

Touch Not The Cat

Phil Young

'Touch Not the Cat'

by

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Na bean don chat gun lamhainn.

***'Touch not the cat,
but a glove.'***

- Clan MacPherson

Prologue

There was a short scream and something heavy struck her in the back, knocking her to the ground. Scrambling with her fingers she clutched at a half buried rock and fought to resist the pull. Whatever hit her slid off down wind and she saw a woman's hand go by...

Part 1 – Bird of Prey

Fire Bird

Off with his head! I won't tolerate traitors in my camp. Cayden! Despatch this man now!"
"Yes sire" and he raised his sword as if to strike the mortal blow.

"Not here man. Too messy. Do it outside."

"Guards!" He signalled them to drag the unfortunate victim from the dining hall and followed them out.

"I'll take care of him now. Back inside. Crowhawk doesn't want any more trouble tonight."

Cayden grabbed the man roughly by his bound wrists and pushed him into the night. He stumbled forward through an open gate. Another shove and a few more steps then the prisoner gasped as his foot slipped and he spun round, wobbling on the edge of a sheer drop.

"Deep isn't it? Can you swim?"

The man shook his head, his eyes wide with terror. A whimper escaped his lips as he looked over his shoulder into the surf that exploded in the depths of the chasm.

"You were unwise to betray Crowhawk. He's a mean one as I'm sure you know now; but me, I'm a reasonable man. I can't let you go, but I will give you a chance.

"Kneel down there... by the cliff. Now stretch your neck over that log. Further." The condemned man did as he was told, his body shaking with fear.

"Now I'll count to three, then my sword comes down. If you're not there when it strikes the log, you may just live, but don't make me chase you."

"One... two... three." and the blade sliced through the air cutting deep into the log.

A scream could be heard faintly above the crash of the waves but there was no blood on the sword.

Cayden peered over the edge. "Good luck...fool" and he retreated to the warmth of the fire inside.

On the balcony, later that evening; "You didn't kill that weasel did you?"

"I'm afraid not sire."

"What am I to do with you Cayden? You're no real warrior, despite you're little show in the hall tonight. I think I was the only one who didn't believe you'd do it... How can I have a lieutenant that doesn't want to fight. I should push you off here now. You know far too much. But then, you're the only man I can trust and a damn fine fighter when you're forced into it. I wish I was such a strategist. By the way, what did you do with him. I presume I can count on him not turning up here again."

"He went swimming sire."

"Good. I thought he needed a drink. He looked parched after our little talk," and he recalled the screams of pain as the spy was licked by the flames from the hearth over which he had been trussed. Torture was not the lieutenant's style, but the lord took a little too much pleasure in it sometimes.

Crowhawk had gained his position from a combination of inheritance, charisma and force. Not a brilliant man, his policy had been, to rule with an iron backhand, supplemented by the gathering around him of others with the skills he lacked.

Cayden on the other hand, was a relatively educated man. An orphan, raised in a monastery, he had fallen in with Crowhawk after the latter, in one of his rare compassionate moments, had saved him from drowning. He was a fine strategist and had led his lord's troops to victory on several occasions.

The two of them had become close friends over the years and Crowhawk relied on him for advice and support. It was Cayden who had introduced the lord to his now wife Ellen.

From 'The Nest' Crowhawk surveyed his domain.

There, ranged along the shore of the bay were the lights of the cottages occupied by his tenants and drawn up on the banks of the river he could faintly see the row of fishing boats, their furled sails reflecting the bright moonlight.

The wind of the day had died down now and with it the sea. The bay lay still and quiet behind its sheltering headlands.

"Ah.. Cayden, it's nights like this I live for. The Lord, me, is in his hall and all is well with the world."

"I know what you mean Sire" and Cayden glanced up at the heavens. "Even the Moon is smiling on you tonight."
They gazed at the face. Funny how it seemed to smile all the time, like the cat that got the cream. Or maybe as if there was some great cosmic joke that Man would never quite figure out. "So there you boys are."

"M'lady."

"Ellen. We were just admiring the full moon."

"It's beautiful. It reminds me of our courting days, when.."

"Not in front of Cayden if you don't mind."

"Don't be silly. He's our best friend."

"Still. There's a time and place."

"Yes dear... Look!" and the men's eyes followed her gesture.

There, streaking across the heavens was a falling star like none they had seen before.

As it fell, a spray of smaller stars burst from it and trailed out behind, before fading. The tail glowed for several seconds after it passed.

"Magnificent", Lady Ellen said. "This is an auspicious night. I must go see the astrologer" and she rushed off down the staircase.

"I'm not so sure about auspicious. That tail of fire looked more ominous than auspicious. I'll be interested to hear what Garvin has to say."

Lady Ellen met the old man in the Great Hall on his way down from the tower.

"Philosopher, did you see the sign?"

"Indeed I did M'lady."

"What did it mean. It was so pretty it must be a good omen."

"I wouldn't be so certain, ma'am. I must consult my charts on this... if you'll excuse me. I'll report to his Lordship when I've finished my deliberations."

"Of course Garvin. Away you go" and he hobbled off down the spiral stair case.

It was dawn before the old man had decided on the meaning of the night visitor.

He entered the Great Hall and nodded toward Crowhawk, seated at the head of the table eating breakfast with Cayden.

"Garvin. What news from the crypt."

"Your Lordship. I have contemplated the portents through the night and have come to my conclusion."

"Come on then, out with it."

"I'm afraid you'll not be pleased Sire."

"That's for me to decide, now what does it mean?"

"Put simply, the Firebird means a battle. Probably a big one and the trail of sparks signifies a breaking apart. I believe we're in for a rough time M'Lord."

"I knew it and it took you all night?"

"I wished to be certain sire."

"Don't worry old man. I needed to be sure too. Thank you, now away to bed. Looks like we'll need our sleep."

Few people brought out the forgiving side of Crowhawk, but Garvin was one.

"What do you think, Cayden? What do you think I should do about it?"

"It's not mine to say, Sire."

"I'm making it yours. Do you think I should do something about it."

"Perhaps. Perhaps you could take precautions. There would be little harm in extending the outer walls out beyond the outcrop. Raise a tower up there to keep a watch. It may be time to build that wharf you keep talking about, to watch the sea at your back. You could even try a little trade. You know how Stanford thinks there's a future in it. What use is a port if you don't use it?"
"You could be right my friend, you could be right."

"Cayden! Come down here." Crowhawk rolled out the parchment on the boulder before him, a rock on each corner. He traced the outline of the new parapet with his dagger.

Cayden descended from the knoll where he had been viewing progress on the extended fortifications.

"What do you think? Will they be enough?"

"If we can man them, M'Lord. We'll need to be able to get men on these walls at short notice. We can't keep them patrolled permanently without taking farmers and fishermen from their work."

"We'll need a way to call them up quickly. Something like a bell. Yes. We need a large bell. I put you in charge of acquiring one. Use whatever means you deem necessary. See Charters for travel funds and have a think about how you want to go about it and let me know. Now where would be the best place to put it?"

"It needs to be somewhere well protected, within the walls, Sire. Somewhere that will reach the whole bay."

"Why not put it on the island. We can make the chasm bridge into a draw bridge. That should protect it. It will also give us a fallback position in the event of the unthinkable happening."

The island was the detached headland of the peninsula the fortress was built on. Currently it was served by a small bridge over the intervening chasm. It was across this bridge that the jailer went daily to attend to any prisoners kept in the walled up cave that served as a dungeon at the foot of the cliffs,.

Journey

With a rumble of wood on stone, the wagon rolled out of the courtyard, along the cobbled path and through the partially built walls of the new works.

Cayden, dressed in abbots robes, rode in front while two hand picked guards dressed as a monks drove the wagon, keeping an eye on their supplies and the gold hidden in a box beneath the food.

Crowhawk was all for taking a bell by force for he was not a subtle man, but Cayden had convinced him of the prudence of a more peaceful path and left the fortress with enough gold to have one cast.

The significance of the trust that had been placed in him did not escape Cayden and he felt somewhat proud of himself as they cleared the outer boundary of the defences. Thoughts of the task ahead, however sobered him somewhat as they entered the forest out of sight of the bay. Their vigilance, heightened for the trip through the woods, would not be relaxed until they returned with a bell.

It was a brave man indeed who would travel unarmed through the forest. Many would say it was foolhardy, but beneath their robes, the three men concealed armour, weapons and fighting skills unmatched by nine out of ten soldiers in the Western Counties. The humble trio drove on confident in their ability to protect themselves and their goods.

By nightfall of the third day they had reached the main road East with some relief, having circumnavigated several small villages on the way. It was common knowledge there were no churches in the far West and Cayden knew that clergy coming that way would arouse suspicion. Now they would be less likely to be challenged and more likely to be believed.

As on the first two evenings, the little group settled down for the night around a fire, in a copse back from the road. Cayden took evening prayers in case they were being watched. His companions grumbled again before joining in. They were far from the religious kind. Cayden could see he would have to keep them out of the taverns if at all possible. They may have been brilliant fighters, but their acting skills left something to be desired.

"Lads, I have an idea to make our task somewhat easier. From now on, you two are not to speak when we meet someone. You're accents will cause suspicion. I will do all the talking. If asked I'll just say that you're from a silent order, right?"

"If you say so."

"Fine, I do say so. I expect by tomorrow night we'll be past Weslake-Cross, which means we'll have to travel through the town to the bridge. It could be a tricky passage. As you know, it will be market day, so all the scoundrels from the Western Counties are likely to be there. Watch your weapons. Some of those pickpockets are cunning. You're on first watch Catt" and with that he wrapped himself in his rough blanket and lay down to sleep.

Cattenach, Cayden's trusted Scots companion, lay quietly, face towards the wagon, eye's just open, ears tuned for the sound of anyone moving in the underbrush. Across the embers, his long-time partner, Murdock, usually referred to as 'The Mouse', huddled into his bedding and his snores soon punctuated the dark.

The night passed uneventfully, with the three men taking turns on watch and they set out on the road to Weslake-Cross soon after dawn.

Arriving at the town in the early afternoon, the band wove their way through the crowd toward the bridge. Every now and then a peasant would grab at Cayden's robes and beg for a blessing. Churchmen were not known for their compassion in the West and this suited him fine. He pulled at the robe, jerking it from their hands saying, "Repent in your own time, I've not time for such as you." While harsh words, they served the purpose and the supplicant would quickly cringe and back away not suspecting the real reason for his rebuff.

As they entered the square, Cattenach climbed from the wagon and, taking the reins in his left hand, he led the party through the fringes of the crowd, around the edge of the market and past the shops and alleys that opened onto the plaza.

As he turned to check the wagon, he felt the slightest movement of his habit and spun round to see a pickpocket running off up the lane with his dirk.

If the thief had the dagger then he would know about the sword and armour. He only had to tell one other person for the news of the strange monks to spread across the three counties like wild

fire. Every unsavoury character this side of London would be out to lift what they could. They all knew armed monks meant only one thing, religious treasure.

Cattenach, threw the reins to his companion and lit out after the thief. He took a right and ran through a courtyard now full of upended barrels. Through the windows of the inn, patrons stared out at the noise. He slowed to a quick walk, trying not to attract attention. Out the other side and back into a run he could see the culprit disappear down a side alley. He leapt the pile of fire wood that came crashing down from a loft and headed up a ladder towards the source. Catching his habit on a rung, the monk bent to pull it free, just in time, as a pitch fork brushed his scalp and crashed to the ground behind him. Now he was really angry. Stealing a dagger's one thing, but trying to pitchfork him to death, now that's another thing altogether. His tinge of guilt over the task ahead disappeared in a flash.

He made the loft and looked around, sword in hand.

The thief was nowhere to be seen.

Advancing on a pile of hay in the corner, he stabbed at it. There was a rustle of grass and he struck further to the right.

From beneath the heap came a whimper. "Come on out rogue!"

No response. The sword thrust violently into the hay met by a muffled scream as a hand flopped into sight holding the dirk.

Blood trickled down the wrist. The monk kicked the knife free and poked at the hand with his foot. No reaction.

"That'll teach you to cross 'The Cat'."

He put the dirk back in his belt. Usually sheathed in his boot, the knife had to be kept well hidden and in his guise as a man of the cloth, boots were out of the question. He pushed the bloody arm back under the hay and left. With any luck the body wouldn't be found for days, maybe weeks, by which time they'd be long gone. In any case, who would suspect a monk.

"Any problems?" Cayden asked quietly.

A shake of the head in reply and a surreptitious finger across the throat told the story.

'Pity.' thought the lieutenant, 'He should have left well enough alone', and they crossed over the bridge, past the keeper who waved them through and continued out of town without further incident.

Hammercroft

The summer journey across rolling country, beside rippling waters and through leafy glades was not at all unpleasant and they wandered on at a churchman's pace, apparently in no hurry, until in a day or two they came to the village of Hammercroft.

It consisted of little more than a smithy and stables, a village green and of course a tavern. Around these, a dozen or so houses were spread in the fields along the road. A small graveyard bordered the green to the East.

As they stood having a drink at the well on the green, Cayden stared across at the headstones. There seemed to be a lot of fresh mounds for such a small settlement.

Just then the local innkeeper approached and he thought no more about it.

"Good afternoon Abbot. What brings you to these parts?"

"Just passing through, my son."

"Where are you bound?"

"To the city."

"Pilgrimage?"

"Not this time. Business."

"Oh. I didn't know monks engaged in commerce."

"Church business. We're going to arrange for the casting of a bell."

"Oh, are you now... Will you be staying here overnight?"

"If no one minds. I thought that as it's getting late, we might sleep in that copse up ahead."

"Looks like it's coming on to rain Your Worship. I've an empty room in the inn. You're welcome to it for the night. No charge. Only one bed I'm 'fraid but your brothers can use the stable out back. It'll be better than getting wet in the woods."

Cayden thought about it for a second. He was missing a bed beneath his back and it did look like a shower was on the way.

"Very well. You're most kind." If you'll show us to our quarters, we'd be grateful."

He was quite pleased with the turn of events. The arrangement meant the two Scotsmen could keep an eye on the wagon, and while it wasn't the comfortable bed and warmth he would have, even a bed of hay would be better than the cold ground they'd been sleeping on lately.

Morning came. It had been a fitful sleep for the pair in the stable but Cayden had rested well despite the noise in the bar downstairs. It seemed there had been a heated argument going on about something.

All would be quiet for a while, then the volume would rise until the innkeeper took over and hushed things down for a time, almost as if he didn't want someone outside to hear. During the lulls he could hear the rain running off the thatch, splashing into puddles in the yard.

The cause of all the commotion soon became apparent when Cayden descended the stairs at daylight.

Will, the innkeeper approached him.

"May I 'ave a word Your Worship?"

"Certainly."

"We had a discussion last night, agreed, well most of us did, that I should talk to you about this bell you're off to get."

"Yes?"

"Well, we've got one here. One we're prepared to sell, for a price mind you."

"Go on."

"Well, if you want to buy it, you can save yourself a long trip."

"And where did you get this bell, Will."

"Oh, it came from on old castle used to be round hereabouts." he replied, with an exaggerated innocence. A real Abbot would have been suspicious, but this band of impostors were not above a little skulduggery themselves and Cayden let it pass.

"We don't need it. No church anymore." Will went on, "You interested?"

"I may well be. When may I see it?"

"I could take you this morning. It's in a barn up the road a bit. A might strange shape for a bell, but it 'as a fair tone. You'd call the folks for miles with it."

"Strange? How so?"

"You'll see. I'll get my son to check with the owner of the barn" and he hurried off upstairs.

The Sun was still in the first quarter when the group arrived at the barn. It was a massive building, built against a small hill by a lake. The timbers looked new.

With a little effort, the innkeeper lifted the bar from the

entrance, swung the massive doors wide and Cayden stepped inside.

There, spot lit by a shaft of sunlight, was one of the strangest objects he'd ever seen. Shaped like a double headed axe folded in two, the blades rising twenty feet above the dirt floor, it hung from a central cross piece that rested on two stone pedestals. It definitely had a certain beauty. He could see instantly that Crowhawk would want such a unique object, assuming it actually performed as required.

The group circled around it and stood back to admire its lines, Mouse bumping into a mare in one of the stalls. It whinnied and pulled at the old rope that held it in check.

"Very nice Will, very nice. Can we hear it?"

"As you wish Your Worship, but I warn you it is very loud. I `ope you don't mind if I leave you to do it yourselves. I'll just go outside a ways till you're finished. Come and let me know."

"But how do we strike it?"

"Oh yes, sorry. `Forgot. See that beam on the ropes there", pointing to a large timber suspended from the rafters, "pull that back and let it go so the end with the leather over it swings up against the bell. Be careful and cover your ears though" and with that he hurried out through the door.

Out of sight, the innkeeper ran hell-for-leather across the field to shelter behind some rocks with his fingers in his ears.

Cayden motioned to Cattenach and he grabbed the beam and thrust it backward. It was a substantial piece of wood but his muscular frame handled it with ease and he held it there a moment.

"Ready?" and Mouse put his fingers in his ears, just in case the innkeeper was right.

Cayden nodded and the beam swung through the air striking the nearest blade squarely in the centre.

The sound was tremendous.

The three men stumbled backwards in shock. They had been warned but Mouse had been the only one to take heed. As he winced at the noise, the mare reared up behind him in terror, breaking the rope. Rising on her hind legs she kicked out with her front hooves.

Mouse didn't stand a chance. His wiry frame collapsed under the blow to the head and his ribcage buckled beneath the weight of the animal as it came back to earth. The horse rushed past Cattenach, knocking him against the wall and out into the field.

They knelt by Murdock's side. Blood poured from his gaping head wound. His scalp lay bared to the bone. Ribs protruded through the skin beneath his habit. His weak breathing gurgled in his chest for one or two breaths, then he was silent.

The after tones of the bell could be heard finally dying away. Catt, quickly took the weapons from the dead man's body and between them the two hid them under their clothes. The game was not over yet.

Cayden closed the poor man's eyes and looked up at the cause of his death. There was no question in his mind that it would fit the bill and after Mouse's accident he was determined not to make it all for nothing. The little man had not been a likeable character, but he had been a loyal one and deserved better than a death under the hooves of a frightened horse.

The question now was price... and transport. It was too big to fit on their wagon. Something would have to be done about that and a coffin would be needed so they could bury their late companion. It seemed that a bit of carpentry was required. If things didn't take too long it might be easier to take his body home. Cayden didn't fancy trying to fake a burial service in Hammercroft.

They went outside to fetch the innkeeper only to see him walking back round the lake with the mare.

"Sully'd kill me if she got away. I should 'ave thought to take her out first, but I didn't think. Been forgetting a lot lately, must be getting old," he said as he led her into the stall. "Well, what do you think?"

"Fine, just as you said. But I'm afraid Mou..., Brother Murdock is dead."

"What?"

"Struck by the horse. The bell spooked her. We'll need a coffin. Will that be a problem?"

"No, no. No problem Your Grace."

"Good. Now what is the asking price... for the bell?"

"We agreed last night on forty crowns. Is that satisfactory?"

"It's a little steep, with the death and so forth. We also need to get a wagon to transport it."

"What about thirty five crowns and we'll provide a wagon in exchange for yours... plus a coffin."

"Let me think on it, if you will. Please excuse me", and Cayden walked over to the rocks, knelt with his back to the innkeeper and pretended to be deep in prayer for a minute or two.

Returning to the barn he said, "Let it be so. We're not travelling with that sum of money, as I'm sure you appreciate. We will have to go on to Cranmere to arrange payment. That should give you time to organize everything before we return. If we could have the coffin first though we can bury our brother in the abbey there." He had decided on another course for laying their friend to rest.

The next day Cayden and Cattenach bid farewell to the innkeeper and his son and headed up the road to Cranmere. Three hours down the road they entered a wood.

"This should do nicely" said Cayden and they turned into the undergrowth and moved off a few hundred yards into the shade. Winding amongst the trees they found a glade by a stream and stopped to camp. They had no intention of going all the way to Cranmere and risking being exposed as fakes. They'd just bury Mouse, wait a few days in the forest, and return to collect the bell. There was no hurry. It wasn't going anywhere.

The clearing was a beautiful setting to lay their friend to rest in and they set to digging a grave. Having no shovel or spade, they used the dead man's own sword which seemed fitting. The work was slow going without the proper implements so they took turns at it. The hole lay half finished overnight and the next day the task was completed.

Cattenach, removed Mouse's habit, placed his weapons on his chest and they lowered the coffin into the shallow pit.

Cayden said a few words over the box and they began filling in the grave.

By nightfall, they were done and apart from the crackling of the fire, silence descended on the woods.

The pair passed the next couple of days, hunting, tending to their weapons and sleeping. Ever aware of the gold on the wagon, they took care to investigate any suspicious noises in the woods. By night they took turns to watch the camp. Sleep was harder to get now there were only two. Catt fashioned a head stone from the lid of a box and carved Murdock's name and the date on it.

Neither of them knew his age.

On the third day, they turned their backs on their companion and with a last goodbye made their way to the road. Hearing the sound of horses on the trail, they held back in the undergrowth as a band of pilgrims passed on their way to the abbey at Cranmere.

The pair moved onto the turnpike, turning to the West and the waiting bell and by dusk they had hitched their horses outside the inn at Hammercroft again.

The Purchase

Vello Father", it was Will. "That was a quick journey."
E"We hurried back. It's not good to be on the road with this much gold. How are you progressing with the bell?"

"Nearly ready. You should be able to leave with it tomorrow. It's still at the barn but it's all ready to lower onto the wagon. Smith has done a fine job there. Do you want to take a look at it now?"

"Please...", and the innkeeper led them down to the smithy.

Cayden had never seen an eight wheeled wagon before.

Smith had done a fine job extending a large wagon with heavy timbers and placing another two pairs of wheels forward and aft of the original rear axle.

All the wheels had been widened and reinforced with iron braces as was the rest of the vehicle. It would be hard to turn, but it looked like it would do the job if they took care.

The pace at which he must have worked should have raised doubts in Cayden's mind, however he was in a hurry to get the bell and leave. The sooner they were home the sooner they could drop the charade.

That evening Cayden negotiated to hire four horses to pull the wagon to Weslake-Cross. They would leave them there with a friend of the smithy at the stables and he would collect them next time he went in to market. His friend could sell them replacements there. Hammercroft was too small to lose four strong horses.

The dawn broke clear and bright. 'A good beginning', thought Cayden.

They all climbed on the new wagon and drove out to the barn. There were a dozen or so extra locals who came to help with the loading.

The bell was propped up on a pyramid of timbers waiting for the transport to arrive. The pillars had been dragged out of the way and lay in one corner of the building. The bell was wrapped in

reed mats, 'For protection' they said, but Catt was pleased that they would prevent it from ringing accidentally. With difficulty he backed the wagon up to the bell and inch by inch it was lowered on its side, onto the tray of the vehicle. The farmers strung a web of ropes over the cargo and it was done. Slowly Catt eased the wagon out of the barn. The wheels left deep ruts as they sank into the turf but the horses kept going. Gradually they moved out onto the road. The well trodden surface packed hard by years of traffic, held up well to the weight. It looked like all would be fine. Slow, but fine. The main worry would be the bridge at Weslake-Cross. They proceeded into the village followed by their entourage of helpers. Everyone was in a good mood and by the time Catt had transferred their belongings from one wagon to the other and Cayden had paid the innkeeper, there were sounds of a party beginning in the tavern.

The travellers said farewell and slowly headed west again. As they passed the last house, Cattenach breathed a sigh of relief.

"Glad that's over Catt?"

"Yes. Finally I can talk again. You don't know how hard that was."

"True. But it's not over yet. We'll have to keep the act up at least until we leave Weslake. Remember we've still got to change horses and I'll bet news of our journey will spread quickly. We're not exactly inconspicuous. I'd say you can expect a little action on the way home."

"Good. That I can handle. This sneaking around is something else" and he pulled his broad sword from the chest beneath his feet and ran his eye over it. This was his favoured weapon, inherited from his father, 'Bless his soul'.

Soon the sound of hooves on the road ahead made him return it quickly to it's hiding place, though it was still close at hand.

The 'Cross'

It was a weary pair that pulled up at the Weslake crossing three days later. They had made half the trip in the dark to keep up progress. The less time they were on the road the better and the strain of travelling, watching the remainder of the gold and keeping up appearances with the passing pilgrims was starting to take its toll, particularly on Cayden.

They had made an unfortunate choice of time to travel. News of a new icon from the holy land arriving at Cranmere had caused a flood of travellers to the abbey and their journey away from it was cause for query when they were met along the way. Some wanted to know why they were heading West, others wanted to know what it was like. Had they seen it? Had they touched it? Would he bless them? His abbot's robes stood out amongst their dusty traveller's clothes and he found it hard to move on without responding.

The bridge keeper raised his hand. "Good afternoon Father. On your way home I see." He recognised them from their passing a couple of weeks previously. "I trust you had a successful journey."

"Yes thank you Keeper. Very successful."

"What have you got there then?"

"A new altar stone" and he lifted a corner of the covering to show the piece of the stone surface."

"The keeper fingered the small cross around his neck."

"Is that all?"

"Yes my son. Apart from our personal belongings."

"Fine. One rock. No tax. You may pass."

"Bless you my son."

The keeper bowed his head as the wagon squeezed onto the bridge. He saw the planks of the bridge move as the heavy structure creaked beneath the wheels, threatening to give way. For a second he had a vision of the whole thing collapsing into the river and his head on a stick but the danger passed and he breathed a sigh of relief as Cayden lead his horse across behind the wagon.

“Keep a wary eye Catt. I’ll go find the trader” and Cayden moved off into the town to find some new horses. Cattenach felt exposed sitting on the wagon and jumped down. He went forward and checked the horses.

Looking up from inspecting a hoof, he heard, “Don’t I know you from somewhere?”

Catt said nothing, remembering his instructions. It could be a trap. The man came closer. He recognized him now. It had been a long time ago, up North. Before he joined up with Crowhawk. They had fought together.

He was a slippery character that Catt had never expected to survive the battle, much less the twenty years or so since they last met. He shook his head, made the sign of the cross and placed a finger to his lips, still trying to slip out of the situation but the man was persistent.

“You’re Cattenach. So the ‘The Cat’ lives on. They always said you had nine lives. Me, I’ve got by with one. How are you old fellow and what’s this? Taken up orders? I don’t believe it.”

Catt could hold out no longer. This old acquaintance was starting to make a spectacle of them both. He never had been subtle. He opened his mouth to speak.

“Ah, there you are.” It was Cayden returning. Turning to the newcomer, “May I help you?”

“I was just talking to my old friend Catt here. Who are you?”

“I’m afraid you must be mistaken. This is father Marcus from the order of St. Avian. They’re a silent sect so I’m sorry, but you’ll not get a word from him.” The name had been the first thing to come into his head. Until now they’d been lucky and avoided having to name their supposed order. Now the fake cat was out of the bag, would they get away with it?

“Where’s that?”

“On the West coast.”

“I’ve been all down that coast. I haven’t heard of St. Avian’s.”

“It’s very new.”

“Well I’ve just come from there.”

“What might your trade be? Mr...”

“Call me Snake.”

‘What is this preoccupation with animal names?’ Cayden thought to himself, raising his eyes to the heavens.

“Mr... ah, Snake...”

“It might be ‘Jack of all trades’..” he replied, tapping the butt of his sword with the heel of his right hand.

"Father Marcus and I could use a... 'Jack of all trades,' for a short journey. Are you interested?"

Catt glared at Cayden over 'Snake's' shoulder trying to dissuade him, but the older man either didn't see or didn't understand the message.

"Well I am at a loose end right now. My fee is a shilling a day."

"Done. You'll be paid at our destination. Do you have any things to collect?"

"No, you see me as I travel."

"Fine. Do you know this town well?"

"Well enough."

"Good then, help unharness the horses and show your old friend here to the stables. Tell him the abbot sent you" and to Cattenach, "He'll be waiting with four new ones. They have my mark on them. You may talk to him", he whispered, nodding at their new companion, "but be circumspect until we leave town." The two younger men unharnessed the team and headed for the stables.

When they returned leading the fresh horses, Snake was limping noticeably and rubbing his stomach.

"Are you feeling unwell."

"No, no, I'm fine. Just a touch of wind. It'll pass."

"Very well. You can ride on the wagon. Hitch them up.

Catt. Take this and get some provisions. I'd like to get underway again as soon as possible."

So it was that when the wagon rolled Westward from the 'Cross', there were three of them to guard its treasure once more, only this time the menagerie had changed.

Snakes and Ladders

"What are we carrying here anyway?"

"An alter stone" replied Catt.

"You mean he really is an Abbot?"

"Something like that"

"And you're a monk"

"No, I'm just helping out, like you. Speaking of which, now we've got the little matter of you're past performance sorted out, don't give me cause to mistrust you again, understand?"

"Yes, yes. He who pays the piper and so forth... Speaking of which, he is good for money isn't he?"

"You can count on it."

"I am, I am."

"And don't think of trying anything tricky with him. He's quicker than both of us put together."

"What, the monk?"

"He didn't always wear those robes," Catt was having fun playing with the words, telling the truth but hiding it at the same time. Travelling was beginning to bore him. Maybe the return of this ghost from the past wouldn't be so bad. Things might liven up a bit.

The trip dragged on. The new horses were strong, but it was a heavy load. The wagon itself was a match for at least two horses without the extra weight of the bell. There were no real rivers west of the 'Cross', only streams with small bridges and each watercourse had to be forded in case they collapsed. Several times Snake and Cattenach could be seen lending their backs to the task of getting up the bank while Cayden hitched his horse up front and coaxed him into pulling too.

Slowly they made progress towards the coast. At night they camped close to the road, the weight of the wagon precluding any excursions into the forest. This meant they needed to be particularly vigilant, exposed as they were to passing traffic. Cayden set two-man watches, swapping one man every few hours. He and Catt slept fitfully when they were not on watch, neither one totally trusting 'Snake'.

"'Snake'. Where did he get that name?"

"We were fighting up North many years ago and things had come to a standoff. One night he slipped through the enemy guards and slit the throat of their chieftain. Got out again without a scratch. They capitulated and ran. He became a hero, but I still didn't trust him. Later on we were surrounded in a glen. About a half a dozen of us hiding in some rocks. Rather than stay and support his comrades, he snuck off in the night and left us to face an entire army on our own. He was spotted as he left, betraying our position. They came on in force and massacred us. I was the sole survivor and that was only because I played dead. Left me with this scar though." He indicated the red line running down his cheek. "That was the last time I saw him."

"I guess that was what the limp and stomach pain back in the 'Cross was all about."

"He'd have been dead before we left town if you hadn't hired him."

"I suspected you didn't like him from the start. Yes, I did catch your look, but I thought, 'Better the devil you know'. Leave him be for the moment. We need him. What happens after he's been paid off is none of my business, I just hope he takes his business elsewhere."

The time to change watch came around and Cayden roused the subject of their conversation and lay down to sleep.

'Snake' tried to talk with Cattenach but he was brooding following his chat with his friend.

After a while he started to nod off. It had been a long day and it was early morning by now. At first his companion shook him awake but the second time he was left snoring, back against a rock.

Several minutes passed with one man asleep and the other staring into the fire, poking at it with a stick.

An owl hooted as 'Snake' rose from his haunches and crept over to the wagon. He leapt up onto the seat, leaned over and slipped the strong box quietly out from under the supplies. He climbed onto the tray and with a small sharp tool, began to pick the lock. There was a slight metallic clunk and the lid was free.

The glow of gold inside, reflected in his eyes as he held up a handful of crowns. "Lord almighty!" He whistled under his breath and stuffed a couple in his empty purse. "He's good for it alright!" He thought for a minute, then locked the chest again and slid it back into place. He wasn't stupid. If he took the money and ran, Catt would get him eventually, but if this abbot carried money like this around, what must be back at the abbey. He'd have to check that out before he made a move. There could be a good future in this somewhere. They wouldn't miss a couple of crowns from the chest though. That is if they hadn't seen him.

Unfortunately for the 'Snake', he had been watched. Catt had been feigning sleep and saw it all.

When it came time to change the watch again, Catt walked over to the wagon and reached in the shadows. Grabbing a rope, he tied it in a noose and holding it behind his back he wandered back to the fire. 'Snake' was stretching and rubbing his eyes. As he dropped his hands, Catt gripped them

and slipped the rope over his wrists, securing them behind his back.

"Hey, what's going on?"

"Theft, that's what. I saw you take money from the chest. Cayden, check his purse. I bet you'll find a couple of your crowns in there."

"These look familiar", Cayden said as he extracted the gold from the purse. "And I trusted you. Oh well, looks like you'll have to come along as a prisoner now. Fortunate really. Now I don't have to pay you. Catt, I think we'll make him work for his life. What do you think?"

"Definitely."

"Bind him across the axles under the wagon. Put a noose around his neck and tie it to the wheels" and to 'Snake', "Now, not a peep out of you or I'll let Catt here have his way. I believe he still has a grievance. If however we get jumped by ruffians, you had better yell for all you're worth or you'll have your neck stretched when they steal the wagon. Get the picture? And remember, I'm a light sleeper, so no tricks."

The rogue nodded in reply his eyes wide with fear.

Cattenach tied him under the cart as instructed and they went to sleep. All of them except 'Snake' that is. He couldn't afford to sleep in case someone tried to steal the wagon. Each time there was a noise, he looked round terrified, expecting hijackers.

Morning came and the trio took to the road again. "You're so fond of the gold my friend, you can ride right next to it", said Catt as he concealed 'Snake' under the stores on the wagon. It wouldn't do for monks to be seen travelling with a prisoner.

By midday they had reached the coastal hills, only a day or so's travelling from home. Cayden could smell the sea, and the salt in his nostrils quickened his blood. Looking forward to the sound of the surf echoing through the Chasm, he wondered how the fortifications were progressing. Probably not that much further on than when they left. They had, after all, only been away a few weeks. Far shorter than expected. Their return would be a big surprise to all.

He had been sure that purchasing the bell had been the right thing to do, but now that the moment of truth was nearing, doubts started to creep into his mind.

Running over the pros and cons helped to allay them somewhat but not completely. It had been cheap and quick to get and had a magnificent sound, but it didn't look anything like what His Lordship would be expecting. Hopefully that would be a good thing. In fact he was counting on it.

The number of pilgrims on the road had tailed off and life was looking somewhat rosier for the travellers, 'Snake' excepted, by the time night fell.

They camped in the approaches to the forest not far from the bay. It was a pity to be so close and have to wait another day, but travel by night was impossible here with such a large vehicle. Catt bound the prisoner under the wagon again and they settled down for the night.

After their travels they felt quite secure so close to home.

The fire was burning low and the morning star just rising when 'Snake' thought he heard hooves in the distance. He strained to hear, trying to tell if they were approaching. They were. He waited in silence.

Slowly the sound of several animals picking their way along the dark trail grew louder until six men on horseback entered the clearing. They must have already been close when he first heard them, as the horses made hardly a sound on the mossy forest trail.

They surrounded the camp and two men dismounted, approaching Cayden and Catt lying on the ground. 'Snake' should have shouted a warning long ago, but as was his nature, he was playing it by ear, trusting his instincts to get him out of there alive. If his luck held, his captors would be dead in a minute and he could negotiate with the intruders for his freedom. They looked like his kind of men.

One of them flipped back Cayden's blanket with the tip of his sword and motioned to the second to do the same with Catt. They nodded to each other and the whole troop screamed at the top of their voices in unison. It sounded like a banshee's battle cry. 'Snake' nearly strangled himself in fright.

The sleepers leapt to their feet, hearts pounding, sword in one hand, dagger in the other. Crouching back to back, they faced the soldiers. They were ready for action and God help anyone in reach.

The night visitors burst into laughter.

"Put your weapons down boys. It's only us. The 'Old Crow' heard a rumour you were coming and sent us out to find you. Rather bad security you've got here. You'd be dead by now if we were someone else."

"But you're not. It was a calculated risk and it paid off in much needed sleep. Let me introduce you to our precautions though, which didn't work" and he dragged the prisoner from beneath the wagon.

"Now my good fellow" he said sarcastically, "I believe we had a deal. Your life for our safety. Seems you've forfeited. Catt, he's all yours."

'The Cat' grabbed him by the noose and put his dirk up to the rogue's throat. "I'm going to enjoy this. I'll teach you to run out on your comrades. It was your slimy actions that betrayed our hiding place. Time to pay, my erstwhile friend... On second thoughts, I've a better idea. You can sweat it out 'til we get home."

The new arrivals dismounted, set up a watch and sat down to hear about the traveller's exploits.

Dawn was not far off.

Home again, Home again.

The entrance to the fortress was littered with stones and tools as they turned through the nearly completed gates. The works had cut up the track and the last hundred yards of the journey was tough going; however there was plenty of manpower at hand and before long the wagon rumbled into the courtyard in front of the Great Hall.

Crowhawk, Lady Ellen and Garvin came out to greet the travellers.

"Welcome home Cayden, Catt. Where's your friend Mouse? Didn't he go with you?"

"Yes Sire, but I'm afraid he's dead. An accident. We do have a prisoner though. A previous acquaintance of Catt's. I'll tell you all about it later, but for now, would you care to see the bell?"

"Of course, show us", he said motioning to the wagon.

Cayden untied the covers and pulled back the reed mats.

"That's a bell? Looks nothing like a bell to me. Are you sure you haven't been tricked?"

"Have I ever let you down M'Lord?" Crowhawk shook his head gently. "Be assured, it's a bell and a fine one at that."

"Very well, I believe you. When can I hear it?"

"Well, it will be a big task to install it. We'll have to reinforce the bridge to the island first. We may even have to build a bigger one; then we need to set up two stone pillars to mount it on. Anyway, let's go inside and I'll tell you all about it. I'm dying for a decent drink and a bit of warmth. Guards! Put this rogue in the dungeon."

Crowhawk led the group inside as the two soldiers took 'Snake' to lock him in the cave.

He called out after them, "You'll regret this!" as he disappeared around the corner towards the bridge.

"I doubt it Traitor", Catt shouted back and went inside.

Crowhawk was anxious to hear his new bell and to satisfy his desire and men were pulled off the building of the walls to replace the bridge with a substantial drawbridge. There was talk amongst them of the wisdom of this. They felt exposed while large gaps remained in the ramparts, but the Lord would have his way.

It was not an easy job and three months had passed before the wagon rolled onto the island carrying the bell.

All hands, save those of the standard guard contingent, were called to assist in raising it into position. A magnificent Oak tree had been felled to provide the striker that now hung on massive chains from the one, large, tree that grew next to the bell. Along its length elaborate designs had been carved, depicting the falling star. Erected in a stone hollow, the bell was sheltered from the worst of the weather by two ridges of rock. Just beyond the hollow, a path twisted down over stone steps, and through a crevice to the dungeon, where 'Snake' languished in the sand and stone cell.

It was a King Tide, with the waves crashing against the outer, cut stone wall of the cave, on the day the bell was finally ready.

Crowhawk insisted on a dedication ceremony before the inaugural bell ringing. Men had been stationed all round the bay, on the opposite point and throughout the fortress to check that it could be heard.

Cayden's reputation was riding on the results.

Garvin did the honours and with Cayden's warning about how loud it was, the designated ringers drew back the striker, holding it briefly at the apogee of its swing, awaiting Cayden's signal. As he raised his hand to give the sign, the spray from a freak wave rained down on the gathering. He slipped on the wet rock, his hand coming down to steady himself as he fell. Mistaking this for the signal, the bell ringers released the ropes and the striker swung inexorably down on the bell. Cayden didn't hear Garvin's yell of warning over the sound of the surf and stood up again... directly in the path of the swinging beam.

Lady Ellen shrieked and the dedication party watched in horror as the timber smashed into his shoulder, breaking the collar bone and upper arm before hitting the bell. As it rang out, the Lieutenant staggered back towards the precipice. He clutched at his shattered limb, stumbled and fell over the edge, cart wheeling onto the rock shelf far below. The boiling sea turned red momentarily before his body disappeared in the undertow. No-one spoke as Crowhawk advanced carefully to the edge of the drop.

He shook his head and backed away.

"You, you and you. Get down there and see if he's alive. Catt, go down to the village and get the boats out."

Down in the cave, 'Snake' was laughing loudly. He had seen the body strike the rocks and mistook it for Cattenach, but he did not laugh for long.

Cayden had known the cave to flood before at King Tide and had planned to bring the prisoner up to the fortress until it had passed, just in case. He didn't like the man one bit, but he had no desire to leave him trapped in the cave to drown. Now he and his compassion were gone and nobody gave a thought to the wretch in the dungeon.

As the fishermen searched around the rocks for the body, the wind rose along with the sea until its violent surges forced them to return to shore, to wait for calmer weather. The crashing waves roared in, drowning out the prisoner's cries, and his cell was gradually inundated by the sea. It was the next day before his fate was discovered, when the Jailer arrived to leave his bread and water. 'The Snake' had already had more than enough water for one lifetime.

No one mourned the loss of the prisoner, least of all Catt. With his elevation to Lieutenant he had enough on his mind to worry

about without feeling guilty for letting him drown. He had been hoping for a more personal conclusion to the matter, but whenever he had broached the subject, Cayden had found a way to divert his attention and so the final ignominious end of his antagonist came about.

After several days, Cayden's body washed ashore in the bay and Crowhawk decreed he should be buried facing the main gate, where his spirit could watch over the fortress.

A headstone was placed on the knoll at the foot of the new tower with the words, 'Gentle Soldier, rest in peace. The bell has tolled for thee.' carved on it.

Some thought it in bad taste, but the lord was proud of his poetry so dissenters kept their council.

Down in the village there were other dissenters as rumblings about a curse on the bell began to circulate.

One of the fishermen had returned from market with a story about deaths having occurred whenever the bell was rung.

Apparently the people of Hammercroft had celebrated for two days when they managed to get rid of it. This would explain their haste to help the so-called religious men on their way. While Cayden was playing 'Cat and Mouse' with the truth, the innkeeper was manoeuvring him into taking the reviled object off their hands.

All this would have explained a few things if they had been aware of it up in 'The Nest', but of course they knew nothing about it and were unlikely to find out too, as long as they continued to stay aloof from the villagers.

On the road again

The new fortifications were progressing well and Cattenach devoted himself to ensuring that all was as it should be. The locals were brought in and training began in the structure and strategy behind the new works. With the bell in place he felt confident that he could call up reserves at short notice, to reinforce the defences now nearing completion.

For the common man life progressed at a normal pace, tied to the seasons the tides and cycles of life, but in the Great Hall, the Lord's attention had turned to expansion once again. He was

known as a brutal man when he set his mind on something and Cayden had been a moderating influence. His successor was less inclined to speak his mind if he had a dissenting thought. What's more, life as a mercenary hadn't prepared him to be a peacekeeper and when Crowhawk floated the idea of raids on the Eastern road, Catt fell in with the plan. The lord's coffer's had been depleted somewhat by the new fortifications and the purchase of the bell and he thought he could augment it with booty from the turnpike.

As instructed, the lieutenant collected a raiding party, fitted them out in travellers clothes and headed to the East.

For several days, the band hid in the forest observing the passing traffic. Catt was careful not to show his hand too soon. He was looking for a big pay off. He knew that after one or two strikes they would have to make for home to let things cool off before returning.

Finally a likely looking caravan entered the forest road and the sound of a barn owl rang out as the lookout signalled their approach.

His men quickly dragged a tree trunk onto the road, blocking the approach to a bridge on the River Russet. Striking a flint, they set fire to the branches. Two soldiers dressed as woodcutters, stood by with axes while the rest of the men hid in the brush around a small clearing that led to a ford in the stream.

As the carriage drew up at the fallen tree, the woodcutters greeted the leading rider and suggested a way across by going through the clearing. The rider looked about warily.

"Stay here", he said and rode down to the water, to check for a possible ambush.

Catt's men were well concealed and he saw nothing suspicious. He waved to his companions and the travellers turned aside and into the woods.

As soon as they were all in the clearing, Catt's men leapt from the bushes while his archers amongst the trees showed the travellers there was no point in resisting. They grabbed the halters and led the horses into the forest, out of sight of the road. At the same time the fake woodcutters, removed the tree from the highway.

Catt advanced on the carriage and pulled back the curtain with his gloved hand. Inside sat a lady and her maid. "Good day M'Lady." He said. " Please step out", and he offered his hand to help them to the ground." The Lady pushed it aside and stepped down on her own.

He signalled two of his men to guard them as he climbed inside and searched the carriage. He tapped the panels with the butt of his dirk. Nothing odd there. Then the kickboards under the seats. One of them rang hollow. He jumped down and inspected the outside of the vehicle. He could see no access doors so climbed inside again. The tip of the dagger slipped along in the join between the squab and the kickboard. There was a 'click' and the cushion popped up slightly.

"Ah." and Catt opened the concealed compartment. Inside, was a small chest, locked and bound with iron straps. He lifted it out and turned to leave.

As he did so, he heard a woman yell and looking up saw one of his men doubled over in pain, his hands between his legs. He had molested the maid and forgot to cover his rear, or his front, to be more precise.

"Serves you right. That's not what we're here for...Thankyou for your kind donation ladies. You may leave now."

By now his men had disarmed the guards, blindfolded them and tied them to the rear of the carriage. They gagged the driver, bound his wrists and feet and tied him into his seat.

"Very good... M'Lady", and Catt indicated the carriage. She stepped up into the carriage again where he made to bind and gag her . As he leaned over to tie her hands, he brushed against the Lady's front. She was outraged and attempted to attack him. He was quicker than his companion outside and avoided injury by jerking the rope tightly around her wrists, pulling her hands behind her back. He then trussed up the maid likewise.

Closing the door he slapped the horses on the flanks and the bedraggled party set off back up the road with the guards trotting along behind like a gaggle of geese, trying hard to keep up. With that the robbers mounted up and fled into the trees.

Opening the casket, Catt found it filled with gold objects, meant as tributes for the abbey in Cranmere. They had been pilgrims. One item displayed a jewelled crest. He recognised it as the badge of Lord Stanford.

Lord Stanford was a very powerful man whose borders touched on those of Crowhawk. There had been much dispute about who

controlled land where their territories adjoined, however several years ago Cayden had negotiated an uneasy truce that had so far managed to hold.

'The Cat' was beginning to get a bad feeling about it all and he ordered his men to move out for the coast.

The Castle

South of 'The Nest', a day or so's ride along the jagged coast, rose a small but formidable castle. Below it the sea pounded relentlessly against the cliffs. There was nowhere to land and no sheltered bay to anchor in. This had been a bane for Stanford since he took over the estate of his late father twenty years earlier. For the last few generations their society had been very insular, but he was a forward thinker and could see opportunities off shore. Ireland, up the coast to Scotland or away to France or even Spain. There lay the future and he wanted to give his heirs more than the crumbling castle he had inherited. Two decades of rebuilding had created a secure seat for the family, but it all cost money and Stanford was determined to provide for it's continued upkeep in perpetuity, however any attempt to form an alliance with his neighbours to get access to the sea, had met with rebuff, or in Crowhawk's case, open hostility. There had been fully armed conflict and men killed on both sides. Each fight brought on by aggression from Crowhawk. Stanford continued to seek a reason to put him in his place until finally he had had to live with the facts and look elsewhere for his trade.

The power of the church was on the rise again and it was a wise man that courted their favour. To this end he had dispatched his wife with tributes to the abbey at Cranmere. While the items were valuable in their own right, he perceived a far greater value in the grace and favour they would curry with the church. A church that was fast redeveloping links throughout the country and across the waters.

He was sitting before the fire, a tankard cupped between his hands when the Page ran in.
"M'Lord, come quick. Her ladyship's back. She has been robbed."

Stanford jumped up and hurried through the halls to the courtyard.

There he found his wife and the rest of her party dishevelled and dusty. It had been a slow journey home, with the six of them crowded onto the small carriage.

The words tumbled from Lady Jane's lips, releasing the tension until she flopped down onto a bench beside the well.

"And the casket?" he asked.

"Gone I'm afraid Sire." It was Michael Marks, Stanford's right hand man. There was no one he trusted more. No one else in whose hands he would leave his wife's safety. He knew that it was not a question of blame. Michael would have died rather than let her come to harm. He also knew when not to fight. Quick to weigh the odds Stanford had seen Marks talk his way out of many a tricky situation. He knew they must have been well outnumbered.

"I've failed you M'Lord. I'm sorry."

"Never mind. As long as everyone's unharmed. Now who were they? Did anyone recognize them?"

"No sire" said Marks."

"Did they have any distinguishing marks, badges, crests?"

"There was a crest on his glove. I got a glimpse when he opened the curtain. He took them off after that. It was a cat I think. A lion."

"Hawk's man... Cattenach. I knew it! Finally, a chance to put paid to him and his cronies. That Cayden fellow, I thought he was too good to be true."

"Excuse me Sire, I've heard that Cayden is dead", said Marks.

"Well, that might explain it. He was always a moderating force there. Perhaps he overstepped the mark once too often. I wouldn't put it past that butcher to get rid of his own mother if it suited him. So... time to take him to task, at last. Come inside dear, I've some thinking to do. Michael, see that Mary and the others are looked after. Oh, and send me your two most trusted men. I have a task for them."

Stanford's men returned from 'The Nest' a week or so later. They had reconnoitred the bay after dark and knew where the walls were still incomplete and where the sentries were posted. They had found the nooks and crannies, so loved by the village children for hiding from their parents. They had even figured out that there was a way from the rocks on the headland to the inner sanctum via the chasm bridge.

The lord considered an assault through the gaps in the stonework but dismissed this as too costly on the villagers. He had hopes of converting them to his cause after this campaign and preferred not to stir them up first.

Storming the Great Hall from the village would place the enemy at his back along the inside of the walls. Besieging the place was too time consuming, besides which they had access to the sea to bring in supplies, however the sea was the answer.

Stanford sent the page to fetch Michael.

He arrived with Madalene on his arm.

"What's this then?" he said, momentarily distracted by the sight of his daughter, arm in arm with his lieutenant. "How long's this been going on?"

"Actually I was going to speak with you about it this evening but... would you mind leaving us Maddy?"

"Certainly my lord" and she went out the side door. Unseen by the men, she passed through the ante chamber and into a small room Stanford used to watch proceedings in the hall from behind a trellised wall. He had once met a Moor in London, who told him about such things and it had served him well as a way of sizing up visitors before receiving them in person.

"Well then Michael, speak up. I called you here to discuss important matters, so come along." He knew full well what was on Michael's mind and contrary to his real feelings he was enjoying making it a little difficult for the young man.

"Sire, I wish to ask for your daughter's hand in marriage?"

"I presume you mean Madalene."

"Yes Sire." There were three girls in the Stanford household. The male heir they had hoped for had not come to pass.

"And what brought this about. She isn't with child is she?"

"No Sire. That would not be possible."

Maddy sniggered silently to herself. She had wondered how he would go with that question. While it was true she was not pregnant, it certainly was possible, in fact it was lucky that she wasn't... yet. If only her father knew.

For some time it had been their intention to ask for Stanford's blessing, but their parting on the aborted journey to Cranmere had been so heartrending that on Michael's return, they had resolved to approach him before anything else happened.

"Do you love her?"

"Yes Sire, very much."

"Of course you do, of course you do, but more importantly, how do you propose to support her in the manner to which I've made her accustomed?"

"I thought, with my retainer from you Sire, and her dowry..."

"Oh, her dowry? I suppose you were counting on a substantial dowry then?"

"Well... Maddy..., Madalene said..." and his voice trailed off.

The lord rubbed his chin and frowned. Michael's hopes sagged. Maddy was sure her father was toying with him, but from her hiding place she could not be of much comfort.

Stanford mulled it over. 'This could work in perfectly', he thought.

"When did you intend this wedding to be?"

"At your convenience my lord."

"I have big plans for the next year or two. I'm not certain we could fit in a wedding."

'He's not going to make us wait another two years, is he?' thought Michael.

"... but very well. You shall have your way. I suspect you already have had. Nevertheless, a wedding there shall be," and turning to the lattice, "You can come out now my girl. You have my blessing" and she ran to hug the older man, kissing him on the cheek.

"Thank you, thank you father!"

"It's my pleasure and delight dear girl. I've been praying for this for some time."

"And there you were, playing Michael along. You're a wicked old man Lord Stanford." It was Lady Jane, descending from the mezzanine.

"You too? I think I've been set up."

"Of course you have. It's a mother's job to see that her husband approves the right man."

"I give in. I don't know why I even pretend to run this place, speaking of which, Ladies, if you'll excuse us, I have something else important and somewhat less pleasant to discuss with my Son-in-Law to be." The women left the hall, smiles on their pretty faces. There were wedding plans to be made.

The Wedding Bell

"**A**nd what might your business be here then?"

"I have a message for your master", replied the courier.

"It had better be good news. We shoot the messenger 'round here if we don't like what he delivers."

"May I pass then?"

"Give me your sword... and your dagger. You'll get them back when you leave. If you leave...Thankyou" and the messenger dismounted and walked his horse through the high stone gateway into the fortress. He was met by another guard who fell in beside him.

"Jumpy aren't you?" the visitor said.

"We have reason to be." The guard replied.

'So true', thought the courier.

"Leave your horse here. This way."

As they crossed the forecourt he could see a man in the stocks, looking the worse for wear. Unlike the public punishments he had seen in 'The Cross', there was no rotten fruit, stones, or other missiles lying around. Obviously this had not been a popular show.

"What was his crime?"

"Foul mouthing the lord."

'Things really have gone downhill here since Cayden died', thought the courier. 'This wouldn't have happened in his day.'

"M'Lord, a messenger from Lord Stanford."

"Come", and Crowhawk, took the scroll from the page.

"Garvin, read this for me."

"It says, sire..."

`The Lord Maxwell
and
Lady Jane Stanford
cordially invite
Lord and Lady Crowhawk
and
Lieutenant Cayden
to the wedding of their eldest daughter
Madalene
to
Michael Marks Esq.
at
Castle Stanford
on the August new moon.'

A response is expected Sire."

"Of course. Page, see to the messenger while I consider my reply."

“So what was the Crow’s response?”
“Here Sire. He seemed a little surprised that you were not aware of Cayden’s death.”

“We’ll be having no guests from the nest then, as I expected. That should make things a little easier around here”, and he passed the reply on to his wife so she could plan accordingly.

Castle Stanford was a hive of activity as the great day approached.

Lady Jane insisted that everything be just right. There was the food, the guests accomodation, the decorations and the ceremony to arrange.

The abbot himself was summoned from Cranmere to take the marriage service.

In other circumstances, the wedding would take place in the Abbey, but that didn’t suit Stanford’s plans at this time. The family chapel would suffice.

Michael understood perfectly and Madalene was too much in love to care. She would have been happy to be married in a puddle in a rain storm as long Michael was the groom. Jane had been a little harder to convince. His ploy had been to say he was concerned about Crowhawk. Considering his recent actions, Stanford said he preferred not leave the Castle. The wedding would take the undivided attention of both himself and his number one man and leave the place open to attack. She finally gave in, after all, she had been the victim of the robbery on the road.

August arrived and with it came the wedding guests. Stanford Castle was packed with lords and ladies and their attendants and personal guards. Stanford had never made a habit of disclosing his military strength, so no-one noticed the men missing from his guard.

The firebrands around the walls of the Castle threw flickering shadows across the courtyard contrasting with the blackness of the sky. It was new moon with scattered cloud. Beyond the walls, a man could barely see twenty feet.

As the bridal party entered the chapel, to the North, on the River Russet, a group of soldiers gathered just below the falls.

On their wagons they carried three leather boats.

"Right men, you all know what to do. Launch the boats and douse the brands. Wait for my signal to move out."

Soon the craft were afloat with four men in each one. On shore the horses were hitched together in three columns and with a man at the head of each they disappeared into the woods, heading for a distant rendezvous. The wagons headed for home to be concealed in the local woods until the wedding guests had all departed.

On command the boats pushed off and with oars silenced with sacking, they moved out into the stream.

The current gently took hold of the vessels and they had little more to do than steer with an oar over the stern.

To avoid being separated in the dark, the boats were tied bow to stern leaving little need for instructions to pass between them. They drifted on in silence.

Every man had been briefed fully before leaving Stanford Castle two days ago, ahead of the arrival of any of the wedding guests. The scudding cloud was the answer to a prayer, blocking out even the starlight most of the time. Lawrence just hoped there would be enough light at their destination to carry out their task. For the moment the river was handling their travel arrangements and the less light there was the less likely they were to be seen.

Through unseen fields they passed, cloaked by the dark, huddled underneath black capes that hid their armour and weapons. The glint of light on even one piece of metal could give them away and cost them dearly. It was a risky business they were embarking on and much depended on the outcome.

Even the occasional glimpse of Orion and his dog disappeared as they passed into the gorge, the enclosing hills blocking out all but the sky directly overhead. Lawrence knew the time of reckoning was approaching fast. At the other end of the cleft lay the bay and the village with the 'Nest' watching over it. A gentle wind blew through the gorge from ahead. Was it a precursor to sea breezes that would whip up the surface of the bay? The boats were not built for sea travel and they really needed a calm sea to pull this off without mishap.

The current picked up as they neared the end of the gorge until they shot out and into sight of the village. Candles were burning in the windows and the occasional villager was moving about among the cottages.

By the fishing boats on the bank, a couple of men were rolling up a net in the dying light of a torch.

As the fishermen stood to return to the village, the leading boat slowing in an eddy, turned side on and the second boat bumped into it followed by the last craft. The two thumps carried across the still water.

Every man on board held their breath.

One of the fishermen looked up, puzzled. "What was that?"

"What? I didn't hear anything", the other replied.

"I definitely heard a couple of bangs out on the river", he said, raising the torch to try and see what had caused the noises.

"I can't see anything. Probably just a couple of logs. There's been a few of them lately. Stephen hit one the other day. Lucky he it didn't hole his boat."

"I suppose you're right."

"Let's get this inside. I want to try and get it repaired for tomorrow" and they picked up the net, doused the torch, turned their backs on the unseen convoy and walked away into the village.

There was a collective sigh from the boats. Lawrence pushed off from the other craft and with his men back on the oars they all passed silently out onto the waters of the bay. On the far ridge the 'Nest' was outlined with torches all along the walls and he counted his blessings once more as he saw a light shining outside the dungeon door.

At the wedding, the Bride and Groom had just approached the Abbot for the blessing. The fact that the Father-of-the-Bride was particularly nervous went unnoticed in the general excitement of the moment. Stanford could hardly contain himself. He knew he wouldn't hear anything from the North for at least twenty four hours and he found it hard to stand by and let it go on without him. For that matter, he would have been much happier about the likelihood of a positive outcome if Marks had been there, but then that was the whole point. Hopefully Crowhawk would never think that he would launch an attack without either himself or Michael leading it and he knew full well that they were both at the wedding. He had already noticed one spy amongst the revellers who would no doubt be instructed to cause havoc if anything looked suspicious. He couldn't complain, after all it was to be expected and just what he would have done if the positions had been reversed. Stanford was, in fact, counting on it in case the raid went badly. His men had removed all identification that tied them to Stanford Castle, in case of

capture. If it all went well, this would cost him a pretty penny in bonus money, but then it would be well worth it.

Back at the 'Nest' all was quiet. The walls were manned as usual as Crowhawk dined in style with his men, watching a travelling Jester who had come to town. Far below him the three boats slid up to the rock ledge below the cave.

Silently the men slipped ashore. The boats had been tied together by their bows and two men pulled them around the rocks and into a small cove, out of sight from the cliff top. One man stayed to ensure they weren't dashed against the rocks while the other joined the rest of the band at the foot of the steps.

Lawrence peered carefully into the cell. Usually the Crow had at least one prisoner inside, but since the death of Cayden, he'd been somewhat less merciful and the number of bodies in the water had gone up while the number of prisoners had dropped to nil. One less potential alarm to silence.

Hugging the cliff wall, the raiders crept up the path, passing through the cleft onto the ridge. Ahead they could make out the silhouette of the bell against the lights of the Great Hall.

Lawrence reconnoitred the hollow for sentries. Not a soul in sight. He waved the others forward and together they crept to the edge of the drawbridge.

Crouching behind the winch towers they surveyed the other side of the chasm. No sentry stationed at the other end of the bridge. Obviously Crowhawk didn't expect a seaward attack, unless of course it was a trap.

He nodded to one of the men who ran across the bridge and slunk into the shadows.

The party watched as he crept along the wall of the Great Hall stopping beneath a trio of stained glass windows. Wedging one foot on each buttress flanking the centre window, he clambered up to the sill. Slowly he raised his eyes and peered in. A quick look around and he dropped silently to the grass. His companions watched as he started back to the bridge to report.

Suddenly a guard appeared from the other side of the hall, moving toward the bridge.

There was a glint of light on a club and he fell to the ground with a barely audible grunt. Instantly the unconscious man disappeared into the shadows, where he was trussed up and gagged. A few seconds later Stanford's man strode across the

bridge wearing his victim's helmet and tunic and crouched down with the others.

"The Crow's up this end of the hall at a separate table. The Jester is performing in front of him and The Cat's on his right. The others are sitting down either side of the main table. They're all there. All seven of them, with their swords. There are plenty of jugs on the table, most of them empty I'd warrant. The door to the balcony isn't barred although it may be locked. There's a key in it."

"Well done. Give the uniform to Simon. Simon, you and Harry will man the bridge. If anyone comes, they'll be expecting someone to be out here. Watch for us when we return."

Lawrence ran across the bridge with a grappling hook in hand. From inside could be heard cheering and laughter. He crouched beneath the balcony, waiting. More cheering echoed out. With a quick flick he deftly swung the hook up over the battlement where it lodged in the stone work with a soft 'clink'.

A strong tug on the rope ensured it was secure and he waved the rest over to join him. One by one they shinned up the rope to the balcony, leaving Simon holding the coil. As they listened at the balcony door, he ran back across the chasm and fastened the rope to the winch tower.

Harry was already at the other hoist and together they raised the bridge halfway up. The end hung high above the gorge, well out of reach of anyone on the far edge, the rope was strung almost horizontally across to the balcony.

The nine intruders unslung and loaded their cross bows. At the next roar of laughter Lawrence opened the balcony door and slipped into the gallery followed by his men. They squatted in the shadows out of sight of the revellers. A quick signal and they dispersed along each gallery, from where they could cover the whole hall. Downstairs the Jester was having a ball. Lawrence peered cautiously over the edge. All eyes were on the entertainer, but his eyes were everywhere. As he whirled around, Lawrence could have sworn that the Fool had spotted him. He drew back quickly as the clown did a series of clumsy tumbles, ending with a crash up against the door to the balcony, behind Crowhawk. There was a soft click, a tap on the wood and regaining his composure, (if a fool can be said to have composure), he returned to the spotlight. He picked up three clubs and began to juggle.

Lawrence snuck down the stairs and opened the door a fraction. The shadows from the firebrands hid his face in darkness. The Joker ran back and forth tossing and dropping clubs with abandon to the accompaniment of shouts and laughter. One of Crowhawk's vassals at the table had fallen asleep, drunk.

Perfect.

"And now I shall perform my amazing hypnosis act. Please gentlemen, do not watch the pendant if you wish to remain awake, and he held up a cut glass ornament on a leather thong and began swinging it gently to and fro.

Almost immediately another of the vassals, keeled forward and lay face down on the table.

'My God, it works' thought the Jester. 'There's a first time for everything I suppose.'

All eyes were on the pendulum when Crowhawk's head slumped forward. He did not fall on the table though. He continued to sit upright in his chair. Catt turned to him and leaned forward.

"M'Lord?"

He hadn't finished the question before there came the sound of several crossbow strings hitting their stops, a sort of 'Whooshing' noise and all the men at the main table fell forward with arrows in the backs. Those already lying drunk on the table would never rise again either.

Cattenach looked round in horror to see the Jester pull apart two of the juggling clubs to reveal a short sword in one and a dagger in the other.

He reached for his own sword, but the dagger pierced his jugular before it left the scabbard.

The Pages screamed and ran for the doors as the room quickly emptied. The sound of running feet could be heard in the gallery, their shadows speeding along the walls towards the balcony.

Leaping the top table, the Jester quickly checked that Crowhawk was dead and sprinted to the balcony door.

"Well done David", said Lawrence, "Great performance" and they ran up the stairs.

Overlooking the bloody scene from the Herald's Gallery, his men back at his side, Lawrence checked the hall was empty of all but the recently deceased, and leaning over the parapet, he grabbed a light from it's bracket.

"Why bother with a funeral. Burn in Hell Crowhawk!" and he tossed the flaming staff onto the straw covered floor. The dry

grass burst into flame instantly, licking up around the tables and bodies. The whole hall would soon be ablaze.

“Time to leave men”

Suddenly an incredibly loud sound rang out.

Once, twice, three times it continued as they gained the balcony.

On the other side of the bridge Simon and Harry were trying to cover their ears as they ran to the bell.

As the bellringer fell, mortally wounded, the striker swung free against the bell for the tenth and last time. One peel for each of the dead. The ringer had postponed his demise just long enough to outlive his lord, having fallen asleep at his post, out of sight, behind the rocks that flanked the bell.

Lawrence, David the Jester and the others took their hands from their ears just long enough to cross the gorge hand over hand along the rope. Severing it behind them they cut off any possibility of pursuit.

Below in the village men ran from their beds, some clutching bedclothes for modesty and looked up to ‘The Nest’ to see flames leaping from the roof and beams crashing into the inferno. Remembering their training they ran for their clothes and weapons and started up the tracks to the battlements.

Everything went to plan, except there were no attackers beyond the walls and no commanders left to take charge. While they stood at their posts waiting for action or orders, the raiders escaped down the cliff path and into the boats.

It was a perilous voyage, out around the headland and up the coast to Halfmoon Bay, but Lawrence and his men made the rendezvous with their horses before sunrise. They stood and watched as their scuttled boats sank beneath the waves, the sound of the bell still ringing in their ears

Once again it’s mournful tone had been the companion of death.

At Stanford Castle the celebrations continued for two days and the news of the death of Crowhawk and his men reached them not long before the wedding guests began to leave. Outwardly the Lords and Ladies expressed shock, but privately they all agreed it could only have a positive outcome. Behind closed doors Stanford drew up an agreement with Crowhawk’s other neighbours to share the bay and develop a port there under his administration .

'The Nest' was dismantled to build a large quay on the river and the village was renamed, 'Stanport'. Under it's new and benevolent lord it prospered in peace, in the shadow of the silent bell.

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## **Part 2 – Duel purpose**

### ***A Mansion on the Moors***

**T**he mist swirled lazily through the long grass surrounding the mansion as Warwick came down for breakfast. He loved coming home on leave and to these Autumn mornings in particular.

Not so, his mother Eunice. She sat rugged up in the corner of the dining room, her cat on her lap, staring out at the scene between fits of coughing.

“Warwick. I’ve got to get out of this place. It’s cold and damp and depressing. At least there used to be some life around here when you and your father were still about. But now he’s passed on and you’re off playing soldiers in London, it’s just lonely and wet and freezing cold half the time. It’s no wonder I’ve got this chest. Why don’t you get me a little place on the coast and you can have this... this mausoleum. I know you love it, though I can’t imagine why.”

“It’s mornings like these and memories of growing up here Mother. Playing in the garden with Nigel, riding to hounds, grouse shooting...”

“Oh that’s all very well when you’re young and healthy, but me, I need fine weather, sea air. I’ve been stuck out here far too long. Time you let me enjoy my old age. I don’t want much, just a small house, four or five bedrooms for the occasional guest, a dining room, drawing room, that sort of thing. Just a couple of servants” and as she finished, the kitchen maid walked in.

“Your usual breakfast Sir?”

“Yes Maisey”, turning to Eunice, “Ill give it some thought Mother”.

“You do that son, you do that.”

## ***A Cottage on the Coast***

**I**t was Spring before Warwick had enough leave again to look for a cottage on the coast and the hillside behind Stanport was ablaze with flowers as he and Nigel cantered down the final incline to the strand.

Against the quay, a handful of fishing boats bobbed on the wake of a departing coaster as she raised her mainsail and fled the river on the breeze from the gorge. The creaking of ropes and knocking of wood against stone as the gunnels touched the wharf, answered the cries of gulls circling over the men sorting fish on the shore. The bite of the salty air enlivened the senses while the bark of seals out on the point echoed across the water like a pack on the scent of a fox.

All was well in the bay, as it had been for decades or even centuries.

Gone were memories of feudal repression, war and deceit. Almost gone too were thoughts of the Mourning Bell, still standing quietly on the headland waiting for another victim.

**"M**agnificent! What a view. Eunice would love it here."  
"If you like quaint", replied Warwick.  
"Which she does and it's just the right distance from 'Moor House'."

"Not too close for her to be a nuisance but not too far that I couldn't get here to see her when I have to."

"I should hope you'd come more often than that. She is your mother after all."

"Of course, of course. I wonder if there's a suitable place around here. There doesn't seem to be anything except in the village and I doubt any of those would do. She said 'little' but that would be ridiculous."

"You could have something built. Maybe over there on that ridge", Nigel said, pointing toward the hills on the northern side of the bay.

"Build a house for her?"

"Why not. Look what you're getting in return."

"I'll get that in the end anyway."

"But you can have it now. Think of the parties you could hold."

"Yes, well there is that" and Warwick struck his horse on the rump with his crop and galloped the last few yards into Stanport. Ducks and chickens scattered as he dismounted in front of the 'Master's Arms'.

"Ho! Ho! Anyone in this godforsaken hole?" and he walked into the inn.

Sitting on a stool in the passage was a large ginger cat.

"Nice pussy" and Warwick reached out to pat it.

There was a hissing sound and he screamed in pain.

There were six red marks down his breeches, above his riding boots, where the cat had clawed him on it's way to the floor. The stains were slowly spreading. A scuffling sound marked the rapid departure of the resident rat catcher.

"What the hell was that?" Nigel asked from the doorway.

"Damn cat attacked me. Look! I hope Humphrey arrives with the carriage soon. I'll need a change of clothes."

"You could do with a doctor too by the look of it."

"Oh, it's only a scratch really. A damned expensive scratch for the owner of that mangy creature though. Now where's the proprietor of this outhouse?"

He turned around and found a handbell sitting on the hall table. Picking it up he shook it violently. After a couple of rings, it stopped suddenly, followed by a clunk. The knocker had fallen off. "Bloody Hell! This does not bode well my friend. Is there another inn in town."

"I don't think so Warwick. Just calm down and we'll get some rooms here."

"You rang sir?"

"Of course I bloody rang. I want three rooms for the night. My man will be along presently with the baggage."

"Very well sir. This way please", he replied, turning towards the staircase.

"Was that your cat that greeted me at the door?"

"I expect so sir. A beautiful cat if I may say so myself. So placid and such a good rat catcher."

"I'll bet he's a good rat catcher but I wouldn't vouch for it being placid. Look what he did to my breeches. I'll be subtracting the cost of repairs from the bill, if you don't mind."

He did mind, but he had more sense than to say so. It looked like a stormy night was in store for the staff of the 'Master's Arms'. Instead he just said, "Funny, you're the first person he's done

anything like that to". 'Must say something for your personality', he thought.

"By the way, innkeeper, you need a new bell. That one's bloody useless."

"Oh that old thing. Don't worry, it always does that" and under his breath, 'if it's bashed about by a numbskull that doesn't know how to ring a bell properly'.

"Most people are used to it."

The pair inspected their rooms. "They'll have to do. Now fill this up" passing a flask to the innkeeper. "Single malt mind you. You do have a decent whisky here don't you?"

"Of course sir" and he led them down into the bar.

"There you are", handing the filled flask back to Warwick. "Now if you'll just sign in here..."

The guests did so and turned to the front door.

"We'll be going for a walk on the hill. When my luggage arrives, please show Humphrey to his room and help him with my chest. What time is dinner?"

"Just after dusk sir."

"Fine, we'll be back in time."

**T**he two men set off along the street and up the path to the ridge.

Stopping to rest on a bend, Nigel said, "It really is picturesque. You've got to find a way to get your mother here."

"We'll see."

"And don't be so grumpy will you. You don't want to get the locals offside."

"You'd be grumpy too if you'd been attacked by that beast."

Nigel chose to ignore the comment and they headed up again, soon reaching the top.

"Look at this flat area. Perfect to put a house on."

"It's a bit close to the edge, don't you think", replied Warwick, passing over the open whisky flask.

"Oh, you could put up a wall. It wouldn't be much of a problem" and Nigel took a swig.

"I suppose not. What's that over there, across the bridge?"

"I don't know. Come on. We'll have a look" replied Nigel as he ventured onto the bridge. "Careful, this looks rather old" and he tentatively tapped at it with his cane. The sound was low and solid. "No, it's fine... come on."

They crossed the gap and walked along the track to where the tree stood guarding the bell.

"Well, what do you think that is?"

"Who knows. And what about this?" Nigel laid his hand on the striker log.

"My guess is that this is meant to be swung against that, like ringing a bell."

"Strange looking bell." Warwick thought out loud. "Let's see" and he moved over to the tree and drew back the striker.

"Don't Warwick."

Too late, his companion let go and the log swung down against blade.

The whisky flask went flying as their hands flew to cover their ears.

"Good God!"

"I told you not to", as the ringing slowly died away.

"Well, I can make my own decisions and I wanted to." Sometimes Warwick's childhood petulance came back with a vengeance. 'To think men like that are guarding the King', his mother would say to herself when her son displayed his lack of maturity. 'It's enough to make you shiver.'

"And look where it got you." It was Nigel. "My bet is we'll hear more about this when we get back to the inn." He looked out over the bay to the village. In front of the Masters Arms he could see a handful of people looking up at the ridge as the innkeeper helped Humphrey unload the baggage. 'God knows why he has to bring so much stuff' he thought. Who would carry their dress uniform around on a trip like this?" Warwick was starting to get on his nerves a bit.

Sitting in the drawing room back at Moor House, this little trip had seemed like such a good idea, but his friend's behaviour had been erratic and aggravating, not to mention downright embarrassing at times. He really did think he had a God given right to say and do whatever he pleased. "Thinks he's still in the middle-ages", he muttered to himself.

"Pardon?"

"Oh, nothing... Obviously this is someone's land. If you want to build up here, we'll have to find out who's and if they'll sell. I expect whoever uses this bell will need access to it. I hope it's not used much or it would drive your mother spare."

"I'm not sure that this is the right place, but they'll sell all right. Everyone has their price, you'll see... Shall we go down?"

## ***Fire in the Hole***

"Was that you two? Up there. It was wasn't it?"

"You mean the bell thing.?"

"Yes. The Mourning Bell. Who gave you the right to interfere with it?" the old man said.

"Why. I didn't see how it would do any harm."

"You oughtn't to meddle with things that don't concern you."

"Calm down Grandfather. All I did was ring a bell. It won't bring down Armageddon on us."

"We'll see, we'll see."

"What do you mean?" said Nigel.

"That bell has a reputation. It's cursed, it is. Whenever it rings someone dies."

"Well we're both alive and well, so there goes your curse old man."

"Don't be too cocksure. The day's not over yet. I'd watch my back if I was you" and he hobbled off up the alley.

"Let's have a drink Nigel", Warwick said and moved into the lounge. The two men leaned up against the bar and ordered a tankard each. The walk up to the ridge had worked up a thirst and the ale slipped readily down their throats. Soon the mugs were refilled and half empty again.

This cycle proceeded for an hour or so until darkness had fallen and dinner was served. Over the roast, Warwick was holding forth on anything he could think of. The drink seemed to be going to his head and he expounded the failures of the government, the vagaries of the royal family, and most loudly of all, the laziness of the working classes. All this could be heard out in the bar and as the locals began to fill the room, Nigel could hear grumbling drift across the hallway about Warwick's comments. The orator himself, was of course unaware of this. He was too busy admiring his own voice.

Eventually the meal came to an end and they repaired to the bar where the fire and friendly chatter had warmed the atmosphere.

**B**y now Warwick was beginning to reel a little. His companion had wisely limited his consumption and was well in control of his faculties. They squeezed up to the bar and settled in for the evening. Down the other side of the room the regulars were playing the local form of skittles and periodically a cheer would go up as a bowler made a high scoring strike. Men drifted back and forth between the game and the bar, to keep a constant flow of amber fluid down their gullets.

Despite the increasing volume and pugnaciousness of Warwick's comments, the locals kept their feelings to themselves and tried to avoid him at the bar, but as the innkeeper had predicted, they eventually came into conflict.

Young Sam, as opposed to his father Old Sam, had just collected another couple of pints and was turning back to the match when the Major, gesturing expansively with drink in hand, collided with Sam's arm, spilling all three drinks over himself.

"You boulder! You did that on purpose!" he shouted and swung at Sam with his fist.

With the jugs still in hand, Sam could not retaliate before the other fist landed firmly on his jaw, spinning him into the roaring fire.

As he tried to push himself out of the flames, his sleeves and hair caught fire. This was all anathema to the soldier and he kicked and punched at the boy heedless of his situation.

Nigel grabbed him by the shoulders and pulled him off as the other men ran to assist Sam.

"What the hell do you think you're doing, Warwick?"

"He did that on purpose. It's a matter of honour."

"Honour, my foot. D'you think it's honourable to kick an unarmed boy who's on fire. You're the one without honour here." Nigel had finally had more than enough. He was about to move his erstwhile friend out of the bar before he was strung up when Warwick slapped him across the face. "You have besmirched the name of Wickham-Smythe and I demand satisfaction. I challenge you to a duel. Up on the ridge... at dawn."

Nigel was not a proponent of duelling. "Don't be stupid", he replied.

"Coward! Just like your father and his father. You Parsons always had a yellow streak."

This made Nigel so angry that he accepted the challenge. As the challenged party, he had the choice of weapons and he thought he knew a way out without losing face. Believing that the Major

had no swords with him and knowing he was quicker with the Sabre than Warwick, that was what he chose. There was also more likely to be a chance for mercy with a sword. Pistols were too final.

"But I don't have my sabre with me, do you?"

"I'm afraid not. I guess we'll have to postpone it." Nigel said, thinking this would give him a chance to calm his companion down and call it off, however fate stepped in.

"We have the swords." It was the innkeeper. "Here."

Looking up Nigel saw him reach above the fireplace and remove one of the matching swords crossed above the mantelpiece. He cursed under his breath.

"Sabres it shall be then." said Warwick.

"Very well. Humphrey! Humphrey, get your master out of here or he won't live long enough to see the dawn."

Humphrey, who had been watching the skittles, crossed the room and with a look of revulsion on his face ushered his employer towards the stairs. He had never been keen on Warwick, but after twenty years service with his father, Humphrey had been loathe to pack up and start anew elsewhere. He was now determined that whatever the outcome in the morning, he would leave Moor House for good when they returned from Stanport. When the thumping on the stairs and along the first floor passage died down, Nigel could hear sobbing beneath Sam's cries of pain. He looked around, expecting as a friend of Warwick's, to be accosted by the men.

It was the barman who spoke first. "Do you have much of a chance against him sir?"

"Oh yes, indeed I do."

"You'll be needing a second then."

"I guess so. Why? Are you offering?"

"I think I could bring myself to fulfill that function, if it would help your cause."

"Thankyou, I accept."

Just then from behind him came, "Samuel, Samuel, no, no!" Sam's mother had arrived just in time to see him close his eyes for the last time. He had died from burns to the upper half of his body and arms, despite the flames having been extinguished quickly by his friends.

"Who did this? I want him to pay!"

"It was this gentleman's friend", replied Old Sam.

She rushed at Nigel and started beating her fists against his chest then trying to claw at his face.

"Stop it! Stop it!" It was the innkeeper.

"He didn't do anything. Quite the opposite. He's the one that pulled him off Sam."

"Well, where is he then? I'll strangle him with my bare hands."

She was a strong woman, used to heavy farm work and could probably have done as she threatened.

"Let us at him. String 'im up" chorused the men in the bar.

"Calm down, calm down all of you... Silence!" shouted the innkeeper.

"Leave him be, Lizzy. What do you think would happen if we topped a Major of the King's guard here in Stanport. The regiment would be down here in a flash and there'd be Hell to pay. The Captain here will take care of it for us. His so-called friend has challenged him to a duel. It will be much better if another guardsman does it. It's a matter of honour after all and no one could blame us for it."

"Oh very well. But you better make a good job of it young man" and she poked Nigel in the chest before turning to her dead son and bursting into tears again.

Gathering around the lamenting couple, the local men all remembered the toll of the bell that day as they gazed with tears in their eyes on the burned flesh of their departed young friend. Once more the curse of the Mourning Bell had struck.

## ***Sabretooth***

**T**he damp air bit through his jacket as Nigel trudged up the hillside. The dawn had barely broken and the swirling fog kept visibility down to a few yards. Immediately ahead of him he could see the innkeeper's back, but further ahead he could hear the footsteps of his opponent and his second, while behind him, stretching down the track, the men of the village followed in their wake. This duel was to be no private affair. These people wanted to see justice done. Nigel had the feeling that even if he was beaten by Warwick, the major would not live to tell the tale.

When they had passed in the hall, Nigel had offered him a way out, but the protagonist had just grunted and headed for the street. It looked like he was beginning to regret his challenge now

that he was sober, but to back down would have been seen as a disgrace. He had manoeuvred himself into a corner. At the head of the column strode Old Sam carrying the swords. He was to act as referee. He was probably more than a little biased, however a referee was needed and every other man in town refused. It had been a set up, but then who would have expected otherwise.

**A**t last the procession reached the ridge and the combatants and their seconds followed the Old Sam across the bridge to the island.

"Now all you men stay over there. There'll be no interferin' d'you 'ear."

It looked like Old Sam was at least going to show a semblance of fairness.

He held up the swords and examined them. They weren't a matched pair for duelling, but as standard military issue they were close to identical. Nigel removed his jacket, wiped his hands on a handkerchief to dry them and swung his arms around a few times, clenching and unclenching his hands and bending his elbows to limber them up. The walk up the hill had warmed up his legs. He was confident in his skills and had more fear of catching a chill in the damp air than losing the duel. He had a plan to try and satisfy everyone without bloodshed and was calm and collected. The Major was looking somewhat seedy after his drinking bout the night before and seemed rather nervous too, as well he should in light of his opponent's prowess with the blade. Likewise he handed his jacket to his second and Humphrey rolled up his sleeves for him and rubbed his forearms. Producing a flask he gave Warwick a slug of whisky to warm the blood.

"I should have thought of that Captain. Sorry. Duelling 's not my particular area of expertise I'm afraid."

"You'll do fine. Just hold my coat and act as a witness. Don't interfere, whatever happens. Clear?"

"Yes sir."

"Good" and to Sam, "Let's get this over with." He walked up to the referee as his adversary did the same.

"Challenger picks first I believe" and Nigel took a sword from the cushion and looked down the edge.

'I wonder where the cushion came from' he thought. 'It looks too good for someone in the village' and then he quickly quelled the thought. 'Concentrate Nigel. Concentrate.'

He flashed the sabre around and sighted down the cutting edge.

"This will do."

The Major took the other sword in hand and eyed the blade.

"Now I don't know 'ow you does it in the city, but this is the way it'll 'appen 'ere. You two stand back to back, come on... yes, like that, and when I say 'Go', take ten paces straight ahead, turn and then have at each other. Understand?"

They both nodded.

"Hey Sam, we can hardly see anything from over here." It was the voice of one of the fishermen.

He thought he was missing out on a good thing, stuck on the other side of the gorge in the fog.

"And probably a good thing it is too. Now be quiet. There's serious business goin' on over 'ere."

"Are you both ready?"

Again they nodded. Warwick's breathing was starting to get heavy.

"Very well then. Go" and the duellists solemnly paced out the requisite steps.

The two protagonists turned and faced each other raising their swords.

Warwick took a step forward. Nigel stood his ground and smiled slyly at his opponent.

The Major took another step, then skipped as he changed pace and ran at the Captain.

Nigel easily parried the first blow to his left, spinning Warwick away. He turned to face the second attack. A split second later and another blow resulted in the clash of metal as the intended victim caught the oncoming steel on the blade of his sword and flicked it away. He spun sideways and elbowed his attacker in the ribs as he slipped by. Warwick stumbled on a clump of grass twisting his ankle barely keeping his balance.

"So it's going to be like that then" and he rushed at Nigel again.

He hadn't woken up to the fact that he was going to wear himself out while his foe stood and waited for his assaults. Once more he was easily deflected and at the far end of his trajectory he turned and stopped. Finally he woke up to the tactic.

"Come on coward... Have at me Parsons, or are you too afraid to face me on even ground?"

The taunting had the right effect and Nigel moved forward, thrusting his blade directly at the speaker's heart. Warwick caught it on his sword just in the nick of time and the tip passed

under his left armpit. He raised his arm and jumped to the right swinging his sabre to the left at waist height. The blow slipped up the other man's blade and locked against the guard. Nigel forced the two swords up over their heads and they arced harmlessly away from the combatants.

Both men took a couple of steps backward.

Warwick wiped his brow with the back of his hand. The last night's drinking had obviously taken its toll.

As his hand cleared his eyes he looked up just in time to see the captain take two steps toward him and spin left to right. As if in slow motion, the sabre sliced the air in a full circle. The power behind the stroke could be seen in the grimace on Nigel's face. Quick action was called for if Warwick was to stay in one piece. He tried to duck and raise his blade simultaneously, barely succeeding. A hank of his long hair flew into the air and drifted to the ground some yards away as his heart missed a beat. He could feel the warmth of blood trickling down the back of his neck, soaking into his shirt.

Feeling dizzy all of a sudden, he stumbled forward. The tip of his sabre dropped to the ground and he leaned on it for a second.

"Do you yield?"

"Never!" and he stepped back raising his blade again.

Fortunately for him the blood only flowed from a small nick in his crown and as the dizziness receded the sweat in his eyes succumbed to the back of his sleeve and his vision returned. He was ready for the next round, or so he thought.

Moving forward again, he curled inside like a spring, ready to unleash his energy in a single irresistible surge.

Nigel sensed it coming and rushing to meet him, deftly leapt aside presenting his blade up and across his attacker's path. A quick flick of the foot and Warwick somersaulted onto the steel edge, slid left and rolled onto his back in the wet grass. An involuntary cry left his lips.

"What's happening? Is it finished Sam? I'm coming over."

"Stay there Martin! I'll tell you when you can come."

He walked forward to inspect the slash across the Major's chest. It looked bad. "Do you yield?"

"You .. ahh.. heard me... I'll never yield to a coward."

"Seems he has the better of you sir. I would advise you to yield now." Despite the treatment this man had given his son in causing his death, the referee saw no reason to prolong the conflict. He would have to live with the shame of losing. That

would be a better punishment than dying. Death was too quick, too painless. Old Sam wanted him to suffer.

"Stand clear old man. I'm not done yet." He got to his feet with difficulty.

"Humphrey, bring that flask here!" His man servant moved forward, hand outstretched with the whisky.

"I don't believe that's allowed Major." said Sam.

"No, let him. It won't do him any good." this time it was Nigel's voice.

Warwick took a swig. He felt the warmth spreading down his throat.

Sam wondered that it didn't start leaking out of his chest wound, but in fact the cut was not deep. The swords had not been sharpened for years and he was more likely to die of ferric oxide poisoning than a shallow cut like that. There did seem to be quite a lot of blood however and it certainly hurt.

"Now my friend, it's your turn" and he lunged again, grimacing in pain as he stretched his arm out.

Once again Nigel parried the blow and stepped aside.

The two men circled slowly, stabbing the intervening space, testing each other's mettle.

As he arrived in a position with his back to the bell striker, Nigel caught his foot on a rock. Looking down he didn't see Warwick's thrust until almost too late and the sabre pinned him to the log through his shirt, barely missing the skin.

Warwick tried to pull the sword from the wood, but the pain from his wound prevented him from gripping it tightly enough and Nigel brought up his sword to force him back.

The ripping of fabric signalled Nigel's release and he snatched his opponent's sword from the log with his left hand.

The unarmed man backed off to one side as his foe advanced and soon he was trapped over a low boulder by the tree, two swords at his throat.

"Do you yield?" Nigel said through gritted teeth.

Seeing the hopelessness of his situation the reply came back, "Yes...yes. I yield."

"Good enough. I'll release you on condition that you pay for a decent burial for this man's son", indicating Sam with a nod of his head. Sam! Is there anything you want before I let him up? "

"You know, we don't have a chapel here to hold the service in. Maybe that would even things up a bit."

"What about it then? I think you can afford say one hundred pounds to build a chapel." The beaten man faltered in his response and the tip of a sword brushed his neck.

"A hundred pounds. Yes, a hundred pounds"

"Does that suit you Sam?"

"Yes sir."

"Alright, consider it done then." Nigel withdrew the swords and turning from his one time friend, he walked over to the innkeeper standing by the bell.

He handed back the sabres.

"I'm afraid they'll need cleaning."

"That's no problem. I'll do it myself." In fact he had no intention of cleaning them. In his opinion, the blood on the blades would make them fine trophies and be a reminder of the justice done that day.

'Altogether a fine outcome' he thought as he handed Nigel his jacket. 'The bastard will have to live with the shame of losing the duel and we'll finally get a chapel. We should be able to get a fine window for a hundred pounds. It's a pity about Young Sam though.'

"Is it finished Sam? Can we come over now?"

"Surely, come on over." And the waiting men started trudging across the bridge.

Martin shouted as he came into sight through the fog and Nigel and the innkeeper turned to see the striker swinging down towards them. The soldier pushed his second out of its path only to be struck full in the head. He died as the bell rang out through the gloom.

Everyone clamped their hands to their ears as it swung back again. Warwick, a man whose honour was by now in tatters, laughed and stepped out of its way as it began its second swing. This time the sound was less intense but it struck the bell nevertheless and the mournful tone was heard as far as the village.

At the inn where the women were waiting, a wail went up. Two rings. That meant more than one was death and they all feared that one of their men would be the victim.

Back on the ridge, the innkeeper called, "Sam. Here" and he tossed a Sabre, handle first, to the older man. Together they advanced on the remaining duellist, followed by the village men.

The major backed away from the advancing mob. Closer and closer he came to the edge of the chasm until he was about to fall over, but the men of Stanport wouldn't let him get off that lightly.

"Now men, no need to be hasty. I'm sure we can come to an arrangement. I'm not a poor man..."

"That may be so, but you're a dead one. You heard the bell. It rang twice. So far only one has died" and as they fell on him, their blades flashed in the morning sun as it broke through the fog.

The body that hit the water was barely recognisable, but then the sharks weren't looking for a pretty meal.

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Part 3 –A Ring For Her Finger

Flames of Passion

“Her head’s on fire, I swear it.”

“Don’t be stupid Peter. It’s only her hair.”

“Well it looks like it to me. It’s like flame. Who is she?”

“Don’t ask me, ask her. Go on.”

Peter picked up his cat and wandered over to the counter.

“Hello. I’m Peter. What’s your nam?.”

“Hello Peter. I’m Mrs. Prattley and this is Aurora.” It was the girls’ mother. She didn’t approve of young men addressing her daughter directly. Far too forward.

They were new in Stanport and she hoped this manner of accosting them wasn’t the standard amongst the young men. If so, then she would have to look out for Rory as she affectionately referred to her only girl. Sixteen year olds could be a handful.

“Hello Uroora. Where do you come from?”

“May I speak with him Mother?”

“Very well, but be quick, I want to get back to your grandmother’s.”

“You can call me Rory, Peter, and I come from London. Mother and I have come to look after my Grandmother, Mrs. James.”

“Where’s your father?”

“He’s dead.”

“How did he die?”

“You’re a bit noseay aren’t you?”

“Sorry, I just wondered. Do you like my cat? Her name’s Uroora too” and he held her out at arms length for the girl to stroke.

“Come now Peter”, the woman behind the counter said. “You know very well you call her Puss’.

“Yes, but I’m changing it. Uroora’s a nice name.”

“Well thank you for the compliment ... Peter? It’s a lovely cat but we must go now. Come along Rory” and she opened the door to usher her daughter out.

Peter turned to his friend. “I like her.”

“Yes she is very pretty, but be sure you don’t bother her. I’ve a feeling her mother wouldn’t take too kindly to it.”

Owen was a normal fourteen year old who had befriended the older Peter some years before when his two brothers had left to

join the army. As neighbours they were able to play together under the watchful eye of one or other mother, but now he was beginning to outstrip his friend's intellect and was about ready to go out to work. The fact that he kept Peter out of mischief was the only thing that had kept him at home so far. He was too old for the local school now and his parents could not afford to send him away to further study, so for the moment he hung around the village looking after Peter and keeping the younger children from continually taunting him.

Peter in his turn had been damaged goods from the start. Problems with the birth had meant this only child had been slow to walk, slow to talk and slow to learn. He was generally a private person but had warmed to Owen and the two soon became constant companions; Peter with Puss in hand. The four year difference was balanced by the mismatch in their IQs.

Things had run smoothly for some years until Peter started to mature, physically that is, and now he was showing an interest in the opposite sex, as with Aurora. Also, Owen's father, Evan, wanted his youngest son to join him on his fishing boat. His long time partner had recently retired to the shore and he needed a second pair of hands on board.

"Owen. It's time you pulled your weight around here. No more lazing around with that retard friend. From tomorrow you're coming out on the boat with me."

"Must I?"

"Yes. You're old enough to be gainfully employed. Play time's over. Now you better go to bed. We'll be off at five tomorrow."

"Can I tell Peter first. He'll be very disappointed."

"No. He can find out in the morning, now off you go" and Owen dragged his feet up the stairs to the loft, feeling like a traitor.

A Boat That Will Carry Two

It was mid morning before Peter arrived on the Palmer's doorstep, with Puss nestled in his arms.

"Is Owen ready Mrs. Palmer?"

"I'm afraid he won't be keeping you company from now on. Peter."

"Why not. Doesn't he like me anymore? It's because I spoke to Urrora yesterday isn't it? He likes her too. He's... what do you call it?...jealous?"

"No he's not jealous Peter. He's just growing up and his father needs him on the boat. It's time he started working."

"But I'm grown up. I'm older than him and I don't have to work."

"No Peter you don't, but you're special. Now, you'll be alright won't you. You and Puss."

"Her name's Urora now. Like the girl in the shop."

"You mean Mrs. James' grand-daughter."

"Yes. She's pretty."

"So I hear. Now run along Peter, I've got washing to do."

"Alright..." bowing his head. "Bye Mrs. Palmer" and he turned and wandered off down the lane behind the inn, idly kicking stones as he went.

"Come on Urora, we don't need him anyway. He just wants her for himself."

Reaching the far end of the lane he crossed the road to the wharf. Tied up in its usual place was Mr. Palmer's dory. For the past couple of years it had been one of his great pleasures to row out into the bay with Owen and watch the seals or fish with a line and sinker. Puss would stand with her front paws on the bow, looking into the depths for a flash of silver, while the boys took turns rowing then she would curl up on the centre thwart as they drifted on the swell. Peter, being older, was the stronger one at the oars and gained much enjoyment from being the best at something for once.

He was standing gazing into the boat as Aurora walked by.

"Good morning Peter", she called and waved cheerily. The poor lad's heart skipped a heart.

"Hello Urora."

"What are you doing Peter?"

"I'm going to go for a row in the boat. Would you like to come?"

"Sorry, I'm busy helping Mum. Maybe some other time."

"Alright. It's fun."

"I'll bet it is. I'd better run. Goodbye"

"Bye Urora" and he watched her disappear down the road and into the shop.

To Peter, her vague 'some other time', was as good as a promise and he stepped into the boat with a warm feeling in his chest. 'She likes me' he thought.

His simple approach to life wouldn't encompass the possibility that she was only being polite. Placing his cat in the bows, he cast off, unshipped the oars and slowly rowed out of the river and into the bay.

A Home Away

The warm sunshine on his back and the gentle slap of the wavelets against the hull calmed his spirit as he absent mindedly struck out for the island. He and Owen had often investigated the rocks around the base of the headland but never dared to go ashore. They had been warned by Owen's father to keep away from there, but now Peter was on his own and as he drew level with the chasm, he decided to find a way onto the island.

Carefully he nosed into a cleft in the rocks and edged up to the shelf. He tossed Puss ashore gently and jumped over after her, with the painter in this hand. He tied the boat to one rock and rolled another onto the rope, just to be sure. Puss was exploring at the foot of the cliff. Peter followed her as she wandered amongst the boulders and started up some steps cut in the stone. "What have you found girl?" he murmured to himself as the cell door came in sight. The cat turned and smooched up against his leg as he examined the door.

The once massive hinges were by now almost completely rusted away, and the latch and lock mechanism had disappeared altogether.

Peter poked at the door. The timbers creaked and moved. The metal straps that held the planks in place were barely holding together. He grabbed the bars of the window and pulled. What was left of them came away in his hands as the door slowly fell towards him. He jumped back and the cat skittered out of the way as the timber hit the ground, falling apart in a heap.

"Meow" and Puss leapt the pile and ran inside. The lad hurried in after her.

"Look girl, a cave. A secret cave. I bet no-one knows it's here. This can be our special place. Just you and me." He sat down on the rock bench carved into the rear wall. "It's like a house. We could live here." If the cat could speak, she would have told him otherwise. There was nothing there except the bench. Not even a cosy corner to curl up and dream of mice and milk, but in his mind's eye Peter was safe and sound, far from the laughter of the children who didn't understand how special he was.

He lay down on the ledge and cuddled the cat to his chest. Soon the sound of the waves and the soft breeze in the grass outside wafted him into sleep. Puss purred contentedly, wrapped in his arms. All was well with the world as the two companions slumbered, cradled in the Earth.

"Peter, Peter. Where are you?"

"Here Mum."

"Who's that with you?"

"Urra. Isn't she beautiful?"

"What are you doing, boy?"

"Dancing Mum, see" and the couple twirled and pirouetted across the rocks, skipping lightly from boulder to boulder.

From the distant shore his mother cried, "Be careful boy, you'll hurt yourself. You clumsy lad, you can't dance with a girl like her." The voice reverberated around the bay and echoed off the hills on the far side. Peter put his hands up to his ears as the sound washed over him like surf.

"Don't let go Peter, don't let go of me" called Aurora as she spun away across the rocks, her white dress trailing in a spiral after her, up into the clouds. "Peter, Peter..."

"Meow, meow..." Puss pawed gently at her master's face. Outside, the sound of the sea had grown markedly since they had landed. He looked around, confused at first to find himself there, then recognizing the cave, he sat up.

"There, there Puss." And he stroked her three or four times.

"Come on. We'd better go. It looks a bit dark out. Picking up the cat he left the cave and walked down to the boat, or rather to where the boat had been.

The wind whipped spray around his legs as he stood and stared at the empty nook where they had landed. 'The boat's gone. What can we do?' He looked out over the water. Far out, in the middle of the bay he could see the white and blue shape that was Mr. Palmer's dory.

"I think we're in trouble girl" he said and sat down dejectedly. His mind went into gridlock as panic set in. The cat snuggled up to him on his lap, trying to keep out of the wind.

Out on the bay, Owen and Mr. Palmer were running for home before the storm set in properly.

"Look Dad! Isn't that your boat?"

"Looks like it lad. Get the boat hook out" and he steered to port to intercept it as it drifted with the wind.

As they drew along side, Owen said, "I wonder how it got way out here".

"Wasn't tied up properly was it. How many times have I told you to check it."

"But I did Dad. Truly I did."

"Well it looks like it doesn't it."

"Yes Dad" he replied dejectedly. He could have sworn that he had secured it properly last time he went out.

Tying the dory on behind, they headed for the wharf.

All through this, Peter, had been waving from the shore of the island, his cries carried away on the wind, beyond help.

"They didn't see us Puss" he said as the boats disappeared into the mouth of the river. "No-one knows we're here", and he started to sob. The wind whipped around them as it rose to gale force.

As dusk came on, Peter was hungry, tired and lonely. Despite the stormy winds his eyelids started to close and he rolled onto his side, bumping his head on the rock. He awoke with a start and a sore head.

"We need somewhere to lie down Puss" he said. "The cave. We'll go in there girl" and he rose and carried his faithful friend into the shelter of the dungeon.

Back in the village, his mother was beginning to get concerned. It was not unusual for Peter to be out and about all day, but he would normally be back by dark for dinner, if not for lunch sometime in the afternoon. He didn't understand time very well, but he did understand night and day and hunger... and of course, in the past Owen had been with him to make sure he returned by dark.

Looking out the window she saw Owen and his father returning from the boat.

"Owen. Owen. Have you seen Peter this afternoon?"

"No I'm sorry Mrs. Sims. I haven't." He looked tired and weary, dragging himself up the lane home.

"We'll keep an eye out for him" his father said and they passed by, heading towards a cosy fireplace.

Half an hour passed and still no sign of the lad. Mrs. Sims was getting frantic.

She went down to the shop and knocked on the back door. They hadn't seen him either. Neither had the men in the bar. One of

them called out, "Try Mrs. James. It seems he's taken a shine that granddaughter of hers. He might be up there."

Back up the lane to the last row of houses she went. Her skirts trailing behind her in the wind as it whistled around the cottages. 'Lucky', she thought, 'it hasn't started raining yet.'

Knock, knock, knock!

"Who can that be at this time of night and in this weather too?"

Mrs. Sims spilled out her concern about her son and asked Mrs. James if he'd been there.

"Oh no, no. I haven't seen him. Seehle... have you seen the Sims boy today?"

"No, no Mother" came Mrs. Prattley's voice from the other room.

"Why? Is he lost?"

"He has not come home yet."

"I saw him earlier Mrs. Sims." It was Aurora, coming to the door.

"He was down at the wharf. He asked me if I wanted to go out in the boat with him."

"That naughty boy. It's not his boat and I'll bet he went off in it without permission. I had better go down and see."

"I'll come with you Mrs. Sims."

"Thankyou dear." Aurora slipped on a coat and left with Peter's mother.

Arriving at the wharf they found the dory bobbing against the quay, tied fast.

"Perhaps he didn't go out after all."

"Oh no, I saw him leaving. He had a cat with him. A white one with ginger and black stripes. That's his isn't it?"

"Yes, but where is he. He should be back if the boat's here. I think I'll get Owen to help look for him" and they went back up to the Palmer's cottage.

There they heard the story of the drifting boat and it's recovery. Suddenly everyone became very concerned. It was known that Peter couldn't swim and the worry was that he had fallen overboard, possibly trying to rescue the cat.

Owen's father hurried down to the inn and roused the men from the bar to search the shore while Jack Harvey who owned the largest boat changed into his wet weather gear and headed down to the river with Mr. Palmer.

While the men combed the beach for signs of Peter, Jack and Evan went out into the bay to look for him in the water. After a quarter of an hour they returned.

"It's hopeless out there. Can't see more than a couple of yards. We'll have to leave it till morning. Some of you jump in though and we'll go across and check the western shore out to the point."

For the rest of the night, lanterns could be seen bobbing about among the rocks all round the bay, but in the cave on the island, Peter slept soundly with Puss curled up against him. The roar of the wind and the crashing of the surf, were muted by the rock and earth above, as was the occasional faint call that drifted across from the mainland.

Dawn heralded a drop in the wind. Fortunately the storm hadn't brought rain or lightning and the dishevelled bunch of searchers returned to the inn for a quick brandy and to warm up by the fire before returning home. As they arrived, the women took over the task and spread out along the shore and up the hills at the back of the village. Aurora and her mother set off up the path to the ridge with a couple of the local girls. They had little expectation of finding him, however there was the possibility of spotting him from there with its wonderful view of the bay.

Reaching the top, they turned and gazed over the settlement and along the shore. The searchers could be plainly seen as they approached the rocks and some of the women were visible landing on the far bank of the river, ready to follow the western shore of the bay out to the point.

It was the first time on the ridge for Aurora and she wandered along towards the chasm.

"Be careful Rory", her mother called as she approached the edge. The others walked up to her.

"Could he be over there?" she said, pointing to the other side.

"It's unlikely, but possible"

"Peter, Peter.." she called.

No response. "Peter, Peter" and they kept calling for a while just in case.

Just as they were about to turn around and go back, Aurora noticed a movement on the opposite cliff top. It was a cat.

"Isn't that Peter's cat?"

"It looks like it. Puss, Puss!" The cat looked toward them, then down at the water and meowed in their direction.

"Don't worry Puss. We'll get you." Aurora felt silly calling to the cat. "He must be over there. Come on" and they all hurried back to the track and descended to the town. On the way down they waved their arms and pointed to the headland and by the time they reached sea level again, Evan and Owen Palmer were waiting on the boat, ready to go. Aurora told them about the cat. "He wouldn't part from Puss" said Owen. He'll be out there all right."

"Can I come?"

"If your mother says you can."

"Go on, but be careful" and she stepped on board as Owen threw off the lines. He screwed his fists into his eyes, trying to wipe the sleep out. He had barely closed them when his mother had called them both to man the boat again.

Arriving at the island, Mr. Palmer deftly nosed into the natural landing, where sixteen hours before, Peter had tied up the boat. With a little help from Owen, Aurora stepped ashore and skipped over the rocks.

"Where do we look first Owen?"

"There's a path over there", Evan called, pointing to the steps leading up to the cave and the two rescuers hurried over to it. Mr. Palmer was staying in the boat. He knew not to risk leaving it unattended.

"Peter, Peter. Where are you?"

As they called, they rounded a bend in the path to be confronted by the cave entrance. Peter was just sitting up and rubbing his eyes. The first thing he saw was Aurora. At first he thought it was another dream, but when she spoke, he realised that she'd come to save him. He hardly noticed his good friend standing at her side.

"Are you alright Peter?"

"I'm hungry. And Puss will be too....where's Puss?"

"I'll go find him. We saw him up on top." It was Owen who offered and he started off up the steps calling the cat's name. Soon he met the pet coming down the path and scooping her up in his arms he returned to the cave. Peter's face beamed when he saw his companion again.

"Come on Peter'. Let's go home" and the three of them went down to the boat.

For the Love

Fortunately the storm swell took a couple of days to die down and the fishermen had a chance to rest after their all night effort to find the lad. The small boats of the Stanport fleet weren't built to venture out in such seas and the men took the opportunity to mend nets and sails down at the wharf. Peter had been admonished over his unauthorised voyage, but not severely. In the close knit community everyone was aware of his problems and understood the ramifications. They felt his night, cold and hungry, on the island would be punishment enough and so he was out amongst the villagers again the next day.

In his own mind, the episode was quickly fading. His stomach was full again and he was back home where he could sleep in a soft bed with Puss under the quilt to keep him warm. His dreams of the girl with the red hair continued and began to invade his waking hours. Her appearance as his saviour in the cave gradually took on religious proportions and he became infatuated with her.

She, in her turn, was unaware of this turn of events and went about her daily routine oblivious to his imaginings.

Owen was back at sea with his father now and Peter was left to fill in his days as best he could.

The mornings he spent down by the river, at the wharf, hoping Aurora would pass by as she had on the day he had borrowed the boat. Sometimes he got his wish and she would wave from the other side of the road and greet him in a neighbourly manner before continuing round the corner and down to the shop.

For some reason she never seemed to return the same way and wove her way up between the cottages instead. Still, Peter sat there just in case she came by again.

Every time she smiled and said 'Good morning' his passion grew a little more, until after a fortnight or so he determined to do something about it.

"Mum?"

"Yes son."

"Why do people get married?"

"Well, because they're in love. Because they want to be together always."

"Is that why you married Dad?"

"Yes dear, I loved your father very much" and her eyes glazed over a little as she recalled his late father, also Peter, sitting up on the ridge with her talking about distant lands and the strange customs of the inhabitants. He was an educated and well travelled man, many years her senior, who had come to the West Counties as part of a grand tour of the country. They had met in the inn where she had been the housemaid and quickly fallen in love. He had extended his stay to be with her and eventually fate caught up with them. Peter was on the way.

Unlike many gentlemen of his time, he asked for her hand and the day was set. It was not to be a marriage of convenience. They were very much in love. She with him and he with her and they looked forward to their child's birth with joy and anticipation. It had been decided that the baby would be born in Stanport near it's grand parents, after which the family would move to the East and Peter would continue his occupation as a writer. A family inheritance ensured they would never starve on an author's income. The future for Beatrice and her coming child was rosy indeed.

One day not long before the wedding, her father invited Peter to spend the day with him on his fishing boat. While they were at sea a pod of whales surfaced among the school of fish they were trying to net. At the time, Peter was leaning over the side, pulling in the catch and as the leading whale surfaced, it brushed against the boat tipping him into the water. Despite the months spent travelling at sea to distant lands, Peter had never learned to swim, and he panicked. As his woollen clothing became saturated it began to pull him under, and he flailed about trying to catch the gunnel of the boat. Beatrice's father rushed to the side and leaned over to try and pull him in. As he did so, a gust of wind caught the badly furled sail, whipping it into the air spinning the craft out of reach of the drowning man.

The fisherman desperately grabbed the tiller in one hand and pulled on the sheets with the other, trying to bring her up into the wind. It only took two or three minutes, but by the time he had returned to where Peter had gone over the side, there was no

sign him. The fishing fleet searched for the rest of the day but to no avail. Six days later his body washed ashore in the bay. Beatrice was shattered and never spoke to her father again, severing herself from his family and taking on her late fiancé's name for her son's sake.

She Walks in Dreams

"Mum?"
"Oh yes, yes.. what did you want?" and she returned from her bitter sweet memories to the reality of her son, the flawed product of a flawless love.

"Can I get married?"

"You Peter? I don't think that would be a good idea dear."

"Why not?"

"Well, you know how you're special?"

"Yes"

"Well I don't think there would be a girl special enough for you dear. I'm sure some girls might seem to be, but I think you would be disappointed in the end. Why do you ask?"

"No reason, just wondered." All through the conversation his mind had been ticking over, figuring out how to go about it.

"Did Dad give you that?" and he pointed to her engagement ring sitting on the window sill above the tub.

"Yes son" she replied and taking it in the thumb and forefinger of her right hand she held it out into the light. The diamond sparkled brilliantly. She knew that if she sold it in the city it would fetch a handsome price, but it was her last connection to Peter's father and no-one in the village cared to criticize her for it. They had been fond of him too.

"It's pretty."

"Yes it is." She placed it back on the sill, admiring it with a tilt of the head. "He loved pretty things", 'like me', she thought, finishing the sentence he had so often said to her. "Anyway, run along now son, I've got work to do" and she turned back to the wash tub.

Peter clicked his fingers towards the cat and the two friends wandered off down the lane, the boy with his hands in his pockets and the cat with her tail in the air, now and then looking up at her big companion for some attention. His mind was elsewhere though this afternoon and they had reached the sea wall on the

strand before he picked her up and held her to his chest. She purred with contentment.

"Now where can I get a ring?" he thought as he stared out sea. His resources were next to nil and all the pondering in the world couldn't produce a shiny ring for him. After a while he meandered back along the street and amongst the cottages, hoping something might appear magically that would get him a ring.

Kicking at a pile of stones his hopes soared as something sparked up at him. 'Could it be a ring?' He bent down and lo and behold, it was a ring. Not a ring for her finger though, but just a curtain ring, rusting away. A drop of water catching the sunlight had tricked him cruelly and his hopes sank deeper than ever. The two wandered off again dejectedly, still looking.

The day came to an end and Peter was no closer to finding what he sought. He gathered up Puss and went off to bed with the problem gnawing at his mind.

Sleep that night was disturbed by more dreams. Peter stood at the altar of a church. Turning, he saw a red haired girl in a wedding dress walking slowly towards him. In his hand he felt the ring, waiting for her finger. The pews were full with the people of the village, standing smiling at him. In the front row on one side stood Mrs. Prattley and her mother. On the other side was his mother and next to him stood Owen. Peter could feel pride flowing from the gathering as she walked out of the light that blazed through the doors. Close behind trotted a small, black, white and ginger flower girl, a bouquet around her neck.

As the bride arrived at the altar, a bell rang out. One long, low ring. The intensity of the sound shook him from his sleep. Lying in the dark he could hear the sound of tiny feet and the fading ring of a bowl settling on the kitchen floor. His heartbeat fell back into rhythm as the rat scuttled out a hole in the dry stone wall. Silence descended once again. He lay still, thinking. The moonlight coming through the door highlighted his clothes hanging over the back of a chair.

By the time he closed his eyes again, he knew what he was going to do.

Sparkling Weather

The morning dawned clear and bright. It was going to be a warm day, she could feel it. Beatrice tried not to do washing every day, but this looked like a good opportunity to put the blankets on the line and she resolved to get stuck into the task after cleaning the house.

She helped Peter dress himself. He may not be the brightest boy in town but at least she could ensure he looked respectable when he went out.

Unusually he didn't go straight out today, but sat down on the stone step in the sunshine. He was smiling to himself and she was pleased to see him happy.

For an hour or so he sat playing with the cat and imagining things in the clouds while his mother cleaned up the house and started at the wash tub.

Halfway through the pile of bed clothes, she moved out to the clothes line to hang the wet washing up to dry.

Peter rose abruptly. "I'm going out now Mother."

"All right son. Be good and come home well before dark. I don't want to be worrying again" and he left via the house and the front door.

As he walked down the lane to the river, Peter whistled, in a breathy sort of way. It was something he'd always wanted to do, but never quite got perfected. Today though, that didn't matter. He was walking on air, in expectation of coming events.

Everything was going to plan. Now all he needed was for Aurora to walk past the wharf.

He sat down on a bollard and turned over the ring in his hand.

The diamond sparkled in the sunlight.

Gulls wheeled and cried above the river as he sat and waited in the hope that she would come. He didn't have to wait long. He could see her red hair above the stone wall of the nearest cottage as she approached down the laneway.

Turning onto the street she noticed him sitting on the wharf.

"Good morning Peter" she called as she waved.

He hopped down from his perch and walked across the cobbles to fall in beside her.

"Urra? Can I ask you a question?"

"Of course Peter."

"Not here. Come with me" he said taking her by the hand. She was a little puzzled by this. It was the first time he had touched her and she was unsure of his intentions. Her mother had warned her to be careful of him, but there seemed no harm in it. He led her back up the road to where a group of boulders clustered together near the village. They walked into the ring of stones, just out of sight of the buildings.

Peter could feel his heart pounding hard.

Aurora was turning over the possibilities in her head. The little expedition had lent an air of importance to the question, whatever it was, that she didn't like the feel of. 'What is his intent?' she thought concernedly.

She had made up her mind to leave, when he spoke.

"U..U...Urora?"

"Yes..."

"W...W...Will you marry me? I've got a ring" and he held out his hand. There in the palm lay his mother's engagement ring .

She was taken aback. She had expected him to ask her something out of the ordinary, but not this. She cast about for a suitable answer. For many reasons it was unthinkable for her to accept, but how could she let him down easy. It was a very tricky situation. Finally she replied.

"I think you're a very special person Peter.."

"That's what my mum says."

"Yes, you're very special, Peter, but I'm sorry I can't marry you. I have a fiancé in the city." she lied.

The smile on his face sank instantly. The ends of his mouth quivered visibly and his eyes flooded. He wiped them with his middle fingers.

"But I love you Aurora" he sniffed.

"I'm sure you do, but he loves me too and I love him. I'm very sorry Peter."

"Then you don't love me?"

"Not like that Peter. You're a good friend, but I must keep my promise...."

Where did you get the ring?" She knew it wasn't really his. He had no income and she couldn't imagine his mother buying for him.

"Mum gave it to me. It's the one Dad gave her."

"Well, that's very thoughtful. Why don't you give it to her to look after for you... until you find someone who you can marry." There was no reply. "I had better go now Peter. Will you be alright?"

"Yes... I just want to be alone now."

"I'm so sorry Peter..." and she touched his hand gently before stepping out onto the road and heading back into the village. Behind her she could hear the sound of sobbing and she felt guilty although she knew it wasn't her fault. She hadn't led him on. Certainly not deliberately anyway.

After an hour or so, Peter stopped crying, but his depression stayed with him and even deepened somewhat. He had now been abandoned by his best friend and the one he thought was his one true love. He could see nothing ahead for the rest of his life but days of boredom and loneliness. Puss was company, of a sort, but no substitute for friends and family. His mother was good to him, but she was too old and too busy to be fun. The children at the school made fun of him and though the rest of the adults in the village were friendly, no one had time to spend with him, exploring the rocks, playing hopscotch or going fishing in the boat. His life seemed to be out of his hands, going nowhere.

He thought about the boat for a while. That was the place he could truly be in control of his life, go somewhere, like the island. Out there nobody would see him cry. If they didn't want to spend time with him, then he didn't want to spend time with them and he started down to the wharf once more.

Stepping into the boat, Peter placed Puss on the wharf.

"Go home Puss, go home. I don't need you today." The cat made as if to jump in the dory. "No, no. Go home!" he said pushing his friend away. Puss smooched up against his hand. "I know girl, but I want to be alone for a while, sorry" and he pushed off, leaving the cat looking puzzled on the shore. She ran along the jetty as Peter headed downstream to the bay. As the boat passed out of the river, the cat stood on the end of the seawall and meowed once, paced back and forth a couple of times, then gave up and walked off with her tail down, into the village.

Thinking back later, no one in Stanport understood why they hadn't noticed the little vessel, under it's one small sail, scudding before the wind across the bay. Maybe they saw but it was such a familiar sight that they didn't notice. Maybe they noticed but didn't think it could be Peter. After all he had recently had such a close shave with the dory. No one in their right mind would steal the same boat a second time within a few

weeks. But then Peter couldn't really be considered to be in his right mind at that moment. Even by his own standards. The sail danced before the breeze and soon boy and boat had arrived at the island again. This time Peter made very sure that it was secure before starting up the steps.

Reaching the cave he went inside and lay down. Now that he was no longer active, his depression overcame him and he fell to crying again.

Back at home his mother hadn't missed him yet, but was searching frantically for her ring, never suspecting her son had taken it. In her mind that was unthinkable.

While he lay on the hard stone, his mind turning over and in on itself, she was on her hands and knees probing every crack in the slate flooring, and ferreting through the blades of grass around the clothes line, hoping for a glint of light to reveal the location of the missing diamond.

Alone in the gloom, without the comfort of his constant companion, Peter gradually worked himself into a frenzy of despair. Finally his contortions became too much and he rose from the ledge and paced about, wringing his hands. His head rocked back and forth in anguish.

After some time he stopped, staring out the door at the steps of the path that lead to the top of the island. A door of possibility opened in his mind and he moved toward it, up the path, a step at a time. The clouds speeding by above beckoned him on until he at length he came to the rocky hollow that encircled the Mourning Bell. He stopped dead in his tracks. 'What's that?' he wondered. distracted briefly from his despair. The rushing walls of loneliness faded slightly as he puzzled over the curves of the object in front of him.

He ran his hand over one of the blades. The cold surface felt smooth, dependable, to the touch. He tapped at it with his knuckle. 'Dong!' A pleasing sound. A comforting sound. He tapped it again. Once more a gentle, deep, tone rang out, decaying slowly into nothingness.

Peter walked around it. He had never seen anything like it. There was nothing like it.

'I bet Owen doesn't know about this' he thought and he looked around for a stick to hit it with. There was nothing suitable lying on the ground and he looked further a field, towards the tree and there, hanging by its ancient chains, was the striker.

He went over to it and eyed the carvings, running his finger around the spirals and along the log. He gave it a little push. It swung away from him and back again, nearly knocking him down. He stepped back as it swung to a standstill.

He looked over at the bell, his mind ticking over. By now he had temporarily pushed his rejection aside and was concentrating on the bell.

He gave the striker another push towards it, carefully avoiding the back swing. Its path took it out and almost into contact with the nearest blade. He waited for it die down.

When it had finally stopped, he went round in front of it and pushed it as far back as he could, then looking over his shoulder to check the alignment, he stepped aside and let go.

It bore down on the bell, striking it viciously right on target.

"Aaaaahhhh!" Peter screamed out as his sensitive ears reacted to the intense sound pressure. He clamped his hands over them trying to block out the noise, his eyes squinted against the pain as he stumbled around in circles, closer and closer to the cliff edge.

The after tones rang on, echoing in his mind. Aurora's words of rejection shaken loose from their fragile cage mingled with the ringing, in his ears, shattering his world which spun before him as he plunged towards the rocks.

Out at sea Owen and his father were pulling in the nets when the bell peeled across the waves.

Evan dropped the rope and his mouth fell open.

"What was that Dad?"

"I'm not sure, but I hope it wasn't what I think it was. Quick, bring in the net" and he grabbed the rope again, heaving with all his might.

Scattered across the water around them the other boats of the fleet were doing the same, every man fearing that it might be one of his loved ones that had been claimed.

In the village women ran from home to home trying to find out what was happening.

Mrs. Sims stood up, her search for the ring forgotten. She had a horrible feeling in the pit of her stomach.

Within half an hour Peter was the only one unaccounted for apart from the men in the fleet. They in turn were making heavy weather homeward.

Rounding the point, Owen and his father could see the dory tied up at the rock ledge. Something was lying draped across the bow. It looked like a sack of clothing.

As a wail went up from the village, Owen recognized the form and began to cry. On the seawall a small black, ginger and white figure, ran up and down calling for the friend she would never see again.

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## **Part 4 –The Bell Buoy**

### ***Coasts of Care***

**T**he coast of Britain can be a dangerous place. Even more so in wartime when steel sharks prowl the waters looking for prey, but there are people who care about the safety of those at sea.

To help ensure they don't come to grief on the rocks of a jagged coastline, a great deal of money has been spent on lighthouses, navigation markers, and those mournful sounding dots on the surface, the lonely Bell Buoys.

Anchored in perilous waters, they sound their note as they rise and fall on the swell, warning off the wayward sailor.

**I**t had been a voyage fraught with stress for Captain Marlow. The big red crosses on the side of the ship gave little comfort. To him they were just targets. There had been reports of hospital ships disappearing without trace on calm seas and everyone blamed the Wolf Packs. He knew well enough that the old ship would never outrun even the slowest U boat on the surface. The Captain had never been quite sure how he came to be in command of a French ship full of British wounded but it had something to do with being stranded in port during a Zeppelin raid. The previous master of the 'Breton Queen' had been killed by a bomb blast while ashore and James Marlow had been one of the few qualified to take his place. Fortunately the crew had been replaced too with his French being almost non-existent. The trip through the Mediterranean had been uneventful in sailing terms, with blue skies and flat seas, but he had kept the crew on constant watch for periscopes and torpedo tracks. Ever since he had heard of the allies penetration of the Dardanelles, he had felt that the submarine was coming into it's own and would be a major factor in the conflict. If they could get through the straits unnoticed right under the noses of the Turks, they could go anywhere and strike with complete surprise and now with the packs roaming the Atlantic, vigilance was the order of the day... and night.

The sinking of the Lusitania full of civilians off the southern Irish coast had only added to the insecurity of commanding an unarmed hospital ship.

All these things were running through the master's head as he gazed out from the bridge, pipe in hand. He was out of tobacco, but the familiar feel of the bowl cupped in his palm, calmed him as the stem tapped against his teeth with each gentle roll of the ship.

"Captain, report from the radio shack Sir!"

"Go ahead."

"Gale force winds, predicted Sir. North westerly. Due around 17:00 hours."

"Very well, Smith." He glanced at his pocket watch, turned and tapped the barometer. The needle fell dramatically. The storm was approaching fast although there had been little sign of it in the sky yet. He reset the needle and raised his binoculars and studied the clouds that lay along the horizon off the port bow.

"Have the watch batten down the ship. I'm going below for a while. If you need me I'll be in my cabin." He left via the internal stairwell and after checking with the cook to have a meal delivered, he retired to his quarters for a short lie down.

The Irish Sea could be difficult enough on a calm day, what with the high volume of shipping, but at night in a storm, he would rather be on the bridge himself to keep an eye on things, not that he didn't trust his officers.

The swell had already risen somewhat when he awoke to a tap on the door as his evening meal arrived.

He peered out the window at the grey sea and sighed to himself. The seabirds were skimming the tops of the waves as the surface began to cut up rough in the wind, the occasional splash of spray striking them in the face. His watch said 16:00hrs. 'Pretty much on time' he thought and sitting down at the fold out table and as he ate he glanced through the handful of radio messages that had been left with the tray. Apart from a weather update, there was nothing that needed attending to immediately. Reports of U boat activity didn't show any particular attention being paid to shipping near their current position and anyway, the storm should help keep them at bay until the 'Breton Queen' made port.

From the bridge the storm clouds could be seen approaching hard on the heels of the wind. By now the bow was plunging and their progress had slowed noticeably. The captain went out onto the flying bridge and holding his cap down with one hand, leaned out and looked up and down the ship, making a check that everything was in order for the coming battle. From the funnel, black smoke billowed as the engines strained to force the old hull through the swell.

Inside, the speaker tube whistled. Smith removed the cap and spoke into the brass pipe.

"Bridge!"

"We've a problem with the starboard boiler Sir. There's a fracture in the pressure pipes. I'll have to back it off, or it'll blow."

"Is there anything you can do about it? We're heading into the teeth of a gale. We'll need all the revs we can get."

"I'm sorry sir, but we've been constantly cobbling the thing back together since Malta and it's just about to give up. We might be able to keep it going if we nurse it along, but I doubt it'll last long."

"Very well, I'll tell the captain. Do your best"

A blast of cold air heralded the return of the Master.

Smith passed on the news and watched as the furrows in the Captain's brow deepened.

"Thank you. I'm sure the Chief will do what he can. In the mean time, get out the charts and look for potential shelter in case we need it. I'm loath to run for cover on a lee shore but on one engine we'd never make the Irish coast.

Set a new course direct for port. We can't afford to maintain this zigzagging on reduced power. We'll just have to take our chance.

I'm going below to check the wards" and he left the bridge in Smith's care.

## ***A Family Resemblance***

Captain Marlow never liked visiting the ward decks, full of maimed and mangled men, some still moaning in pain. The field hospitals tried to make sure their patients were fit to travel, but in the circumstances it was near impossible, and he found his walks amongst the stretchers a stressful experience. As a result he rarely asked his officers or crew to attend in there

and took on the task of monitoring the nursing staff's needs and situation himself. The truth be known, he had a high regard for their professionalism and for that of the head nurse in particular. She was a young woman, not more than twenty five or six and if he had been thirty years younger... but then she reminded him too much of his own daughter, somewhere in London. A fine girl with a fine mother. Such a pity he was married to the sea. They would have made a fine family.

"Nurse Harcourt..., Tabbatha."

"How many times have I told you Captain? Call me Tabby. Everyone else does."

"No, no. Tabbatha will be fine."

"Alright you old fuddy duddy. Have it your way."

She really was disarming. It was this easy familiarity with people that made her so good with the patients, although she was a real stickler for procedure and could be a strict boss when it wasn't followed.

"Did Smith fill you in on the weather situation?"

"Yes thankyou. We're all, how do you sailors put it?.. battened down and ship shape."

"Something like that. It's going to be rough though and some of these men will be hurting before the night's through."

"We'll do what we can. I've strapped some of them in bed already, just in case."

"A wise decision. How is the doctor?"

"Not too well I'm afraid. Still in bed with Malaria. I'll wager he regrets that trip to the East now."

"I'm sure you're right. Give him my regards when you're in there next."

"Certainly, now unless there's anything else, I had better get back to work...?"

"No, no..."

"Thanky ou for coming down Captain."

"My pleasure Tabbatha, good luck."

"I'm sure we won't need it with you at the helm."

He blushed, just a little, and hiding it with his hand he touched the peak of his cap and stepped through the bulkhead door.

## ***Any Port***

**L** 6:50 hours and the sky was dark. Dusk had passed quickly and all the helmsman could see was the occasional burst of spray that flew as far as the windows. The bow was lost in the dark somewhere ahead. The deck lights, that would have shown the way in peace time, were doused and the portholes covered with thick curtains. The only light coming from the vessel was the glow of sparks from the funnel as the remaining engine struggled to keep it on track. With the starboard propeller stopped and the wind on the Port Bow, the ageing craft was having trouble maintaining a course for home. The faint radiance of the binnacle light kept the helmsman's eyes fixed firmly on the compass as it swayed with each wave that lifted the bow.

"Smth."

"Sir."

"How did you go with the charts."

"There are a couple of possibilities. Here... and here." He pointed out the mouth of a river and a little South of it a headland behind which the 'Breton Queen' might seek shelter. It was the peninsula that enclosed the North end of Halfmoon Bay.

"Which would you suggest?"

"The bay is closer and should be easier to get into in the dark. There's a bell buoy marking the rocks off the headland here... If we continue North until we hear it directly on our starboard beam, then run before the storm to the South East, we should be able to come about in the deep water behind the peninsula. We can anchor there until the storm blows over."

"What about this bay?" Marlow said indicating Stanport.

"There's a bar across the mouth and no navigation aids. I think Halfmoon Bay is a better bet."

"Very well. How long until we'll be abreast of the buoy?"

"Depending on the sea, about three hours, Sir."

"I'll make a decision at 19:00 hours. In the meantime we'll continue on this course."

**T**ime slid slowly by, marked by the waves crashing against the bows. Each one anticipated, then counted, by two hundred and thirty men, trapped in their stretchers on the ward decks.

The nursing staff ran back and forth administering comfort and pain killers to those in need and bed pans to those susceptible to seasickness. The rolling of the ship creating a need for the mop and bucket that couldn't always be met before one or other of them succumbed to the slippery mess on the deck.

Through it all, 'Tabby' Harcourt was the epitome of calmness. Unfazed and unflustered.

Time dragged for everyone. On the Bridge the watch changed. Fresh eyes stared into the gloom. Fresh hands steadied the wheel.

The captain was the only one not to be relieved. He had sent Smith off to rest, certain that he would need him later on. The continued rising of the storm had already made up his mind for him on the course to take.

Sitting in his chair on the bridge, Marlow' eyelids drooped as he gave way to weariness, dropping in and out of sleep in a series of short naps. Only the largest waves causing the 'old salt' to jerk awake.

## ***Timekeeper***

Just beyond the Eastern horizon, out of sight and out of mind of the 'Breton Queen', the storm smashed up against the beach in Stanport. The North Westerly tore straight into the bay throwing spray across the strand and up against the walls of the 'Master's Arms'. Inside the locals huddled round the fire, with mugs of mulled wine between their cupped hands or cheered on the skittles players in the corner. The barman peered quickly out across the street, then bolted the front door. He had closed the shutters at dusk when the wind began to rise. He recognized the signs when the clouds roiled black across the northern horizon like that.

"Gents, gents. Just to let you know you'll have to use the back door when you leave. I've locked the front. The sea's right up" and everyone turned back to their conversations. As always it was cosy and safe in the bar.

Up on the headland the lone tree swayed in the gusts. It was ancient now and not so resilient to the elements. In the past the striker had acted as a counterweight, balancing out the forces of nature and the tree had stood almost magically erect against the gales. Now however, with the passing of time, things had

changed and the trunk creaked and groaned and finally gave in to the bidding of the storm lords.

The striker began to move too.

With each, even minor, sway of the trunk, the trajectory of the log increased ever so slightly.

Nearer and nearer it came to the blade of the bell, but each time it was about to strike the stone, the wind backed off a little, as if playing with providence. Rather like some cosmic watchmaker, tightening the spring, only to loosen it off again just before it breaks with the tension, and then winding it up once more.

The spirits in the ancient rocks held their breath.

## ***Dead Reckoning***

Captain Marlow's eyes shot open with the crash. Out on the foredeck, a crane had come loose and smashed against the foremast.

"Get some men down there and secure that crane!"

The second mate shot out the door and into the storm.

Soon lights could be seen bobbing around on the deck as the crewmen lashed it back into place.

He looked out the windows into the maelstrom. There was no doubt now, as soon as they heard the buoy, they would have to head for shelter.

He called Smith back onto the bridge and sent two men out onto the starboard wing with orders to listen for the bell.

He checked his watch. It was 19:35hrs.

"Should be soon" he muttered as a cabin boy appeared from the stairwell with steaming mugs for the bridge crew.

"Cookie thought you'd appreciate these Sir."

"Thankyou son. Tell him he's most thoughtful" and he felt the warm liquid slide down his throat as he stared out the starboard windows at the two men out in the weather.

'What a job', he thought. 'Sometimes I feel like an ogre, sending boys out to do things like that. But I guess they've got it easy now. Not like in my day' and his eyes glazed over as he revisited his youth, spent before the mast. Images of rounding the Horn, bare masted and with frost hanging from the yards swam before his eyes. Memories of fingernails ripped out by the canvas as the wind whipped it from his hand while he desperately gripped the sheets with the other. Nights praying he wouldn't drop the

hundred feet to a sticky end on the deck, or even worse, end his life watching the stern disappear in the dusk as he struggled to stay alive somewhere beyond the roaring forties. He suddenly realised just how tired he was. Not just sleepy, but sea-weary. He knew though, that with the war on there was little likelihood he'd be leaving the ocean anytime soon. How little he knew.

Rain swept in as the sailor rushed in from the flying bridge. "Sir! The bell. We can hear it off the starboard bow." "Smith. Check it out for me would you?"

Smith already had his wet weather gear on, and he followed the man outside.

"Sounds like it Captain, and right on time too."

"Dead reckoning. There's nothing like it Smith. You've done well. Alright, have them tell us when it's hard a-beam.

Helm! Prepare to come about to port"

It would be a tricky manoeuvre, but he knew they had to circle a full 240 degrees to port in order to head for the bay. Turning directly to starboard would put them too close to the rocks. If they could hear the buoy in this storm, they had to be perilously close as it was.

"Lad." He said, looking at the cabin boy. "Yes you. Hurry down to the ward and tell Nurse Harcourt we'll be coming about. The storm will be on our stern and the ride will improve, but it'll be a lot rougher while we come around. We're running for shelter."

"Yes Sir."

All too soon the word came from the flying bridge and the Helm swung to port on the Captain's command. He had waited for what he thought would be the right moment, with a slight lull in the wind and the wave crest just passing under the bow.

The ship pivoted slowly on the top of the swell and slid sideways down the back into the trough.

The remaining propeller bit hard into the water, struggling to keep up the momentum.

An oncoming wave, pushed back against the stern and the bow twisted to starboard, placing the vessel broadside on to the sea. The port rail arced towards the water.

In the wardroom, crockery flew across the room clattering and smashing against the port bulkheads.

Down on the hospital decks, men in stretchers slid about violently. Some of them coming to rest in a heap against the hull.

Others, with their arms free were hanging on to anything solid within reach, their beds slipping around and away from their legs. The cabin boy hadn't made it in time and no one had been ready. Screams of pain came from the men on the bottom of the pile. Tabby and her girls slid down to the men as the sea rushed up and over the portholes. Sprays of salty water erupted through the imperfect seals as the women desperately tried to free the injured men.

They had made little progress when the deck heaved up again beneath them and the whole lot slid inexorably back across the deck.

Up on the bridge, Marlow scrambled to his feet again to see the ship slowly come into line with the storm at her back.

It had been a close call but they seemed to have made it. The 'Breton Queen' was wallowing somewhat, probably from water she had taken on, but he knew the pumps should be able to handle it, assuming they were still working. It hadn't been that bad after all. He'd been in ships that had survived a lot worse. Everyone on the bridge breathed a sigh of relief.

**D**own below, the nurses wrang out the hems of their skirts and set to, getting some order back into the wards and relieving what suffering they could, while the decks continued to pitch and roll beneath them. If they had known what the Captain had said, they would have agreed. The ship did ride a little easier now, but that turn had nearly cost the lives of several of the patients. Tabby wondered if it had been worth it.

At the foot of a stairwell, the young cabin boy lay in a sad, twisted heap. Things were worse than the Captain knew or even suspected.

On the bridge the helm kept as steadily as possible to the South East course set by the ship's Master as he waited to feel the motion of the ship die away as they entered the calmer waters of the bay.

"Slow ahead!"

"Aye, slow ahead Capt'n" and the engine room bells clanged as the Chief Engineer confirmed the order.

Outside the buoy could be heard tolling relentlessly, far off to Port now as the vessel felt her way through the storm for safety. If men's wills could part the waves then the crew of the 'Breton

Queen' could have walked with Moses as they yearned for smooth water ahead.

## ***The Tolling of the Bell***

"Quiet! Quiet!  
D' you hear dat?  
Dere it is again!"  
"What? That bell?"

"Yes. Yer know what dat is?"

"What?"

"D' Mourning Bell. Dat's what t'is."

"But that's just a myth. Don't be silly old man."

"Well what do you t'ink it is den?"

"Well it could be ah.... Or then again maybe.... Or...."

"See. Yer don't know now do yer. D'ere's not'ing else it could be"  
and the old man rose to go outside.

"Who locked dis feking door?"

In his rush he'd forgotten the front entrance was bolted and the rest of the bar burst into laughter.

"You'll laugh out t'other side of yer faces when people start droppin' dead."

"Aw get off with you O'Connor", but still, a few men followed him out the back and stood under the eaves, looking out into the storm to see where the sound came from.

The old man went round the front of the inn. The spray coming over the seawall nearly knocked him off his feet but he clung resolutely to a downpipe straining to hear the bell. It was definitely coming from the headland.

"Youse men. Come here. Hear dat. It's coming from up dere, where t' Mourning Bell is. See. Now what you goin' t' do 'bout it?"

"Do? Nothing of course. What can we do. There's no way over there."

"Dere's a landing dere. Who's got a boat? We got to go and stop it. Come on."

"Not likely old man. You can swim out there if you want but I'm not going out in this weather for some silly superstition."

"Me neither" and a chorus of fishermen made their thoughts known on the stupidity of the idea as they traipsed back inside.

"You'll regret it. Don't say I didn't warn yer." The old man wandered off into the storm, no longer welcome at the fireside.

## ***An Invitation From Davey***

"C<sup>aptain.</sup>  
"Smith?"

"We should be entering the bay by now with the buoy behind us. There's something wrong. I've checked the compass and we're still on course."

"Could just be the wind blowing the sound around. Hold this course for another five minutes. If the seas don't start to drop by then we'll come about."

He bit down on the stem of the pipe. His concern had been growing by the minute and now Smith had cemented it. They should have been safe within Halfmoon Bay by now. Maybe he had misjudged their initial position and they were running into the bay further South. It might be prudent to come up into the wind now, and not wait for the sea to drop. He quickly weighed up the possible consequences of doing the wrong thing.

If he stayed on this course he risked running onto rocks. If he came about to Port they might run aground on the beach and if they headed out to sea again, he risked rolling on their beam ends or foundering due to lack of control on one engine.

Meanwhile the bows thrust skyward with each wave only to plunge into the depths of the attendant trough as it swept from stern to stem under the hull.

Chaos reigned on the Ward decks. Tabby and her nurses scrambled about in the mess trying desperately to control the havoc.

In his bunk the doctor moaned and closed his eyes, unconscious, after a chair flew across the cabin and struck him on the head.

"Port thirty helm!" Marlow had made up his mind. He was taking the gamble heading into the wind. Hopefully they would be in the shelter of the headland within minutes. If he was wrong, the worst that should happen is that the 'Breton Queen' would run aground on the soft sands of Halfmoon Bay. They would at least have a chance of getting everyone off safely there.

The old ship groaned as she strained to come around. The rolling increased markedly as she began to take the sea on her port beam.

It seems to Smith that the waves had increased sharply in height and violence all of a sudden. He looked across at his superior officer. The older man's lips were moving silently in prayer. Then it dawned on him, the change in wave pattern meant they were

almost on shore. The captain was unwittingly running them onto the coast. But where?

"Captain, captain!..." but he was too late.

The bow corkscrewed down to starboard as the sea opened a trough over the

rocky outcrop known as 'The Anvil'. Lying just off the headland opposite the Chasm, many a fisherman had had a close call with the rocks that marked the entrance to Stanport bay.

The 'Breton Queen' smashed down on the rocks like a mighty hammer, crushing the old steel plates in the bow like paper.

The foredeck buckled and folded up toward the superstructure. In the bridge Marlow, Smith and the other crewmen stood amazed as the fo'c'sle crane came crashing down on them, cleaving the compartment through the middle.

The helmsman had no chance, but then he was lucky. For him it was quick. The rest of the bridge crew lay trapped beneath the twisted metal.

In the distance the Mourning Bell tolled on. ...ninety one, ninety two, ninety three..., the ring count continued, driven up by the storm,

**A**s the sea swept in from the stern the stricken ship lifted off the rocks again. A large fracture across the hull ahead of the bridge, emitted a terrible groan and the whole forward quarter of the vessel, collapsed into the wild water.

Below decks, the noise was horrendous. The crash of waves fought with the sound of tearing steel which clampered to be heard above the screams of wounded men, unable to help themselves from their beds.

As the deck listed to starboard, Tabby pulled herself to the door in an effort to find out what was happening. She needed to know the situation immediately in order to decide what best to do for her patients. The other nurses were trying valiantly to assist, but there was little they could while trying just to hang on for themselves.

Entering the sloping companionway the door bang shut behind her, followed by a crash as a cabinet, torn from it's mounting, slammed hard up against it. Tabby tried to open it again but it was jammed tight. She would have to find another way back, but first she must see the captain.

Se slithered along the sloping deck to the stairs, and pulled herself up to the next deck. Looking down she saw the lights below

flickering wildly. It was getting near time to panic. She looked up the two flights to the bridge, out of sight around a corner and took a deep breath. 'Come on girl' a voice inside said and she rushed up the steps, tripping on her skirt every few feet. She reached top, bruised up and down both shins.

She took the door handle in her right hand and leaned against the frame with her left, puffed from the climb. Slowly the whole wall collapsed away from her and she stumbled, no longer able to support herself as the ship rose violently beneath her.

As the door hit the deck, a rush of seawater pinned her to the wall. She wiped her eyes with a sleeve as it drained from her face, to see the destruction of the bridge before her. Spitting out the salt in her mouth she clambered over to a man's arm she could see sticking out from under the wreckage.

It was Smith and he was dead.

She looked around. On the far side the helmsman was lying up against the bulkhead. She made to go and check him for signs of life but it was hard moving around in the restricted space between the crushed roof and the deck.

Halfway around the remnants of the crane, another wave struck and Tabbatha watched helplessly as the body was washed overboard. She bent over to take a breath and there beneath her was the captain, his mouth moving silently. Not in prayer this time, but in pain.

She tried to pull some wreckage off him but her hands slipped on the wet wood as the 'Breton Queen' beat down on 'The Anvil' once again. She tried again and this time she was able to remove the timbers.

"Hold on James! This might hurt, and she dragged him free.

She cast her eyes around the remnants of the bridge. Nearby was a lifejacket floating in a pool of water in the corner. She stretched across and pulled to her.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry" he said as she raised his head to slip on the jacket and he winced in pain.

"We're not going to survive this are we Captain."

"I doubt it my girl."

"Will you be alright here?"

"Yes, go see to your people. I'll be fine."

She bent and kissed him on the forehead, "I'll be back soon" she lied and disappeared into the remains of the stairwell.

She was struggling down the gangway into the gloom and cacophony the wards when she met the stokers coming the other way.

"Go back miss. The bottom's opened up. She's going down fast. There's nothing you can do down there!"

"I've got to. Come on, help me!"

"The head stoker looked up towards the lifeboats, his blackened face shining in the spray, a pained look in his eyes. Should he save himself or try to help the men trapped below?. There was next to no chance of helping them, but could he just turn his back on them?

"Come on boys! After the lady!" and they turned down again into the dark.

Up on the boat deck a handful of men were endeavouring to launch the lifeboats, but the Starboard list had swung the boats on that side out of reach over the turbulent sea, while those on the Port side were tangled in the superstructure and rapidly disintegrating as they smashed against each other and the side of the cabins.

**T**he ship continued to heave with the ocean, smashing holes in the hull with each wave. It couldn't last much longer.

Deep in the dark of the ship, Tabby led the stokers on towards the ward, the flickering light of a lantern scavenged from a cabin in passing, throwing an eerie glow in the soaking walls.

By now they were climbing the steep decks to get to the stern cabins when a roar could be heard behind them and a rush of wind nearly flattened them against the boards.

As the ship shuddered massively, Tabby looked round to see a wall of water engulf the passage behind them and rush headlong in their direction.

**A**bove her the Captain was already floating, nearly unconscious on the wild waters, buoyed up by the life jacket she had so selflessly put on him.

His eyes flickered open and his head lolled to one side. He lay like that for a minute or two watching the heaving ship drifting further away, or so it seemed. Steam erupted from vents, now below water. The funnel creaked and groaned before tearing off at the base and falling into the sea, still attached to the stricken vessel by its stay wires.

Some of the lifeboats began to float as the upper decks sank to water level but any hope they provided quickly faded as they were pulled down by the ropes that had never been untied. The sailors attending to them having fallen foul of their wild swinging. In the background, underpinning the sounds of destruction, Marlow was vaguely aware of a bell ringing. Slowly but inexorably counting off the lives of those drowning before his very eyes. The last image he saw before slipping into a coma, was the boiling water, closing over the stern of the 'Breton Queen' as it slid beneath the waves and down the undersea shelf into deep water.

There was surprisingly little jetsam left to mark it's passing.

## ***Aftermath***

**M**orning came and with it the silence that follows such wild weather.

Along the beach in front of the Master's Arms, the usual debris was scattered; seaweed, fishing floats, the occasional fish, a sea bird or two and on this day, an old sea dog, barely breathing.

On his lifejacket were the words 'reton Quee'.

He lay staring at the dawn sky, too exhausted to move. Too grief stricken to care.

One thing he did notice though, that damned bell had stopped ringing.

If only he knew what it was. Its cursed tones had been his downfall and the whole cause of the disaster.

'My God! They're gone. Smith, Tabby, the Chief. All gone. Those poor soldiers...' and tears streamed down his cheeks, glittering in the crisp morning light.

Suddenly the sun went dark as a shadow fell on this face.

He blinked to bring the object into focus.

It was a face. A wrinkled, upside down face. It frowned at him, or rather it smiled, but upside down. He twisted his neck to re-orient the image and a pain shot down his back.

The face spoke.

"Are yer alright den?"

Marlow raised his head and grunted. Surely he could say more, but the pain in his spine made him flop back onto the stones of the beach. A shell stuck into his shoulder blade. Another grunt.

"I don't t'ink so meself. Stay here, I'll go get help" and the face disappeared, calling up the beach for someone called Gracey. The captain closed his eyes and felt the warmth of the sunshine on his skin. Where his clothes were still intact, the cold seeped in from the seawater that saturated them. He dreamed briefly of a warm bed with crisp sheets and lace curtains filtering the daylight, waking to find the aforesaid Gracey sitting next to his bed in the loft of the inn.

"Where am I?"

"There, there, Captain. Just lie back. You're in the Master's Arms in Stanport. You've been through a terrible storm."

"My ship? She's gone isn't she?"

"I don't know but the men are out looking now. What was she called?"

"The 'Breton Queen'. She was a hospital ship carrying wounded back from Turkey. We lost an engine. I tried... to run for Halfmoon Bay but something went wrong. The buoy wasn't where it was meant to be. Must have dragged in the storm."

"Don't worry 'bout that now, just get some sleep. You must have been in the water all night by the look of you. I'll wake you if there's any news."

Out past the headland the fishing fleet was sailing slowly up and down between 'The Anvil' and the seaward shore of the peninsula. They couldn't heave to due to the extreme depth of the water around the rocks. Their particular danger lay in the way they rose like a pinnacle from the depths, to lie just below high tide mark, waiting for an unsuspecting vessel to come by.

The men were picking jetsam from the water and checking for identification marks or clues to what had happened during the night. It all seemed rather obvious except, for the reason such a large ship was in so close to shore. Maybe the survivor back at the village could answer that question.

Several men went ashore and combed the beach for survivors. There were none.

The bodies of a couple of young seamen were washed up between the rocks however. One had a rope burn around his neck, like he had been lassoed by Poseidon and wrenched overboard. The searchers would never know how the lifeboat had swung round and whipped the noose around his neck, dragging him under to drown as the ship descended into the blackness.

**A**t the end of the day, all hope of finding more survivors had been abandoned and the fleet returned despondently to port. There would be no revelry in the bar this evening. The men sat quietly at their drinks, pondering the fickleness of the sea.

All those young men, narrowly escaping a violent death in front of the guns, only to drown, trapped below the decks of the 'Breton Queen'.

"I told you so, didn't I, MacPherson?"

"Yes, yes, you told us O'Connor, but we couldn't do anything in that storm."

"Well you can now. You can prevent it happening again...." and next morning he could be seen standing in the bow of the leading boat, as the village men, equipped with blankets, ropes and steel bars, left the mouth of the Russet River, heading for the island and a date with the Mourning Bell.

## **Part 5 – Touch Not The Cat**

### ***The Cat and the Bag***

The cool autumn sunshine bathed the little village of Stanport in it's bay beneath the head land, as historian Jan Carmichael parked her Subaru in the main street. The only street. Pushing her sunglasses back on her head she entered the 'Store and Post Office'.

"Good morning miss. Can I help you?"

"Hi. I'm looking for information on local landmarks, stone circles, that sort of thing."

"Oh. Well we have these brochures and some postcards."

"I was thinking more of places off the tourist route. Something a little less well known. Do you have anything like that around here?"

"Well I wouldn't know about that. I'm a bit of a newcomer. I've only been here twenty years. Why don't you try the Master's Arms down the road. They'll be open in half an hour or so."

Going out into the street, Jan sat on the sea wall and taking a sandwich from her rucksack, ran over a few things in her mind while she waited for the pub to open.

After a few minutes taking in the warmth of the sun, Jan heard the tapping of a walking stick and turned to see a white haired old man walk up to her along the sea wall. Draped over his shoulder was a white cat.

Introducing himself as Rowan MacPherson, he welcomed her to Stanport adding, "This is T.N.,"

"Nice cat", she said, stroking the long fur. "What's the T.N. stand for?"

"Touch Not."

"Sorry, I didn't..."

"No. That's his name. Touch Not the cat."

"Of course, the motto of Clan MacPherson. 'Touch not the cat but with a glove.'"

"Nearly right. No 'with'."

"I beg your pardon."

"There's no word 'with' in it. 'Touch not the cat, but a glove'."

"Let sleeping dogs lie."

"I s'ppose you could read it like that, but I prefer cats meself; anyway, what brings you here lass?" and he leaned forward on his elbows, settling in for a chat. T.N. settled in too, around the back of Rowan's neck.

He knew his master well and was preparing for a long pleasant snooze in the sunshine.

"Oh, I'm just checking out historical sites. You know, stone circles, old churches, that sort of thing."

"You an expert on ruins and things?"

"Something like that."

"Well there're a few strange stones up on the moor. Some folks say they used to be a Druids gathering place, but you know how these things are. Small town and all that and then there's the remains of the fortress up on the ridge."

"Yes, I've seen the stones on the moor. Quite interesting really.

I've taken a few photos. I'll check it out when I get home.

They've probably already been documented. I'm really looking for something new, or older, should I say. Less well known. What about this fortress?"

"Well, let me see", replied the weathered face, glancing furtively around to see if he was being overheard. "It's all tied up with the Mourning Bell" and he nodded towards the headland. "A carved stone, shaped like a double-headed axe folded in two. Still there I think. It balances on a couple of stones with the blades in the air and when they're struck, it rings like a bell. The sound can be heard clear across the bay, and way out to sea; or so they say. There used to be a log hanging from a tree next to it so you could swing it against the bell to sound it."

"Does it still work?"

"Oh no. The tree rotted through back in the war. The Great War"

"Why doesn't someone restore it. It'd be a great tourist attraction. You'd have them flocking in here for a thing like that."

"Maybe we don't want them flocking in here. Besides, there's the legend."

"Legend?"

"They say that whenever the bell rings, it brings death to the bay"

"Oh come on. Who really believes that?"

"Quite a few people round here for one and they'd be pretty unhappy to know I told you 'bout it too."

"But I can see you want to. Go on, tell me. Don't worry, I won't say a thing."

“Well.. it’s said, that many centuries ago, there was a fine fortress on the ridge over there, built by a local lord who ruled over the hills and shore hereabouts.

Crowhawk I think his name was. All the men around here were drafted into his army to defend the fortress, but he wasn’t very popular amongst the villagers. Crowhawk managed to make many enemies and when one night a bright meteor was seen streaking across the sky he took it as an omen that he was under threat. To secure himself against an attack he had the fortress reinforced and expanded and as the final piece in his strategy, he ordered his right hand man to find a bell to call the men to fight when needed. It was to be placed on the headland where it couldn’t be silenced. Although you can’t see it from here, the peninsula is split by a deep chasm. In those times it was accessible by a drawbridge from within the stronghold walls. But nowadays the bridge is long gone, as is the fortress.”

“How come I haven’t heard about this bell before?”

“With the bush along the ridge it can’t be seen from the edge of the chasm or even from the sea and we don’t advertise it ye see. No one round here wants it disturbed in case it rings out and causes more tragedy.”

“You’re taking a bit of a risk telling me then?”

“Oh.., you, you’re just a slip of a thing. You wouldn’t cause any trouble now would you? Besides, no one can get over there now anyway.”

“Go on. What about the deaths?”

Well, it’s said that the Lord’s right hand man Cayden was sent out to purchase or steal a suitable bell or failing that find someone to cast one. He rode off dressed in religious robes with a small entourage so he could pose as a Abbot in search of a church bell. Not far to the East he unearthed the Mourning Bell, all ready to hang.

The locals claimed it came from some unnamed ruined castle and when Cayden asked to hear it’s tone, they said that it was so loud that they’d rather be out of earshot and hurried off leaving him to ring it himself.

He ordered one of his henchmen to strike it, which he did but as he stepped back from the bell, the front hooves of a horse that had been spooked by the sound, came down on him and killed him instantly. Cayden considered this unfortunate, but saw it as

no reason not to buy the bell,. The traders quickly wrapped it in reed mats to protect it and stop it from ringing, then put it on a specially built wagon.

When he got home Crowhawk was very pleased with his purchase and when it was installed on the headland, he wanted to test it, as you'd expect.

Just as they were about to swing the log, Cayden, who was supervising the installation, fell in the way of the striker. The bell ringers tried to hold it back, but it slipped from their grasp, swung forward and knocked him off the cliff before striking the bell. Its note rang out clear and loud across the bay. Cayden was smashed on the rocks below of course. That was the second death. Soon there was talk in the village about the bell being cursed. Anyway, not long after his good friend went over the edge, the Lord's enemies crept in and assassinated him. The bell ringer called up the local men from their beds to man the walls, but the raiders got away. They killed all the lord's vassals and razed the Great Hall. That was incident number three.

Afterward, a neighbouring Lord stepped in and helped the locals pull down the fortress and build the quay over there with the stone.

With Crowhawk dead and no fortress left, there was no cause to ring the bell and it stayed silent for many, many years. Not a squeak, however it had to happen eventually.

**T**his time it was a couple of officers in the King's regiment. They were friends and one of them had come down here looking for land for a country estate. Seaside air...that sort of thing. Must have had a sickly mother or wife or something, anyway, a friend came along for company. Well they say two of them were drinking at the inn down there, one night when a local lurched against the officer and spilled his drink all over him. The drunken soldier lashed out violently, throwing the man across the bar, and into the fireplace. His clothing caught fire and as he tried to get up and pull his burning jacket off, the soldier took to him. Now the second soldier wasn't a bad sort and objected to his friend's brutality. He grabbed him and dragged him off the local man. Unfortunately he died soon after. Anyway, the soldier, the one looking for the land, started carrying on about being personally insulted by the villager. Having his honour questioned etc. and the friend said something like 'What honour? Do you call

kicking a burning man honourable?' This really made his friend mad and he challenged him to a duel at dawn."

"Up by the bell?"

"You guessed it. Up on the head. In the fog. They fought with sabres till the good guy, the friend, got the upper hand and had the other pinned down. He wasn't about to kill his friend and so made him yield before letting him get up. That didn't satisfy the officer's honour and he grabbed the striker and swung at the other man. It hit him in the head, killing him instantly. then swung back to ring the bell for a second time. The locals were outraged and threw him off the cliff. Are you beginning to get the idea now?"

"Have there been anymore?"

"Oh yes, at least twice. The next time a young simpleton fell in love with a visiting redhead. He was infatuated, although rumour has it that there weren't too many attractive lasses in town. Anyway he followed her round like a puppy for a while until he plucked up the courage to ask for her hand. She turned him down though and in a fit of depression he rowed over to the headland to jump off. The bridge had collapsed by then. Like so many other jilted lovers though, when it came to the crunch, he couldn't go through with it, but as he passed the bell, he tripped on a tree root and fell against the striker. It swung back and as he tried to regain his balance he stumbled over the edge. As he fell, the log struck the bell and it rung out. Number five down. It should have been the last..."

"But...?"

"But it wasn't. Last time was in the Great War. A hospital ship crammed with wounded. Inward bound in a mighty storm. Visibility down to a few yards. The winds somehow got the striker swinging and the ringing bell drew the ship onto the rocks when they confused it with a bell buoy further up the coast. Hundreds drowned, unable to swim with their injuries. The villagers had tried to stop the bell before the wreck, but of course there was no way over the gap. The ringing only stopped when the branch finally broke. After that was when they built the lighthouse over yonder."

"And nobody's been over to restore it, to get rid of it?"

"Would you? You'd need a helicopter and even then there's nowhere to land. Nobody round here would risk ringing it accidentally and causing another tragedy anyway."

"I guess not. Well thanks for the story Rowan. I feel honoured."

"You're welcome, but keep it to yourself lass. Ah.. the Arms is opening. Would you care to have a pint with me?"

"Not right now thanks Rowan. The sun's not even over the yardarm yet. Maybe later. I think I'll take a little walk. Cheerio"  
And they parted ways. Rowan's stooped form tapping off back up the street and off into the darkness of the inn, while Jan's rucksack bobbed off round the bay towards the headland.

**A**scending the hill by a sheep track from the beach, Jan's silhouette quickly traversed the ridge finally stopping at the edge of the chasm. Here was interest indeed.

Gazing down into the cauldron of foaming water, she imagined she could hear the cries of the dead echoing round the cliffs as sea birds called, riding the violent updrafts that whipped the spray into the air with each wave.

Jan shuddered and pulling herself together she surveyed the far rocks for a way up. Her experienced rock climber's eye seeking cracks and ledges to slip her small but strong fingers into. Not a pretty sight and by the colour of the water, not even a rock to start from at low tide. No wonder it hadn't been climbed. But nothing's impossible. A little help from a friend and there would be a way. Maybe even shooting a rope across. 'It should be possible secure a rope on that pinnacle near the top' and she had just the friend in mind.

Gazing round the landward skyline, Jan could just see the outline of the cell phone tower on the distant heights. "Good", she thought, and pulled her mobile phone from the rucksack, flipped it open and spoke. "Ben." A few seconds wait and the deep tones of her partner's voice squeezed from the tiny speaker.

"Jan?"

"Hi sweetie, what you up to?"

"Oh, the usual. I'm just leaving a meeting with the architects. They've finally accepted my recommendations for the auditorium. Seems like acoustics will win out over chic for once. What's up with you? Find anything to peke your interest?"

"Well I think so. At least I've found a new challenge, climbing wise. I'm down at Stanport. There's a gorge here, a wet one, with some really slick walls. Never been climbed before. Why don't you come down and we'll give it a try. I'm sure we can do it together. I think there's something interesting on the other side. Something that'll interest both of us."

"You're sounding a bit mysterious. What is it?"

"Come on down and we'll find out together. If I'm right, it'll be worth it. Besides you need a break and it's lovely down here. Just throw your gear in the car and take the Western link. I'll meet you at the inn in Stanport tonight."

"Guess you're right. I could do with a break. I'll see you tonight then."

"Oh Ben, throw in your minidisk recorder too if you would?"

"Ok honey. Anything else?"

"No. Don't get lost. Take care. See you tonight."

Jan took a last look at the pounding surf in the gap and headed back down the track with all sorts of possibilities running through her head.

The rest of the day was spent sitting on the beach running over her thoughts on the possibilities of the bell. If it really did exist. From Ben's point of view it would be a god-send. He was an acoustic engineer with degrees in physics and engineering and a background in music. He was about to do a PhD. and if the bell really did exist, it would make a unique subject for his thesis. Then there was the historical side. Her year's sabbatical from the National Museum's Archaeology Department was nearly up and so far she'd found little to advance her theories and justify the drain on her savings. It had been a great twelve months though. Travelling the country staying in out of the way places. Fossicking around in the backwoods, communing with nature, then back to Ben and the apartment. Weeks and days rolled into each other. Weekends only distinguishable by the frequent jaunts into the hills for climbing expeditions with Ben and their friends. But the bell could make it all worthwhile, if it existed. 'Funny though that it hasn't been written up before. Or has it? Ah.. the Internet. What do we need? Laptop, phone and somewhere to work. I wonder if the inn has a room with a phone. It'd be cheaper than using the mobile to connect and we could do with somewhere to stay the night.' They'd slept in the back of the Four by four plenty of times before, but a little comfort would go down well with Ben after the long drive.

Inquiries at the bar turned up a room overlooking the bay, with a double bed, but no phone. 'Oh well, you can't have everything' and she fired up her web link using her mobile.

Two hours and a small fortune later, Jan had decided that if the Bell had been discovered by academia, it hadn't made it to the journals or even the weirdo sites on the web yet. She seemed to have the jump. "So far so good."

Dinner time came and went. A simple lamb roast and apple pie. Just the right amounts at the right time. Even a nice red to wash it down. Altogether very comfy and unexpectedly not at all like a backwater pub. Someone in the village knew a thing or two about epicure. With the bell to draw in customers, they could make a tidy little living down here. More possibilities. Maybe a young couple from the city with an entrepreneurial bent could invest a little money in the area and augment their income. 'Funny I just happen to know a couple like that.'

As she took her drink over to a corner near the fire, Ben walked in, a little bleary-eyed and tired from the drive.

"I guess you two know each other then." Called the publican as they hugged. "I trust he's the reason for the double room." As much as she didn't want her personal life spread around the village, Jan had started to warm to the big voice of the landlord and she smiled back.

She introduced Ben to the barman.

"Ben, John Arrow."

"Me name is John, just call me Jack. I'm straight as a die and sharp as a Tack' as me Dad used to say."

"Ben Raynier. Pleased to meet you."

"Likewise I'm sure."

The young couple sat down, leaning back from the fire that kept the locals warm around the dartboard and Jan began to tell Ben about her day in Stanport.

She was a stickler for detail and today was no exception. By the time she had reached the end of her tale, the dartboard was closed up, the locals had drifted off and Ben's fingers cradled a second empty brandy glass.

"A stone bell, whew!" His exclamation carried across the empty bar to where the ears of the innkeeper informed his not inconsiderable curiosity that the young couple were interested in the Mourning Bell. He absent mindedly wandered over to bed down the fire as the clock in the hallway struck ten. Thinking again, he asked if Jan and Ben required 'anything else this evening'.

"No thanks, we'll be off to bed in a minute. Big day tomorrow."

"You thinking of going up on the head then?"

"I thought we'd have a look at the chasm."

"Well don't' go getting any ideas about looking for the bell. Waste of time that. Only a tale old Rowan likes to tell. Makes him feel

important. The 'Sage of Stanport'. Besides, best not to trifle with that which you don't understand."

"Don't tell me you're a suspicious man Mr. Gregson."

"I'll not confirm nor deny that one, but I say 'better sure than sorry'. Night to you both. Breakfast in the parlour, 7:30 to 9," and stooping, to pass through the door he disappeared into the private quarters leaving Ben and Jan alone in the glow of the fire.

## ***Preview***

**N**ext morning after a country breakfast, the two shouldered their packs and headed off up track. The steep path felt slippery beneath their feet as the village fell away behind them. What for most people would be a hard climb was just a stiff walk for the legs of the two climbers.

Reaching the top they turned to walk along the ridge and down the gentle slope to the gorge.

"Magnificent. Quite a challenge too. What d'you think. Abseil down and pendulum across, then free climb the other side or try to get a rope over that pinnacle?"

"Well, I'm not too sure about safety at the bottom here. The sea's running high and the wind through there looks pretty strong, though it's not too bad up here. On the other hand, where'd we tie off the rope at this end? There's nothing here solid enough", she replied.

"How about the Four wheel drive? There's a track along the ridge from that far gate. Maybe we could bring it up and tie off on the bull bar."

"Now there's lateral thinking for you. Mohammed and the mountain etc. First we should try and get the leader across. How far do you think it is?"

"Oh, only about thirty metres, I'd say. Here, hold the end of this", Ben said, taking a light rope from his rucksack. Usually he'd carry such gear over his shoulder, but this time they thought it best not to raise the curiosity of the villagers if they could help it.

Leaning back from the edge he launched a loop of rope in an arc out over the gorge. It's slow motion flight ended about five metres short of the rock that was the target.

A second try landed not much closer, and Ben nearly slipped over the edge in the process.

"I think we need a little assistance here. Hmmm.. Let's see. I know, come on. I've got just the thing in the wagon. We'll get your car while we're down there" and he coiled the last of the wet rope as the two of them trotted off up the ridge to the sheep track.

Beneath them their cars could be seen parked conspicuously by the sea wall outside the Master's Arms. The morning sun shone down on Stanport, lying curled round the bay like a lizard on a rock. The thatched rooves blending into the surrounding fields above the stone and plaster walls. Here and there a cottage or two had been repainted in the last few years, and the dew on the cobbles in the laneways had dried quickly in the reflected warmth.

"Picture postcard perfect", Jan said to herself. "Hold on a sec Ben." and she took out her digital camera. The village just lay there; a rose waiting to be picked and so she did, with not a single thought for the thorns.

Down at sea level again as they strode to the cars, Rowan's stooped form could be seen passing between the cottages behind of the pub.

Lifting the tailgate of the Volvo, Ben pulled out two surfcasting rods and a tackle box.

"Put these in your car and then we'll have a bite before we head back up. What d'you think?"

"Now I see your plan. Clever little fellow, you. Sure, I could do with a cuppa. Maybe Jack can arrange some sandwiches to take too."

As they entered the inn, a heated discussion could be heard in the back of the building. Rowan and Jack were at odds over something.

"Did you or did you not tell them about the bell?"

"Only her. It was such a lovely day for a story and she looked so pretty and lonely sitting there by herself."

"Oh yes, you dirty old man. Fell for her charms did you? Again."

"I'm not a dirty old man. I just have a finely honed appreciation of the female figure. I'm still allowed to window shop you know."

"Try windows with older stock next time, and don't steam up the glass. In any case I think we've got a problem."

"What sort of a problem?"

"Name me one person in town who wants the bell disturbed. Go on... You can't now, can you?"

"Well... I guess you're right."

"Of course I'm right. So what'll we do about it."

"Ah..."

"Well there's nothing we can do, is there? It's on the common. No one owns it. No one even wants to admit it exists, except you. How can you stop someone fooling round with something that doesn't exist, for Christ's sake? .. and get that cat out of here. There are health laws you know."

**B**en raised his eyebrows in Jan's direction as he rang the bell at the reception desk. Arrow's voice could be heard saying, "Now you just sit here and think about how we get out of this while I go and see who that is", The sound of his boots on the flagstone floor heralded his arrival in the hall.

"Ah it's you two. Had a nice walk then?"

"Lovely thanks. We wondered if we could get a cuppa and maybe some sandwiches to take out with us."

"Sure, sure. Take a table and the wife'll be with you presently."

He went out the front door to where his better half was tinkering in the strip of garden along the front of the building.

Muffled conversation drifted through the door and a minute or so later the host and hostess followed.

"Any preference in the sandwiches?" The gentle tones of Mrs. Arrow were a welcome contrast to her husband's booming comments.

"Just something light thanks", replied Jan.

"Right you are."

"And what have you got planned for the rest of the day? A spot of fishing maybe? I notice you've got a couple of rods in the station wagon."

"We thought it might be nice to find a secluded spot and have a cast or two."

"You should try Half-moon Bay. Back up the hill, third left and follow the road down to the beach. It's a short walk from the car but I don't think that'll bother you two. It's well known round here for providing a good meal."

"Thanks. It's sounds like what we're looking for"

"Fine... Oh well, better get back to work. See you later. Have a pleasant a day" and his footsteps disappeared out the back.

"Have a pleasant day! Seems from that little talk with the old man that he wouldn't be so cheery if he knew what we're doing. We'll have to be careful not to be seen up on the ridge."

"I guess you're right. But after all, we're not doing anything wrong. Only a bit of climb..."

"Here you are folks. The sandwiches will be ready when you're finished."

**A**rmed with the fruits of Lucy's labours, the couple took the road back out of town, up the hill and through the gate to the Common. Carefully Ben eased the Subaru along the hill below the ridgeline, out of sight of the village and parked a dozen or so metres back from the edge of the drop.

While Ben took out the rods and climbing gear, Jan wedged a couple of rocks under the wheels, just to be sure.

"Here, hold this love" and Ben handed a rod to Jan. Holding the other rod under his arm he tied a sinker on the end of the line. 'Flip the lock on your line off and pass me over the end of the line. He tied the ends together and motioned Jan to move away along the lip of the gorge.

Taking careful aim he cast the line towards the rock on the far cliff. 'Close but no cigar.' Reeling in the lines they tried again. Better luck this time and the sinker fell just off to the left. Once more and it dropped cleanly behind the rock, looping the lines neatly around the target. Ben tied a light climbing rope on the heavier of the two fishing lines and gently reeled in the other. Slowly the rope edged out across the gap, around the rock and back into Jan's waiting hands. Quickly they rigged up some heavier gear between the car and the other side and clipped on ready to cross the void.

"You first girl. It's your baby" and Jan slipped hand over hand along the line to the far side. Carefully she clambered around the rock and up the cleft behind onto the headland itself with Ben close in pursuit.

Unshouldering their packs, they moved forward. Beneath their climbing boots the remnants of an ancient track drew them towards a gnarled tree, its twisted arms spreading above the bushes that hid the final rocky outcrop. Negotiating the tree roots with care, Jan bumped her shin against something in her path. Reaching down she brushed aside some undergrowth exposing a large log. The end was carved with primitive symbols.

"Woh! Look at this Ben. It must be here."

"Where? Oh yes! What's this here?" running his figure along a groove in the weathered timber. "A star.. with a tail. A comet or

maybe a meteor! You know there could be something to this after all."

Jan cast her eyes around.

"Well there's only one place it could be. Right in the middle of all that gorse." and she smoothed her hair back, pondering the myriad of spikes waiting to test the resilience of her climbing kit. "How do we deal with that..? I know. Where's some rope? Take this and go over there. Ben grabbed the end she proffered and worked his way part way around the bushes. The ground sloped steeply away on both sides of the ridge and he had to be very careful not to slip and tumble onto the granite teeth piercing the sea below. Pulling the rope tight between them they made a loop around some of the larger gorse bushes and pulled them back as close to the ground as they could. Ben drove a couple of pitons into the rock to tie them down while Jan fetched a torch from the pack. The couple peered into the gloom beneath the spiky canopy. Flashing the torch around they could see that the ground fell away into a large depression in the rocks and there beneath a tangle of branches was the vague shape of a sharp edged curve. "There's definitely something in there", he said, "and it doesn't look natural. Do you want to crawl in or shall I? You're smaller." "I'll go", and taking a knife with her to deal with the smaller branches, Jan began to squirm her way to the dark shape. "I could do with a little light in here", she called and Ben passed in the torch.

"Jackpot! This thing's got to be 6 metres tall if it's an inch."

"You're mixing your measurements there girl. What's it look like?"

"Like he said from what I can see. A big axe folded in two. Strange looking stone. I think it's fallen over though. Come on in Ben, it's bigger in here than it looks."

Ben arrived at her side, jammed in amongst the branches. "Wow! What a discovery."

"Well we didn't exactly discover it did we? Just followed the directions and here it is. Now what?"

"I was hoping to record it's sound. But that's out of the question. What with it being in the middle of all this. Have you got your camera?"

"Yep. In my pocket, if I can get to it in here... there."

"Ok then, how about we get a few shots and then we can measure it. You don't happen to have a measuring tape or a ruler?"

"What you think?"

"Ok, we'll use a rope. Tie knots in it for the major dimensions. I'll go get it."

Soon Ben was back with the rope. "Crawl through there, if you can. Take this end."

Jan slithered between the branches of the bushes and across the bottom of the pit to the far side of the bell. Reaching around the branches she threaded the rope around them, until it was taut across the face of one the blades. Ben tied a knot in it at the other side and they repeated the exercise with the other major dimensions. It was lucky for them the bell was lying at an angle. With the gorse in the road it was hard enough without trying to reach up to the top. This way Jan was able to scramble up the upper most blade, using the gorse to stop herself from sliding back down its slippery surface. Running his hand across the blade, Ben said, "I don't think this is stone. I guess it looks a bit like it but I don't think so. Maybe some kind of metal. That would explain the ringing. But it's no metal I've seen before. What d'you think?"

"Well... you could be right. But where would it come from.. although..., it's pretty old, supposedly. Maybe they had a metal we don't know about. It's happened before. Like concrete. After the Romans the secret disappeared for hundreds of years before someone discovered it again."

"Yeah maybe. Then maybe it's not that old. We've only got old Rowan's word for it. Maybe it's left over from the war or something. One thing's for sure, it wasn't meant to be a bell."

"But the log, with the carvings. That looks like it was a striker and it fits the description. How old do you think that is?"

"Who knows. What I do know is we need to come back with some heavy gear and take a proper look. We know it's here now. Next thing is to re-erect it or take it back to the lab to check it out. I guess we'll have to think about that one", he said tapping the bell with his knuckle absent mindedly. Instantly a warm low tone reverberated through the hollow.

The couple just stared at each other in stunned silence. Without mentioning it they'd both assumed that something this large needed to be struck much harder to produce a sound and here it was ringing clear and quiet under the light tap of a single finger. "Minidisk!" they said in unison. Ben pulled it from his pocket and checked the record function. Everything was in order and so they spent a half hour or so tapping the bell lightly in various spots all across the face of the blade. Before each note Ben dictated a

description of where it was being struck, ever the careful researcher. This time he was making do; crouched in the bottom of a basin, under a canopy of spikes, on the ridge of a headland, cut off from the mainland by a deep chasm, still meticulously notating and recording.

"Don't you think we're taking a bit of a risk doing this?"

"What do mean"

"Ringing it. You know, the deaths and all that."

"Oh don't be silly. Besides, I'm not ringing it, just tapping it to test it."

"Pretty much the same thing only smaller."

"If you say so, anyway I'm finished now so don't worry. How about we go now. I'm itching to get this stuff to the lab and analyse it. We can let the gorse spring back and it'll be hidden again. No-one will ever know we've been here."

"Hold on Ben let me get it I firmly fixed in my head," and she took a careful look around, memorising the shape and positioning of the bell and it's stand, now broken, in the rock hollow. She knew the photos didn't show the whole scene and as soon as they got back to the Volvo, she wanted to model it up on her computer. There was sure to be someone at the museum that would recognise it, or something about it. Unlike Ben, Jan was convinced that Rowan's stories were based in some way on the real history of this fascinating object.

Crawling from the bush, they carefully released the ropes and the gorse sprung back to its' original shape then picking up the packs they walked back to the chasm, avoiding the tree roots, and stepping over the log.

"Hold on a minute Jan. We don't want to go through all this again next time" he said pointing to the ropes ahead. Rubbing the back of his neck he thought about it minute or two, then took a couple of pitons from his pack.

"What're you going to do?"

"I'll drive these in down here behind the rock and thread the ropes through. When we get across we can tie on the fishing line and a couple of sinkers and pull the rope out leaving the line. The sinkers will hold it down against each wall of the gorge so it'll be nearly invisible from the top. The pitons will be hidden by the rock and we'll tie the line off on one below the lip over there."

"What d'you think?"

"Sounds good to me."

Ben stepped down between the lip and the pinnacle and drove a piton into a fissure in the rock, then to be sure he placed another spike on the crack and hammered it home with his hammer. As he leaned over to move the ropes to the karabiner, there was a loud cracking noise and a pile of small rocks tumbled into the ravine.

"Shit!" Ben scrambled for the lip of the cliff. As Jan grabbed his hand and pulled him up over the edge, the ground shook as the anchor rock slowly rolled over and plunged into the gap. Seeing it all as if in slow motion the couple watched the ropes tighten, expecting them to break any second, but to their shock they reached their limit and with a jolt the front wheels of the car jumped the wet branch under their treads. Then the ropes broke. Jan sighed in relief at the close shave. She had had a vision of her pride and joy plummeting into the cauldron below. Then slowly the vehicle started slipping towards the abyss. Her vision was on rerun, but this time for real and all the way to the bottom.

She dropped to the ground stunned, her mouth hanging open,. Ben peered cautiously over the edge. He could see the Subaru bobbing in the surf. Still afloat. With all the windows shut tight it was quickly drifting towards the bay on the current that ripped through the gap.

He moved over to Jan and cradled her head in his arms. He could feel her sobbing quietly. The tears dropping silently on the back of his hand.

They stayed that way for while until Jan pulled herself together. "Sorry. I know it's only a car, but I saved four years to get it. You've no idea how useful it's been this past year." By now it could be seen out in the bay, not far from the beach, sinking slowly but with the tailgate still in view.

As they watched, a boat could be seen leaving the quay at the far end of the village. Motoring out of the mouth of the river a white clinker dory with two men on board headed towards the stricken car.

"Come on sweetie, up you get. Time to try and get off this island."

Ben took off his orange jacket and started waving it and shouting towards the boat. Jan soon joined him. As the minutes passed they could see the boat drawing closer to the car but with no sign of having seen them. Obviously the crew were concentrating on the vehicle, afraid that they were still in it.

The boat nosed up to the rear of the car and the men could be seen peering inside. The white haired man shook his head and rummaged around in the bottom of the boat. He reached over the bow and tying a rope to the tow bar, drew it along the gunnel to cleat it off at the stern. The helmsman turned for the beach, tightening the cable and gunned the motor. They could see the water churning behind the boat as the outboard strained with the load, but slowly the car bobbed after it towards the shore.

"We've got to attract their attention somehow."

"How about this?" replied Jan, pulling her mobile from her inside jacket pocket. Dialling Directory she was quickly connected through to the Master's Arms where the Lucy Arrow answered. Jan explained the situation and Lucy said she'd tell John when he and Rowan reached the beach with the car. Jotting down Jan's number, she hurried out to meet the boat. A few minutes later the two men beached the boat and pulled the car in until it grounded in shallow water. Rowan scrambled across the gravel and tied the vehicle to a ring on a post on the sea wall.

Lucy explained the phone call to him and he called the innkeeper over. They hurried over to the pub and Arrow called Jan back. She explained that they had rope to lower themselves down to the water and he told her where he could come in to take the two of them off in the dory.

**S**oon it was all arranged and the couple lowered themselves down to a rock shelf where Arrow and MacPherson helped them into the vessel.

Behind them Crowhawk's cave lay unnoticed, the steps of the tunnel worn by the tides of centuries.

"Well lass, you've had an eventful day then. The car doesn't look too bad. You'll be able to get all your things out of it ok, but I'm thinking the insurance will have to write it off in the end. Too much salt water and some damage to the front and one of the sides where it banged against the rocks."

"Yes of course. Insurance. I think it's paid up. I can't remember when it's due but I think it'll be fine."

"Lucky the bay's so shallow. My guess is the front was bouncing on the bottom when we got to it. That tow bar certainly made the job a lot easier. How'd you say it ended up in the water anyway?"

"We were just doing some climbing on the cliffs and needed an anchor point. There's nothing suitable on the landward side so we

used Jan's car" and Ben quickly described the rest of the accident. No mention was made of the bell.

"I thought you were going fishing." It was Jack's voice above the sound of the motor.

"Got sidetracked along the way. We were going to go a bit later in the afternoon. Towards dusk. Maybe watch the sunset from the beach."

For a minute or so the whine of the outboard was all that could be heard, then Rowan spoke up.

"Find anything interesting over there?"

"Where. Oh, on the headland. A lot of gorse and a great view," replied Ben.

"You can see for miles down the coast from there. You should put up a lookout platform, or a tower... for tourists", said Jan.

"What's this tourism thing with you anyway? You're not from the County, or the Tourist Board are you?", this from Rowan.

"No, no. I guess when you live in the city you really appreciate coastline like this. They say you can get a bit blasé about scenery when you live in it. Not you personally. Just people in general. I reckon you could make a nice profit able living here with a little investment. Nothing too big. Don't want to destroy the ambience."

"We're doing nicely as it is thanks. Besides where would we get the money?"

"From the County maybe, or a lottery grant. Even the Heritage Council and there might be private investors that would be interested. Wouldn't you like a few more home comforts?"

"Well, maybe. Do you really think somebody'd invest in this place."

"I might even be interested myself. Just a little bit. I'm not rich and of course I've got to sort out a new car. Who knows how much that'll entail."

"I'll think about it. Have a chat to the others, see what they think."

"I'll give you my number later."

"No need. Lucy's got it already."

"Of course" and the conversation rested there waiting quietly for the scrape of the beach beneath the keel of the boat.

Jack beached the boat next to the car, still sitting up to the windows in the bay.

"Don't worry I'll go get Crusty to pull it out with his tractor" he said, hitching the boat to the bollard with the car and climbing the

wall onto the street. "Back soon" and he disappeared behind the post office and into the back alley.

Jan and Ben stood looking at the car for a while until the 'Chug, Chug, Chug' of an old Massey Ferguson heralded the arrival of Clive 'Crusty' Kinnear, preceded somewhat by his two front teeth and followed by Jack with a couple of large planks on his shoulder. A little stooped under the load but in control nevertheless. Ben ran over to take some of the weight. It was time he and Jan did something to help themselves. These people had been more than 'A friend in need' and all because of their selfishness and stupidity. Ben was starting to feel just a little guilty.

"You guys were pretty quick off the mark with the boat today."

"I was leaning on the wall having a smoke staring out across the water as I'm want to do occasionally, when the car drifted into sight", said Rowan. He wasn't going to mention that he was really checking out the headland with his binoculars to see if they were up to something or that he was feeling guilty to. His knee-jerk reaction when he sighted the car in the water had been, 'serves 'em right' stuffing around with the bell', until he came to his senses and realised they could be trapped inside.

With Clive's help the Subaru was hauled out of the water, the doors and windows opened and the mats and Jan's personal belongings removed to dry. On the off chance, Ben tried starting it, but to no avail, so Clive backed up the tractor towed it up the planks and onto the street.

"I guess I'd better ring the insurance company then" and Jan ferreted out her organiser from her briefcase in the Volvo. "Lucky I threw my stuff in here this morning when you got your sunglasses out", she said as she waited for the Insurance company to answer.

After the obligatory wait on hold and the telling of the story three times as she was passed up the chain, she hung up. "They said to arrange to get it back to the city and they'll take a look at it there. If they have to, they'll send someone down here later. I didn't say exactly what caused it. If they come and talk to you, you'll be discrete won't you?" she said to the three Samaritans.

"Of course lass. I know these big companies. They'll use any excuse to get out of paying. You can count on us, can't she lads?" There was a mumble of agreement.

"Now I think we owe you men a few pints. I'm sure my stuff'll be ok out here drying."

"Now you're talking" and they traipsed into the inn. The rest of the afternoon was spent on the phone organising a car carrier to pick it up in the morning while the locals got quietly and then noisily drunk, on Jan's account.

## ***The Project***

The tow truck arrived mid-morning and Jan and Ben followed it up the winding road out of the bay and onto the main route to town. It was a quiet trip home. Both of them lost in their thoughts. Jan had a good deal on her mind. Tomorrow she was due back at work. Fortunately they lived within walking distance of the museum but she still had to get the car sorted out. Much as she loved the Four wheel drive, she'd rather not have it back after being in the water. Then, of course, there was the bell. For a while it had slipped their minds while they dealt with the accident. What should they do about it? She new they couldn't just leave it alone now. She'd have to have a quiet word to someone at work first, but she'd need to be careful about whom she chose. Some of them were a bit too ambitious to know about it just yet. On the other hand Ben was busy putting together a plan to haul it out to the lab and subject it a range of scientific tests. As she gazed out the window and he stared down the road ahead, the two of them were silently and unwittingly setting out on a collision course.

.Eventually Ben spoke up. "Are you angry with me?"

"No. Should I be?"

"You've been quiet all the way home and it was my idea to tie off on the Subaru."

"I'm quite capable of saying. 'No'. If anything I'm mad with myself. But no, I'm not mad with you. I've just been contemplating the bell."

"Me too. Do you think we should build a bridge and take it out that way or get in a helicopter?"

"I beg our pardon. Who said we were going to move it all?"

"Well, we can't test it properly out there on the rocks."

"I was afraid of this. . What about the locals? You just want to walk in and carry off all their history and tradition without a second thought?"

"You heard Jack, there's nothing they can do. It's on the common. No one owns it. Most of them won't even admit it exists. As he said, 'How can you stop someone fooling round with something that doesn't exist?'"

"That's not the point is it? That bell represents their ancestry, culture and traditions. It's also wrapped up in superstition. What do you think'll happen if it's moved? I know you don't give a hoot for old wive's tales, but old wive's tales have been shown to be based on some kind of fact as often as not. It may only be psychological, but it can still have an effect. Look what happened to us."

"Don't be silly. That was carelessness. The bell had nothing to do with it."

"Oh, you think so, do you? Then why were we there? The climbing wasn't that good. In fact we didn't even do any real climbing. We took the easy way over. And then you had to go and ring the thing just to tempt fate..."

"Keep your hair on. That's all garbage. My tapping it didn't put the car in the drink."

"...and another thing. I found it. That thing could fast track my career. And it's not likely to do that if the locals get up in arms."

"Well, what about my career. You know how important it could be to my Ph.D."

"Yeh well..."

"Exactly." And they fell into silence for a time.

"There must be a compromise" he said finally. "If I can get the village to agree to bringing back to lab for a while, you can study it there too and spend some time in Stanport hunting down the history and stuff."

"A lot of that I can do here."

"Wherever and when I've checked it out we'll put it back on the headland for them. Maybe we could restore it so they can use it as a tourist attraction. That means they'll need a bridge, so we'll take it out that way. We build the bridge now and leave it to them as a sort of payment for the privilege."

"Build a bridge! Like we can afford that. How do we design a bridge? Who's going to build it?"

"The last question we'll have to look into, but the money shouldn't be too hard. You said it yourself. The County council, Tourist Board, Heritage Council and I reckon I can get some from the Uni' as part of the research grant and so far as design goes, Marc's a civil engineer. It'd be a snap for him and he owes me

one from when I designed his new music room. Maybe you get some funding from the museum for your research..”

“You’ve got it all worked out, haven’t you?”

“Well, yes... I reckon we could make it happen. You do want to investigate it don’t you?”

“Yes, sure I do but... we’d still have to get the locals to agree.”

“We don’t have t, but I agree. We should. John’s the one to get on side first. I get the impression he has a bit of influence `round there and he’s a businessman, of sorts. He could then help us convince Rowan. Once those two agreed, we’d have the extremes covered and those in between should be a push over then.”

“Don’t underestimate the people of Stanport. They’re likely to have deep seated beliefs and traditions and they won’t give them up easily.”

“I don’t give up easily either. It’s not like we’d be trying to rip them off. We could put them on the map and improve their lifestyle.”

“If that’s what they want.”

“Well we should at least ask them.”

“Ok. But I guess we should sound out the possibilities of funding it first. No point in upsetting them or getting their hopes up for nothing.”

“Fine. So you agree we should go ahead.”

“Yes... but gently. Not push them around or make a big splash yet.”

“Ok” and the conversation died as Ben concentrated on the city traffic.

**M**onday at work and Jan couldn’t wait to talk to Marta, her close friend and colleague, about the bell, but that had to wait until her boss brought her up to speed on the department. Not that she was really out of touch. She’d always counted her blessings in having a job that she loved and the past year had been less of a holiday that twelve months of field work with irregular but frequent visits to the museum. Generally on these visits she’d had little to report in response to their queries, but this time she was having trouble containing her excitement. A evening’s discussion over a bottle of red and most of the night pondering the possibilities in Ben’s arms had convinced her he was right and now she was itching to get under

way. The departmental head could see something was up and when he'd finished filling her in, he asked Jan to spill the beans. "I'd rather not go into detail right now. Suffice it to say I've found something very exciting that I want to work on. I'd like to write a report on my sabbatical and it's results first. It'll all be in there. Then I'll put together a proposal for you to look at. One thing I will say though, it'll be a multi-disciplinary project, involving the University plus the Tourism and Heritage councils and maybe some others."

"Thinking big now Jan. That's what I like to see. I just hope you don't want too big a budget. Now off you go. I'm keen to see what you've got." It was a long time since he'd seen anything new or different cross his desk and knowing Jan, he thought her excitement just might presage such an occurrence.

Jan had taken a while to get used to her boss, Artimus. He tended to be a bit patronising to the female staff members, but it did mean that he took a fatherly interest in their work and supported them, rather than test them all the time as he did with the men. It looked like this would work to her advantage.

Meanwhile across town at his office, Ben was having trouble concentrating on the alterations to his auditorium proposal. While his suggestions had been accepted by the architects there were still some fine details to tie down and a couple of minor changes to draw up. Ten thirty rolled around with little progress Parker, his assistant turned up. Late as usual, but this time Ben was in too good a mood to reprimand her. He had a better idea. It was time for her to get stuck into some serious work and it looked like the bell was going to take up a large slice of his time, so he called her into his office.

"Park, as punishment for your tardiness this morning, I've decided you're ready to take on a real job. You can take over the Hartfield Auditorium project. Most of it's supervision from here on, but there's a little work to do first", and he handed over the files with relief. "Just ask if there are any problems. Now he could concentrate on what he regarded as the interesting stuff. The rest of the morning was taken up with phone calls, emails and making appointments. Jan sent across her photos and Ben set to, creating a crude model of the chasm on the computer.

The Internet provided maps and information on the geology around Stanport and before long he had a useable mock up of what he was proposing.

Lunch was spent with Jan and Marc outlining the problems and talking about the bridge. He quickly agreed to help and they parted with visions of soaring spans and low loaders on their minds.

By dinner time Ben had roughed out the project management structure, schedule and projected costs. Things were under way.

The next few weeks were spent chasing up grants and wining and dining prospective backers in the university and the museum board, all without giving away too many details.

Until they had convinced the people of Stanport, they couldn't afford to let out too much or they might jeopardise the whole scheme. The Heritage Council and Tourist Commission would wait until they had some sort of certainty about the initial phase.

When Jan finally presented her proposal to Arti, he was cautious at first then intrigued and finally enthused about the plan. Ben's proposed funding structure enabled the museum to get access to the bell and research it thoroughly with as little funding as possible. Sure the university would gain the most from bringing to the lab, but then they would organise most of the cash and it looked like there might be commercial possibilities for their acoustic materials research. You never know and to top it all off, the whole proposal was to cap it all with a socially and culturally responsible return and restoration of the artefact and a potential improvement in the local economy.

"Damn near a perfect scenario. What do they say, 'A win, win situation'."

"Except this time it's a win, win, win, win, win situation," said Jan.

"Ok my girl,. I give it my blessing. I'll talk to the finance people in the morning to make sure we can support the field work and you can take this on as your number one priority."

A flurry of negotiations at Ben's end secured provisional support from the college and all was set to approach the people of Stanport.

## *The Thickening*

Six weeks is a long time in the city, but not down Stanport way and Rowan was there where they left him, leaning against the sea wall. Arrow was propped up against the frame of the inn door, polishing a pint glass unnecessarily and staring out at the bay. Jan pulled up next to Rowan. "Ah, there you are. I didn't recognise the car. Is this the new one from the insurance?" It was John talking. "I have your room all ready."

"Do you like the colour?"

"Very nice. What do you call it?"

"Sea stone. Very appropriate I thought."

"Quite so, quite so."

"And how are you Rowan?"

"Fine, fine thank you. What brings you back to Stanport?"

"That little incident last time cut our visit short and we thought it was time to check out that fishing spot. Halfmoon bay? Up the hill and third left wasn't it John?"

"Aye... Do you want to settle in now?"

"Sure, why not" and Ben slung a bag over each shoulder and they followed the innkeeper into the building.

"There you go. Same as last time if I recall."

"Yes, thanks."

"Well, I'll be down in the bar if you need me." John's heavy steps could be heard clomping down the narrow staircase.

"Should we talk to him now?"

"I think it might be a good idea at least look like we came here for what we said. Besides I could do with a spot of fishing. It's been a hectic few weeks."

The last rays of the winter sun silhouetted the couple as they put their rods in the car and drove back to the village.

"Lucy. Look what Ben and Jan have snagged."

"Jan actually. I was a bit distracted."

"Can you prepare this for their dinner, love. Use that recipe of your Mum's. I know they'll appreciate it," and to Ben, "I have a couple of nice bottles of Chardonnay down stairs. Should go nicely."

"Sounds great. How about a couple of pints then to whet the whistle and have one yourself."

"Thanks, don't mind if I do."

"Well.. what's been happening round here then?"

"Oh nothing much. Same old same old."

"Business good?"

"Fair to middling. We get by."

"Did you have a think about Jan's idea. You know, bringing in a bit of tourism. If today's anything to go by the fishing would bring in a bit of trade with a little promotion."

"Maybe..."

"And there's the bell. You know we found it don't you?"

"Well I suspected it but I wasn't sure. In fact no-one was sure it really was there. Since the bridge collapsed there's been no way across. That's if there was a bridge which I suppose you're little expedition has rather confirmed.'

"We didn't see any evidence of a bridge, but that doesn't mean anything. As we know, the rock up there has a habit of breaking off."

"Speaking of bridges..." said Jan, " we've had an idea you might be interested in. Can you spare a few minutes?"

"Sure" and Jan and Ben outlined their proposal, slowly adding the detail so as not to scare him off .

"So you don't put any store in the bell being bad luck?"

"No.. and even if we did, we'd be doing you a favour r taking it away for a while. If it's that important we can re-erect it with a damper so that it can't be rung. In fact, that would make it even more attractive to the tourists I'd say. You know, 'For your safety we have we have muzzled the bell, however, please don't attempt to strike it.', on a sign with a restraining fence around it. Nothing like a little bit of danger to peke the curiosity. Someone like Rowan could take tours up there for a small fee and tell the stories. Package them up with accommodation and a fishing guide. Maybe a boat trip round the bay. What more could they want?."

" And what do you two get out of it?"

"Mainly the kudos and Ben will get his PhD. out of it. Filling in history and investigating archaeological finds is what I do for a living. The museum provides my wages and apart from that the knowledge is it's own reward although we may be interested in investing a little here to help you out."

"Sounds interesting. The county keeps wanting to scale down services for the bay. Too few people, too little money generated. Something like this might help keep up the bus service and we

need funds to repair the quay. Maybe they'd kick in if it was going to be used for tourism "

"Well you have a little think about it tonight and if you're agreeable, we can all have a talk to Rowan tomorrow. Sound like good idea?"

"Sure, sure. Another drink?"

"Why not."

Lucy's cooking was exquisite and the chardonnay quite a treasure. Jan and Ben spent a wonderfully pleasant evening talking , sipping wine and listening to the locals argue around the darts board before retiring to set sail on the sea of quilts that served as a double bed.

As they were drifting off to sleep a low growl echoed around the bay and heavy rain began to splash against the slate roof just above their heads. Soon the flash of lightning lit up the tiny room and the bang of the inn door accompanied the farewells of the drinkers downstairs as they splashed out into street on their way home.

After a half hour or so of trying to sleep, Jan rose from the bed and stood at the window watching the spray from the waves against the sea wall.

"Come back to bed love, you'll get a chill."

"Not yet. Come here and take a look. Even in this weather the bay's picturesque. Ben joined her the sill.

Looking across the water to the headland they watched as a bolt of lightning ran to ground on the point.

"My god! Do you think it hit the bell, Ben?"

"I doubt it. It's in a hollow. It's more likely that it hit the tree. I hope it hasn't destroyed it. We'll have to go and check on it. Don't mention anything until we've got John and Rowan on side, then maybe they can take us out there. Lucky I left the rope to climb up again"

**B**y dawn the storm had passed and they woke to another idyllic morning in the little bay . John met them at the foot of the stairs with a big smile and a warm greeting.

"Good morning folks! Have a good sleep?"

"Once the storm died down a bit."

"I had plenty of time m'self to think over your proposal and I'm for it. Time I stopped hiding out here and did something worthwhile. Rowan'll be in when we open at eleven if not before and we can broach it with him then."

Sure enough, eleven o'clock rolled round and the old man was at the door.

Ben and Jan let John do all the talking,, lubricating the story with a couple of pints.

At first he didn't look too keen but when John mentioned his role as tour guide and official keeper of the legend, Rowan warmed to the idea. It was late in life to embark on a new adventure, but he'd never been one to shy away from a little drinking money and now wasn't the time to start.

"One thing folks, I'd like to see this thing for myself before going any further. Just to be sure. Can we arrange that?"

"Don't worry John. It's there", this from Rowan.

"How can you be sure?"

"Well it was there in 1916 when my father went up there after the hospital ship wreck."

"He went up there?"

"Sure he did. He and a couple of friends went up and knocked it off its perch to stop it ringing again."

"So that explains why it's sitting on the ground", said Jan,

"anyway, if you can get us over there we can get you both up to the bell", so Jack left the inn in Lucy's hands and soon the little band were on their way across the bay to the headland.

**I**t was difficult landing on the rocks so the couple clambered ashore and up the ropes first to organise a Bosun's Chair for the others.

Reaching the ridge they came upon a scene of blackened devastation. The tree was spilt in two and the ground burnt black for metres around.

"Blast!"

"Don't worry, Jan. It all adds to the attraction that this is a mysterious place."

"I guess so."

Next they hauled Rowan up to look around. It was a bit hard for him to see the bell in the bushes, but with the help of their photos he was satisfied that all was as they said. Jack wiggled his big frame further in and managed to touch it. This act cemented his faith and he came out of the copse, a hardened convert.

"It's magnificent from what I can see. We'll make a fortune."

"Now let's not get too carried away. Once we've investigated it properly we'll have plenty of information to promote it with in line with Rowans tales of course. We can work both sides of the fence.

In the mean time we'll need to get things happening with access and council backing . And of course, what about the rest of the village."

"We'll organise a meeting at the Arms tonight. I think everyone's home today", so they did.

**C**rusty sat prominently at the front when the innkeeper opened the meeting. The snuffling sounds from his apparently permanent cold, punctuated Arrow's speech. He'd never taken to the young couple since he met them. 'Only an idiot'd put his car in the drink like that.'

When Jack had finished outlining the proposal, the farmer sat, muttering to himself while Ben and Jan answered questions from the rest of the residents.

Eventually everyone's concerns had been addressed and a vote was taken. Crusty was the lone dissenter.

Immediately the result was announced, he disappeared out the door and into the night as the sounds of celebration built in the little bar.

After another evening in the inn Jan and Ben were starting to feel at home in Stanport and by the time they climbed the stairs that night they were on first name terms with the whole village.

Everyone in the bay felt a warm glow as they drifted off to sleep that night. All, that is, except the disgruntled farmer.

**M**orning crept into the room with the fog. Seeping past the window frames and through the lace curtains. The fog horn at the lighthouse on the southern promontory moaned through the grey like a wounded spirit. More of a curse on passing sailors than a warning of land.

By mid morning the surface of the water was still indistinguishable from the sky as Jan put her baggage in the car. Ben climbed in the passenger seat as they bade their farewells, Jan started the engine and moved off, but not far.

Horrible metal-on-stone sounds accompanied by the flapping of rubber signalled major problems with the tyres. All four were flat. So things weren't going to go as smoothly as hoped.

After reinflating the tyres down at the quay, the couple left Arrow and MacPherson to deal with the farmer and headed back to town to get the project into gear.

Things began to move quickly now they had the approval of the locals, and three months later saw Ben navigating the Volvo down the now familiar route to the coast. Immediately ahead of him was a small army convoy. This had been the inspired thought of Marc. The Army Engineers needed practice with their bridging techniques and Ben's approach to assist in moving the bell to the university had brought a positive response. Using a temporary bridge meant that the permanent tourist bridge could be built of lighter materials and be more in keeping with the legend. In fact Mark had proposed installing a drawbridge. Perfect for controlling access to the bell as it would enable the headland to be sealed off out of business hours. While Ben was supervising things on the headland, Jan was organising the financial end in the city. Grant applications had been submitted and approved and now the project required a bank account to receive the funds.

She set up an appointment at her bank for late Friday afternoon, the day the army were due to deliver the bell to the lab.

Back in Stanport, the process had gone well. None of the expected trouble from Crusty had eventuated. Maybe the army was too much to take on by himself. Early Friday morning however, the rattle of his old car echoed off the rocks along the road out of town. Ben watched from the ridge, half expecting it to turn onto the common, but the sound slowly faded inland and he turned his mind to other things.

The loading went well and by two o'clock, the Sappers were dismantling the bridge as the low loader eased out of the gate and onto the country road followed by the Volvo.

## ***Conspiring with Mice***

**F**ar ahead in the city Jan was arriving at the bank. Going to the information counter she was directed to a chair to wait for the manager. Normally she would just open an account at the counter, but she were hoping to butter him up in case the project needed support further down the track. She sat and flicked through a 2 year old magazine. Not nervous, just bored... but boredom didn't last long.

Suddenly a young man burst through the door brandishing a swan-off shotgun.

"Everyone on the floor. Now!"

Bang! followed by screams. It wasn't a gun shot, just the sound of the security screens going up. This robber had miscalculated. One of the last branches to have screens installed, Jan's local bank had only had them a week now. He was trapped with the customers on the outside.

Obviously rattled by this, he shouted "Shut up!" as a young child started crying..

More sobs, "I said shut up!" and the crying dissolved into sniffles. In the distance police sirens could be heard approaching..

The would-be robber hurried to the door, just too late to catch the waiting sports car as it sped off with a squeal of tyres. No one inside moved as he returned, looking flustered.

"You! Come here - Now!" He pointed at Jan. "Pronto!" and he aimed the gun at her. As he taped her arms behind her she could hear him breathing heavily through the ski mask, feel the warmth of his breath on her neck and shuddered at the touch of it on her skin.

'Why do I think he's dirty. Just 'cause he's a crook, doesn't mean he's dirty.' she thought.

"I said move woman! Are you deaf?"

'Concentrate girl' she thought and doing as he said, she exited the bank as he pushed the gun hard against the base of her neck.

**H**e quickly looked up and down the street looking for a potential getaway car, then shoving her from behind he followed Jan up the entrance to a valet car park. Holding her by the hair he threatened the attendant for the keys of

a nearby WRX wagon then pushed her in the rear and locked her in behind the cargo barrier. A caged hostage.

Jan's abductor, dropped the clutch and sped out of the park and into the high street as the police entered from both ends of the block.

A quick left sent the Subaru down a side alley in a flash of electric blue, through a clutch of rubbish bins and out onto the parallel street. It soon became obvious the driver knew his way around as he wove in and out of traffic, ducking round red lights through alleys and driveways, taking a detour through the forecourt of a hotel, demolishing a chain link fence, across the verge and onto the motorway. Here the rally-cross engine came into it's own and they were soon doing over 150 kilometres an hour, quickly leaving their pursuers in their wake.

But his luck was sand in the hourglass and the time had come to turn it over.

As the grey of dusk briefly parted the driver could see a road block ahead. He took a right, crossed the median strip, all four wheels spinning on the damp grass. Shooting between a semi and a row of peak hour cars they exited the motorway down the on ramp, barely scraping past the oncoming traffic.

Jan could feel the bruises coming up already from being tossed around in the rear. She grunted as her head hit the window and they sped off up the road and around a corner.

Twisting her left leg out from under her she looked up just in time to see the roundabout ahead jammed with cars. There was nowhere to go but into the wrong lane. The WRX swerved across road, side-swiping a Volvo and bouncing off the gutter. Jan saw Ben's astonished face go by in a blur, matching his expression line for line, but she didn't have time wonder what he was doing there. The answer loomed large in the windscreen as it shattered over the driver who collapsed unconscious on the wheel. Jan felt the mesh of the cargo barrier press hard into her back.

Progress didn't halt there though. Locked into the drivers side front guard of the prime mover, the car slewed across the footpath in a screech of metal. Commuters from the underground scattered in panic as it came to rest just past the entrance to the escalators.

Steam erupted from the radiator of the truck like a classic cartoon and quiet settled on the scene. There, just walking distance from the university lab, the low-loader had come to rest, hanging part way down the escalators. A metallic groan, like that of a sinking

ship, echoed from the tiles of the subway as bystanders rushed up to release Jan and the driver from the wreck. The soldier clambered out the broken windscreen of the truck and into the arms of the commuters, bleeding from the head, but basically uninjured. The Police pulled up as an army orderly began to check the victims of the accident. Soon an ambulance was on the way and the onlookers had been moved on to another entrance.

**A**fter several minutes the scene was calming down, when without further warning, the trailer slipped further into the escalator shaft, and with a loud report, the restraining ties on the load snapped.

Down the slope bounced the bell, pummelling the turnstiles and on down the second flight towards the platforms.

The whoosh of air from the departing train had just subsided as the farmer walked from the platform. In his hand he carried a couple of signs proclaiming, 'Hands Off Our Heritage' and 'Leave Our Bell Alone'.

Crusty had travelled far that day. By car to the station, express to the city and subway to the university. He'd called the tabloids to meet him there to greet the bell when it arrived. He wasn't giving up yet.

Looking at his watch he grumbled, "Hope I'm not late. Can't trust these bloody city trains."

Unfortunately he wasn't late. He was right on cue to meet the bell and here it came.

As he rounded a corner the bell landed with a loud clang! The ringing reverberated through the station as commuters clapped their hands to their ears to block the sound.

Clive looked up from his watch to see the object of his demonstration posed precariously on one blade above him. His mouth dropped in shock and he stopped dead. Well, not actually dead yet, but the creaking of the bell slowly tumbling towards him heralded his end.

Another soul had passed at the tolling of the bell.

**'B**ell Strikes Again! Farmer flattened by Fairy tale', the tabloid headlines shouted the next morning. The sound of sirens had brought the reporters running from the university to find the subject of their curiosity lying dead on the platform, mute testament to his claims.

After a night in hospital for observation, Jan returned to a barrage of queries from management. Arti fielded them as best he could but still questions were raised as to whether the museum should remain involved with the project. Kinnear's demise had created a lot of bad publicity. Current affairs programs and talk back radio had been full of discussion on the wisdom of moving the artefact. So far she and Ben had avoided the reporters and the museum hadn't yet been linked with Crusty's death. Amongst other things a conspiracy theory had been voiced, accusing the Government of funding the Army and University to collaborate on a secret acoustic weapons program. For the meantime, Ben ignored requests for interviews and concentrated on helping the army extract the bell from the subway. With equipment and expertise at their disposal, the task was accomplished, with a little difficulty, by rush hour the next evening and the media interest began to subside. Jan was off the hook and the bell was in the lab. The conspiracy theory was treated as the rubbish it was and life went back to normal for the commuters on the university line.

Life was far from normal for Ben though. Sitting on a specially built stand in the acoustics lab he now had a six and half metre tall, single note instrument... or was it. His first priority was to photograph and precisely measure the bell. Utilizing a laser system, he transferred the dimensions to computer for future modelling and analysis. The first thing he noticed was that the blades were identical as expected. This might help explain some of its unique transmission properties.

Next he set up an array of microphones at various distances and hooked them up to a digital multi track recorder. Then he wheeled in his custom-built clapper. Ben had built this device for two reasons. One, because Jan thought it best not to tempt fate by having someone strike the bell directly, but secondly and more importantly, he could control the position and strength of each stroke, with a hundred percent repeatability. He clapper frame could be positioned precisely on a floor grid, using a laser mounted vertically on the stand. The trajectory and speed of the electrically propelled projectile could be accurately predicted and recorded. He had everything under control. This was the scientific method.

## ***The Lady and the Lake***

**M**eanwhile, back at the museum, Jan was pursuing leads on the bell's history. Trawling the Net, wading through piles of files and chasing up colleagues across the globe began to pay off. Images of faint carvings of the bell shape popped up in the archives of a small regional museum on the road to Stanport. A short phone call organised an appointment and Jan was once more headed out of town.

Pulling up outside the cottage that served as the Hammercroft museum, she was in time to see the curator unlocking the door, his black hair curling over his collar, topping off the crumpled tweed jacket.

"Mr, ah, Smith?"

"Yes, yes. You can call me Haseem" and he turned to show the dark skin and heavy features of his middle-eastern heritage.

"Haseem?"

"You're surprised. Of course you are. I'm sorry. I should have warned you on the phone. It throws most people. My father was one of the first oil sheiks to move here. Bought the manor just up the road. I grew up there,. Went to public school, hence the accent, or rather lack of it."

"And the Smith?"

"It's the English version of my family name. It makes some things easier."

"But surely your father...?" as she stepped into the cluttered room.

"Oh, we fell out years ago. I'm my own man now. Now where are we? Oh ,here it is. This is the file. See these photos."

"Yes. These look like the bell."

"Do you now where they come from?"

"There's a rocky outcrop a few miles north of here. They're in a rock face there. Or they were. Vandals have destroyed them with graffiti now."

"So it's accessible to the public?"

"Not really, but I can take you there if you want?"

"You sure the owner wouldn't mind?"

"No, I wouldn't mind."

"You own it?"

"Yes. That's how I got into the museum. I bought the property next to my father, and the rocks and some other stuff were on it. History always interested me. Back home in our part of the gulf,

there's plenty of history but not much in the way of archaeological sites, so this intrigued me. Come on, I'll lock up and we can go up there. Bring the file with you."

**T**wenty minutes later Jan was driving the car across the fields to the knoll the Haseem pointed out.

Pulling up beside a small lake, they walked over to the outcrop where he outlined the carvings with his finger. Obscenities and initials scratched over them had made them almost impossible to discern.

"They're much bigger than I thought from the photos."

"Yes. I know what you mean and there's other carvings not shown in the snapshots. See.. here is a man, in a robe and something above him. A star or a comet maybe."

"This is very interesting. Have you ever tried to track down it's meaning?"

"Well it seems that in mediaeval times this was a place of worship. My theory is that this was the backdrop to an altar of some kind. If you look behind you there's a couple of large stones sticking out of the ground... there and there. They seem to have hand cut, or chiselled edges. They're on their sides now, but I think they used to support a horizontal stone. If so it doesn't seem to be here now."

"Have you done any excavation around the site?"

"No. It's not my area of expertise and whenever I mention it to someone knowledgeable I just get ignored. I guess I don't look too legit."

"Would you be interested in letting me organise a dig here?"

"Sure, great. Could I help?"

"Of course. It's your land. But the museum, my museum, would need access to any artefacts found, for research purposes."

"What about displaying them in Hammercroft?"

"I'm sure we could come to some agreement, but don't count your chickens yet. We've still got to find something worth while. Let's go up top and look around."

They scrambled up the knoll until they stood twenty metres or so above the surrounding fields. Jan shaded her eyes with her hand and slowly scanned the neighbourhood until her eyes came to rest on the car down by the lake.

"Has that always been full of water?"

"As far as I know, why?"

"Look at the shape of it, sort of teardrop. And notice how the land doesn't slope down to it. It's just there... Slap bang in the middle of a flat field. Doesn't look natural at all."

"I see what you mean."

"Come on. I've an idea" and they slid and trotted down the hill and over to the lake.

"Any idea how deep it is?"

"Not really but let's see" and so saying Haseem picked up a large rock and heaved it into the water. There was a deep splash. "I'd say it's a few metres deep at least."

Jan walked along the shore a bit, picked up a similar rock and chucked it in. There was a higher sound as it plunged beneath the surface. "Uh, huh!" then walking to the far end she repeated the exercise. The rock struck the bottom almost instantly, sitting just below the surface. "Just as I thought."

"What's that?"

"The lake bottom slopes down from this end. It's almost like it was made by something big ploughing into the ground at a low angle."

"You're right and that would explain the bank at the far end. I just assumed it was man made as part of the altar."

"Well I think it is linked, but not like that. It's beginning to look like it's part of the reason for the site, not part of the site itself and I've a suspicion I know what those two stones were for too."

"Go on..."

"Well I'd rather wait a while on that one. It's a bit off the planet. I'd like to see if anyone else comes to the same conclusion. Now, how would you feel about us draining the lake? We can refill it when we're finished" and so they began discussing the investigation of the site.

## ***For whom the Bell tolls***

Late that evening when Jan met Ben at home she could hardly contain her excitement. He on the other hand was tired and frustrated after a day of computer problems which prevented him from starting his testing. Procedure meant everything to him. Not a man to take to flights of fancy, the lack of reliable IT support was enough to get him ranting and raving. Suddenly Jan felt deflated. She knew this was not the time to mention her new

theory and when Ben absent mindedly asked how her day went, 'Okay' was all he got in return.

"Well mine was bloody disastrous" and off he went in a blue tinged description of the frustrations of his day.

By the time he'd finished Jan felt totally deflated and only had the energy to say 'Goodnight' and wander off to bed. Ben sat up while longer cradling a single malt and while his favourite CD washed over him. By the time he pulled the sheet over his shoulder, Jan was deep in a world of witches and warlocks, altars and cosmic signs.

A blade of sunlight slicing the cold bedroom air woke Jan after a night punctuated with dreams and nightmares.

Ben stirred, opened his eyes and smiled at her.

"Sorry love, about last night."

"It's okay. I understand."

"So how did you're little trip go yesterday?"

"Wonderful... intriguing. I got far more than I bargained for or should I say hoped for. Haseem took me..."

"Haseem?"

"Yes our Mr. Smith turned out to be son of the local Sheik.

Anyway, he took me out to the rocks where the carvings had been, which he happened to own and a couple of things turned up. What would you think if you found the image of a falling star and an impact crater nearby?"

"A meteor?"

"Normally I'd agree. But what if there was a picture of the bell next to it and two stone pillars lying around."

"Like the ones on the headland?"

"I'm not sure but I think so."

"Oh. That puts a different slant on it altogether. What else is there?" and she filled him in on the details and her plans to investigate the lake and surroundings.

"Well. I suggest we keep this under our hats for the moment. You go ahead and see what you turn up and I'll continue at this end. Just in case I think I'll have to get the materials experts in sooner than I planned. I'll do some cursory tests and then get them to check it out. With any luck we'll have some results about the same time.

Parker."

"Yes? And good morning to you too."

"How's it going with Hartfield?"

"Great. Things are on time. I've got a meeting this morning."

"Excellent. Before you go can you drop by the lab with some requisition forms. They're in the Lab file. Bottom drawer, filing cabinet. I'll need about half a dozen."

"Okay I'll see you about ten."

When she arrived at the lab Parker found it almost empty. Ben was alone in the control room.

"Where is everybody?"

"Morning tea. Do you want to watch the first test? It won't take long."

"Why not, but I'll have to be off in half an hour."

"Can do, now make yourself useful and man the remote, there.

Turn the retract knob to 1 and press the green button... Right.

Now, when I say, press the release button. The red one. Ready?"

She nodded.

"Three, two, one, now."

Parker's thumb came down and the clapper swung against the bell.

In the control room, the speakers crackled with distortion as the system overloaded from the intensity of the signal.

"Christ Ben. What was that?"

"Now now Parks, Language. That was a sample of why this thing has stirred up interest. You did set the retract dial to 1 didn't you?"

"Yes."

"Well 1 is the gentlest we can hit it and that sound you heard in the speakers came from the mikes furthest from the bell. Lets look at the recording."

Ben brought up the waveform. It swung right off the screen .

"That's one powerful tone and see how perfect it is. Not a single harmonic. I've never seen anything like that before. We're going to have to put digital dampers in the system to get anything useful" and he switched in the filters.

"Let's do it again."

"Okay, but I'd met get moving straight after."

"Same deal. Set it to one... and on my mark....3, 2 ,1 mark!"

"How'd you know." Marc's voice was drowned out by the sound of the bell reverberating through the room.

"Hey Marc. Come to see the fruits of your labours?"

"Yep."

"Well you won't be disappointed. Look at thi.... Hey, where's the centre mike gone? Parker?"

Looking through the sound proof window, she said, "Still there. Look I'm off now. Don't want to be late for the Hartfield crew. Bye"

"Bye Parks" and Ben opened the door to the Anechoic Chamber and walked over to the bell.

"What the.." as he examined the microphone placed midway between the blades.

Removing it from the clip he turned to Marc.

"Look at this. Fried. Totally fried. There's something special going on here."

"Wow! What could do that?"

"My guess is, very high energy pulses or a standing wave."

"How hard did you hit that thing?"

"Just a tap. Let's look at the other traces."

As he stepped around the array, Ben brushed against the foam cones that lined the room. Half a dozen or so crumbled and fell to the floor.

"What the...! Foam cones don't crumble. They may tear or come unstuck, but Ben knew this room had been built with top quality materials especially for the bell. He brushed his hand across the wall. A semi circle of destruction followed in its' wake.

"Well that's the end of the acoustic tests. For a while at least. I think I'm going to have some questions to answer. Marc, you know a big of geology. What do you think this thing is made of... Stone?"

"I don't know but I doubt it's stone. You want to find out, ask the guys in materials research. They'd die to get their hands on it."

"Well they're scheduled to, but they're going to get at it early now. I need to know more before I start hitting it again" and with that they adjourned to the politics of organizing a new schedule.

## ***Digging in the Dirt***

**D**espite their enthusiasm for the job, the Materials Lab were committed for the next few days and following that they had a lot of equipment to move in before beginning their analysis. Meanwhile Jan's side of the project moved

forward apace. The basic procedures for archaeological site investigation were established in the early twentieth century and it was only days before the grid was being laid out and pumps chugged away emptying lake. Haseem recruited some of the less occupied locals and Jan gave them a quick course in what to do and look for. He was placed in charge of them with Kamryn Clear, a student friend of Jan's to assist him . She of course took overall charge of the dig. The investigation was initially focused on the area between the carvings and the pillars and on the lake bed. As the water level slowly receded, the shape of the lake bed began to show. As Jan had suspected it gradually formed the distinctive profile of an oblique impact crater.

**B**efore any earth was disturbed on dry land, ground penetration radar was dragged across the site looking for any buried objects worth investigating first. Apart from rocks, there were what appeared to be the stumps of posts. It seemed a large building had once stood on the site and Jan set Kamryn and a couple of locals to excavating them. She was however, keenest to see what lay beneath the lake itself. Eight days into the dig the lake was empty and the mud sufficiently dry to walk on. Jan had Haseem mark out a grid and they began scanning it with the radar. Slowly up and down the grid they went. Occasionally a small rock would appear on the screen or what appeared to be branches, and each time they were carefully marked for further scrutiny. Finally after two days of criss crossing the mud they reached the deepest part of the lake bed. This was where Jan felt they were most likely to find something interesting and sure enough just before noon a group of solid objects of various, apparently random shapes appeared on the scanner. The silhouettes gave now indication of what they might be so as they were about 3 metres down, she brought in the metal detectors before excavation. The headphones registered a weak but distinct signal. Between them radar and the metal detector indicated something unnatural was buried beneath their feet.

**B**etween Jan's first visit and the start of the dig Haseem had unearthed some old maps and local references to the area around the rocks. These indicated that the lake had been there at least as far back as the end of the Dark Age. Prior to that he could find no records. This meant that the objects

could only be made of metals available then or earlier. This could be a key fact in proving or disproving Jan's suspicions. She tossed all through the night before they were to dig up the objects.

**M**orning came and the earthmoving began. Carefully the top metre or so was removed with a back hoe and workers put to double checking the excavated earth.

Jan's tension mounted as the manual labour began.

Fortunately the radar had pinpointed the objects very accurately and no energy was wasted digging unnecessarily large pits.

When it came to the fine work at the end, Jan took it on herself and climbed down into the pit with a trowel and brush.

Soon there was a clunk as the trowel struck something solid, Carefully scraping back the soil she slowly unearthed the object, photographing it as she went.

Finally it lay exposed for the first time in centuries.

It was obviously manufactured, but what it was, was anyone's guess. Or rather what it had been. It was about a metre long , twenty centimetres wide with a branch two thirds of the way along and appeared to have been hollow at one stage. Any detail it may have had was gone now. While it didn't seem to have corroded underground it have obviously been subjected to high temperatures and all features had melted off.

More photos were taken before it was removed to the site office and catalogued. The digging went on.

**B**y the end of the day Jan had twenty three melted metal objects of various sizes arrayed on the floor of the office. At first glance they fitted her hypothesis perfectly.

"Haseem. What do you think we've got here?"

"Well, in my opinion, these, whatever they are, fell out of the sky. A long time ago."

"Uh hu and where do you think they came from? Originally."

"I hate to say it, but I guess from outer space, since no one down here could have put them up there. Back then."

"You're sure they're that old then?"

"I s'pose so. How would they get there? Do you think somebody planted them?"

Who would do that? It's a hell of a lot of work and how would they know we'd look for them much less find them?"

"You could have done it Has, then planted the references on the web. It's all on your land and you run the museum."

"Do you believe that? Why would I do it?"

"Boredom, publicity. Maybe you saw the headlines in the tabloids and saw a chance to attract some visitors to the museum, any number of reasons."

"Surely you don't really believe that."

"No Has I don't, but I have to consider it. After all, the alternative is a bit off the planet, excuse the pun."

"I guess you're right, sorry."

"No need, anyway I'm promoting you. I've got to take these back to town for analysis. You're in charge while I'm away. Kamryn will help with any technical problems and you can get me on my mobile. I'll probably be back tomorrow or the next day."

Back at the lab that night Jan showed her finds to Ben.

"What do you think? They don't exactly blow the theory out of the water do they?"

"That's for sure."

"Haseem came to pretty much the same conclusion, poor thing. I as much as accused him of faking it for publicity. How's it going at your end?"

"The materials guys have run a couple of scans. X-rays, MRIs and the like. No results so far. They can't identify it. It seems to have some form of polarised matrix structure."

"Polarised matrix! What the hell is that?"

"Bit hard to describe really. Suffice it to say it's something our blokes are only just getting into. I think they're looking into using it as armour on tanks. Something to do with energy redirection. The funny thing with the bell is that the matrix is oriented perfectly to its contours. All over the surface."

"So what did they say when they found that out?"

"They looked a little crestfallen actually. I think they were pissed off too that someone had beaten them to it."

"Who?"

"Didn't say, but I got the impression they were referring to someone in the U.S."

"Of course. Any ideas about what it is?"

"How about a gravity amplifier. That's what one of the young assistants thinks. Been reading to much Sci Fi I'd say. What about you. What do you think?"

"Well I can't come up with anything better but let's take look at what we've got.

One; A bunch of melted metal objects that fell or were propelled into the earth probably around a thousand years ago.

Two; a large artefact , the bell, made of an unknown metal with a polarized matrix, apparently of the same origin, and ...

Three; a collection of myths, maybe truths surrounding its appearance and disastrous effects on people.

If we accept the time line of the stories and the impact crater, then the Yanks are out of the picture as is anyone else working on polarized matrix metals at present.

No one's ever found evidence of this sort of technology from this age before, so assuming there wasn't any, technology I mean, then this is a foreign object. Foreign to it's Earth time that is.

Therefore it either came from somewhere other than the Earth or from some time other than the presumed age of the crater.

Three options then; Extraterrestrials, time travellers or frauds. Which is it?"

"Maybe a bit of all three. It's a hell of a lot of effort to go to for fraud, though it wouldn't be the first time. Time travellers seem unlikely. That would be a first, but UFOs, now that's more plausible if you believe some people and there is the possibility that the bell itself is genuine but this Haseem fellow, or someone else planted the rest. How much do you trust him?"

"A lot. I left him in charge while I'm away."

"Do you think that's wise? If he was playing ticks, he could get up to anything ."

"It's ok. Kamryn's keeping an eye on him. She can't afford anything to go wrong. It'd ruin her career before it started. I brought some soil samples and photos down to check out. See if there's anything strange about the strata above the artefacts. That should help determine if they've been planted or not."

"I look forward to the results."

"What's next? For you?"

"The materials guys won't be back for a day or two and I can't do any more acoustic tests until I know more. At the very least I've got to find a replacement for the cones. Did you see what happened to them?"

Jan looked though the isolation window into the lab. "Yes. Very odd. Is there anything productive you can do on it in the meanwhile?"

"I talked to the guys about doing an ultrasound but they didn't think it was worth it yet and it might be risky anyway. I could do that while I'm waiting, although I've had a couple of enquiries lately about tendering for some projects. Probably should pay a

bit of attention to generating some income. Oh well, Ill think about it overnight.”

“Come on Quasimodo, let’s go home. We’ll drop these off at work on the way.”

## ***Playing with Matches***

**T**hursday morning Jan had left early for Hammercroft. Wednesday evening she’d spent with Marta helping her pack for her trip with Arti to a conference in Vancouver or more precisely, helping her finish a bottle. After kissing her goodbye at the door, Ben wandered around the flat looking for his organizer. Several items of clothing were lying about on various pieces of furniture. He picked up his jacket, extracted the target item from the inside pocket and made a short phone call. A couple of things had kept him awake. The more pleasurable one had just left for the dig and the other one was the question of doing an ultrasound on the bell or not. Finally he’d made the decision. He was going to do it, and the phone call meant the equipment would be there by the time he got to the lab. With a trained operator although what a medially trained technician could contribute he wasn’t quite sure. He picked up the clothes absent mindedly as he pondered the day ahead then left for the university.

**S**ure enough, as he pulled up in the lab car park, a familiar face appeared from a white van.

“Howdy Ben.”

“Hi Chris. Hows things.. got the gear?”

“Of course. Would I be here otherwise?” and they unloaded the ultrasound unit and took it inside. Twenty minutes later all was ready with the handset mounted on a motorised frame that could position it precisely at any point on the surface of the bell.

“I don’t know what you expect to see with this Ben. It’s not like a body. It’s solid.”

“Well maybe it isn’t and then the other thing is it’s acoustic properties. I’m keen to see how it reacts to the scanner. Some of the guys in Materials think it might respond quite violently. They weren’t too keen on trying it, but I say if you don’t try, you don’t

find out. With that in mind, maybe you'd rather not hang around in case."

"Actually, I think I'll go down to the canteen and grab a bite for breakfast. Late night last night. I'll be back soon to see what you've got" and with that he left the lab.

**B**en began the scans. Starting at the outside edge, taking a shot, then storing the results on the computer he moved on round the perimeter in a decreasing spiral pattern. In the chamber the bell began to hum faintly, the sound growing slightly louder with each scan. Each time Ben turned off the ultrasound, the hum took longer to fade. In the control room, with the mikes and scanner off, the bell appeared silent behind the isolation window, but forces were gradually building up within it.

Ben worked on, closer and closer to the focal point of the bell, unaware that he was pumping synchronous pulses into the heart of an energy amplifier.

**H**igh above Hammercroft a vapour trail stretched from horizon to horizon where a west bound 747 was climbing into the darkness of the polar winter, heading for Canada.

On the quay at Stanport, Rowan and Jack looked up from their fishing rods and saw it disappear where the sunlight stopped at the edge of dawn.

"I don't envy them Jack. Up there on a wing and a prayer. Way out over the ice hoping nothing'll go wrong. Not for me."

"You're just a stick in the mud. I'd be more than happy to go. It's a beautiful day to fly."

"It's a beautiful day to fly isn't it Marta?"

Marta was already asleep and didn't hear Arti's words as he looked out the window of the plane. It had been a hectic departure. Such an early flight. She was quite happy to nod off and leave the trip in the capable hands of the pilot, Capt. Kahn. He in turn was leaning back in the cockpit admiring the Aurora while the auto-pilot did the work.

"Magnificent. I haven't seen a show like this for years. Look Hamish, they go right up out of sight and almost seem to touch the ground around to the rear. What you think. Should we alter course a bit to give the passengers a look?"

"Sure. I'll check with traffic."

The co-pilot tried to make contact for a temporary course change, but try as he might Hamish couldn't get through. "It must be the lights. Too bad. I'll just suggest they look out the windows anyway" and so saying he grabbed the intercom mike. The announcement was quickly followed by 'Ooh's and 'Ah's from the passengers as spears of bright light shot through and around the Aurora.

Staring out the window of the canteen, Chris could see the roof of the acoustics lab beyond the main auditorium. He stirred his coffee, lost in thoughts of the girl he'd met last night. Suddenly the roof of the lab seemed to heave and settle again. Ever so slightly. A deep thrumming noise filtered through the plate glass. In the courtyard he could see students stop and look towards the lab. A feeling of impending disaster crept over him and he quickly stood up and moved to the exit. Breaking into a run he brushed aside pedestrians as he rushed down the corridor and across the yard to the lab door. It was shaking violently. He looked around as if for help, uncertain about whether to open it. On the ground behind him his shadow flickered and cast itself clear across the quadrangle slamming into the far wall. Just then the door hit him in the back as the lab equipment exploded. If he could have looked in, Chris would have seen a wall of electrical energy leaping from the transformers into the glowing orb that encircled the Bell. Ben was nowhere to be seen.

The Bell was white hot. At the focal point between the blades, where the scanner had last been seen, was a small dark void. It's fuzzy edges twisted and writhed as it rotated, sucking in every small object in sight, and it was growing.

From the top a small black whirlwind was developing. What it was made of was hard to tell, as the very light in the room seemed to be bending.

Outside, a crowd of students and staff was gathering as the walls began to crack and twist. Believing it was on fire, someone called the emergency services.

The thrumming noise continued to grow, now augmented by the sound of furniture crashing about.

Bystanders grabbed at their jackets as a fierce wind rushed in from behind. Toupees and scarves flew into the maelstrom that had been the Lab.

Worried expressions turned to terror as the building imploded. The crowd was already on the run.

Sirens could just be heard in the distance, competing for attention with the cacophony close at hand.

As the fire engines pulled up, a black tornado appeared above the rubble of the building. The morning cloud began to dance with the dervish as iron and slate from nearby buildings rushed into the vortex.

**O**n the other side of the university the Master was having trouble focussing on the lecture hall. Everything seemed to be waving. Was it an earthquake?

He looked out the window.

No, nothing was falling.

Quite the contrary, things were flying around.

A hurricane? Here? Not likely. Besides they don't make the ground move. Or was it moving?

By now his class was in chaos. Obviously they felt it too.

He felt dizzy. He went to the window for some air.

It disappeared in a shower of glass, not leaving a scratch on him. The shards just launched into the air along with the rest of the windows in the building and rocketed over the next roof, disappearing into the black column that now rose above the town. The next thing he knew he was off his feet. It was the last thing he knew.

He was not alone as he was stretched and squashed into the two dimensions that survived the unquenchable thirst of the vortex.

All around the university a circle of destruction was expanding, eating up every last vestige of civilisation.

**B**y now the tornado had grown tall enough to be seen from outside its sphere of influence and slowly people were waking up to the need to flee.

It only took ten minutes to clog the roads of the inner city.

It only took fifteen minutes to clear them.

There was nothing left to show where they'd been in twenty minutes and the destruction went on as the vortex grew.

## *Distant Waters*

**I**n Hammercoft the perfect day quickly turned grey, Shadows raced across the site of the dig.

Haseem pulled his collar up as a cold wind whipped around his neck.

"Jeez Jan. I though you ordered good weather for today."

"The forecast was fine but look at the cloud cover now", she replied and turned to the sky. "My God Has, look at that!"

Above them clouds were forming rapidly and rushing headlong towards the city only to be replaced by others that formed behind them. The quickly changing patterns on the field gave a surrealistic atmosphere to the scene. The workers in the lake bed gazed up from the bottom of the pit as Haseem called to them to come up.

Reaching ground level they stood and stared where he pointed to the eastern horizon.

There, just starting to show above the distant hills was the top of the funnel, sucking up the cloudscape while beneath it the landscape shimmered and wobbled before their eyes.

As they watched, the vortex shot upward until the top was out of view above the clouds. It had reached a critical mass and everything started happening in triple time.

**B**eneath their feet, Jan and Has could feel the earth begin to move. As it vibrated, the soil and grass started to crawl eastward. They ran to the knoll for a better view and began to climb. Boulders rained down the sides as they scrambled for the top.

Jan reached the summit a second or so behind Has to see him whisked off into the distance.

There was a short scream and something heavy struck her in the back, knocking her to the ground. Scrambling with her fingers she clutched at a half buried rock and fought to resist the pull.

Whatever hit her slid off down wind and Jan saw a woman's hand go by.

She glimpsed an engagement ring. It was Kamryn's.

Jan's fingers began to slip and tears filled her eyes.

"Christ Ben, what have you done?", she screamed at the sky as she finally let go, following her scream as it was whipped away in the wind.

In Stanport, Rowan and Jack packed up their rods and retreated to the pub.

The sea had come up rough all of a sudden and the waves crashing against the quay precluded more fishing. Jack pulled a couple of pints and they wandered over to the window.

"She's a wild sea Jack."

"Aye, Rowan and a high wind. If it keeps rising the surf will broach the seawall come high tide. I'll have to sandbag the door if it doesn't die down soon."

There was a loud crash in the back yard. Jack ran through the bar and into the yard. Beer crates were scattered up against the back wall. He began restacking them. This time not so high.

As he placed the last crate on the top of the stack he noticed the sky beyond, above the ridge. It was boiling.

"Hey Ro'. Come here."

"What?"

"Look at that. You ever seen that before?"

"Not in all my ninety four years."

"So that's how old you are you old bastard. Real weird isn't it?"

"I wonder what it is. Looks like something big's happening over East. Might go up and take a look. You want to come?"

"You got to be joking. I can't keep up with you. How do you do it?"

"Exercise and good whisky. You know about the whisky. It's kept you in business these past years. Anyway I'm off. I'll see you a bit later."

"Be careful in this wind, Ro."

"I can look after meself. 'Bye" and he pulled his coat tight around his old frame as he started up the lane to the road.

Jack turned back inside and went to check the sea again. It was still rising. He walked across the street and eyed off the height of the tide between breakers. Despite his best efforts, he ended up soaked.

Standing with his back to the water, the wind tearing at his dripping clothes he stared up to where McPherson was starting up the road. He could clearly see the old man's trouser legs flapping furiously in front of him. 'Those old bones', he thought. 'Will they ever stop?'

Jack glanced back at the sea just in time to see a clutch of waterspouts rush into the bay from the open sea.

As they passed along the southern shoreline, the lighthouse disappeared behind a wall of water and spray. When they cleared the point, he could see a trail of damage on the rocks and there, wedged through the glass of the light room, was a boat. Or more precisely the remains of a boat and from the colour it looked like it was Gregson's, one of the few local fishermen.

He cast his eyes around the bay looking for a sign of Gregson among the waves, but no luck.

**A** roar overhead signalled the arrival of a gust that tore round the hills flinging anything not tied down into the streets and around the cottages. Doors and windows slammed, accompanied by the sound of breaking glass.

Jack looked up at the road. Rowan was gone.

On the bare tarmac he had been exposed to the full force of the blast and his little body had simply been wiped from the face of the hill.

Things were beginning to look serious.

Jack ran inside barely missing a serious head injury as the sign board came off its hinges and smashed through the parlour window. He found Lucy in the kitchen.

"McPherson's missing on the hill. I'm going to look for him. Grab the sign board, it's in the parlour, go up to the linen cupboard, cover the skylight with it and lock yourself in. I think it's going to get worse."

"Be careful love."

"I will."

Unfortunately all the care in the world couldn't help Jack Arrow. Half way up the road the cauldron spilled over the ridge and onto the town.

Before he was sucked into the maelstrom, he saw the cottages explode as the contents burst out. Luckily he had no time to recognise his wife's distorted body as it flew past, before he joined her in the race to oblivion.

**F**ar to the rear of flight CA001, the horizon began to glow. Lightning bolts flashed constantly beneath the Northern Lights.

Hamish scanned the screens.

"Jacques. We've run into a bit of head wind. Port 20. One hundred clicks and rising."

"Better keep an eye on it. Watch the fuel too. I'll try for a met report." This wasn't in the forecast when he filed his flight plan. All his efforts to make contact met with the same result as his co-pilot in his earlier attempts.

"Thank Christ for GPS", he said as he gave up trying. "We'd be right up the creek. I can't raise anyone.! How's the fuel situation?"

"Dropping rapidly. I calculate the way point is about 10 minutes away. If the wind doesn't drop by then, we should turn her around if we want any margin of safety and if it gets any stronger, we won't have to turn around. We'll be blown back whether we like it or not."

"Ok. Give me a three minute warning. I'll be back in a minute" and he left the cockpit. He was starting to get the jitters.

## ***Box Seats***

**M**eanwhile at the International Hurricane Centre all hell was breaking loose.

Reports cascaded from the printers and the phones were running hot. Something big was developing over the UK and fast.

Warren called up the latest satellite images of Europe.

There it was. A tight swirl of cloud surrounded by radial bands that reached as far west as Iceland and to Berlin in the East.

The clouds were being sucked in so fast that they barely had time to begin rotation.

This was no ordinary hurricane. It was a monster and it had developed within one orbit. That was unheard of.

He called up the UK Meteorological Office in London. He needed a Hunter to pierce that cloud and see what was going on.

The phone squealed at him. He tried again. Same result.

Three more numbers failed to contact any of the branches in Southern England. They all responded with a squeal.

"Squealed? What do you mean squealed?"

"Here listen."

"This reminds me of that old film, 'Failsafe'. When they dropped the bomb on Moscow it went just like that."

"Come off it. Must be a fault in the transatlantic link. Get on the email pronto and tell them to get a Hunter up there if they haven't already."

Two minutes later came the reply, 'Unable to locate that server'. "Shit! What's going on. Get Colonel Branton on the line. I want to know what's happening over there."

As the call connected, "Colonel, have you got contact with your bases in England? Have you talked to them lately? Can you tell me what's going on over there, we've got a massive system developing at a record rate over southern England and I can't get through to British Met."

The colonel's voice sounded worried. "We were about to ask you. We had a call about twenty minutes ago reporting a missing flight of Harriers in extreme weather conditions. Halfway through the call we lost the line. We've been trying to make contact ever since."

"Ok, I'll have to try NASA. See if the ISS has any new data. Let me know if you get through again." He hung up and speed dialed the Space Station mission control.

"Hi George. You're guys been watching the weather over England in the last hour or so? ...No. Well can you get them onto it. I need live pictures of a big system developing there... No, now George! I need them now! Our bird's passing out of range... Pardon? ...You'll see why when they come through. Thanks, much appreciated. I'll be in touch."

**I**n the Earth Monitoring Module on the ISS, Cat floated down to the camera bay and flicked on a bank of cameras. These were the high definition digital video units reserved for events of major interest.

She drifted over to the window as the eastern Atlantic appeared over the horizon. Beneath her spread vast streamers of cloud thousands of miles long, all converging on a black pillar that writhed and twisted from the top of system.

Around it the star patterns were warped and buckled appearing to fold in toward the blackness that disappeared into the void of space toward the Sun overhead. From this side of the station she couldn't tell how far it sent.

Looking at the Van Allen monitor she gasped involuntarily at the sight of the shower of cosmic particles that was pouring into the storm. The very structure of the Earth's protective field had been punctured by the black pillar.

Passing through the core of the station, Cat grabbed her colleagues and they floated across to the outer arm. There through the portal they could see the star field distortions that showed the vortex reaching for the solar source. Beyond the glare shields the Sun's surface swirled and flowed as always, except that in one small region a whirlpool of fire was coalescing around a massive Sunspot. Despite the carefully controlled environment, the crew shivered with a feeling of dread.

Behind them the constant chatter of radio traffic crackled and began breaking up as they moved further from Mission Control and closer to the storm. The brief window of contact had been long enough however for their images to give Warren a good look at the beast and he was scared.

The Hurricane Centre's analytical computers hummed inaudibly extracting data from the pictures and sensor readings.

Wind speeds:

Eye - unobtainable

Eye Wall - 500mph

System edge - 200mph

Unbelievable figures and the visible effects weren't the half of it. The non-visible light scans were maxing out everywhere.

Whatever this was it wasn't a hurricane in the normal sense of the word. Even the terminology seemed wrong but this thing looked familiar, though not from photos in the Centre's files.

'What was it? Something commonplace but somehow not quite real.' That didn't look like the wall of a hurricane's eye. It was more like a... an.... Event Horizon!

Warren had seen Sci-Fi movies and documentaries about black holes. Sure they were only computer models, but this was behaving exactly like one, except it was long and thin. A Black Funnel!

He lifted the phone again. Branton was on the other end almost before it rang.

"Chuck, you've got to get your men out of there as fast as possible. It's probably too late already."

"Why? What is it? and don't call me Chuck."

"Ok, ok. You're not going to believe this but I'm pretty sure that's not a hurricane over the U.K. It's a black hole, or rather a black funnel and it's growing fast."

"You what?"

"Look at your screen. I'm sending the ISS images now...."

There was a few seconds silence and Branton spoke.

"Holy mother...! What.. Where'd that thing come from?"

"Don't ask me, but right now I don't care. You'll be the first to know if we live to find out, now get moving and pull your forces out before they're all sucked into the damn thing!" and he hung up.

Picking up a sheaf of faxes and print outs Warren flicked through them in case he'd missed something important. The last and most recent one was from the Orbiting Solar Observatory project. The OSO had detected a massive plume reaching out from the Sun towards Earth. They were issuing a Solar Flare alert like never before. The prediction was for almost total radio blackout of the Earth for a period of up to two days.

It's got to be connected he thought but there was something to take care of first.

"Guys, guys. Everyone into the conference room, stat."

"Stat. Where'd you get that from."

"Too much TV I'd say. I knew he wasn't working all those late shifts..."

"Quiet please, please... I've some important news. I know you've all been watching this system over the U.K. well it seems it's not a regular Hurricane at all. We think it's a black hole and it's still expanding. Last I saw, the tendrils were just reaching New Foundland. Unless one of you here is an astrophysicist I don't think there's much we can do. I'll stay here with Martin and Sandy to man the phones, but any of the rest of you who want to, can go home to your families. I think it's going to reach here soon. There's not much else you can do at the moment but batten down your houses and wait. Keep in touch in case we need you back. Right, Sandy, Martin. Sorry, but I need you here" and they headed for the phones.

## *Wings of Fear*

"This is Charlie Alpha Zero Zero One calling. Respond please. Charlie Alpha Zero Zero One bound for Vancouver. Respond please. Anyone? We are returning to Heathrow due to headwinds. Please advise London traffic control. Radio reception negative. Repeat we are returning to Heathrow. This is Canadair Charlie Alpha Zero Zero One. Please respond..."

No luck Jacques."

"Well we'll just have to go blind. We'll get through to them closer to London no doubt. Bring her 'round."

The shadows on the instrument panels swung back across the rear wall as they made a one eighty degree turn. The air speed indicator leapt up the scale as they were caught by the tailwind.

"What the hell's that?" It was Hamish as he sighted the vortex towering up from the eastern horizon.

"I think we made the wrong decision Captain."

"Mais oui, mon ami. Certainment." In his astonishment Jacques reverted to the language of his childhood in Quebec.

Quickly coming to his senses he ordered the co-pilot to relinquish the controls and he took over.

"I don't like the look of that. I think we better head for the NATO base in Greenland... I guess we found out why the radio doesn't work." And he gently tried to coax the big aircraft around again, but to no avail. Applying more pressure to the yoke he tried again. Still no luck so he called on Hamish to assist. With the two of them fighting the controls the nose came round a few degrees but the plane just slewed sideways across the sky, still heading east.

"Right, we'll try reprogramming the autopilot to help pull us round."

With the computer work done, they tried again to alter course but the effect was even less noticeable than before. Every minute their speed was climbing.

Jacques throttled back the engines.

"I don't like to give up, but I'm running out of ideas here. What about you?"

"Negative."

"I suppose I'd better explain to the passengers. They'll have seen it all through the windows."

"What are you going to tell them?"

"I don't know, let me think."

He was still thinking when windshear tore the wings off. The outboard port engine slammed into the first class cabin spraying kerosene everywhere.

Immediately electrical sparks ignited the fuel which exploded in a huge fire ball flaring out ahead of the plane.

Weakened by the heat of the blaze, the nose broke off, spinning out of sight.

Marta and Arti stared wide eyed into emptiness for a split second before being catapulted out into the storm with the rest of the passengers.

No one screamed.

No one survived long enough for that.

The wreckage disappeared into the dark still headed east.

**I**n the oval office, calls to Downing Street, Paris and Berlin went unanswered.

Moscow reported rapidly deteriorating weather and outside the president's window, the clouds above Pennsylvania Avenue were rushing frantically eastward.

"Mr. President, the chopper's arrived. Time to go. Norad's expecting us."

"Fine, fine. Is everyone taken care of?"

"Yes sir, the evacuation's under way."

"Rising into the air the presidential helicopter struggled to maintain station before turning and heading for where Air force One waited for it's number one passenger.

Behind it a small squadron of other choppers took turns at lifting off members of the senior staff.

The flight to the air base was a roller coaster ride. Winds battered the craft violently from side to side while in the East thunderstorms could be seen blanketing the horizon. While the weather rushed eastward, these storms were developing westward a sure sign that the system was expanding as it sucked up energy from the atmosphere.

Finally all the staff were buckled into their seats and the jumbo taxied out for lift off. Air forces one was renowned for the smoothness of its takeoffs, but that wasn't going to be the way of it today.

As the Captain opened the throttles, the wind speed outside increased rapidly and by the time the big plane was through half it's takeoff run, it was airborne.

Under the pressure of the storm, the nose rose violently, exposing the underbelly of the aircraft to the full force of the gale. The wings stalled and driven by the windstorm, the plane slide backwards onto the runway, crashing on its tail and flipping over on its roof.

This wasn't the first, nor the last plane to be snatched away in a ball of flame.

All around it, trees and buildings were being torn from the ground.

Whole fighter wings, parked along the taxi ways, flipped like dominoes into each other as a fireball ripped along the line. Hangers, plucked from their foundations, collapsed briefly before the wreckage cart wheeled across the base and into the air, the sheer quantity of debris masking the number of people torn from their shelters and thrown to wind.

## ***Finger of Fate***

**F**ar above the turmoil and destruction, a feeling of entrapment was creeping over Cat and the ISS crew.

On one hand, on the surface below, they could see fiery cracks radiating from the funnel. The ground was literally breaking up and the magma that burst violently from the fractures showed only briefly before being whisked into the vortex.

With every minute the flaming chasms spread further.

Steam clouds exploded from the ocean where they opened up the seabed. Everything was happening on an unheard of scale giving the impression that the Earth's mantle was tearing apart.

On the other hand, one look at the Sun showed a long finger of fire reaching out toward them along the path of the funnel.

Viewing it end on as they were, they had no real idea how close it had come, however its intense activity could be seen in the whirlpool of flame that outlined the vortex as it swirled into the void.

"Enterprise to ISS. This STS 251, We're approaching rendezvous. Do you read?"

"Roger 251 we read you. Thought we'd lost you for a while there. How's your ground coms?"

"Negative on that. Are we glad to see you. Seems like all hell's broken loose down there."

"Sure looks like from here. Come on in, we're ready for you."

Before long the shuttle had docked and the new crew joined the others in the space station who were staring at the monitors.

"Holy shit, Cat. What is it? I didn't realise it was this bad. We've been a bit preoccupied on the way up with the loss of coms and all."

"We had a couple of messages from Hurricane Centre and OSO Mission Control. Before they disappeared in the static I heard something about a Black Hole and Dimensional Fractoids whatever they are. We can't raise them now and by the look of it I'm not sure we ever will again. Take a look at North America. It's starting to show fire lines too."

"You mean we're going to be stranded up here?"

"We'll see I guess. Looks like there won't be any Progress rockets from Russia for while anyway. The whole region around Baikonur is patterned with fractures, assuming that's what they are."

"Don't sound so calm girl. This is... it's unbelievable... incredible... It's Armageddon!"

"Now don't go getting all religious on me. You're trained for emergencies. Lock into your training Frank. Deep breathe or meditate or something. We need clear thinking right now, not panic and you're meant to be in charge, so calm down and check that solar monitor for me. Any sign of how far away it is?"

Cmdr James took a deep breath, relaxed slightly and replied;

"Can't tell. Readings are all off the clock, but I don't think it'll be long before it arrives. What's our position like?"

"We're due over the UK, or what's left of it, in about two hours."

"Well I think we're on a collision course then."

"Ok, what options have we got... Sit here and wait, or leave."

"The Shuttle's ceramic tiles would be a whole lot more effective protection than this tin can. How about we make a run for it?"

"I'm in, but will we have enough fuel to get back?" Cat said.

"We'll worry about that if we survive. Right now our chances aren't looking too hot on that. I'm sure you agree. One last thing, have you tried getting hold of the Mars Mission. They're at about

ninety degrees just now. They should be able to see where the things got to."

"Sorry, we tried. No response. The Van Allen belt's gone haywire and cosmic particles are causing havoc with coms. We only heard you because you were so close... The Northern Lights must be spectacular tonight", she said, thinking out loud.

Ever since her father had showed her the Aurora as a girl, the words Cosmic Particles and Northern Lights had been inextricably linked in her head.

"Earth to Cat... come back to me girl. Get the crew suited up. We're leaving."

Thousands of metres below what was once London the Mourning Bell glowed white hot. The runaway reaction in the amplifier burned on, as the cause of the destruction sank deeper into the planet, trembling as it went. Above it, the demon it had spawned, writhed as if in pain. In response a pained look crossed Frank's face. "Look at that. There's no predicting where it'll go next."

He fired the manoeuvring rockets and the shuttle moved out from the space station. As it drifted into a higher orbit it appeared to slow down but this was just an illusion as the ISS pulled away ahead, closer and closer to the vortex.

The glow coming through the cockpit windows grew noticeably by the minute.

"How's it going Lee?" he called to the mission specialist at the rear science station. Looking out past the cargo bay doors, Lee replied, "Time to shut her up Commander. It's almost here" and he locked the bay doors down as fast as he could, with the supplies and new crew module once destined for the ISS, still snugly fixed in place. He flicked the remote monitor link to view the event from the cameras on the station.

**W**ithin minutes the station had disappeared from sight ahead and below them, but watching on the link the shuttle crew could see the funnel looming larger and larger on the screens. Out the windows the solar flare seemed close at hand now. The life of the Space Station was numbered in seconds.

Frank turned the shuttle so the bottom was facing the danger. He knew the tiles underneath would stand more than those on top.

Despite their new orbit they were still being drawn towards the hole.

"Buckle up folks, we're taking a ride."

He quickly scanned his crew and checked with the others in the cargo bay. Everyone was secure.

"Ok. Hold on" and he fired the main engines.

There was a kick in the back and a long strong pressure. Frank almost ran the tanks dry before shutting them down.

"Now pray I've got it right everyone."

Cat looked out ahead. They were seemingly headed straight for the funnel.

Suddenly the stars flicked off as the Sun filters kicked in to protect their eyes.

"Visors down quick!" and the flare flashed across their path.

On the monitor link screen objects in the station screamed down the length of the room, and out through the far wall. Equipment modules wrenched themselves free from the bulkheads and smashed their way out the holes through which solar panels, conduits and assorted other external gear could be seen speeding to their destruction.

The scene jolted violently and went black.

If Cat had been able to look, she would have seen a small ball of fire as the station stretched to infinity and merged with the flare but she was too busy shielding her eyes with her hands. Her visor had jammed.

Frank fire the manoeuvring rockets again briefly changing their attitude again and they plunged on into the fire, or so it seemed. Although she couldn't see the Earth beneath her, Cat felt the shuttle accelerating rapidly. The craft shuddered violently. Outside, the tiles glowed brilliantly with the friction as they whipped around the axis of the funnel.

Cmdr James had taken a huge risk in an attempt to slingshot the Enterprize

Through the edge of the vortex and away from the destruction beneath them.

There was a sound like rain on the hull. Lee crossed his fingers and started chanting a mantra from his childhood days then gradually the glare dimmed behind Cat's fingers.

She looked out on the stars again.

Gases still rushed past, illuminated by the fire, but it seemed to be receding behind them. They were free of its grip!

"Everyone alright?" A chorus of confirmation came in reply.  
"Good. Lee, see if you can get a look at what's happening. The skin should be cool enough to open the doors now."  
As the roof of the cargo bay folded outward the scene beyond the tail fin took some comprehending.  
The Earth's crust had fractured into half a dozen pieces and was heaving under the pull of the funnel.  
As they watched, great slabs of the planet folded up disintegrating as they fell into the hole. Fragments from their collisions flew off into space, only to circle slowly back and into the maws of the beast.  
The effect was so overwhelming that the crew could not begin to comprehend that amongst the devastation, were the bodies of 7 billion people. From the silence of space, destruction on this scale seemed to proceed in slow motion and the human element was swamped by the enormity of it all.  
STS251 sped on away from the grip of the world that give birth to it, searching ahead for a tiny spark in the vacuum.

## ***Tongue of Fire***

**S**everal million kilometres away, enroute to Mars, a small band of men and women stared at the image of the Sun on their monitors. The tongue of fire had nearly reached the Earth.

"It'll be over by now, one way or the other. That light's about twelve minutes old by the time it gets here."

Behind him, sobs could be heard. They all knew that no-one would survive that lick of flame.

From that distance, the earth was little more than a small steady light against the backdrop of stars and as they watched, the flame advanced relentlessly on the tiny dot.

Crew member's thoughts turned to family and friends left behind in safety as they risked everything in an venture to establish a colony on Mars. Now the roles were reversed.

The light wavered, sparkled briefly and faded as the flare struck home.

Through his telescope, the resident astrophysicist watched in shock as the world imploded.

The tongue of fire curled at the end, folded back on itself and began to withdraw.

"We're alone. Utterly alone..." and he collapsed in his seat, the straps holding his unconscious body from floating away. For some time shock ruled The Messenger. No one moved or said anything. Periodically, crying could be heard and the drops of liquid drifted up against the window, fragmenting and scattering the sunlight in glorious rainbows across the room. Their beauty was lost on the mourning crew. Then, weakly at first, but quickly gaining strength, came a small voice from the radio. "This is STS251 calling The Messenger. Mars One, come in....."

## ***Touch not the Cat***

**O**n the third planet from the sun, a few degrees from the pole, sat a small transmitter, beeping once a second, a blue light flashing in sync with the signal.

Through a crack in the reactor casing, radiation leaked out onto the Martian soil. An insect-like creature probed at it with a tendril.

Would it enter and risk the unknown perils of the machine, or would it leave the object in peace, waiting patiently for the arrival of a handful of strange beings, the last of a long line of curious cats.

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*A tale of events that follow
the falling of a star, this story
spans the centuries from the
middle ages to the near future.
Adventure, love, honour and
disaster weave through the plot
in an ever changing pattern.*

*Gripping, Sensitive, Exciting,
Surprising, Unbelievable
All these words could be applied
to this mini epic...*

*Some quotes:
'The finest novel yet from this
author'
'Infinite potential'*