. With a sharp twist, Mira freed her weapon.

The remaining creatures held their distance, flapping high above her, screeching their fury.

She snatched the opportunity and ran to the dragon's side, with a swift movement Mira clambered to her shoulder, and then straddled the sinuous neck taking care to avoid the row of sharp spikes that ran from the middle of her shoulders to the end of her long swishing tail. She shouted; "Up now Mistress!" The huge creature, even though seriously wounded and exhausted, rallied to her call, and with a massive thrust of its powerful rear legs launched them both high into the air. Its wings opened with a loud clap, thrust upwards, then with a powerful downward stroke they surged upwards into the sky.

The three remaining creatures, incensed at seeing their prize about to escape made one last attempt to fly above the dragon, to force her to the ground. Mira's sword swinging at them was sufficient to keep them at a distance, allowing the dragon to get into her rhythm. With massive beats of her wings she had soon left the ugly Gargoyles behind.

Mira sat astride her neck, gripping with her knees and attempting to make herself as light as possible, but as they flew she could feel the dragon's exhaustion.

How long the dragon could continue Mira knew not, for she too could feel her own strength slipping away. Her sight began to blur and her limbs to shake. No matter how she tried she couldn't maintain her grip, she was gasping in the thin, cold air, for they had climbed to a great altitude. In desperation she cried, "Enough Mistress, I can hold no more." She began to slip towards unconsciousness, and worst of all, to slide from between the driving shoulders.

As she began to fall, she heard the sound of massive wings pumping furiously behind her; she could hear what sounded like the beating of more than one pair of wings swooping towards her as she slipped into blackness.

## A Meeting of Minds

### The M'ntar Caves

Mira came to her senses beside a tinkling stream on a wide ledge outside a huge cave entrance. Crawling to the edge of the stream, she plunged her face into the water and began to suck greedily.

'NOT SO FAST, LITTLE ONE. CALM YOURSELF, TAKE IT EASY. TRY LITTLE SIPS TO START WITH, THEN DRINK YOUR FILL.'

Powerful thoughts filled her head, pounding at her senses.

Although she should have examined the source of the thoughts, she was too thirsty to bother. Bodily demands long denied came first. With reluctance she did as she was bidden, finding the cold water sweeter than any she had tasted in her life. Finally, her stomach full, she began to feel some semblance of life flowing back into her body.

Strengthened by the water, if not the hope of extended life it represented, Mira climbed to her feet. Glancing about to determine her whereabouts, her eyes lighted upon the most unlikely of creatures. Startled, she blinked once. She scrubbed her eyes, blinked again rapidly. The apparition did not vanish.

Forgetting even to clutch her sword - for what use would such a weapon be against this beast? - Mira could do nothing except tremble in abject fear as she watched a giant Red dragon approach.

The huge creature was easily half the size again of the Gold. It walked with a rolling motion which, if it hadn't been so frightening, might have been amusing. Overcome by its sheer enormity, Mira almost fled - especially when the creature rose up on its rear legs.

It-it's a mountain! was her first astounded thought.

It wasn't, not really. Yet the Red was massive. Its front legs were held like arms curling downward, its back legs were like tree trunks, and two huge wings furled along its back. Its long tail, which offered balance to its upright stance, doubled the creature's length. The bright, black eyes, staring down on her with intelligence and concern, were well over two arms' stretch above Mira's head.

All four limbs ended in immense, lethal sets of claws. That was daunting enough. Its vicious jaws, full of teeth which looked as though they had been created specifically for ripping flesh, tendered no reprieve. The beast's diamond shaped head was crowned with two long horns.

An impression formed in Mira's mind.

'COME, MIRA. WE HAVE FOOD.'

Food?

Without stopping to think, Mira found herself following the creature. Am I mad? The invitation might be a siren's call, luring me to the rocks of destruction, but Mira was too hungry to do anything save heed it.

Ahead of her, the huge Red walked with a swaying gait, its long tail swishing from side to side. Created to soar the currents and thermals of the sky, it looked ungainly on the ground - rather like a swan waddling about awkwardly on dry land. Yet Mira followed in stupefied amazement as the creature led her deeper into the cave where the gory remains of a mutilated deer spilled across the ground.

'CAN YOU EAT THIS?'

Half-starved and too hungry to be revolted, she pulled her hip knife from its scabbard and bending, hacked a piece from the deer's shoulder. "I'll try, Lord." Bringing the meat to her mouth she sucked hungrily at the raw flesh. Initially, she gagged at the taste of strong red meat, but her hunger swiftly got the better of her and she took a mouthful of the venison, chewing noisily before swallowing.

“How old is this kill?” she asked, recognising the slight tang of spoiled flesh.

‘SIX DAYS,’ came the reply.

I suppose the gallopers are better than dying of hunger, she mused, and took another mouthful.

Her belly churned, roiled, growling in response. Realising just how hungry she was, she cut another strip from the deer, devouring it in a single bite. As she ate, Mira could feel her strength returning, but with it crept in great weariness.

Sated for the present, and knowing she would not last much longer, Mira inquired, “Where may I rest, Lord?”

In truth, sleep was the last thing she wanted, for she had many questions. Where am I? What beasts are these? How do they speak in my mind? Do they mean to devour me as they so obviously had partially devoured the deer? But, seeing as how the creatures had offered her no harm thus far, she guessed they did not consider her a possible meal. Besides, I am so very weary.

‘OVER HERE, LITTLE ONE.’

Strange, along with hearing the voices in her head, she deduced a strong mental impression that they refer to themselves as M’ntar.

Well, she decided, too sleepy to puzzle out either the M’ntar, their plans for her, their peculiar form of communication, or by what witchery these impressions flooded her mind, M’ntar does sound better than dragon, which is what I first feared them to be.

Again, she followed the Red behemoth without question, only to find the M’ntar had created a human-sized nest for her in the great cave balanced on the ledge above the stream where she had first drunk. To her wonder, and gratitude, Mira found upon sinking into a nest that it was lined with soft skin shed from the breast of a Queen.

Mother Mary, a body could become accustomed to such comforts, she thought, kicking off her boots and rolling about in the nest like a dog in straw.

The nest was warmer, more supple and pliable, than any feather mattress in her former master Daniel's Schloss. Almost instantly, her eyelids were drifting shut, seduced by the M'ntar luxuries. However, as she blinked a final two or three times against sunlight slanting in through the cave's yawning orifice, she saw outlined against the oddly coloured sky more of the dragon-creatures. Of differing colours and sizes they were; nevertheless, the giant red appeared their patriarch.

What manner of world or dreamland have I come to, was her final waking contemplation?

Then she was asleep, asleep in moments, waking only when her body forced it upon her. Some twenty hours had passed from when she first climbed into the nest. Hunger, thirst, and a desperate need to pass water - along with severe stomach cramps - were more than sufficient to bring her out of her lengthy, deep sleep.

Escaping behind a nearby copse of trees was the first order of business. There, Mira was forced to endure her body purging itself from both ends. A severely unpleasant experience the girl decided when the fit had passed; leaving her slumped, panting and shaking upon the warm earth. Nonetheless, it did strengthen her spine to respectfully refuse the M'ntar's subsequent offer of more venison.

Aged, raw flesh, although a delicacy among the dragon-creatures, had never been one of her favourite meals, and she knew that gorging herself upon it earlier had been the most likely cause of her body's protestation. Yet when she attempted to explain both her reasoning and the gallopers, she found her new hosts - a herd of whom had gathered round to view the newcomer - indifferent to her plight. Apparently, the M'ntar could not even comprehend the gallopers, for their internal workings were designed to cope with meals of the sort Mira's had just rejected.

Exasperated with failed attempts to elucidate, Mira finally, boldly stated, "It is not that I do not appreciate your hospitality, my lords: the truth of the matter is that I cannot eat flesh if it is not fresh. Furthermore, I am accustomed to eating flesh only after it has been cooked. Had I a choice in the matter, rather than raw flesh I would prefer to eat fruit."

'YOU PREFER FRUIT?'

In her mind, Mira heard the strong humming of many voices as the dragon-creatures took to murmuring amongst themselves about the oddity of this two-leg who preferred fruit to flesh.

“Is that so strange?” she finally asked aloud.

The giant Red, lord of the clan, stared down at her. ‘TO US, YES, IT IS. YET, IF THAT IS TRULY WHAT YOU PREFER, I WILL DESPATCH RUNNERS TO OBTAIN SOME FOR YOU.’

Singling out two of his fellows, of a different breed, much smaller and leaner than himself not much larger than Daniel’s charger, he commanded, ‘GO YOU TO THE TREES BESIDE THE RING OF WATCHER HILLS, THOSE UPON WHICH TREE-FLESH GROW. FETCH SOME. BRING THEM HITHER FOR MIRA, OUR GUEST.’

Trees beside the ring of Watcher Hills, those upon which tree-flesh grow?

Privately, Mira decided that such ambiguous directions would leave her running around in circles. The M’ntar, though, obviously both took and gave directions differently than humans. With an awkward little bobbing of the head, evocative of a waterfowl ducking its head below the surface in search of food, the two orange creatures turned tail and were off, speeding across the ground with all the grace of a gazelle.

Mira watched, amazed. For as awkward as the mammoth Red appeared on ground, this pair, built for speed were amazingly graceful, and fleet. She watched in further amazement as, their speed at the proper level, the two used the smallish wings on their back to lift themselves effortlessly into the air. Airborne, they circled round the cave a time or two as if testing their wings, gaining altitude, and then were off-shooting into the air like an arrow from a bow, vanishing within seconds into the distant horizon.

For many moments, Mira was unaware of having sunk to her knees in amazement. Unaware, that is, until a cool breeze and a jagged, growling pain of hunger pierced her belly. Chill from the ground was sinking past the barrier of her leggings, creeping into her knees. A shadow crept over her, causing her to look up.

It was the Red.

‘COME, LITTLE MIRA,’ he said, gesturing with his curved forearm towards the cave. ‘SLEEP, IF YOU CAN, UNTIL YOUR FOOD ARRIVES. YOUR BODY IS YET WEAK. WHILE YOU LOSE YOURSELF IN SLEEP, IT WILL HEAL ITSELF.’

Since his knee was close and convenient, Mira availed herself of its support while pulling herself to her feet. A rush of dizziness assailed her once she stood, causing her to sway. If not for the hand thrust out helplessly, landing upon the M’ntar, surely she would have fallen. As it was, the beast waited calmly until the dizziness had passed. Unfortunately, as it did pass, a twisted cramping in her guts warned her of what was coming. Once more, Mira was forced to flee for the refuge of the trees. Finished, she scuffed up loose soil with the toe of her boot, using it to cover what she had left behind.

Hopefully, that will help curb the stench.

At this point, she was spent, her body having rid itself of far more these past days than had gone into it. Or, at least, so it felt. Barely had she adequate strength to make it back to the cave, and her nest within. There she collapsed, losing herself once more in the oblivion of sleep.

Either her long hike, or this strange world, or the continuing case of the gallopers served to keep Mira down for the next several days. To the girl, it seemed as if she continually dozed in the soft nest of shed skin somewhere between wakefulness and sleep, coming fully awake only when the gallopers, or thirst and a necessity to drag herself to the stream demanded it. Or, at other intervals, when one of the creatures-usually an agile one, which Mira assumed to be of an allied race to the M’ntar - gently woke her, bidding her partake of the mound of fruit gathered fresh every day and kept beside her bedside. The fruits there were markedly different from anything she had previously partaken of. Their taste was not foul; in fact, some Mira found most delightful. Still, they looked wrong, as if having come from a world where colours and shapes had been turned lopsided. They were strange, compared to fruit with which she was accustomed.

Nevertheless, Mira was grateful. Why the dragon-creatures went to such special pains to furnish her peculiar diet, she did not know. Nor knew she why they took such pains to keep her alive at all. Was it out of gratitude for her part in fending off the golden Queen’s attackers, or what?

Her mind too muddled for such serious contemplations for more than minutes at a time, Mira continued to sleep. And as she slept, the young girl dreamt. Oddly enough, her

dreams were of violet sunsets, lavender blooms, plum wine, and amethyst jewels. Each time she touched or partook of these delicacies she received the oddest sensation of being lifted off the ground to soar through wine coloured skies. As if she was flying, as she had once flown on the back of the Golden Queen. Flying, but this time filled with joy. A deep joy, so profound, that it had no other name than; exquisite happiness.

From such dreams, one would not wish to wake. Mira was no exception. If only real life, she remembered thinking drowsily at one point, could be as pleasant.

Eventually, the restorative powers of sleep, clean water, and fresh fruit combined to reverse the ravages on Mira's body. Less than three weeks after her initial meeting with the M'ntar, she was able to stand on her feet and exit the cave for more than a single reason. No warning cramps twisting her gut. Flinging her arms wide, she welcomed the world and the new vitality in her limbs with a satisfying stretch. Letting her head fall back, she drank in the sweet air of morning, allowing its spicy autumn tang to clear her head.

At the stream she immersed herself in the chilly waters for a much needed bath. Having removed her clothing, she sank down deep, dismayed to see how much flesh had withered from her frame during those days of illness.

Why, I look almost skeletal, she realized, perturbed by the observation.

Although she was aware that the long days of unending illness and scant sustenance were the major reasons for her dramatic weight loss, she knew as well that if she hoped to gain back both flesh and vitality, meat must henceforth be included in her diet. Gritting her teeth, Mira scrubbed the worst of encrusted filth and debris from skin and hair with the fine, crystalline sand comprising the stream bottom, relishing its gentle scrape against her skin. The wound on the side of her head had healed; the skin still tender though, but no longer scabbed over with encrusted blood.

With fire apparently unheard of among the M'ntar, and herself with no supplies for creating it, any meat she ate would have to be raw. But fresh, she told herself firmly, and as well-drained as possible.

Verdict reached, and the flowing water too chilled for a comfortable soak, Mira completed her bath and climbed from the clear waters. After cleaning her clothing as

well as possible, and allowing it to at least partially dry in the warm autumn sun, she went in search of the Red. She would request that, along with the fruit, she now required animal flesh.

## Recovery

### M'ntar Caves

Days, perhaps weeks passed. Now sustained by fresh flesh, fruit, water, and edible roots, nuts, and berries she was able to recognize in her scavenging, Mira's former health and figure returned rapidly. The M'ntar were gracious hosts, even if not always capable of readily processing her requests. An alien species, their minds worked in unfamiliar ways.

Mira's request for animal skins with which to create for herself clothing had been met by Lord Dominie, the huge Red, mate of the golden Queen, with a head cocked to the side in suspicious bewilderment.

'YOU WOULD CLOTHE YOURSELF IN THE HIDES OF OTHERS WHEN YOU HAVE YOUR OWN?'

'My hide is not as yours. It requires extra protection,' she answered easily in her mind, now accustomed to this novel form of communication.

There was no explanation as to why; after all her dealings with dumb beasts, she should now be able to hear and answer the M'ntar with her mind. None, except that the M'ntar were truly an alien race, and possessed of some novel gifts - gifts which had enabled Lord Dominie, their leader, to, as he put it; 'RELEASE THE ABILITY WITHIN YOU TO COMMUNE WITH US.'

What this signified she was not entirely certain. The phrase was strange, seeming to suggest that she had carried within her a skill she knew nothing of. That of conversing with her mind. Somehow, the Red had known of it, and opened or released it during those long hazy days of sickness and recovery. How he could know this, or accomplish such a deed, was a mystery that to the young girl sounded suspiciously like magic.

Not that she was unacquainted with magic. After all, she still retained 'Ulrich,' her former master's sword in her possession, and was now approaching the time when she felt some practice with the huge sword would be well worth her while. Well did she know the tales surrounding the strange weapon, tales of its blue glow when danger approached and its insatiable thirst for blood. Such tales attributed the blade's unusual propensities to the entrapped spirit of a magician, its former owner, slain by Daniel's father, who had cursed the weapon, binding Daniel's line to its grasp.

Although taught by the clerics to distrust magic in its various forms as witchcraft, Mira had passed many hours mulling over these strange phenomena of flaming blue swords and talking animals. Perhaps Ulrich was a creation of witchcraft wrought by an evil sorcerer, but the M'ntar? Nay, she could not believe it. She had seen no bizarre rituals, no sacrifices, no mumblings of ancient words. Furthermore, she could not envision the dragon-creatures being involved in such. They were but beasts, possessed of unique abilities, yes, but that was all. Beasts with whom she was able to empathize in singular fashion, albeit only when in close proximity to them as she presently stood with Lord Dominie.

'You have seen that I array myself in what mankind calls clothing,' she continued, explaining to Lord Dominie her plight. 'Now, my clothing grows thin even as the cold increases. Soon, its protection will not suffice. I must have new hides to fashion new clothing for myself, else I shall not long survive your land.'

Although the scarlet behemoth blinked one beady eye sceptically, he dipped his massive head in a very human-like gesture of acquiescence.

IT SHALL BE AS YOU SAY, he conceded. I SHALL INSTRUCT OUR HUNTERS TO BRING WITH THEM THE SKINS OF THEIR PREY THAT YOU MAY BE FURNISHED WITH WHAT YOU REQUIRE. I SHALL FURTHER INSTRUCT THEM TO TAKE CARE WITH THEIR KILLS, THAT THE HIDES BE NOT DAMAGED BEYOND YOUR USE.

Mira, touched by his generosity, I bowed low from the waist and said aloud, "I thank you, lord."

Within the next two hours, a heavy deer hide in surprisingly good condition arrived. Over a period of five days, adequate skins piled up in her cave to provide clothing not just for herself but for Daniel, her father, and half of Daniel's fighting force as well. The M'ntar were possessed of hearty appetites, and prodigious amounts of food were

required to sustain them. The creatures which they brought back from their hunting trips were not strange to Mina; among them, she recognised deer and young calves. Such flesh the M'ntar found most palatable, and Mira sometimes cut a piece from the carcasses, aware of her need to consume flesh. Howbeit, never having developed a true carnivore's lust for uncooked meat, she preferred the foreign fruit for eating and familiar skins for clothing.

So was she supplied, yet after five days, Mira, holding up a hand, cried 'Enough!' to the lithe orange who dropped a plush rabbit pelt at her feet. 'You have more than fulfilled my request,' she went on, 'but I am provided with plenty, and I thank you for your service. Please extend my gratitude to your brethren, as well.'

Dipping its head, the orange accepted her thanks, backed out, and hied itself off she knew not whither. After its departure, Mira surveyed the large pile of different coloured fleeces somewhat ruefully.

Ever have I despised needlework and stitchery. Still, if I'm to survive the winter and have something to wear other than my own skin, best I put myself to work.

The next few days she spent cleaning and curing the hides before procuring some sharp, slender bones to use as needles and long, durable, flexible river grasses which she pounded down to fibres, and then by rubbing them together on her thigh was able to create a passable thread. Stitching was indeed a tiresome chore the young girl had always detested, preferring bouts of swordplay and feats of horsemanship learned at her father's side. Yet she made fair go of it, and within a briefer span of time than she forecasted had fashioned a warm, presentable jerkin for herself.

A pair of breeches was next on her list, yet by this point Mira was heartily sick of cutting, piecing together, and sewing. Moreover, her fingertips were heartily sick of being pricked, so on that day-some fifty days since her rescue of the Queen, Mira put down her sewing on the worn rock at the cave's mouth and rose to stretch.

The day beyond beckoned-bright, clear, unseasonably warm, and inviting.

Mira explored deeper into the caves. Wherever she wandered she was greeted warmly by the creatures as they undertook daily housekeeping tasks which were not unlike those that she would see in a human settlement. That they were highly intelligent was

not in question, and her wonder increased as she discovered that the young were required to attend a time of schooling. After discussion with Lord Dominie she attached herself to the school with the hatchlings.

She discovered as she did so, that daily her mental abilities began to grow stronger, and she was able to communicate with the giant M'ntar at further and further distances. The hatchlings were of all sizes, from freshly hatched, no bigger than she, to yearlings who matched the golden Queen in bulk.

She felt a wrinkling, a curling in her consciousness as her mind grew stronger, more powerful. The contact with the M'ntar was releasing more than just the ability to communicate. Something was opening inside her, something which was more M'ntar than human. Something so totally and beautifully Purple.

One day, after a particularly difficult time of training when Lord Dominie had been teaching the hatchlings to mind block and filter unwanted thoughts. She was lying in her nest trying to get warm after a dip in the freezing waters of her pool. She caught a thin, far off deliberation. A human thought. Not the pictorial impressions which she perceived from the M'ntar, but a human thought. It was faint, barely discernible from her own, but on such a diverse subject from anything she could be thinking, that she knew it could never have been hers.

In her excitement at perceiving she was no longer alone, Mira attempted to focus her mind as she had been taught. With every fibre of her being she endeavoured to force her thoughts outward in reply. It was difficult, the momentary connection had faded away to nothing, she had no point of reference as with the M'ntar, when suddenly she heard a voice inside her head, 'who are you, what do you want?' the mind radiated surprise, tinged with an underlying childish fear.

She screamed frantically, "I'm Mira, it's me, it's me." She shouted loudly, both with her mind and her voice.

Two fledglings nearby squawked in surprise, scuttling away from her, broadcasting shock touched with fear.

She had not recognised the mind though it seemed it were a girl child. Mira was distraught, for as quickly as she had become aware of it, it faded to naught, who could it

be, could she ever make contact again? On reflection, - considering the shock and fear she had perceived in the other mind, it may not want to communicate with her again.

She could perceive the rumblings and murmurings of the M'ntar minds around her as they communicated each with the other, but try as she might; the elusive human contact was silent. Her eyes filled with tears of frustration and loss. She felt so alone, even though surrounded by her alien friends. She covered herself with the warm, soft furs and cried herself to sleep.

## The Purple Queen

M'ntar Caves.

It was but a few days after her shocking connection with the human mind, that Lord Dominie approached her. 'MIRA, YOU HAVE BEEN WITH US FOR MANY MOON TURNS, DURING THAT TIME YOU HAVE TRULY SHOWN YOURSELF TO BE AN EXCEPTIONAL BEING, WHEN YOU ARRIVED SOMETHING WONDERFUL HAPPENED. TODAY WE KNOW FOR SURE THAT YOU ARE TRULY SPECIAL TO US.'

The girl looked totally bemused.

'COME HERE TO ME GIRL.'

Mira stepped to the big Red, and stood in front of the massive creature. Lord Dominie dropped his head until they were face to face, then suddenly, totally unexpectedly; he dropped to his knees and rolling his huge body forward, touched the girl's feet with his nose. The other M'ntar present dropped to their knees, and then they trumpeted, the sound was repeated by every M'ntar throughout the cave. The noise rolled through the caves, it felt as though the rocks themselves were vibrating, at the same time all of their minds and those of every M'ntar on the planet began broadcasting almost as one; 'HAIL PRINCESS, HAIL PRINCESS.'

Lord Dominie rose to his feet and beckoned the bemused Mira to follow, as they moved side by side further into the cave, Mira felt something was happening, something totally outside her comprehension. Together they walked into an area that Mira had never previously visited, a shaft of light lanced from the roof of the cave, through a crack high up to the left of where they stood, the beam illuminating a breach low down in the wall.

Lord Dominie turned to Mira, 'OVER TWO HUNDRED YEARS AGO, AN EGG WAS LAID, THAT EGG WAS A PURPLE. A PURPLE EGG WILL ONLY HATCH WHEN IT PERCEIVES THAT A SIMILAR MIND IS IN EXISTENCE. A PURPLE MUST JOIN WITH ANOTHER TO EXIST, IF

THERE IS NO MIND TO JOIN WITH, THE EGG WILL REMAIN DORMANT, YOU MIRA ARE THAT MIND, IN THOUSANDS OF YEARS I HAVE NEVER KNOWN OR EVEN HEARD OF A PURPLE JOINING WITH OTHER THAN A M'NTAR MIND. YOU COULD BE IN SERIOUS DANGER, FOR IF THE PURPLE REJECTS YOU, IT WILL KILL YOU. BUT WE BELIEVE YOU ARE THE ONE, THAT YOU ARE THE ONE THE PURPLE HAS CHOSEN, FOR YOUR MIND IS PURPLE. MIRA YOU MUST GO NOW TO THE PURPLE EGG, IT IS THROUGH THAT GAP.'

'I know, I can feel it calling me' the young girl broadcast, 'I must bring it here, where the birth can be witnessed,' she squeezed through the opening and disappeared from sight.

Her mind filled with a scream of frustration, it was the purple fighting to break free from the confines of the egg, there was another mental howl, this time of pure raw anger, followed by another of frustration.

Mira returned with the beautiful purple globe, once more she squeezed through the opening. The egg was almost the size of her head.

Just beneath the surface of its shell, flashes and sparkles of light could be seen; the M'ntar around her fell to their knees and began to hum.

The deep bass sound resonated throughout the cave, climbing to a crescendo then falling back to almost silence before it swelled again, it was powerful in its intensity as it peaked, it was almost as though the entire mountain was vibrating, from further away she could feel others pick it up, then Mira too was caught up in the moment of worship, her heart swelling in joy and wonder as she joined her mind and her clear, bright voice with the M'ntar in their song of praise.

When it ended, Mira stood absolutely still; the egg held tightly in her hands, it was pressed against her breast, its upper edge just below her chin.

Another scream of frustration came from the Purple, and then the egg cracked, a tiny fracture of the shell just below Mira's chin. A piece of it splintered and flew upwards, pushed from beneath, a spot of blood appeared on her chin where the shard had struck, then another crack appeared, accompanied by a howl of success from the Purple.

As the M'ntar watched transfixed, the egg cracked once more and the birth spike on the top of the Purple's head appeared through a little hole. Twisting left and right the tiny

creature made the hole bigger. The egg cracked all the way down one side and a large chunk of shell fell off, crashing to the cave floor where it splintered into hundreds of pieces. The humming from the M'ntar rose louder at this, and suddenly the Purple was free, it sat in the remains of its shell, still held in Mira's hands.

It stood up and stretched its body, whipping its long tail from left to right, then it unfurled its wings and stretched them out, it was no bigger from wing tip to wing tip, than the length of her arm, with a scream which could only be interpreted as extreme agitation it launched itself upwards and snatched hold of Mira's halo of dark hair, there it hung screaming a howl of mental anguish as it sought its soul mate's mind.

The little Purple then began to hum gently, Mira joined with it, the two of them starting a melody which was rapidly picked up by the other M'ntar, the tune then took on words as the M'ntar' began to broadcast with their minds.

SING, SING A SONG OF LOVE,

FOR THEY SHALL LOVE EACH OTHER

THE DAY HAS COME

OF THAT WE CAN BE SURE,

FOR LOVE THAT IS TRUE,

IS LOVE THAT IS SET ALIGHT.

NO LONGER CAN THEY STAND ALONE,

FOR THEY ARE JOINED FOREVER.

REACH OUT AND TAKE THEM IN YOUR HEARTS,

FOR THEY HAVE A LOVE THAT WILL ENDURE,

SING, SING A SONG OF LOVE,  
  
FOR HAPPINESS AND UNDERSTANDING  
  
COME, SING A SONG OF LOVE,  
  
FOR LOVE TELLS ITS OWN TALE,  
  
SING, SING A SONG OF LOVE,  
  
FOR THEY WORSHIP EACH OTHER IN THEIR LOVE,  
  
AS ONE MIGHTY MIND THEY WILL SING,  
  
A SONG THAT WILL RING FOREVER MORE,  
  
LET THEM SING THEIR SONG OF LOVE,  
  
THEIR SONG OF LOVE AND UNDERSTANDING  
  
SINGING THEIR SONG  
  
WHICH WILL LAST FOR EVERMORE.

The little Purple stretched its wings again, flying away from Mira, who slid to the floor in a faint.

It flew towards the other M'ntar, who watched in absolute silence, making straight for Lord Dominie, it then performed the same move as it had with Mira, hanging from the sides of his head. The two, the tiny Purple and the massive Red stayed in concert for a long while, eye to eye. The tiny creature released its grip on Lord Dominie and flew once more around the cave, climbing higher and higher towards a hole where light streamed

through.

As it reached the beam of light, it gave a roar, Mira who had regained her senses thought it was strange that such a loud noise could come from such a tiny creature, then with what sounded like a harsh cough, it blew a jet of flame at least ten yards across the roof.

‘SHE FLAMES, THE PURPLE QUEEN FLAMES’ Lord Dominie’s mind was full of reverence.

‘SHE FLAMES, SHE FLAMES’ the other M’ntar responded.

Swooping from the ceiling she landed on Mira’s shoulder, with a pop of in-rushing air the little Purple Queen and Mira, her chosen companion, disappeared.

## Part 5

### Through the Veil

#### Paul's Punishment

#### Day 4

"And don't think you get to goof off with your pals until I give you permission," Jeanne admonished, shaking a forefinger in her son's face.

Paul stood his ground manfully. Only his lower lip betrayed his bravado with an almost imperceptible quiver. "Awww, Mum -"

"No Awwws. What you did was unforgivable. Inexcusable. Criminal even."

"Mum, it wasn't that big a deal..."

"Not that big a deal?" Jeanne echoed incredulously. "Disappearing without asking permission or leaving as much as a hint of your whereabouts, and that's not that big a deal? Young man, I ought to..."

"Oh, c'mon, Jeanne. Lighten up," Tom drawled.

Caught off guard, she spun towards Tom, lazing beside the flickering campfire that Shelby was attempting to coax into fuller life. Morning had scarce breached night's defences, and he was too chilled to climb out from under the warmth of his sleeping roll. Jeanne's remonstrating with her pre-teen had wakened him. However, amusing as

the scene was, cute as she looked all fired up and angry, he felt a bit sorry for the kid. Paul'd done nothing any other twelve year old boy in his position wouldn't have: that is, sneaking around behind his mum's back with his little buddies Finn and Xjang and cajoling a visit with their dragons out of Mira and Winn.

Only thing was, with the abilities of the two Riders and their mounts to transition easily from one place and time to the next, tracking their whereabouts was utterly unfeasible. Tom knew Jeanne wasn't just being overprotective; the two young troopers were highly trained and could look after themselves. Mira and Winn could shift into very real danger at any instant. They had their M'ntar and their own abilities to protect themselves, would they have enough to look after Paul, as well?

He watched her restrain herself with visible effort. Doubtless, she was concerned not only about any potential hazards awaiting Mira and Winn, but also remembering the strike forces' brush with death the previous morning.

Great flocks of flying creatures had appeared in the sky, out of the east, arriving with the rising sun. Nobody had been alarmed, except Finn and Kesha. Before most of the others were out of their sleeping bags the two Brosynan were sounding the alarm, hooting a call to arms, translated and echoed by the human forces.

The roars of two M'ntar, appearing out of thin air in steaming battle-rage, had cemented the verve of the moment. Battle drills proved their worth as the teams came awake and into position fully armed. Tense, they'd taken shelter wherever possible, weapons at the ready, waiting.

The attack hadn't come. At the last instant, the flocks spying the M'ntar had veered off towards the north, fading away in an ugly black streak across the horizon.

"What were those?" one team member had ventured aloud once the threat was past.

John Wilson translated Finn's words, but not his sigh of relief. That was universal language. 'Flying death,' was all the little Brosynan would say. No further elucidation was proffered - or necessary. The incident served to underscore the weirdness and perils of the world into which they'd come.

Tom could practically read her memories of the near attack, but Jeanne was smart

enough to know a mother only ruined a boy by coddling him. Wisely, she backed off from the assault, but fixed her son with a stern look. "Alright, no more lecturing, but I'm not forgetting you did disobey me, Paul. And disobedience out here, in a place like this, could mean instant death. No-one else disobeys me, and I'm certain my own son's not going to. So, off with you now, lad. Report to Amy and tell her I said to give you all the work you can handle. All day today, you're hers to boss around as she will."

Disappointment creased the kid's face, but he was smart enough not to argue with his mother. She was right. As leader, Special Forces troops from both sides of the Atlantic were under her control. If they had to obey her, it was a cinch he did too. Plus - Paul knew her current expression as well as Tom. In this mood, Hurricane Jeanne was a force to be reckoned with.

Tom felt the full force of her pull as she strode briskly across the grass approaching him. "Come with me," she commanded, catching him by the hand and pulling him up from his pallet.

"Where're we off to?"

"Naer you mind."

He let her lead him; hand in hand, they trod through the long grass towards the river. As they walked, the stiff set of her shoulders relaxed. In the distance, overly large insects, some distinctly bizarre, chirped their odes of praise while a cleansing breeze stirred the tall grasses, brushing away the final remnants of night. The air retained a bit of a chill, but they were well wrapped up.

A diminutive furry biped creature ran ahead of them. The being was hominid in that she had four limbs, two each of arms and legs. She displayed obvious female attributes with two modest breasts on her chest. She walked upright, her head just reaching Jeanne's waist. Obviously highly intelligent for she quickly learnt whatever was asked of her, and began performing simple tasks as required. She had made no attempt to communicate, or impart any information of her own, although she would give a series of high pitched 'yips' of excitement whenever re-united with Jeanne.

The creature had appeared from out of the grass, and seemed to have adopted Jeanne. Its head was its one anomaly, it was shaped like a dog's even down to the position of its

ears which were erect and pointed. Its mouth, like a dog, had sharp teeth and sported extended canines. It was covered with short black and white fur. They named it Lisa for other than the ears; facially it reminded Jeanne of a well loved Blue Roan, Cocker Spaniel companion of the same name that she had owned as a child. Every now and again Lisa would leap high to get her bearings, and almost certainly to ensure they were following.

It had been six days since the expeditionary force's arrival. They had moved to a position just five clicks inland from a rocky seashore. In those six days a great deal of work had been completed. An outer ring of sharpened stakes had sprung up and a similar inner defence ring was taking shape as well. The defences were advised by John against possible attack by large nocturnal bears, which to his pleasure, had yet to make an appearance.

Tom felt guilty at leaving the work teams, but at Jeanne's insistent, "You should take a wee break" and a suggestive wink, his reluctance soon faded.

Far too soon the walk terminated, even though the point of the stream Jeanne originally aimed for was about two thousand paces away. Approaching, they could see beasts, huge cattle almost two yards high at the shoulder, sporting impressive horns. One member of the team, an amateur expert in prehistoric animals, had claimed they were Aurochs. Aurochs or not, the creatures were eagerly grazing the tops of the tall purple grasses whilst totally ignoring the presence of the two little humans.

Tom noticed one of the bulls chancing his luck, and glanced away, not wanting to seem interested. Jeanne, however, had noticed. With a teasing sideways look, she grasped his hand and gave quick squeeze.

"You next, Tom?"

Tom, already warm, coloured up, causing her to burst out laughing. She let go of his hand, and laughing even louder, dashed off following Lisa.

Spurred into action he accelerated after her, catching her within a few strides. Arms stealing about her waist he tackled her, and they fell together in a tangle of arms and legs. Straightway, they were clasped in an embrace that Tom had dreamt of since the moment he first laid eyes on the beautiful, feisty woman.

“Calm doon big’ yun,” she said. “Nae but a bittie longer ‘n’ we can be playin’ yon games. But is you wintin’ yon lads ‘n lassies ower there, tae hae a grand view of us’n’s cavortin’?”

Reluctantly, Tom stood. Secretly, he loved the rare occasions when she lapsed into her natural accent. Listening to the Highland lilt in her voice made his heart sing. Hands clasped, fingers intertwined, they continued towards the river. In due course they reached the bank and lay their cloaks on the black sand.

Dropping to the makeshift bedding, they sat for a moment, leaning against one another, enjoying the peace and quiet. The gently flowing water was of sufficient translucence that they could see the bottom clearly. Crouching on the warming sand, lay their little companion, on her front, lapping at the crystal clear water as though it was due to run out.

Jeanne turned to Tom with a somewhat questioning smile. “It hardly seems real, does it?”

Did she mean the place, the time, the adventure? Or did she mean that, despite the tremendous odds, they were finally here, now, together? Either way, Tom wasn’t about to let the question, or opportunity pass him by. Not this time.

“No, baby, it doesn’t,” he replied, voice gruff with emotion. Desire. An arm around her waist drew her close, and as their lips were drawn together, Tom felt himself falling into her bottomless green eyes.

What started off as excited, awkward fumbling soon sorted itself out as Mother Nature took over. To his delight, Tom discovered his many imaginings had not been wrong: Jeanne’s body was perfect, with a slim waist, and all the other pieces in the right places.

They lay together afterwards, enjoying the delight of each other’s presence and the warmth of touching skin. Jeanne, feeling a nudge on the side of her face, opened her eyes to see the little creature standing over her. Disoriented, she looked at the sun. Tom followed her gaze and leapt to his feet with a start.

“We must have dozed off. Good grief, it’s freezing,” he said, suddenly shivering.

"No alarm clock out here," Jeanne agreed, accepting the hand he offered.

He went still. She saw the remorse, the apology on his clean cut features. "Jeanne," he asked soberly, "are you sorry it was this way? A quickie wedding, Vegas style with no time for a real wedding night in five star accommodations?"

"Don't be a fool," she chided. Wrapping her arms around his lean waist, she pressed close in a way that let him know regrets were the last thing on her mind. "Any idiot can have a lavish wedding and spend their first night in a five star hotel. Gretna was more than enough for me. Anyway who beside us gets to have their honeymoon in a different time and place, while on a mission to save the world?"

"Sort of gives it an edge, huh?" he grinned, pulling away grudgingly from the warmth of her smooth skin.

"I'll say." The look she gave him was perfectly wicked, making his heart race and all sorts of thoughts leap to his mind. If only they had more time...

But Lisa, the little creature, was right. It was time to go. As they threw their clothes on, tugging the warm cloaks over their heads, Jeanne noticed the colour of the sun change in its reflection below them in the water. It was a horrifying sight, and utterly inexplicable to the twenty-first century Earth dwellers. The sudden chill became positively Arctic, they pulled their cloaks tighter. The reflection morphed into a shade of dark green with a black corona. Although in the sky, the original blazed brightly, the unexplained phenomena in the water persisted for a frightening ten minutes. They stood, unable to move. When it had passed, the sun's warmth returned.

Jeanne shivered. "Now that is something I could have done without on my honeymoon." She said her voice low and serious.

Her new husband, her secret husband, chuckled, sliding an arm about her shoulders. "Sorry babe. When we get back, I promise I'll take you where ever you wanna go."

"I'll keep you to that, when we get back," she cracked, over-emphasizing the 'when.'

Once more they strolled hand in hand along the riverbank, heading towards the camp,

the excitement of their tryst subdued by the strange magical sight. Before long they saw the tents, glinting white in the late afternoon sunshine, looking for the entire world like a cluster of golf balls half buried in the grass sea.

“Goin’ fine ‘ere, Guv,” shouted one of the Special Forces lads, the first to spot them.

Tall and fair, pure white skinned, and like his fellows, stripped to the waist. A crop of tangled snow white hair reached below his heavily tattooed and muscular shoulders. Now, remarking on his cheery attitude, the pair noticed no one else seemed to have been affected by the strange event that had left them with a feeling of utter dread.

“Hairs’ called ‘dreadlocks’,” Jeanne remarked to Tom, almost as though she was reading his thoughts.

She waved to the lad and was rewarded with the widest, whitest grin she’d ever received. “Rock on,” she called out to them, using one of her recently acquired sayings.

To which he and his colleagues punched their right fists in the air and in unison shouted back, “Johnny!” They then burst out laughing and whistling.

With a final wave, they strolled on through the other gangs of workers. All of them appeared happy and industrious, proven by the tents that were going up like wildfire inside the two circles of tightly interwoven stakes. Their spirits lifted at the obvious enjoyment the men and women were experiencing.

“Not long before we can start moving in,” informed Case, having stolen up behind them as they paused on their tour.

“I guess that must be the outer circle of tents almost done. Time to get the remainder of the gear packed away before these morning snows ruin it,” Jeanne replied.

“We’re working on it already,” came a rumbling comment.

“Can’t see why you need me,” Tom said feigning hurt. “Sometimes I feel completely left out of this entire operation.”

"I gotta have som'one to moan at," piped up Jeanne.

"I guess" Tom said sulkily, the smile on his face giving lie to the whole interaction and betraying his secret pleasure at all they'd shared earlier.

Jeanne and Tom moved on, still holding hands. Almost, he was afraid to let her go in case she floated away. As much as this expedition, Jeanne was a dream come true. Any other woman in his past paled in comparison. Right now, he felt he was riding high; the luckiest man in the world. The Expeditionary force's first close brush with death just three days beforehand had faded into insignificance in the light of the latest achievements; the camp was looking great.

"Mum!" there was a youthful shout from across the centre clearing. Jeanne turned to as Paul came running towards them. "Mum... Finn and Ny-mo want to speak to you both."

"Okay, be there soon, and don't think you're forgiven yet. There's going to be a lot more scrubbing and cleaning of pots and pans before that happens - and today is still far from over."

"Aw - Mum, but we just wanted to see Winn and Mira."

"That's enough," Jeanne replied firmly. Tom wisely kept his mouth shut as she added, "Off with you now. It's still K.P. for you!"

Samyaz

Croninn Territories

Day 8

Tom and Jeanne had joined with other couples away from the camp, taking a snatched opportunity to spend a night together. The fortress was completed and would be their permanent base.

Soon they could begin patrolling.

Lisa lay snoring gently, wrapped in the furs at their feet, she had not left Jeanne's side for almost two weeks, not that Jeanne was complaining, the creature was highly intelligent and a charming, and helpful companion.

Tom reached out with a bare foot and gave the creature a little nudge to stop her snoring.

"Nae, leave her be Tom" chided Jeanne, "she's comfy an' all."

Tom quickly brought his foot back under the covers "Cold out."

"Dinnat stick oot yer bines then."

"I'm tired," he said.

"Aye, me an'all, let's try for a bittie a kip."

"Later" he said his voice husky. He ran his hand over her stomach. She gave a low moan

in the back of her throat, and arched her back, giving herself to him.

~

Jeanne opened her eyes to a shocking scream; it came from their right, between where they lay and the fortress. The dark was giving way to a milky dawn, and it was snowing gently. There was a damp mist around them, restricting their outlook to a few yards. Jeanne and Tom dressed swiftly, she had pulled on her boots and was about to follow the direction of where the scream had come from, another, more bloodcurdling, more terrifying came to their ears. Lisa rushed past them snarling, exhibiting a fury that was so out of character with her usual gentle demeanor.

Out of the mist came horrors such as Jeanne had never imagined in her life. They stood at least chest high and had eight legs, walking on six whilst they held the other two in front of themselves. The two raised appendages were armed with the most vicious pair of snapping pincers imaginable. The creatures were black in color, and were striding relentlessly in one direction.

With nothing to defend themselves against such overwhelming numbers, for they could see what looked like hundreds heading towards them. They took to their heels and ran, blindly at first, away from the marching creatures.

As they ran, they became aware of more screams and calls for help from their right. Instinctively, they turned and ran towards the sounds. Lisa had disappeared and Jeanne feared for her safety.

Ducking through a breach in the relentlessly advancing creatures, they came upon the others, grouped together in the midst of a low circular group of rocks; nearby a fire still smouldered. The Troopers were wielding whatever weapons they could find; everything from swords to spades, axes and hoes, facing the monsters which by now had surrounded them. Grabbing a bunch of burning stalks from the fire, Tom joined them; Jeanne taking up a position alongside him with a shovel in her hands.

The horrors either side of them appeared to take no notice, it was only the creatures whose path they blocked which slowed and began snapping their pincers and waving their front limbs in a threatening manner.

The horror's intention; to make their way unhindered towards the seashore, but the humans stood between them and it. Any living creature obstructing their march was attacked; and they attacked without hesitation, their pincers were sufficient to inflict fatal injuries, able to slice through flesh and snap bone.

The little band of humans fought valiantly but without noticeable success for the creatures were encased in a hard exoskeleton which proved impervious to anything they had by way of weapons. In moments the monsters were upon them, tearing and slashing with those horrific blades. The humans fell back, in complete disarray.

Eight of them succumbed immediately, their bodies covered by the fiendish black creatures, which proceeded to pierce them through a tube which came from their necks. The nightmares then began to suck their blood. Some of the fallen were still alive and their screams haunted Jeanne for many years after.

Jeanne gave a cry, Tom spun in time to see Lisa appear from out of the grass behind her, the little female rushed at a hissing creature in danger of overwhelming Jeanne. Showing surprising courage she rushed at the creature, dipping beneath the snapping outstretched pincers, she began tearing at the creature's underbelly with her teeth, in moments it reared up and collapsed.

"Stab them underneath!" a call came from Tom's left; someone else must have witnessed the little creature's attack.

A young lad named Lixie, seeing his new girlfriend dismembered in the most horrific fashion by three of the horrors, dashed at a group of creatures with a wild yell, swinging left and right two handed with a shovel. He used it like a scythe and tore into the black horrors, his blows falling at head height. The monsters fell back from his onslaught. The other troopers saw this, and along with the advice to stab the creatures low, they took fresh courage. Following Lixie's example the humans attacked, Jeanne was beside Tom swinging her shovel as well as any man.

Tom now hefted an axe which had been used to cut thicker rushes the previous evening. Shoulder to shoulder the two leaders stood aiming their blows at the frightening heads and the creature's abdomens, taking care to duck and dive away from the snapping pincers. Even with their renewed efforts, the creatures were still threatening to overwhelm them, for as many as they dispatched, more followed.

Lisa circled around a creature which was attempting to attack Jeanne from behind, and snarling and jumping left and right, endeavored to distract it, the black creature was truly a frightening beast, hissing loudly and snapping its pincers all around the little heroine's head. Tom screamed Jeanne's name and tried to force his way through to her, how they had become separated he couldn't guess, but she was at least five paces away, he feared he wouldn't reach her in time, but he needn't have worried.

In the moment that he thought all was lost; Lisa once again managed to duck under the swinging pincers and once more tore a lump out of a hissing creature's soft fleshy underbelly. The horror expired falling on top of her, trapping the little creature. Jeanne ran back to join the group during a momentary lull.

Lisa struggled to free herself; try as he might Tom couldn't reach her, for another of the beasts loomed up on him, demanding his attention. He smashed it in the head with his axe; it scuttled off to one side, dying. It was immediately replaced by two of its fellows. When he finally managed to look back in Lisa's direction he could see one of the horrors had already lifted her in its pincers, slicing through her abdomen, killing her instantly.

Tom shouted her name in total distress and with complete disregard for his own safety, swinging his axe like a madman, he tore through a gap, leaping at the beast which was about to pierce what remained of her still trembling body with its proboscis. His first blow cleaved the blood stained pincer from its spindly limb, the creature hesitated momentarily then turned towards him, its other pincer swinging in an arc upwards towards his head, without a thought he ducked under the swinging, snapping lethal appendage and struck it between its eyes with his axe, cleaving its skull open. The creature died instantly.

Then they were past, continuing on their way, moving towards the sea shore, none even looked back, it was as though the battle with the humans had never taken place.

Worst of all, the humans' lost nineteen brave troopers that fateful morning and of course the faithful little biped Lisa that had given its life protecting Jeanne.

They had killed fifty three of the beasts, a tiny fraction of the vast numbers that extended hundreds of yards to either side of them.

It was a blooded and wounded group of eleven who staggered back to the fort to tell

their tale; Jeanne cradled the bloody remains of the little biped in her arms. Case and a group of young bloods swiftly hitched up an empty wagon, and with a score of body bags, made their way to the spot to bring back what they could of the dead.

It was a sad time for them all. They buried the young men and women close to the Fort and erected two massive cairns over their bodies. Jeanne ordered that anyone passing outside the stockade's gates in future should wear full armour.

The fort was named Lixib after the courageous youngster who lost his life revenging his girlfriend.

The Croninn knew them as them the Samyaz, for they were devils from the black depths of the forests which surrounded the shores of the sea.

## Tom's first patrol

### Day 12

It was a few nights later, wrapped up against the cold wind, when Tom set off on horseback with a joint Croninn, Brosynan and Human patrol, following the river towards a nearby estuary.

After building a fire in a centre circle, the Brosynan had shown how rather than waste precious wood which had to be collected from the nearest forest, dried rushes burnt well and gave off a pleasing aroma, but with less smoke.

The patrol had brought with them from the cookhouse tents, a few containers of the Fort's evening repast, a warming stew, creating an enjoyable communal meal. They all crowded round the fire, dipping mess-tins into the large cook pots once it had been reheated.

With relish they sat in a circle, digging out chunks of fresh meat and vegetables, some pieces easily as large as a fist. The meal was delicious, and more than enough for all of them to eat their fill.

After the meal they remained sat around the fire, swapping stories of their lives in their home lands, a few cans of beer were passed out and the night was interspersed with lusty singing. A couple of guitars appeared and the soldiers set to teaching each other bawdy songs; it was a enjoyable time of getting to know each other. The Brosynan and Croninn warriors joined in, clapping, hooting and stamping to the rhythms.

One of the young special services troopers who wielded a guitar as proficiently as his sword began singing a rousing song which had recently crossed over into the secular hit parade. It wasn't long before they all joined in.

i

Used to know a fella, was the strongest of them all  
But when it came to women he was only two foot tall  
This fella's name was Samson and his dolly was a peach  
And all day long old Samson his dolly's name would preach

ii

Delilah was her name but she loved a Philistine  
Who tried to kill poor Samson, but failed time after time  
Samson wasn't worried, he didn't really care  
Until Delilah went and cut off all his hair

iii

No more killing lions that would just be crass  
No more smashing armies, with the jawbone of an ass  
They threw him into jail, and locked up all the doors  
And left him there to die, sick and covered o'er with sores

iv

They stuck needles in his eyes just to make him blind  
But forget about his hair which grew down to his behind  
And one day while boasting about how big they were  
They took him to the Temple and made him just stand there

v

Samson said to a lad who had led him by the hand  
Take me to the pillars, that's where I want to stand  
Then as the kings laughed, and called him weak and humble  
Samson pushed out with his arms, until he felt the columns rumble

vi

It wasn't long before the roof, made of marble white and shiny  
Toppled and fell inwards, on top of the high and mighty.  
It wasn't long before the roof, made of marble white and shiny  
Toppled and fell inwards, on top of the high and mighty.

Stamp, stamp, clap... stamp, stamp clap..... They continued singing it through at least five times until finally in utter exhaustion it ended; the applause and hoots went on for a long while after the cheerful voices faded out.

Tom learned more about the men and women under his command that night than he had in the whole time the force had been together. It was late when they decided to take to their bedrolls. Not much if anything had been discussed concerning future plans, never mind, thought Tom; it had given everyone an opportunity to bond. It was with a pang that he settled down in his tent, missing Jeanne uppermost in his mind.

As they rolled into their sleeping bags, the human elements of the patrol spoke amongst themselves quietly, some of them trying to guess how far into the past they had travelled, consensus was that the Aurochs dated back some fifty million years, so it could be any time around then, and the constellations bore that out, there were some who argued that they could even be in the future or even on another planet, although the presence and majesty of the moon, so easily recognizable, gave that suggestion a lie.

Tom lay for a while mesmerized by the absolute beauty of the heavenly display. The sky, full of stars was truly amazing to observe. Although his view was frequently obscured by huge clouds scuttling across the sky, pushed on by high powerful winds, the sight was almost overwhelming in its majesty.

As he lay in the solitude of his pup tent, Tom's mind wandered back to his youth. One of the teachings which had so puzzled him throughout his early enforced church attendances bubbled up in his thoughts. Giants and gods, ever since Ny-mo had expounded his theory, Tom's mind had struggled over an idea; sons of gods laying with daughters of men, their children becoming giants, and wasn't there something about them also laying with animals and creating abominations, part monster, part human.

Well there are enough references to that phenomenon throughout the world; the

anthropologist part of him confirmed. I guess there might be some substance in it somewhere. I'm sure it's in Genesis, a weird couple of sentences without any bona fide reason for their existence. He struggled to remember the Chapter and verse where he had read it, but couldn't. Perhaps I'll see if someone has a Bible where I can look it up, he thought, try as he might he couldn't rid himself of the feeling that it was relevant.

The moon rose, climbing sedately; at least it still looks the same, he thought. Its passage almost eerie as the white painted landscape was splashed with black by massive moving shadows thrown by the racing clouds. He lay wrapped in his sleeping bag, listening to the growing thunder of distant waves pounding on the shore line's rocks, his thoughts as he finally drifted off to sleep; were full of Jeanne.

~

"Hey hun, the Croninn has a custom pretty much like the Cajun folks back home." Were almost Tom's first words to Jeanne on return from the week long patrol.

"What's that?" she said from the depths of his shoulder, holding him close.

"They jump a broomstick to indicate that they are pledged to each other, I reckon it's about time we came out in the open, just about everyone knows or has guessed about us anyways." His breath was warm in her hair; Jeanne tingled at the feel of his strong arms and the husky sound of his voice.

"Is that by way of yet another proposal, Doctor Pinkerton?" she leaned back to look straight in his eyes. - "I take it you want to get me to jump over some mankie old yard brush, and class it as every woman's dream wedding?"

"I guess, and then you can wear that ring which cost me a king's ransom on your finger where it's supposed to be."

"I'll think about it," she said snuggling back even deeper into his arms.

"I was chatting to Ny-mo out on patrol, and asked him about that strange phenomena we experienced, you know, the sun's reflection going weird on us?"

"Aye."

"Well it seems that it is the enemy, the giants, their force, magic, call it what you will, breaking down the Croninn Shaman's own protective shield."

"So is that the type of thing we could expect if the Shaman are unable to hold the giants out?"

"That would be a tiny part of it. And it wouldn't just be a reflection it would be the real thing."

Jeanne shuddered as she thought back to the moment.

## Devastation at Ghe-r-ghe

### Northern Plains

#### Day 37

It dawned a bright day; the sun flashed on the high, snow filled gullies of the nearby mountains. Twin peaks stood stark against the azure sky. Wispy clouds clustered around the craggy summits, looking for all like a bride's veil being whipped by a light breeze across her groom's face. The rough stone filled track was hard on their mounts making it necessary to wrap their hooves, pasterns and fetlocks in leather, protecting them from the sharp flints.

Jeanne capped her eyes with her right hand and squinted against the bright sunshine looking for signs of the pass through which Ny-mo said they would have to travel.

For five days the column had been following the course of the wide river across the open plain. Now they began to climb, two Croninn warriors were riding ahead of the convoy, picking the best path for their six loaded wagons.

Tom turned to John who rode to his left, "Tell me John, the history of these Chin, who are they, and are they human?"

"That they are, my friend," the Scot replied, "but they are not of the original peoples of this land. As you know even the Croninn are not the original inhabitants."

Ny-mo had dropped back alongside them, at a signed invitation from John he took up the story.

'According to our history, there came a tribe of red skinned humans, they called themselves "Numunuh", which means: The People. Once they roamed the great steppes

to the west of the Blue Mountains following the buffalo. They did not conquer the local Brosynan for the diminutive people had little response to the fierce bowmen. The red skins took control of the plains, bringing a semblance of peace. They integrated with some of the Brosynan tribes, becoming over many generations the plains folk, the Croninn.

‘The Croninn moved south towards the middle plains, where the plains were more like the People’s homelands, the true Brosynan remained, for they were more comfortable closer to the snow fields of the northern plains. Croninn settled the southern lands; they began to grow crops and husband beasts. They built permanent settlements, farms, villages and even towns, which they fortified against new invaders.

‘These were the Chin, from what I can construe, they were once part of nomadic tribes from the east, their skins are yellow, their eyes slanted. They somehow, in the same way as the Numunuh had done, passed through one of the tears between this world and yours. They were swift to attack the Brosynan, forcing them out of their lands pushing them further north.’

John took an opportunity to interject as Ny-mo paused, “That was when I became involved with the little guys, some two hundred or more years ago. A continuous war seems to have been simmering between them and the Chin ever since.”

Ny-mo took up the story again, ‘These Chin warriors, who are once again causing destruction and death on the central plains, are not the same clans as those against who my people originally fought. They have allied themselves with the Anakim who attack from the south. Magic, built and spun by our Shaman is all that is stopping the giants, but that magic has no effect on the Chin, for they are human, not the spawn of hell.

‘For now, our biggest concern must be the forces we currently face. These are named Shishmanid, a clan of barbaric nomads who have been welcomed and recruited by the Watchers in order to help the giants rid themselves of the children of the Doubter. I know this for my brothers are adept at extracting information from captured enemies.

‘Were it not for our Medicine men, who have built barriers of force across the continent, and who through their magical presence are managing to keep the giants under some semblance of control. I fear the enemy would have accomplished far more than just these annoying raids.’

Suddenly Ny-mo stopped signing as they crested a rise. Aghast, they watched as black tendrils of smoke rose lazily into the sky. Ny-mo had been planning to camp the night close to the Croninn village of Ghe-r-ghe.

Someone had arrived before them.

The village had been sacked. Nothing remained but burnt out shells. Those inhabitants, who had escaped, hiding in the nearby hills, were slowly returning. Their eyes were dull as they shuffled through the ashes and burnt out remnants of their homes, searching for whatever thing of worth that might be redeemable.

The bodies of their families and friends had been piled in a heap and cremated in a mass funeral pyre the day before. The ashes were still smoking. The sickly sweet smelling pall of death hung heavy in the air.

Jeanne watched Tom closely as they carefully picked their way towards what once was the village centre. She could see her partner was struggling to hold back his anger, little knew he, that inside her heart she wept, but she was thankful that she had insisted Paul stayed at Fort Lixeb.

They made their way through the ruined village in silence. A silence broken only by the soft jingle of their equipment and the muffled sounds of their horses' hooves, the soft padding interspersed by the nervous coughs of those troopers who were most affected by the unholy stench.

Livestock lay where it had been slaughtered. A loud droning came from swarms of huge black flies which rose in clouds from the bloated, distorted bodies of cattle and horses. Fat crows hopped around the swollen carcasses, their raucous calls tearing at the air. The reek of rotting and burnt flesh was everywhere.

They rode slowly, some with hands across their noses trying not to breathe too deeply of the fetid air.

The horses were skittish, snorting to clear their nostrils of the smell as the column made its way past the cadavers.

## Search for the Chin

### Day 40

Accompanying the mounted Special Forces troops and the Croninn plainsmen were fifty Brosynan warriors mounted on their fabulous plains runners. John Wilson had assisted in their training with the unfamiliar crossbows. John, even though he was the oldest amongst them, was recognized by the UK and US Special Forces troopers as a competent leader and comrade in arms by virtue of his skills with any weapon, his knowledge and experience of plains warfare, and his connections to the Brosynan clans.

One half of Ny-mo's fifty Croninn infantry carried pole arm weapons and swords, lances, spears and halberds, along with razor sharp, double edged Tungsten carbide swords, enabled them to deal effectively with a mounted attack.

The other half was armed with powerful crossbows and similar swords; each bowman carried fifty bolts. The heavy iron bolts with their barbed points were able to pierce virtually any armor at a considerable distance.

Joining with them on the expedition was a detachment of twenty Croninn plains warriors; the formidable horse mounted fighters were also under Ny-mo's command, and rode as flankers either side of the Special Forces column.

The lethal combination of the two bodies complimented the heavily armored Special Forces on their powerful horses.

It would seem that not many enemies would be able to stand against Jeanne's troops. However the hit and run tactics of the Chin with their 'scorched earth' technique of attacking and destroying the lightly protected outlying villages was causing the Croninn considerable loss of life and limb.

Ny-mo rode back to join the two humans, he was noticeably frustrated, 'If only they would stand and fight, instead of running and hiding like the cowards they undoubtedly are, we would soon have the measure of them,' he signed.

'My understanding is that it's not their bows we should concern ourselves with; it's their 'thunder weapons' my spies tell me that they throw lightning bolts, full of fire and with a noise that causes the very mountains to shake in fear.'

"That would need to be seen before it could be believed." Tom said his mind racing.

"I would rather not see it, if what you say is true," interjected John.

Ny-mo signed, 'These Shishmanid do not follow the accepted rules of warfare; they have no concept of honor or chivalry, to them retreat is but an element of attack. To them defeating a foe, as we have already seen is to totally wipe out everything; every creature, and every person, man, woman and child. Should we finally meet up with them, one of their tactics will be to attack with a vastly inferior force, then to turn tail and run. Then naturally, we would want to pursue them and claim total victory. That would be what they desire, for the main complement of their troops lie await in ambush. Their intention has forever been the entire annihilation of their enemy, they show no quarter. I have closely measured our own position and am constantly alert that we would do well to be aware of that underhanded tactic.

'If all possible, the Shishmanid will shy from engaging in hand-to-hand combat with another force. They will initiate their attack using arrows from a distance, to maim and to kill their enemy and their horses. Once they have rendered their enemy too weak to continue, the Shishmanid cavalry will move in to finish them off with sword and spear. To you this may seem cowardly, but to them the final victory justifies any means necessary.'

The sun was beginning its descent into the mountains ahead of them as they made camp; the sky daubing itself with brilliant shades of red, yellow and mauve. Clouds bunched overhead, promising the possibility of rain before dawn.

Their meal was tiny, after five days not much remained of their rations. The Shishmanid with their scorched earth tactics had left little of worth in their wake; pickings for the pursuers were meager. Before long they might have to abandon the chase.

"What you think, Tom?" Jeanne asked, looking down at the Spartan fare. "Can we catch these bastards? Or should we call it a day? -- It's not gonna be too long before we're out of food."

## The Skirmish

### Contact

#### Day 42

It was but a short hour before sunrise; a faint glow of light on the horizon heralded the approaching dawn. It had been a long cold night.

Jeanne pulled her cloak tighter around her shoulders; leaning forward she stirred the small fire with a stick before placing it on the glowing coals. The night chill and early morning dew had seeped through the damp cloth of her cloak, and her teeth chattered momentarily.

She leant back against her saddle and stared deep into the fire. Mesmerized by the flickering flames, for a moment she had the feeling that someone had come up behind her, Jeanne turned to see, but no one was there.

She stood up. With her toe she nudged the sleeping Tom; she moved across to wake John, but he sat before she reached him.

“Good morning, Boss lady, how goes it with you?”

“Fine, but hungry,” Jeanne said. “If we make no contact today, we’ll break it off and go back to the Fort.” she picked up her sword from behind her saddle and slid the blade into its scabbard behind her shoulders.

The sun began to make its presence known; the distant horizon lightening imperceptibly.

“Okay,” said Tom.

No sooner had she the blade in place, a desperate shout broke the silence.

“Stand to! Stand to!” a cry came from the far side of the encampment.

The fluttering sound of arrows in flight caused them to dive for their helmets. The flights of iron tipped death struck all around, horses and men screamed in pain. A second flight of indiscriminate death rained down from the sky causing more outbursts of equine distress. Jeanne felt two heavy blows on her armor. In horror she watched helpless as Case without his helmet, fell with an arrow through his throat. Blood from the wound poured in dark streams from his severed jugular, gushing across his face and chest.

A strangled cry of anguish at the loss of her friend broke from her lips. Drawing her sword, she stood and strode towards the milling horses.

“Jeanne! Stop!” Tom called, climbing to his feet. In his bewilderment he began running after her in an attempt to stop her apparent suicidal actions.

A more knowledgeable John, his shield held high and his favorite weapon, his Morningstar in his hand, strode after them. Taking hold of the reins of the first armored horse she came to, Jeanne swung herself onto its back.

Arrows began buzzing towards her; the Shishmanid aiming their barbed death at the easy target in the morning gloaming.

To the enemy bowmen it must have seemed impossible that they missed, the arrows were spinning away from her, rebounding from her armor. It was as though she were protected by magic; arrows were clattering and clunking to the ground around her, the barbs punching ineffectively against her armor, the points pinging from her horses’ armored head, shoulders and back.

Jeanne wrenched on the reins, the horse spun in reaction to the metal bar dragging its mouth around, her heels raked its ribs and the well schooled beast leapt forward in response. Her two male companions were close behind her.

Within moments their challenge was answered by the Shishmanid and four horsemen charged from out of the woods at full gallop, their curved swords swinging over their heads, roaring their defiance.

The three responded with loud cries. The Chin were approaching fast, secure in the knowledge that they could soon cut these foolish idiots from their saddles. The three launched their attack first; Tom swung his sword in a low horizontal sweep at the nearest warrior's waist, the modern, razor sharp carbon steel blade cut easily through leather armor, flesh and bone in a single blow. Swinging up, then downwards with her blade, Jeanne cleaved the next rider from the top of his unprotected head, almost to the centre of his chest.

Pulling his blade clear from the hardly recognizable mass of flesh, Tom spun his mount; with two swift strikes he cut the nearest Shishmanid from his saddle. The remaining warrior, his face covered by a silver mask, spun his horse at the last moment in a frantic attempt to escape, too late, for John had reached him. The artist swung his Morningstar; the spiked iron ball on its short chain stove the luckless man's head in, splinters of bone, and mush from his brain splattered all around. He fell from the saddle of his wiry horse, instantly dead. His silver face mask clattered to the floor beside what was left of his head, the eyeholes staring blankly at the sky.

Shocked at the speedy dispatch of their champions, the Shishmanid bowmen had ceased firing, but they were quick to recover and the arrows began to buzz towards the three once more.

"Follow me! Now!" Jeanne called, and spurred her horse once again towards the enemy positions. John and the still elated Tom, shields held across their bodies sped their steeds after her. Protected by their armor, they were unharmed by the flying missiles. Within moments they were amongst the un-mounted archers.

Jeanne's horse took a deep sword blow to its neck through a gap in its armor, and with a shriek began to crumble beneath her. Leaping from the stricken creature she landed amongst a group of enemy bowmen, they had thrown down their bows and drawn their wicked curved blades. In distain she allowed her sword to flow where it would, her first sweeping blow cut through their blades as though they were stalks of grass. The return swing of her blade, as she took a pace forward, cut through armor, flesh and bone as though it were no more substantial than the early morning mist.

She kept striding forward; her blade dispensing death with each blow. The Shishmanid fell back, unable to touch her with their thrusting and swinging blades. Tom and John had joined her, and on either side were likewise dealing death in handfuls.

The remaining Troopers, having re-grouped began to take the fight to the Shishmanid. Both on horseback and afoot they were rushing to join their three leaders. The twang of crossbows began to ring out. Ny-mo's bowmen had found targets and were making their bolts count. A platoon of Plains warriors braving the swarms of arrows buzzing through the air, jogged in formation across the wide killing zone, eager to join the fight.

The Shishmanid ambush soon became a rout, but a rout that the Shishmanid had not expected; it was total devastation. The Croninn warriors were avenging their fallen, no quarter given, death of the enemy was the only resolution that they were prepared to accept.

A hoot belled from the right of their position, thundering through the morning mist came the Brosynan warriors on their formidable mounts, lances held upright they approached at full charge. Dipping their lances almost as one they crashed into the line of Shishmanid cavalry who themselves were about to charge the Special Forces and the Croninn from the flank. The carnage was complete. Their work done, broken lances were discarded in favour of their recently issued melee weapons, swords, axes, maces and Morning-stars appeared in powerful fists and began to dispatch death.

Having decimated the Shishmanid cavalry, the ferocious little hunters and their terrifying mounts fell on the rear of the Shishmanid infantry, who were by now taking a terrible beating from Jeanne's forces who were full in their faces.

It was not long before the Shishmanid began throwing down their weapons in surrender, but memories of the death and destruction that the Chin had so recently heaped upon the unarmed and helpless villagers did not help to slow retribution. The killing ceased when the last Shishmanid lay dead.

Blood splattered, Jeanne walked to where John and Tom had ended up fighting back to back. A pile of dead Shishmanid bodies surrounded the two, testifying to the intensity of the battle that had encompassed them.

John had taken a cut to his shoulder, the armor finally giving way under countless

sustained blows; the blood flowed down his arm and chest.

A Croninn medicine man appeared and with a red hot knife cauterized the lesion, blood bubbled as the knife fused the wound, knitting the flesh together. With a long drawn out moan, John fainted into Tom's arms.

After ensuring the Scot was okay, Jeanne made her way to where Case lay.

The big man lay on his back, his sightless eyes staring into the sky. His torn jugular no longer poured out his life blood; for his heart had stilled not long after the arrow ripped his throat apart.

Jeanne knelt alongside Case; with a gentle hand she closed the snake eater's eyelids, mouthing a quiet promise of revenge. She rose to her feet, her heart heavy and sighed deeply. "What is this life? That we should be born, just to die," she quoted to herself. Tom having passed John over to the human medics had followed her, and stood by her side.

"What do you mean ..."we're born to die?" ... We're born to live. Otherwise we wouldn't be born..." was all he could give by way of comfort.

"Get me a report, please Tom, names of our men and any other troopers who have fallen and how many of the Chin are dead as well..... What do you suggest by way of funerals; do you think that there will be sufficient timber for pyres to be found at this height, or should we take our people down the mountain to lay them to rest?"

Tom hid his surprise; it had been a while since Jeanne had requested help for any reason.

'Ny-mo, can any of your fighters be spared to scout close by to search for the Shishmanid camp? I bet it's not far from here.' Tom asked.

'It shall be done, brother.'

"Good, then maybe we can destroy the last of this lot." Turning, he called "John!"

"Yes, my friend," the tall Scot appeared from behind the corralled horses, his arm and shoulder now bandaged by the SAS medics.

"Can your Tirnano make their way alone back to the plains?"

"Sure, no problem."

"I think it would be best if they went back the way we came up the mountain, make sure we are not being followed. We will continue in this direction; meet up with them back at the Fort."

"Okay, I'll pass it on."

~

'Jeanne, we can waste time no longer. Daylight will shortly be upon us. If we remain here we are surely asking for yet another night of danger, we should make for safety.'

"I'm sorry, Ny-mo. I fear my mind has not been my own since poor Case was cruelly taken."

'That is understandable, my dear Jeanne. He was a loyal and trusted companion to us all. It is not easy to put aside a friendship in just a few hours. Perhaps it is time we return to the Central Plains.'

"Break off the search? I agree. As you say, they are no longer in this area, I can only assume we have seriously disturbed them and they have fled."

## Ny-Mo's Village

### Day 68

The remainder of the night passed without further incident, the path down the mountain being wider and not so overgrown was easier to follow. Before the dawn broke, they were following the course of a river through a wide open valley; the clear starlight night remained bright, even though the pale lantern of the moon had long fled the scene, they were able to see sufficiently well enough to make a good rate of progress across the open fields. It was towards mid afternoon when they came to the outskirts of Ny-mo's home village, bustling with life as the exhausted troopers rode into the central square.

Stripping the saddles from their horses they set them to graze in a nearby field where they were tended and groomed by a number of eager Croninn children.

The folk streamed from their homes to welcome home Ny-mo, their beloved leader. Then meals, such as would have been expected to have stripped bare every larder in the town and every cultivated field for miles around, were prepared for them.

The troopers at first protested at the extreme generosity of the Croninn, but acquiesced and ate their fill of the roast suckling, the crisp spitted fowl and numerous fruits and freshly baked flat breads, liberally washing the splendid feast down with flagons of ale and cups of wine.

"We must have munched through at least six months worth of rations," said a glassy eyed Tom, loosening his belt for the third time. "Have your people the means to replace these provisions we've just scoffed?"

'I think you have consumed almost the entire amount yourself, my friend; never have I seen so much shoveled into one hole without filling it,' joked Ny-mo, 'But fear not, it has been a good year and their stores are yet still full. They are delighted to provide for our sustenance and pleasure.'

"That's the truth Prince. Tom has indeed a cave of a stomach to fill," said Jeanne.

"Jest all you like, you two were not far behind me," he waved to a passing girl who was carrying a wine jug, 'Just a little more to make sure my digestion is going to operate correctly,' he clicked as she filled his jug to the brim.

His two companions laughed loudly, Tom glanced at Jeanne; it was good to see her finally relaxing.

~

'Jeanne, soon shall we be receiving important visitors. I have acknowledged this morning a message. Two Chin knights, emissaries from their King, arrive within the week. They have demanded an audience with you.'

"How could they know that we are here?"

"Well, it's been nigh on a month since we last had contact; I would expect that a report on our little skirmish has been passed to him by now, and I'm sure we've been followed every step." John said.

Tom chuckled, "I would hazard that if we had not, then by now, all of us would have been posted as officially missing... Ny-mo, your hospitality has been overwhelming; that along with your people's generosity makes it increasingly more difficult each day for us to make the decision to return to Fort Lixeb.

"However, let us see what these two fops want," Jeanne cut in. "Then I think we should consider returning back to the fort. The place will soon be falling down if I leave Yvonne in command much longer; mind you her pal, Amy is more than capable of keeping her in line so maybe it will still be standing. And I miss my lad, no guessing what he's been up to whilst we've been gone."

The fort stood about a hundred miles from Ny-mo's little village of Rasnov, at least a week's trek away.

'Do you think we shall ever be able to drag Tom away from the kitchen?' Jeanne clicked, practicing her recently acquired skill.

Ny-mo laughed long and loud, 'And that too, my dear Jeanne, is another serious matter for conjecture, perhaps one day we can spend some time considering the possibility of it.' He replied.

Arm in arm Tom and Jeanne strolled back to the inn where they shared a room, a room which the pair had hardly left for the entire month. Climbing the stairs to their love nest, Jeanne dismissed the coming meeting with the Chin ambassadors in favor of a more interesting get-together.

~

The Lizards had accepted Ny-mo's offer to use the flat fields on the river side of the village to hone the Trooper's skills. Twenty-five troopers at a time were enjoying a time of relaxation in the village, whilst the remainder were billeted in the field under battle training conditions. After a week, the rested troops would be replaced by troops on exercise, the next twenty-five on rotation.

~

Jeanne dressed in her full armor; it had been scrubbed with sharp sand from the river and shone like new, the rust and the many splashes of dried on blood painstakingly removed.

The Lizards had taken to wearing surcoats over their black body suit armor, a blue lizard emblem crawling across and down from the shoulder, stood out sharply against white wool.

Oops forgot that was still there... Jeanne considered for a moment the blurb which had come with the suits, a smile flickered over her face, she slipped a plastic info strip from her pocket. I must be sat inside a flipping fortune here, Casting her eyes over it she read:

This Armour is woven from a high-tech, nano-matrix, dark black fabric, which is pliable but soft. The fabric is a layered micro-weave of Kevlar, Twaron and Heracron fibers, skinned with a titanium-ceramic alloy symbiotic mesh, resistant to heat, bladed weapons, falls, impacts and small-arms fire. The nano-matrix fabric receives and amplifies intra-muscular nerve transmissions from the person wearing the suit to affect its density and movement-similar to modern bio-electronic prosthetics. Like an insect's exoskeleton, the mesh amplifies by a factor of 3 times the wearer's natural strength. The vest, cowl helmet and mask are reinforced with contoured armoured plates and wired for cellular and radio communication....

I just wish the flipping radios would work, she reflected as she replaced the slip.

Her black helmet had been polished, the visor burnished. It looked as though Jeanne had been delivered a brand new replacement. One of the village artisans had repaired her shield, and then painstakingly painted three blue lizards on it as a tribute insignia.

During their rotation time in the village, each of her troopers had been treated likewise. They stood alongside their massive chargers looking resplendent. The huge beasts were well fed and groomed, the entire troop looking immaculate. A powerful, experienced and well-presented body of fighting men was receiving the Chin King's envoys; Jeanne waited on horseback to one side.

"Mount!" Tom gave the order. As one, the troopers took to their saddles. The foot soldiers with Ny-mo and his young captain to their van came to attention and shouldered their weapons.

Two Ambassadors rode into the village square at the head of a long column of mounted Chin warriors. Flags and streamers flying from pretty lances, lances more suited for the jousting field, lances that would last no more than thirty ineffective seconds in a real battle. They sat astride appealing and delicate horses, obviously chosen for their parade ground looks, each being the correct shade of tan. They trotted almost in step.

Like the lances, neither man nor horse could survive for long in the screaming, cursing and violent, bloody and deadly cacophony of battle.

Jeanne almost laughed aloud as she watched the troop tripping daintily towards her, as it was she could hear sniggers coming from beside her.

The entire entourage came to a perfectly precise halt. The two knights accepted Tom's salute on behalf of their King, and then assisted by their squires, dismounted.

"We bring greetings from his gracious and beneficent majesty, King Michaelos lord of all, ruler of Ortensia, Hutolaponia and of all these lands, to the person named Jeanne."

"Jeanne McLennan Pinkerton von dem Felden, Commander of the Knights of the Lizard, of the brotherhood of the sword, Inspector out of Aberdeen, first in line to the throne of Blackburn, gives greetings to his highness King Bogoff of the Chinnie Chin Chin." Tom responded, his voice thick with anger. Jeanne could hardly contain her laughter.

Tom had been instantly aware of the obvious slight in the lack of formality. The manner in which the Chin monarch's Ambassador had addressed Jeanne, not providing any title, was tantamount to an insult.

"State your business," said Tom darkly.

"It has come to the notice of his majesty King Michaelos, that you have in your custody an outlaw, we have been ordered to collect and bring the person who calls himself Prince Ny-mo, who stands convicted of the murder of numerous of his majesties troopers, and false claims to a throne that will never be his, to justice. This person is to be brought before his gracious majesty King Michaelos, in order he may be justly punished, and this futile war between the kingdom of Chin and the outlaws of Croninn brought to an end."

"That is a command that I am not yet prepared to comply with," Jeanne said her voice low and ominous, "what proof have you that Mickie boy will honour this truce."

"His gracious majesty, King Michaelos has commanded me to convey that in his deliberation this action will in no doubt appease him. In addition he is offering his eldest daughter as wife to this Jeanne, to seal the agreement."

"How know you all this?" Jeanne asked, "For it is my knowledge that Prince Ny-mo is a prisoner of yours, and has been incarcerated for six years." She looked at Ny-mo who gave her a grin and a wink.

The pompous envoy ignored her and continued with his prepared speech, "His majesty King Michaelos, has commanded me to inform you of this, in order that you will understand his reasoning and comply with his commands; in addition we have one thousand gold crowns to pay this Jeanne, for your good works in capturing this foul mercenary and for apprehending and imprisoning his murdering outlaw mob."

"And if I refuse to release this err ... personage to you..... what then?" Tom asked his voice measured and dangerously quiet.

"Then I have orders to seize this criminal, and to arrest you all and take you along with this brigand to Obuda for trial."

"How many men do you command, Sir Knight?"

"I have over three hundred of his majesty King Michaelos' finest dragoons at my command."

"And pray, how many men have I at my disposal?" queried Tom.

The knight looked at Jeanne's assembled troops and ran a quick mental calculation, "You have twenty-six," he sneered.

"Is that all?"

"If you include the foot soldiers, then I surmise you have fifty more."

"Good, you have counted well, and you consider that as you have a superior force, we should immediately submit to your demands," Jeanne asked quietly, her voice carrying only as far as the two knights.

"Undoubtedly, and now enough of this chit chat, I speak not to women camp followers, even though you hide your face behind that ridiculous helmet. I demand that you surrender your swords, that your men lay down their arms, that you then make acquiescence to me, and hand over the outlaw." He spoke directly to Tom.

"And that is your final word?" Jeanne's voice sounded how she felt, dark and ominous.

She slipped from the back of her horse and faced the pair.

"It is." The envoy snarled in response.

She drew her sword, the spokesman for the pair smiled, expecting submission. The Lizards, for that was the name the Special Forces had given themselves immediately drew their swords or put their hands to their *mêlée* weapons, Ny-mo's conscripts' quietly notched bolts onto their crossbows, drawing the strings tight.

"This is for Case, die yer bastad," Jeanne cursed and leapt forward, with a single thrust she struck her Tungsten Carbide blade clean through the bewildered knight's fine armour, piercing his heart in a single stroke.

"Damnation," she muttered, "now I'm to get my shiny, clean armor all covered in blood again."

Withdrawing her weapon, she closed on the second Ambassador; the terrified man turned tail and ran back to his horse, screaming, "Attack, Attack, kill them all."

The bewildered Chin troopers simply gazed in horror, mesmerized by the death of their invincible commander.

Jeanne turned and ran back to her horse; the huge animal was quivering in excitement, she vaulted easily into the saddle, and took the reins from Tom.

Raising her sword above her head, she brought it down in the command to attack. Immediately a hail of death flew from Ny-mo's crossbowmen, the screams from the Chin, both man and horse, were terrible in their intensity.

Tom waited a moment longer watching the unfolding carnage with dark eyes; holding back the Lizards.

Ny-mo's men were ready once more. Catching Jeanne's nod, Ny-mo gave a further clicked command and another hail of iron bolts flew into the Chin troopers who by now, were in total disarray. The death toll was appalling to behold, the heavy metal spikes tearing through the brightly patterned surcoats and shining chain mail, the spurting

blood drenched the pretty yellow and blue designs with the deep crimson hue of death.

Tom gave out with an incomprehensible shout and the Lizards surged forward, an unstoppable wall of flesh and steel. They struck the massed ranks of the Chin, bowling over the lighter horses, smashing and cutting with their terrible weapons.

It then came down to the simple basics of warfare, man against man, face to face, weapon to weapon, shield to shield. The Lizards, highly trained and experienced fighters in many diverse areas of the modern world, wearing modern armour that enhanced their already prodigious abilities, were lethal opponents.

These Chin were experts in the noble art of 'face slapping'.

Once Ny-mo's foot-soldiers with their viscous pikes, spears and halberds hit the Chin, the battle was done. Dragging the troopers from their saddles with their long reaching weapons, they tore through the Chin at almost the same rate that Tom and his Lizards had. The crossbowmen, their initial task completed, followed their colleagues stabbing and slashing with short swords; any floundering Chin soldier could hardly expect mercy.

The business of war at this basic level was kill or be killed. Within minutes the short but bloody battle was over, the Chin began throwing down their weapons in surrender. Jeanne's troopers had dispatched more than two hundred of the Chin soldiers without losing a single man.

The remaining Ambassador was wounded but still alive, he was dragged before Jeanne.

"I am going to allow you to live," she said, "but only so you can carry a message to your King. You will tell him that the future King of all this land has recruited me, Jeanne McLennan Pinkerton to his cause, and that he should protect the virginity of his eldest daughter, for it may be required to clinch a peace deal with the rightful King, Ny-mo of Croninn."

"I cannot return, for I will be held responsible for this humiliating defeat," said the Chin Ambassador, from his knees.

"You will return, or I will choose another from among your men, and he will also be

carrying your head in a sack to your king as proof of my response.

“Now, we have been here for many days without pay for the hospitality we have received, we cannot exist on promises and that which we receive as gifts from our Croninn brothers, so we will accept your thousand crowns as payment for past atrocities, yours not ours.”

“John, get those prisoners to bury their countrymen, outside the village. Then make sure, all of this lot is set on the road back to Obuda, including this slime who diligently shall carry the head of his fellow envoy back in a sack. Strip them of all armour, they will carry no weapons other than their knives, and they will learn how to walk. Those pretty horses will be gifted to these townsfolk as recompense for all the blood that has been spilt on these streets.”

“It shall be done my Lady,” replied John with an exaggerated bow.

‘Back to business then,’ signed Ny-mo. The three of them walked through the village towards the open fields to speak to the troopers who were still on training exercises, oblivious of all that had taken place.

What would the future hold now that they had given the Chin Emperor yet another bloody nose? Jeanne thought to herself.

## The Twelve Shamans

### The Eastern Highlands

#### Day 103

It had taken more than a week of continuous travel before the line of wagons and horses reached the foothills of the Eastern Highlands. Jeanne stood looking up at the ice and snow covered peaks that marched in either direction from their position.

‘We have to pass through that range over there, following a valley carved by the river Bis-trita. It should take us another few days before we reach the twelve Shamans in the Rep-edea valley. From there we begin to climb,’ signed Ny-mo.

‘We should not be without fresh meat. The valleys at this time of year abound with ox and Stag, but we need to keep close watch on our own beasts for these mountains are also home to bear, lynx, and wolf.’

“The twelve Shaman?” queried Tom. Riding close to him, on one of the ‘recently liberated’ Shishmanid horses was John, shoulder still swathed in bandages. Just behind Tom astride a beautiful bay gelding, courtesy of the Chin Ambassador, rode the young agent Johnson. The two had struck up quite a friendship, much to Jeanne’s amusement.

‘They are rock formations which are between eight and twelve arm lengths in height; guarding the Eastern route from the lower plains.’

“Are any of the Giants hereabouts?” asked Jeanne.

‘Of that I know not, but what I do know is that within a day we shall be joining a group of travelling folk who frequent this area. They trade freely, from one side of the massif to the other, passing through yonder valley. It is my intention to recruit some of them to

guide us safely through and mayhap others to join our cause, for they are vicious and unforgiving warriors. Among them reside the twelve Shamans who assisted me in my sojourn to your world.'

"Not Chin, are they?" said Johnson, "As if we've not had enough dealings with those nasty little rat-bags," he then continued with a wicked smile, "I missed out on the last bit of fun."

"I think we will have a lot more of them before this little game is over son," said Wilson.

'No my friend, these travelers are from much further to the east. They come from the far side of the Great Sea. They have journeyed through these plains for longer than my people have; in fact, I believe they preceded our ancestors by many hundreds of years.

Be aware that they have some strange ways and customs, and they will happily relieve you of your valuables if they feel a need of them. They call themselves Croman. They are not heathens for they follow the Light, but not quite as you would expect. Their teachings come from writings by one of their gods called The Doubter, who took refuge with them after a great war.'

"The Doubter?" asked Jeanne.

'Furthermore they believe that The Doubter, was a younger brother of the dark one, The Jackal, in fact they believe The Doubter was also the very twin brother of The Un-named God.'

"I don't understand one word, but I must admit it seems oddly familiar," said Jeanne.

"Where are we to meet with these travellers?" asked Paul.

'It is a special time of year for them, there will be many thousands gathering on the banks of the Bicat, at a settlement called Targuiatra. They come together once a year, to bring gifts to the mountains, for it is said that the mountain known as Ceah-lau was once the residence of Zamolxe, God of the Dacs; the ancients, the one time residents of this land.'

“So are we to join with these travellers?” asked Jeanne.

‘That is my hope; I have sent to them a messenger warning of our approach. It would be a great shock for them to perceive more than three hundred arriving at their gathering, particularly as some of our number be Brosynan warriors on their mighty Plains Runners. They have never as yet met with our little companions, though they know my people well enough, for we have melded together for centuries. This area is one of great importance to them, for with its great beauty it is easy to see why they think it the home of a god. From a distance the rocks form the shape of a rider astride his mount... Soon we shall be through this valley, and the revelation you will see for yourself.’

Ny-mo fell silent for a while as he gazed at the mountains in the distance.

‘We will shortly be coming to the confluence of the Bis-trata and the Dor-na, it was there when I was a child, that my father would bring our family in the winters, a more beautiful place on this earth I have yet to perceive. My mother was most enamoured of this land, for her family originated here. ....

‘There are springs in the adjacent valleys which provide a discharge of water with the most magical healing properties,’ he said, after a further pause. Jeanne looked at him curiously as he gave a heavy sigh.

‘They are but my memories, Jeanne; they beat upon me from all sides, both joyous and sad. But this is a wondrous land which I love greatly. It brings to mind my mother, for she passed into the hands of the Light in this place. It is without a doubt a place which I would happily die protecting.’

“Speak not in haste, Prince, lest it come to pass,” remarked Tom.

‘Regard that peak; the highest massif, that is Piet-roso Ro-dnei; we shall pass to the right of that mountain when we make our way across. The passage is not difficult, for it follows a high pass which cuts through from one side to the other. There are many high lakes. Each one with the clearest, purest, sweetest water you have ever tasted. I hear tell that there many caves, two of which are so deep, they surely give passage clear through to Dilkadeck.’

Targuiatra

Croman Bulibasha

Day 105

Two men came galloping down the valley towards them, their horses lathered with sweat. One of them was Ny-mo's emissary. The other was a tall, dark skinned swarthy human individual with a colored scarf tying back his long hair. He was into his late forties.

Ny-mo threw himself from his horse in time to catch the man in a massive embrace. They stood wrapped in each other's arms for what seemed like an age.

The man broke the embrace, raised both hands to chest height, and turned his palms upwards.

"Stanki nashti chi arakenpe manushen shai," he said.

'Devlesa avilan,' signed Ny-mo, adopting the same stance. 'Te khalion tai te shingerdjon che gada, hai tu te trais sastimasa tai voyasa.' He concluded.

The dark skinned man threw back his head and gave a huge laugh, "Not a word out of place, well remembered my little brother," he said. "Hold, for you should introduce me to these Gajes. It is not meet to be un-named."

Ny-mo made his introductions, the man he pronounced to be Asalour, king of all the Croman tribes. He then named each of his colleagues, starting with Jeanne to whom he gave full title; he then introduced Tom and John, pronouncing them all to be his true and faithful friends.

The Croman king suddenly leapt to his saddle with a hard look at two approaching Brosynan warriors on their Plains Runners, he swung his mount, sawing on the reins, and raking his heels down its flanks took off at a fierce gallop down the track.

“Oops, that didn’t go down too well for some reason,” said Tom, Ny-mo looked pensive, Jeanne sucked the inside of her cheek, pursing her lips, a thought was racing through her mind, Gypsies here, how could that be?

The trio picked up their pace and moved off, following the direction taken by the Croman king, the column lumbered into life behind them.

The sun had set behind the mountains by the time the last of the Troopers had assembled in a wide valley alongside the river.

Cooking fires were burning brightly in front of each of the Croman vardo’s, the smell of roasting flesh wafting across the fields towards Jeanne's hungry troops.

A group of pretty, dark haired and fiery dark eyed, barefooted Croman girls came running towards them and stopped before Ny-mo, “Voivode, Te avel angla tute, kodo khabe tai kado pimo tai minge pe sastimaste,” said one of them dropping one knee in a curtsy, without waiting for an answer; they all ran back to their camp laughing and giggling.

“What was that all about?” asked Tom.

‘We have been invited to join at the Croman camp fires, they have prepared sufficient repast for all of us,’ signed Ny-mo.

“Once we have settled the horses, circled our wagons, lit our own fires, you can start letting the men make their way across to the Croman camp, but ensure sentries are posted first,” said Tom to Johnson who had assumed command of the US contingent. The young FBI man moved away to relay his commands to the troopers.

‘No weapons and no armor, we want these people as friends, and they vastly outnumber us, my scouts tell me at least twenty thousand travellers are here already. More than half of them are fighting men,’ clicked Ny-mo.

Johnson stopped mid-stride, and turned back, looking to Jeanne for confirmation.

Jeanne nodded, and Johnson with a wry glance at Tom, continued to complete his task.

Magic goes off beam sometimes

Jeanne's troops joined the tribes at their campfires. They were warmly welcomed; enjoying a fine meal of roasted venison, wine, and ale followed by much carousing. The Croman had a musical instrument they called a Castalap, it was like a five stringed fiddle. After the meal, at many of the fires men took up the strange instrument, while others played the Curule and Tupan their versions of pipes and drums. Nonstop they churned out rousing tunes to which their young men and women danced, whirling and leaping in time with the music.

There were a few Special Forces heads which required a coming together, this was ably carried out by the ever present and circulating Junior Officers, and their Company Captains who were quick to react, wherever they found occasions of drink induced belligerence breaking forth amongst the strong-tempered fighting men.

~

The king approached their little group, "Come, there is one who is keen to meet with you Voivode, if you all would be so kind as to accompany me?"

"With pleasure, Sire." Jeanne said, standing quickly.

Tom, John and Ny-mo rose from where they sat on soft cushions and blankets and followed Asalour. The king made his way across the wide open area between the circles of wagons. He came to a halt outside a beautifully decorated vardo, the arches either side of the door were painted intricately with gold leaf scrolls.

Asalour rapped the door with his knuckles.

"Me som Asalour," he said loudly "Asalour, le Tinshasko shav."

"Te pabaren mange memelia," replied a quavering voice from within.

“Baba, Ravena, I bring the Bengsko, to see you.”

“Nais take, enter my dear Asalour, bring the Bengsko with you.”

“I bring Ny-mo the Voivode, to greet you.”

“Let him come into my humble home, I would embrace him.”

They climbed the steps and entered the vardo, which seemed suddenly tiny as they crowded in. A swinging oil lamp hung from the middle of the centre arch. By its smoking light, Jeanne could make out an old woman sat on a single bed wrapped in a multi coloured blanket, she wore large rings in her pierced ears, and her head was covered in a red scarf, which was tied behind her neck. The only clothing she could see under the blanket was black. She looked for the entire world like a large predatory bird, her hooked nose, adding to the illusion.

‘Baba, Ravena, I greet you,’ clicked Ny-mo.

“Well met, Ny-mo, I greet you in return.” Her voice softened, “You have grown, boy.”

‘Time does not stand still, Baba.’

“You!!! Young woman, let me see your face.”

Jeanne, compelled by a strange force stepped forward.

The old woman began to hum. Her tune rose and fell with a harshness Jeanne had never experienced before.

“Bring your lover to me,” she said suddenly.

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Rubbish, bring him to me.” Her voice was harsh, commanding.

Tom threw Ny-mo a querying glance, the prince nodded. Moving forward he knelt as indicated before the old woman.

Jeanne flinched as the old crone drew a knife from the folds of her clothing; she grasped the handle the blade turned towards her own chest. A look akin to ecstasy came over her face; she began humming a strange warbling tune for a moment; she then called out in a clear voice, "Putrav lesko drom angle leste te na inkra les mai but palpale mura brigasa. Te aves yertime mander tai te yertil tut o Del," she finished, then pushed the blade into Jeanne's unwilling hands. The interior of the vardo filled with a flaming green light.

The old crone buried her head into her hands and gave a great sigh.

"Bring my son to me; I would introduce him to his fate."

The Croman king opened the door, "Bardu," he called.

A tall man in Croman garb detached himself from a group gathered around the nearest fire and made his way to the vardo.

"What is your wish my king?"

"Baba Dai, calls for you," he said stepping to one side to let the man past.

"This is my son, Bardu..... Bardu, I would that you come to your mother's side, come, come and greet these people my child."

Bardu was obviously confused; a knife spouting green flames, his mother's crazy words, the strangers who stood with his king, the tall man kneeling in front of his mother was around his own age if he was not mistaken. The smaller Croninn, he knew as the Voivode Ny-mo, the woman holding the knife was comely, and he could perceive no reason for his presence.

"I greet you all," he muttered, nodding his head at them.

"Clasp your hands tight to the knife," she waved at the blade Jeanne held.

Jeanne drew a quick breath; paused for a moment, she had a sudden premonition that there would soon be a whole mess of blood splashing around this caravan. Letting out her breath in a stream and under a strange compunction she passed the shining blade to the man. The tall Croman took hold of the hilt. As he did, the knife took on a life of its own and spun in his dark hands, the razor sharp edge struck at his neck it nicked his flesh and stopped; blood welled from the cut.

Bardu stood petrified, his eyes wide in shock. The knife began to hum; a low ominous growl.

Jeanne realizing what was supposed to happen, that the man was supposed to kill Tom and then her, snatched the knife, pushing the man to one side. He stumbled over the rising Tom and the two of them crashed to the floor.

"You're naught but a daft wifie; expecting your son to kill us. Another moment missus and your boy is going to start leaking his blood across the floor of this wagon. What kind of stupid magic are you trying to throw at us?"

"Bengesko niamso!" the old woman screamed, "Ka xlia ma pe tute! You, Bengesko, I lay a curse upon you." She spoke the Croman tongue again, her voice rising higher and higher with each word, so much so that by the end of her rant, she was screeching.

The knife began to hum, the sound rising to an ear-piercing scream as it once more blazed a sickly green. It spun, twisting out of Jeanne's hands and sunk into the old woman's chest, extinguishing her life in a moment.

Before Jeanne could move, the blade hummed loudly once more, then flashed across the vardo and buried itself in Bardu's throat. He fell to the floor, his lifeblood flowing into the knife.

"What happened?" Asalour demanded of Jeanne. Staggering back from the carnage he had crashed against the vardo wall; his voice was contorted in a mixture of shock and anger.

"The knife responded to something," said Jeanne, her face impassive, "I haven't a scooby what happened, for she spoke in your language; but something she said caused the knife to react, to react in a way that I have never seen anything do before."

'I must out from this evil place,' Ny-mo clicked, stumbling over the dead man's body; he pushed his way through the door, and fell the three steps to the ground. His stomach heaved... his vomit spurting through the fingers which he had clamped across his mouth in a vain attempt to control the flow of puke and bile. Slumping to his knees his eyes streaming, Ny-mo's body racked and bucked as the contents of his stomach poured onto the ground in front of him...

Jeanne waited until Asalour had cleared the bottom step, before she retrieved the knife from the floor of the cabin. The blade was spotless; she warily slid it into a leather sheath the old woman was still holding, and then stepped gingerly from the vardo, secreting the knife inside her jacket.

Tom moved quickly to Ny-mo who was climbing unsteadily to his feet. With his right hand he steadied his friend. The commotion had caused those closest to the vardo to rush across, and, Asalour was surrounded by his tribesmen, seeking assurances as to his well-being.

The Croman king raised his hands to elicit silence, "Bardu and Ravena have been removed from this life, Si khohaimo may pachivalo sar o chachimo, they have conjoined with the dark side, and for that they have paid the price.

Gino you and your young bride are in need of a wagon, clean this mess up and the vardo 'n' gras are yours."

There was a cheer from a group of young men, one of them, obviously Gino sprang up the steps of the wagon, pushed open the door and disappeared inside.

In a moment, he reappeared; called to two of his friends, and then turned to Asalour, "Nais take," was all he said, it was enough.

The two tall men, with the diminutive Croninn prince between them, walked away from the fire towards where Jeanne stood.

"There is one other who has asked to speak with you Lady Jeanne, but I think this night is no longer one for visiting."

“Whatever you say, Sire, I will with Tom to our beds, and maybe tomorrow will find us all in a sweeter frame of mind.”

It was just after sunrise, a light mist was still clinging to the boles of the fir trees surrounding the open fields. A gentle, but bitterly cold wind was blowing from the snow-covered mountains, when John rapped gently on Jeanne's vardo. "Time for breakfast you two," he called.

Jeanne, Tom and John had spent almost all the night sat at a nearby fire draining the contents of a number of wine skins, deep in worried and concerned conversation.

Although they would have dearly loved to remain in the warmth and dark of bed, the two finally came out into the daylight nursing their heads.

"Rough wine, Tom?"

"For sure John, it must have been, for we didn't drink that much," replied Tom kicking at the empty skins with a wry laugh.

A short while later the four, joined by Ny-mo, made their way across the field into the huge Romany camp. They passed Gino's new vardo, a pretty, black haired, dark eyed girl was raking a fire back into life; she flashed a wide smile at the pair.

"Zhan le Devlesa tai sastimasa," she said waving.

'Me Baxt hai sastimos tiri patragi,' replied Ny-mo signing.

"I wish you'd stop that, I can't understand a thing you say, you could be plotting my demise for all I know..... I guess that's Gino's wife."

'I am, my dear Tom, I am, and you're right it is his bride.'

"Pretty young thing isn't she?"

"I wonder how long it took for them to clear it up," said Jeanne intentionally ignoring Tom's inflammatory question.

'Know you that the king is elected, not born to the post?' Ny-mo signed, quickly changing the subject.

"No... by elected, do you mean that he is voted for, the way a new President is, chosen from his peers?"

'That's correct,' replied Ny-mo.

"Mmmm, not the best way to choose a successor, look at some of the idiots we have had to accept laws from."

'I know, sometimes the best is overlooked in favor of the one who can crow the loudest, but not in this case,' concluded Ny-mo, 'Tell me, why did Baba, Ravena call you Bengesko, have you Teutonic blood?'

"Teutonic, does he mean German Tom?"

"I guess, have you?"

"I don't know - anything is possible."

Deep in conversation, it didn't take them long to cross the central field to the king's caravan. The wagon was not much larger than the others around it, and it was less ostentatious than Gino's.

The Romany king was waiting for them, word of their approach having reached him before they had passed Gino's vardo.

'Good morn, Asalour, how fare you?' Ny-mo clicked.

"I am well. - Tom, you look a little tender."

“Nothing that a flagon of ale, or a cup of wine couldn’t cure. Of that I am sure.”

The Croman king smiled, “Come my friends, and Lady Jeanne, let us hope that the Drabani our Phuri Dae, our beloved Shaman will not incur the wrath of that knife you are carrying.”

“Why is it that we must meet with this person?” asked Jeanne.

“Our Phuri Dae is the Croman hope for our future; she is loved by each Familia in every Kumpania, in every Vitsa. Without her guidance we would be nothing more than a group of vardos moving aimlessly through these mountains. She has given us purpose, she has built us into the Natsia that we are today. She wishes to greet you. Remember you Ny-mo that we would gather here once a year?”

‘Yes, it is one of my most vivid memories; I loved the horse racing, the trading and bartering, the feeling of being part of your people, even though I was an outsider, a gadje.’

“You were never a gadje, Ny-mo; did you not know your ancestor was a Croman? It was she who was first to marry into the Croninn, creating the melding of our peoples, it was she and your great-grandfather who delivered our people from the evil one, they who rescued us from death and brought us out of despair.”

‘Yes I knew, and it explains much; why mother loved to come for the gatherings, why I felt so close to you, however after my mother died, my father would commune no more about your people, I fear his grief was too great.’ Ny-mo clicked quietly.

“Our thanks rest with Sa-lam-rik and Su-anna your ancestors, the saviours of our people, the woman we go to see is your mother’s sister, your Aunt on your grandmother’s side; she is the one who has bound us together as a Natsia, as a nation. Though I may be the elected Crom Baro, and have been Bulibasha for these last twenty years, you are of our royal family, you are our Phuri Dae’s nephew, and you are our true bloodline king.”

Jeanne listened to the exchange in interest, “If Ny-mo is your king, do all the clans and tribes know of this?”

“Every one of them, Lady Jeanne, every single one of them, all would lay down their lives for the Phuri Dae, and through the association of your bloodline Ny-mo they give to you the same veneration. We have waited long for your return, for you to come to take up your crown.”

They walked the remainder of the short distance to the Phuri Dae’s caravan in silence, each of them deep in their own thoughts.

Two Croman warriors stood casually outside the dark coloured caravan; they both wore red head scarves, with vicious looking curved swords tucked through their waist bands, obviously on guard.

One of them nodded to Ny-mo, “Basht.” was all he said.

A woman stood alone in the empty wagon. She was dressed in what Jeanne had by now perceived to be the traditional Croman dress, her head covered with a loosely tied white scarf, her long dark hair tumbling from either side across her shoulders. She wore a tight white blouson that made no attempt to disguise her ample charms; wound around her waist was a long, wide black sash, the end of which went behind her back and over her left shoulder. Completing her outfit was an almost full length, bright blue skirt. Her feet were shod with soft tan coloured boots. Both her arms were encircled with many bangles, and her neck was festooned in chains, all of which were crafted from pure gold, gifts from her adoring people.

Jeanne could see a beautiful, pure white metal torc, clasped tightly around her shapely neck just below her chin. Fitted at the centre of the hoop, was a large blue gemstone, a blue which sympathized with her skirt. She sported large golden ear rings, and through her right nostril was a tiny ring of pure gold. Jeanne calculated that she was a year or two younger than John Wilson, in her mid forties.

The woman turned her gaze full on John, who was surprised to see two beautiful blue eyes which perfectly matched the jewel looking him up and down with obvious interest, a smile playing across her lips. He grinned inanely in return, for she was truly worthy of great admiration.

“I understand that you have been dealing none too kindly with my kin, Lady Jeanne,” she said, her voice was rich and warm, her intonation perfect, the words in English

flowed from her tongue as though it were her mother language.

"I don't understand, my Lady," Jeanne responded, "of whom are you referring?"

"My aunt and my cousin, I understand there was only a small amount of blood to clean up, even though both of them had been pierced fatally by an angry knife."

'It would seem she cursed the blade and the magic turned on her,' interjected Ny-mo.

"It happens more than some fools know." She replied. "However I welcome you to our gathering. This is a time of great celebration and joy for us. More chikno and chikni are created than at any other time of year, it would seem to be our mating season." She chuckled, a rich deep sound of merriment.

"The young buck's and doe's delight in it, many of them under the influence of the grape have no memory of their partners, and any children which may come as a result are accepted by all as Ashen Devlesa. Come close Lady Jeanne, I would see that blade," said the woman.

"I'm a bit wary of anyone touching it, the old woman cursed it."

"Pass it to me," the woman said in a voice that brooked no dissent.

"As long as it's not your death," Jeanne muttered, stepping backwards, fighting against an impulse forcing her to come closer.

"My name is Drabani, Me san de Ny-moski shey," she concluded in the Croman tongue. "My mother was Ny-mo's mother's older sister. I have the right."

She leant over Jeanne's shoulder and with a decisive grasp pulled the knife from the sheath behind Jeanne's back. The knife blazed green, the light contrasting the jewel at Drabani's neck which in turn blazed blue in response.

Almost blinded, the three humans fell to their knees, Drabani, held the knife in front of her face, the power of her magic poured over them all. The knife began to hum, this time a sound of pure joy and happiness. She stood holding the blade unwaveringly until

its song subsided. Both were now shining blue, the lights faded, leaving them standing in almost total darkness.

The woman handed the knife back to Jeanne; still in shock she sheathed it swiftly.

“It will now follow the light,” she said smiling.

Drabani stepped to the wagon door, followed by the shocked visitors. She set out crossing the dew soaked field in silence, her entourage, including the two guards, fell in behind her. Coming to a halt at the edge of the trees, she sat on one of a group of low standing stones. Hundreds of Croman had come running when she had appeared from her wagon; the Croman sat quietly on the grass around the stones listening in great expectation.

“Let me bring to you the dukkerings as they come to me, we can discuss them later to discern their meaning,” she said once silence had descended.

She closed her eyes and sat quietly.

“El Crallis ha nicobado la liri de los Cales,” she said in a decisive voice.

Ny-mo leant across and translated for Jeanne. ‘She said, ‘The darkness has taken away the law of the Croman.’ Jeanne nodded her understanding.

“Das dab ka I roata le neve vurdoneski, o ushalin zhala sar o kam mangela.”

“What she say?”

‘I know not, for I understand it not, but her words were: ‘Give a push to the wheel of the new wagon, for where the wagon goes a trail is left.’

Drabani opened her eyes and said, “I have nothing else, but to my mind has come a piece from our learning’s, from deep in our teachings. From the letters we keep in our hearts, the letters that were carried by The Doubter.

The words that have come to my heart are these: the Leader pukkered them this parable: 'Suppose tutti's got a hundred bokros and yek of them's nasherdi. Is there a mush among the lot of you as would not muk the waver ninety-nine in the bokro-puv and jel after the nasherdi bokro till he latches it? Karna he's latched it he riggers it on his dummer, well-pleased he is. Karna he jels home he pukkers his friends and all the foki around: Be happy with mandi, because I've found my nasherdi bokro.'"

John sat in silence, mesmerized by her lilting contralto, the words meant little to him, and without a doubt Ny-mo would give them the translation later. For the moment he enjoyed drinking in the sight and sound of her.

It was clear to his friends he had been truly smitten.

Jeanne was elated, the meeting with the Croman had boosted their forces by a considerable number, and she felt sure their new king elect, Ny-mo would more than agree to allow his warriors to join the battle against the enemies of the Light.

## A Warning

### The Eastern Highlands

Day 115

“The Chin are crossing the high passage, they have forced their way through a fresh tear. They will be passing the Twelve Shaman tomorrow about noon.” John lifted his visor to squeeze the bridge of his nose, and then continued, “Numbers are about fifteen hundred, these are fresh Chin troops, and the Emperor must be well pissed.”

Jeanne turned to Ny-mo, “What do you think, can we set a good old fashioned ambush?”

‘I find your suggestion to be most commendable my dear Jeanne,’ Ny-mo signed, his face twisting in the grimace that the humans now knew to be a wide grin.

‘I’m sure Commander Pavel and his troopers wouldn’t mind travelling overnight, up over the mountain; they could be behind the Chin before dawn. They could then indulge in a little harassment,’ he continued, nodding at Pavel who was stood alongside John.

Pavel clicked his agreement.

“As long as they leave a couple of the little sods for us, - I haven’t forgotten poor Case and the others we’ve lost,” said Tom.

“I can’t get my head around this whole thing, we have been here almost four months now and not a sign of those giant things, all we’ve managed so far is these skirmishes with the Chin, who keep appearing from the distant past, or is it future?” Jeanne said looking into the far distance.

'We know through our shaman that the Chin are in league with the Anakim, the more we can weaken them, the more chance we will have when eventually we have to face the sons of the watcher's.

'The giants come closer now Jeanne, they approach the lines our Shaman have drawn, they have breached so many of our wards, destroyed villages and towns, soon magic will not be enough, the shaman weaken daily, soon we will have to face them without magic, face them and destroy them, for if we fail, the fate of all will be sealed.

'Until then Lady Jeanne, we face the Chin tomorrow, may our spears be true, our swords sharp and our strength sufficient.'

"Amen to that," said John.

~

It was in the dark hours just before dawn that Jeanne woke, covered in sweat and shaking. She sat straight up, a strangled moan breaking from her lips.

"Whassup hun?" a sleepy voice came from beside her.

"I just had the worst dream ever," she replied in a whisper.

"What was it all about then?"

"It was horrible. Grief, I don't want to think about it, but it keeps slamming through my mind." She buried her head in her hands for a moment, rubbing her eyes with the heels of her hands.

Tom sat up, cradling her in his arms, "Go on, spit it out, a problem shared and all that ..."

"It's not funny Tom, it really scared me, and it was so real."

"Go on then."

"I dreamt I was a young girl being chased by slavers, it was frightening, and I could really feel I was there."

"Tell me." He said brushing her damp hair away from her face where it clung to her striking features.

"I'll try...."

'Staccato yelps pin-pointed their positions, as they converged on me. I had run far, stumbling across the broken ground, my bare feet torn by the sharp flints littering the frozen riverbed. My legs were ripped and scratched by the thorn bushes growing along the forest edge.

I knew following closely behind the huge yellow beasts, would be the slavers.

My heart was pounding so wildly in my chest I could feel it banging against my ribs. My dragging breath short and gasping, the red mist of panic descended, closer they came, closer and closer, unable to run any further I climbed the tallest tree I could find.

I was surrounded by the long legged, slavering beasts. One followed swiftly by the others began to bray, the howls more frightening than the hunting yelps. The howling told its own story 'we have her'.

I screamed in absolute fear as the beasts began to climb the tree, the nearest, its eyes glowing red in the moonlight, clawed its way closer and closer...'

Gathering the shaking woman into his arms Tom began to hum a wordless tune, rocking in time to an internal beat, cradling his wife's head into his chest, gently he stroked her hair, soothing her, calming her sobs.

As Jeanne quietened, Tom turned the woman's tear streaked face toward his own, "There, there babe, it was only a dream, you're alright now."

Jeanne's voice betrayed her fear.

"But Tom, they nearly caught me, what will happen if they do, they came so close?

“Can you checkout my legs and feet please Tom, they’re awful sore, I feel as though they are all scratched.”

Tom un-zipped their sleeping bag and pulled it open.

“Oh my God,” he exclaimed, ‘how can it be, what have you done?’”

There was no way he could believe his eyes, Jeanne’s legs and feet were scratched, cut and bruised.

“Have you been outside?” Even as he asked Tom knew the answer, there was no way Jeanne could have been able to make her way from their bed through the camp and out through the patrolled perimeter to the river, without his waking, or the sentries seeing her.

She lay in his arms, silent and withdrawn, until the day broke cold and damp.

Crazy fearful thoughts raced through Tom’s mind as he cradled the woman he loved, is she being assailed by some strange form of magic? Is Jeanne under some weird and serious mental attack?

Did that mad Gypsy woman’s curse really mean something?

## The Ambush

Day 117

‘WE ARE CLOSE BROTHER,’ the golden mare tossed her head, ‘I SMELL HORSE AND HUMAN SWEAT, IT HANGS HEAVY IN THE AIR.’

And I can sense his thoughts, - how vile and evil they are.

Bodan was alone, forging ahead of the Brosynan force. His aim and that of six of the finest close quarter fighting troopers; to eliminate any Chin scouts and ensure that the ambush which was being set just a few leagues ahead was not discovered.

Bodan slipped from the golden mare’s neck, the two, joined in mind, stalked the unfortunate human. While the huge plains runner distracted and terrified the rider, Bodan leapt onto the horse’s withers from where he was hidden in the grass, and whilst the scout was fighting to control his mount, sliced his neck. One slash between his helmet and the chain mail of his chest armour scribed a deep red gash from ear to ear. With no throat to scream a warning from, the Chin scout slid to the ground and was dead in moments.

Bodan controlled the mount with a twist on the reins. With his prodigious strength he brought it immediately under control. Stripping off the high saddle he tethered the horse to a tree, piled all of the scout’s weapons into a sack, before adding the precious arrows to his own quiver, can’t waste good weapons, he thought and swung back onto his mount’s shoulders and straddled her neck. Who’s next?

~

Commander Pavel and his brother JoJo were deep in mind talk, the two sat on an outcrop of rock in full view of the column making its way through the valley below them,

they watched as another three Chin fell from their saddles, crossbow bolts sunk deep into their bodies.

‘Boss, the Chin sure are getting jumpy.’

‘I’d think you would be jumpy too, it’s been two hours and we’ve culled eighty of them so far... oops, make that eighty three.’

‘That last troop that turned back to face us were more fun, at least they tried to make a stand, I had to hold my Runner back, he was all for taking them on, on his own.’

‘It won’t be long before the front of the convoy reaches the ‘Shaman rocks,’ we need to bunch them up a bit more, so that they have no opportunity to scatter.’

‘What you suggest?’

‘I think they could do with a full on charge from behind, inflict maximum casualties then fall back just outside bow range, let them see us, any that turn back to give chase’... he sliced his finger across his neck, flicked out his long tongue, pointed the twin forks upwards in a gesture of derision and laughed. ‘Like the idea?’

‘Simple enough, should surprise the shit out of them, how many troopers?’

‘The valley floor is about wide enough for five runners abreast, send in two ranks, keep the rest of out of sight, and see how many are brave enough to take the bait again.’

‘You think they would risk it again?’

‘Wouldn’t you?’

‘I would - but they are humans....’

‘Who are crazy enough, you saw the aftermath of the last battle our friends had with the Chin.’

'I know, that female leader of theirs is pretty head on.'

'Mad John rates her.'

'I know, how strange is it that he has come back to fight alongside the Tirnano.'

'Let's just be glad he has, facing this lot pushing into our lands would be bad news without the 'black suits' to help.'

JoJo patted his crossbow, 'wish I'd had one of these to face the vamps with.'

'It's strange, since that time we beat the crap outta them with the Chin swords they haven't been seen much.'

Pavel gave a mental call to his 2 i/c Luie, and passed across his plan.

'We'll be right on it, Boss,' came back the mental acknowledgement.

Within minutes, ten troopers on their runners came leaping down the valley walls, the Runners and their riders hooting battle calls. The Chin were quick to draw their weapons and turn to face the charging Brosynan troopers, but they had nothing tangible to engage with, the Runners in mental connection with their riders, were able to leap clear of any attack, moving with unhindered speed and extreme violence amongst the Chin warriors.

The Runners lashing out with tooth, claw and spiked tail, their riders dealing death with crossbow, lance and sword. Within moments over forty Chin lay in bloody heaps, their horses stampeding away from the Runners in abject terror and bowling into the nearest Chin warriors upsetting their mounts in turn, a volley of bolts from the surrounding cliffs was sufficient to turn the tail end of the Chin column into even further disarray.

The column which had been moving at a steady pace through the mountain pass shuddered to a halt. The lead riders had sprung Jeanne's ambush. The Tirnano Company, following Pavel's lead and mental command as one leapt from hiding and fired another salvo from the backs of their giant steeds. With Pavel and Blue leading, the entire force then leapt from the cliff tops and at full gallop struck the Chin column from

both sides.

Jeanne's Special Forces troopers, in their jet black armor, at full gallop struck the vanguard, the carnage was terrible, the lightly clad bowmen had no opportunity to draw bow, their cavalry, used to battling confused and weakened troops were thrust into a bunch with no way to turn. With their lines of retreat closed, they fought valiantly but in vain. From the heights, the Croninn under Prince Ny-mo rained cross-bow bolts down on the Chin warriors trapped behind their beleaguered companions.

Within half an hour the battle was over, the column's leaders dead or dying. Those Chin who were able, threw down their weapons and raised their hands above their heads in surrender.

Day 130

It was three days before the tired forces came in sight of Fort Lixeb.

Paul's Upset

The Central Plains

A figure came running through the grass towards the column.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Paul stood in front of Jeannie, his hands on his hips, his face contorted in anger.

Jeanne looked at him, her eyes narrowed "What you on about, - what's up lad?"

"You and him! Why didn't you tell me? Why should I have to hear that you are married from someone else, don't you think enough about me to tell me yourself then?"

Jeanne was dumbstruck, she gave a long drawn out sigh as she looked at her son.

"And don't think you are going to be my dad either" he snapped at Tom. Tears sprang to his eyes; with the back of his hand he wiped them away. Before Jeanne could reply he spun on his heels and dashed back towards the camp.

"Well that was a nice 'Hi, Mum, how are you. Have you risked your life again this week?'"

"Hmmm, I guess it's common knowledge; we've been here living together for eight months now." Tom said quietly. "Paul knows that."

"I want to know who told him" Jeanne remarked.

"Does it really matter? Fixing things with that young man is more important, don't you think?"

"Hmmm," Jeanne passed her horse's reins to Tom, "Look after him for a moment," she said and stepped off through the waist high purple grass following in Paul's tracks.

"Paul, wait!" she called after him, the lad slowed and finally stopped, his chin on his chest, tears streaming down his cheeks.

Jeanne took her son into her arms, "I'm sorry lad, no excuse, we should have told you. It's just that we haven't told anyone."

"I'm not anyone, I'm me, and surely I count?"

"Of course you do lad, no excuse that would give enough of a reason."

"I knew you were an item, but when did you get married?"

"Just before we left home, don't you remember we were away for the whole day?"

"I guess." Paul gave a big sniff.

"Forgiven?"

"I guess, but I'm not calling him Dad, I've already got one of them."

"That's up to you, of course," Jeanne's voice tailed off as she buried her face in his hair and drew in a deep breath, "you know we both love you to bits though, don't you?" she concluded.

"I guess," said Paul giving another sniff.

"Right, let's go and find Tom, shall we?"

It had been a week since the ambush; the troops had ridden hard to make it back to Fort Lixeb in that time. A bit of R and R was on most minds. They had fought some bloody battles, and lost some good friends, not least of which was the popular American Special Forces leader, Case.

"Hey, Paul," the anthropologist called as Jeanne and her son returned arm in arm.

The lad was almost as tall as his mother. He had grown up in the past year, not only in height and body mass, but also mentally, though his recent sharp outburst showed a bit more was still possible.

"Hi, good to see you both back safe and sound. I heard you had a bit of a nasty battle last week."

"Who told you that?"

"Winn, of course."

"Is she here?" Tom asked.

"No, but she has been teaching me to mind speak for the last week. It's hard sometimes, but I think I'm getting it, Lord Dominie says he can help, but would prefer Winn to be my teacher."

"Was it Winn told you we had married?"

"Sorta, - I got it from her mind."

Jeanne stood quietly for a moment ... "Now I'm sure it could be useful" she muttered,

"What," asked her husband?

“Remember when you called Winn, and she appeared?”

“Yeah, that was a bit creepy.” He said.

“Remember I said we could exploit that, if Winn is teaching Paul to mind-speak, the way she does with her M’ntar. That would answer our comms problems if our commanders could use telepathy, if that’s what it is, it would be a fantastic help to us.”

“The Brosynan seem to have embraced it without too much trouble.”

“Yeah, but they have their tongue-talk,” said Jeanne. “Mind when we first saw Finn and Kesha connect?”

“Mmmmm, you’re right they did have a bit of a head-start. We’ll have to chat with Winn about it.”

A White M'ntar

M'ntar Caves

'LADY WINTERGREEN, IS PRINCESS MIRA WITH YOU?'

"She is not my Love, and I find it strange that I am unable contact her."

'NOR AM I WITH QUEEN ALUSHAMENTA, - I FEAR THEY ARE OFF WORLD.'

"Have they to my time?"

'I THINK NOT BELOVED, FOR I WOULD STILL FEEL MY DAUGHTER'S PRESENCE, FOR THEY HAVE JOURNEYED THROUGH THAT TEAR BEFORE.'

"I don't get you."

'AS THEY PASS THROUGH THEY WOULD EACH LEAVE A TRACE OF THEMSELVES WHICH CAN BE DISCERNED, HOWSOEVER NONE OF THE KNOWN PORTALS BEAR ANY TRACE OF EITHER OF THEM.'

"What about those tears that we know not of?"

'THERE ARE MANY THAT HAVE BEEN USED BY THE DARK ONES, THEY ARE CONTAMINATED BY THEIR EVIL ESSENCES.'

"Mira was talking about Baron Daniel just the other day, perhaps she has gone across to that place."

'I CANNOT PERCEIVE AS TO HER REASONING, BUT I KNOW THE HILLTOP WHERE FIRST

SHE WAS ATTACKED BY THE GARGOYS, IF GO WE THERE, PERHAPS A TRACE OF THEM WE CAN FIND.'

"I'm ready my Lord."

'WISH YOU TO FLY, OR FLIP.'

"Let's fly, I love it."

~

The day was bright, the sky a deep blue with high wispy clouds building in the distance. Lord Dominie with Winn astride his neck lifted from the open space outside the M'ntar cave. With powerful sweeps of his wings Dominie climbed high into the sky. Winn marveled as her view of the world grew before her eyes. The purple topped grasses rippling in huge waves as the wind blew across the plains. The mountains in the far distance were smoky blue, their snow capped peaks overshadowed by the towering peak of the volcano.

"For what reasons wish you to speak with Mira and Lusha?"

'IT IS A MATTER OF SERIOUSNESS, WHICH I NEED TO DISCUSS WITH MY DAUGHTER.'

"And I suppose that I am not up to it, being yet a child?"

'FORGIVE ME BELOVED, I THOUGHT NOT TO INCLUDE YOU FOR IT IS A M'NTAR MATTER.'

"You're pushing your luck now buddy, c'mon spill the beans."

'I MAKE NO SENSE OF YOUR WORDS, BUT I UNDERSTAND WELL YOUR THOUGHTS.'

"So?"

'SO, AS YOU PUT IT, I WILL SPILL THE BEANS, WHATEVER THEY MAY BE, - AN EGG HAS

BEEN LAID BY A BLUE.'

"So what, don't Blue females lay eggs?"

'OF COURSE THEY DO, BUT IT HAS NEVER BEEN KNOWN FOR A BLUE TO LAY A WHITE EGG, IT IS A TERRIBLE THING FOR ANY QUEEN TO LAY A WHITE EGG, BUT ESPECIALLY NOT A BLUE.'

"What is so wrong with a white egg, and why not a Blue?"

'YOU ARE SO FULL OF QUESTIONS MY LITTLE ONE. A BLUE ONLY TAKES ANOTHER BLUE AS A MATE AND THEREFORE HER PROGENY WILL ALWAYS BE BLUE.'

"So how come you and your Golden Queen produced a Purple."

'THE GODS GAVE THE PURPLE QUEEN TO LEAD US IN BATTLE; I FEAR THAT THE WHITE MAY BE TO REDRESS THE BALANCE.'

"What? You must be joking, so what can be done, can we not just take a sledge hammer to the egg?"

'NEVER! WE MAY NEVER HARM ONE OF OUR OWN, EVEN IF IN EGG.'

"But if a white is able to nullify Lusha's power, surely that would be reason enough."

'NO, BUT THERE IS STILL ONE MORE OPTION, IT IS SLIM, HAS VERY LITTLE CHANCE OF SUCCESS.....'

"And?"

'THE WHITE EGG WILL HATCH A WHITE, AN ALBINO, ONE THAT HAS NO COLOUR, THE ONLY CREATURE THAT A WHITE WILL BOND WITH IS ANOTHER ALBINO, EVEN THEN IT MAY NOT HAPPEN, FOR THE WHITE FIRST HAS TO MAKE A CHOICE, FOR THE LIGHT OR THE DARK. BUT THERE AGAIN, HOW WILL WE EVER FIND ANOTHER ALBINO?'

Winn was silent as she digested all that Dominie had said, her mind racing as she tried to think what an albino would be like.

"I don't think I have ever met an albino human, I've seen white rats and they got red eyes, has a White dragon got red eyes?"

'A WHITE M'NTAR HAS RED EYES YES, AS FOR A DRAGON I COULD NOT SAY.'

"Oh, you know what I mean; I guess Uncle Tom or Dr Jeanne might know."

## The Shout

Snowy Maxwell

Day 130

As they approached the camp gates, there was a crash from overhead followed by a terrifying, ear splitting screech. Those who were still on horseback fought to control their mounts, some were unseated. Jeanne shocked by the sound looked up and was surprised to see a huge white M'ntar swooping down towards her troops, without landing it plucked one of her troopers from his saddle, carrying him in one of its rear feet. With powerful beats of its wings it then climbed into the sky above her, it gave a scream of triumph and disappeared.

"Who was that, who was taken?" she shouted.

There was a scurry from around the rider-less horse, visors were lifted, faces checked, the call came back to her; "One of us Brits, 'Snowy', it was Trooper 'Snowy' Maxwell, Ma'am."

"Which one was he?" she said aside to Tom.

"The kid with the white dreadlocks, do you remember him?"

"Sure I do, full of fun wasn't he, always had a quick crack to make everyone smile."

"Can you find out as much as you can about him Tom, I'd like to know." Jeanne's voice was a little shaky.

"Sure."

“And we need to talk to the M’ntar to find out what the hell is going on.”

“I’ll try to give Winn a mental call, last time we were together she tried to get me to communicate mentally, but I couldn’t quite get it, although she said I should control my base instincts when around you, - can’t imagine what she was on about.”

“Tom, can she read our thoughts?”

“I’m not sure, she didn’t say, but... it’s, it’s... possible.”

“The Tirnano have been ‘opened’ and can speak to us mentally and understand us, so why not Winn too? ... Tom, that’s fantastic, here I was worrying about the lack of personal communicators, and we’ve had the capability of doing it all along.”

“What?”

“Communicating with each other using just our minds ... Try to speak to Winn, in fact try shouting for her ... now!”

Tom looked around at his friends and colleagues who were stood around watching him, “What now?”

“Yes now!” His ‘wife’ said, with a look and stance which challenged any argument from him.

“Okay, if you insist.” He cupped his hands around his mouth and through the ‘megaphone’ shouted for Winn; he repeated her name twice more, each time louder than the last.

Aware of the heads that were turning towards him, and feeling his face fire up, he turned with a sheepish grin to Jeanne. “Well, I tried,” he said.

## The Call

"Whoa, is that Uncle Tom calling me?"

'ASSUREDLY.'

"Can you home in on his call? He sounds desperate."

'WE WILL NEED TO FLIP, FOR IT IS MANY HOURS FLIGHT, AND WILL BE TOO COLD FOR YOU AS WE TRAVEL NORTH.'

"Okay, I'm ready."

Winn felt the wriggling and scratching within her thoughts as the giant M'ntar melded his massive mind with hers. Together, summoning up power from within and visualizing the airspace above Jeanne's Forces as seen by Tom, they flipped instantaneously.

It was getting on towards dusk when they appeared.

Lord Dominie settled to the ground and assumed miniaturized size to avoid terrorizing the horses.

~

"And succeeded," came a familiar voice from behind Tom.

"Wow, it worked! Winn honey, how are you? I wish you wouldn't leave it so long," he gathered her into a bear hug.

"It's only been a month or so Uncle Tom."

"Winn darling, where's your dragon?" Jeanne interjected.

Dominie came forward from the shadows. Jeanne bowed in deference and continued, "Lord Dominie,. We were attacked less than a few minutes ago by a White M'ntar, is it possible it could have been one of your people?"

'IT SURELY IS LADY, THE EGG HATCHED NOT LONG AFTER OUR LAST VISIT, THE HATCHLING IMMEDIATLY FLIPPED AWAY FROM THE CAVES, WHERE TO WE HAVE NO IDEA, FOR WE WERE UNABLE TO TRACK IT.'

"How could it have grown to adulthood in such a short time, because it was flippin' massive?" Jeanne asked, her eyes flicking to Tom for confirmation.

He nodded.

'THE ONLY WAY IS NOT ONE I WISH TO CONSIDER, IT IS POSSIBLE THE WORST HAS COME TO PASS.'

"What mean you, my love?" asked Winn.

'IT HAS CONNECTED WITH THE DARK'

"Oh, damn, and what reason would it have to take one of my troopers?" asked Jeanne.

'I KNOW NOT LADY, WILL YOU ALLOW ME TO COMMUNE WITH HIS CLOSE COLLEAGUES, FOR THEN I MAY DISCERN A REASON?'

"As soon as we get these Chin prisoners stripped and on their way, I'll have them brought to you."

There was a howl of delight as Paul took off running at full speed toward the pair. "Hi Winn, it's great to see yer," he was bubbling with excitement. "We've got loads of Gypsies who have come to join us, and Ny-mo is their king."

"Is Ny-mo here?"

"Yep, came in with Mum and your uncle Tom tonight. You ought to see Finn's people,

they ride dragons too, not the big flying kind though," he said with a long worshiping look at the miniature version of the mighty Lord Dominie.

"I know I've met with them." Winn draped her arm over his shoulder and gave a squeeze. Let's go find Ny-mo, I want a word with him."

They made their way through the tall grass to the main encampment, Dominie walked between them, the top of his head reaching their shoulders, his horns swept back as he strained to see.

'IT IS NO ENJOYMENT BEING THIS SIZE, FOR I PERCEIVE NOTHING.'

"Look you through my eyes then."

'AMUSING, FOR YOU ARE NOT MUCH TALLER THAN I.'

Tom and Jeanne followed the trio. They came across Ny-mo with a group of his warriors watching the Chin prisoners.

"Prince Ny-mo, can some of your Croninn be trusted to escort them to the holding camp, without separating too many heads from shoulders?" Jean asked him as they approached.

'Assuredly dear Lady, we would enjoy that task.'

"Which one, escorting or separating heads?"

'You misjudge me my dear Jeanne,' he signed, and grinning, turned with an evil look in his amber eyes to choose escorts from the wild plains warriors.

Winn greeted Ny-mo with a warm hug, and together with Paul and Dominie, the four walked off, arm in arm, heads close, deep in mind link.

"He's growing up too darn fast," said Jeanne watching them depart.

Tom's mind was on the White M'ntar, and the disappearance of the young British SAS soldier, Snowy Maxwell, who had been snatched by the huge white dragon.

"I hope Dominie can come up with some answers soon, that was one scary beast." Tom said, almost to himself. Jeanne nodded and squeezed his arm in agreement.

"You're not wrong there." She replied.

**To be continued in:**

**The Tirnano - Book 2 - Q'reem**