

Head, Hand and Heart

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Thanks to my beta-reader “fredbasset” (from livejournal).

Chapter 1

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A Primeval Short Story

Note This story presumes fredbassett's Primeval stories as background. In particular it assumes that Stephen Hart and Captain Ryan were a couple and that everyone was aware of this fact.

1.1 Head

"Drive a bit faster, can't you?"

"That was a blind summit. You may choose to ignore concepts like stopping distance Cutter, but I make a point of paying attention to that sort of fiddling detail."

"At this rate we'll still be on this damn road come dark. I dread to think what speed you'll go then."

Lester sighed. "I'm doing 45. If anything that's on the fast side for this road. We'll arrive in plenty of time. I'm beginning to regret offering you a lift from the airport."

"Why *did* you offer me a lift, by the way?"

"Saves the expense of a second hire car. It certainly wasn't for the joy of your company. All you've done is sleep and complain about my driving for the past 100 miles."

"Aye well, you weren't up all night hunting a Gorgonopsid."

"Ah yes! Another good reason not to let you drive yourself."

“Why are you here, Lester? You don’t do fieldwork. And why did we leave the others behind?”

“They had other engagements. We can always call them if there turns out to be something in these reports.”

“And you are here because?”

“Maybe I have a soft spot for the Highlands and Islands?”

Cutter snorted. “Pigs might fly.”

Lester glanced in his direction, approximated a shrug, and then turned his attention back to the single-track road.

“Come on, Lester, something’s going on. Tell me what it is.”

“It took you a while to notice.”

“I was only half awake, but now I’m *properly* awake I can tell that you’re up to something.”

“Yes, I am ‘up to something’ as you put it. Unfortunately I’m not at liberty to tell you what. You are just going to have to live with the suspense.”

“I’m not going to be much use if I don’t know what’s going on.”

“I believe part of the point of the exercise is to see if you can work out what’s going on. I have supreme confidence that you’ll excel yourself.”

“I don’t like being kept in the dark, Lester.”

“Believe me, I am no happier about this than you are.”

Cutter reached into the side pocket of the car and extracted a file. He flicked through the papers and photographs it contained.

“I take it that all this is a cover then?”

“No, those reports are entirely genuine.” Lester glanced sideways. “Don’t look at me like that, Cutter. The wind might change, if nothing else.”

The sun was just setting when they pulled into the car park of the Kilchoan House Hotel.

After checking in, Nick found himself waiting for Lester in the bar. He’d simply dumped his bags on the bed in his room. He suspected Lester was attending to fiddling details, like unpacking.

As he sipped his beer he recalled another hotel lounge in another world. Suddenly he had the most overwhelming sense of her perfume.

“Excuse me.”

Her hand on his shoulder. The taste of cheap wine on his lips.

“Excuse me!”

He blinked suddenly at Lester's voice. The scent was gone. He could taste nothing except 80/-. Lester was staring at him, looking puzzled.

"What's the plan?" he asked, trying to cover for his sudden disorientation.

Lester blinked. "You're the creature expert, Cutter. I was rather hoping you would have one."

Nick picked up his drink and carried it to a side table, slightly more private than the bar. "Well, I doubt that whatever the locals have been seeing is really a Nuckelavee."

"Fairy tale monsters would certainly be a first." Lester didn't sit but returned to the bar, buying a beer of his own. Nick leaned back in the corner seat, still shaken by the intensity of the memory he'd just had. Lester returned to the table and sat across from him, carrying menus.

"I've told them we want dinner. We can order here and they'll call us through when it's ready."

Nick glanced over the menu. "I'll have the soup, followed by scampi." Lester shrugged then headed back to the bar. Nick could hear him ordering scallops and Scottish salmon. He finished his drink and then waggled the empty glass at Lester, who rather visibly sighed but ordered another.

"So, what do you think we have?" Lester asked, returning to the table.

Nick shrugged. "Could be anything. Anything large anyway. The reports make it sound like a large herbivore."

"Only with teeth."

"No one's been hurt. People could be imagining the teeth."

"We can live in hope."

"Still, large herbivores can be dangerous. More dangerous than carnivores in many ways."

"Ever cheerful and optimistic, Cutter." Lester deadpanned.

"We still don't know it's anything. Connor's detector hasn't registered a signal."

"It didn't pick up the Smilodon."

"Yes but that had been found as a cub and raised by someone."

Lester looked across at him eloquently.

Nick started. "You think someone's keeping the thing?"

Lester shrugged. "That's what we're here to find out."

Nick looked up to see a waiter signalling to them from the doorway. He stood up, nodding in the man's direction. Lester followed him to the dining room. They sat in silence over the starters. It wasn't necessarily an awkward silence, they simply didn't have a lot to say to each other outside work.

“Someone needs to talk to the people in the reports,” Nick said at last. Lester looked up from his scallops, eyebrows raised. “You can canvas them, find out what they really saw. I’ll go along the beach, see if I can pick up a trail.”

“With all due respect, Cutter, I’d be happier if you weren’t gallivanting around on your own.”

Nick found himself smiling. Clearly Lester wasn’t any keener to talk to people than he was. Where was Jenny when they needed her? “Me? Gallivanting?”

“We’ll check the cliff path tomorrow. Together. We can canvas the locals later on.”

“I thought you said I was making the plan.”

“And an excellent one it is too.” Lester spared a weak smile for the waiter as he took away the dishes while Nick took the opportunity to order another drink.

“I’d go easy on that if I were you, Cutter.”

“This is only my third.”

Lester gave him a hard look.

“What?”

“I don’t recall you being much of a drinker.”

“Leave off, Lester. You never come out with us. How would you know?”

Lester looked hard at him again but dropped the subject.

Beyond Kilchoan the single-track road stopped at a turning circle, the rolling hillsides of Ardnamurchan on one side and the breakers of the Atlantic on the other. Beyond the road was a slight rise and a ruined croft. Standing at the turning circle you could see across the Sound to Mull.

Lester parked to one side of the circle. The boot of the car contained a tranquiliser gun which he gave to Nick, and two backpacks. Nick’s was hefty and contained basic camping equipment, on Lester’s insistence. Lester’s own was rather smaller. Nick decided not to comment.

There was a clifftop path from that point, marked on the maps, which would take them round the headland all the way to Ardnamurchan lighthouse. All the sightings had been on the rocky beaches either near the lighthouse or near Kilchoan. Of course there weren’t that many people to see anything in between the two.

As they set out, there was a light salty breeze blowing off the sea. Nick would have preferred to have been walking with Stephen, and not just because Stephen

was far more likely to pick up and follow a “Nuckelavee” trail than either him or Lester.

Your right hand man.

The words were so vivid that Nick glanced round in surprise. He half expected to find Stephen there, just behind them, the tone was so familiar.

“See something, Cutter?”

“No.” No, he couldn’t see anything. “Nothing.”

It was too early in the year for the heather to be in bloom, but large clumps of it grew either side of the sheep trail they followed, brushing against their ankles. The day remained clear and Nick found he was enjoying the walk, if not his taciturn companion.

After about half an hour, a woman appeared over the brow of an outcrop walking towards them. An oak tree grew on the ridge, a lone sentinel in the sheep cropped wilderness. She paused beneath it, one hand resting against the trunk; a young woman in combat fatigues wearing a backpack.

“Looks like we’re going to have company,” Cutter commented.

“No doubt as a result of your magnetic personality.”

They walked up to the tree, meeting the woman beneath its boughs. She was about Cutter’s height, strongly built with dark brown hair pulled up into a pony tail, a small heart-shaped tattoo visible on her neck. Nick noticed that she had a knife rather prominently strapped to one leg. Her face looked vaguely familiar, though he couldn’t place it. She leaned against the tree waiting for them.

“Hiya, Dad!”

Instinctively they both looked behind them. Then Nick found himself embraced in a hug.

“I think you may have got the wrong person,” he began.

“Nope,” she said confidently, “I just came through an anomaly. I’m from the future.”

“The future?” Nick looked helplessly across at Lester. At that moment a mobile rang. Lester began looking in his pockets, a small smile on his face, no doubt enjoying Nick’s discomfort.

“Connor,” he said, glancing at the display. “Hello? Yes, yes we know. Well I’m sorry I’ve deflated your moment of triumph. Yes, we’re investigating. We’ve no evidence anything dangerous has come through yet. No I don’t think there is any need for you to come up. Connor!”

“Here, give it me,” said Nick, disentangling himself from the girl. Lester glanced at him and clearly hesitated, his eyes on her. Then he handed Nick the phone, but with the tiniest shake of his head. Nick turned his back on him.

“Connor?”

Cutter?

“Yes, it’s me.”

What’s come through the anomaly? Lester said nothing dangerous. Can we come and see?

Nick looked back at Lester who stood with his hands in his pockets, wearing his best poker face. The girl was standing inside Nick’s personal space, close enough to hear Connor’s words. She mouthed something at him which looked distinctly like “He’s cute, but no.”

Nick frowned. “I’m not sure if we’ve got anything yet but it might be a good idea if you bring the rest of the team up here.”

Cool!

“If you’re doing that,” said Lester from where he stood, “you’d better tell them to bring the landrover and a large trailer.”

Nick nodded. “Connor?”

Still here

“Tell Abby it could be something large. Probably a large herbivore and we may need to move it over rough ground. Come prepared.”

A large herbivore?

“Yes”

That’s a bit dull isn’t it?

“You were the one who wanted to come.”

It’ll take us ages to drive up with a trailer. Tell you what! Maybe we can commission a jet!

“No.” Nick winced at the thought of Lester’s regular budget speech if he let Connor start chartering planes. “Just tell Abby, OK, and drive up if you have to. And tell Jenny there have been local sightings. She may need a cover story.”

Got it. See you soon.

“See you.”

Nick hung up. He looked around. “Where are we getting a phone signal from?” He’d left his own phone at the hotel, assuming it would be useless.

“Mull,” said Lester, pointing. “Reception’s good until we get out of sight of that hill. I suppose it would be too much to ask that we could wrap this all up before that happens?”

Wordlessly Nick passed him back the phone. Then, almost as one, they turned to the young woman in front of them.

“Now, who exactly are you?” asked Lester.

“Yamin Cutter,” she said. “Which I’d like to point out is a crap name.”

Nick blinked. "I can't imagine it's my fault."

"Probably not," she conceded.

"So, Miss Cutter," said Lester, "assuming we believe your story, what exactly are you doing here?"

"You said I'd be needed," she said brightly, smiling at him. "And you just sat there and glowered," she added to Nick.

Nick looked across at Lester. "You sent my daughter back through an anomaly!"

"Apparently she is needed. I don't suppose I gave any helpful hints about why?"

"No, you just said 'don't talk about the future' and 'don't tell anyone who your mother is' oh, and 'don't pass comment on who's around and who's not' "

"And what was I doing all this time?" Nick interrupted.

"Sulking mostly, far as I could tell."

"Sounds like you," said Lester, drily.

"Oh thanks. Why should we believe any of this?"

"You prefer the alternative?" asked Lester. "Some random person has found out about our activities, more pertinently worked out where you and I would be today, and furthermore thinks it's a good idea to pretend to be your daughter?"

"He's got a point," said Yamin.

"Well you would say that wouldn't you?" Nick retorted.

"Frankly," added Lester, a tight smile on his face, "I was expecting Helen. I'm pretty pleased with how things are working out."

"You were *expecting* Helen, and you didn't think to tell me?"

"I did think to tell you. I just thought the better of it moments later. Your temper is bad enough as it is."

Yamin opened her mouth as if to speak, caught Lester's eye and shut it again. Nick wondered if she'd been about to say "Who's Helen?" which would have been comforting in a way or "Don't take that tone about my mother," which would have been distinctly unsettling.

"So," he said slowly, "you're proposing we go along with this?"

"Yes," said Lester. He gestured almost chivalrously up the path inviting Yamin to take the lead.

With a cheeky grin that bought her face out in dimples, definitely nothing like Helen's at all, Yamin set off along the path. As he fell in beside Lester Nick said, "Let's just hope she's not taking advantage of your pleasure that she isn't Helen."

"As if anyone could take advantage of me."

"Point."

Suddenly Yamin stopped dead and rounded to face them.

“You still haven’t told me what’s going on.”

“We’re hunting mythical beasties,” said Nick.

“Cool! Which ones?”

Lester sighed. “I take it you get on with Connor.”

“I’m not supposed...”

“Then you shouldn’t have been mouthing comments about him when Nick was on the phone.”

“Connor’s cool, if old.”

Lester closed his eyes briefly. Nick saw he was taking a deep breath. “I’ll fill you in as we go,” he said.

An hour or so later, they were still following the cliff top. It had long ceased to be anything approximating a man made path and had become a series of sheep trails. All the sightings had been close to the sea; mostly by walkers but some by locals either in Kilchoan or at the lighthouse to which they were walking, so they kept as close to the cliff edge as possible. It came as something of a surprise, though, when they crested a rise to see before them a copse of slender ash trees unravaged by the sheep. They were closely planted but there was a small clearing visible in the centre. Even through the trees it was possible to see the rough hewn stone at their heart. Puzzled they entered the trees and came to a stop in the grove, the large standing stones stark and tall before them. Nick pulled out the Ordnance Survey map.

“These aren’t marked on here,” he commented.

“Let me look,” said Yamin, peering over his shoulder.

They studied the map with the aid of a compass for several minutes until both Nick and Yamin agreed with their location, but the map showed no ancient monuments.

“Well, it’s unusual,” said Nick at last, “but it’s not unknown for these maps to be inaccurate.”

Lester was studying his mobile phone. “I think this is where I turn back,” he said.

“What!” spluttered Nick in surprise.

“I’m out of range of that phone mast and I may need to co-ordinate with Mr. Temple or, preferably, Miss Lewis.”

“What if we need back-up?”

“You have your daughter with you now Professor, which you didn’t when you set out.” His eyes wandered to the knife at her hip. “She may well be of more use to you, should things get dangerous, than I would.”

“And what if she’s not my daughter?”

“In the past hour she’s completed three of your reminiscences for you; displayed a wide-ranging knowledge of paleontology; refused point blank to accept there is ever a justification for getting the army involved with anomalies and, obliquely, complained at length about some situation when I refused to let her chase through an anomaly on some damn fool errand to rescue a mammoth that had accidentally wandered into the Permian. She’s your daughter all right.”

“I have *not* mentioned anything about the future.”

“You and your father are many things. Subtle about grudges is not one of them.”

“That mammoth was injured, and imperilled the time lines”

“I refuse to have an argument about something I’ve not done yet.”

“OK, OK,” said Nick, “I’ll take her with me, but if it turns out she’s working for the Press on your head be it.”

“Very good!” said Lester, tucking the phone back in his pocket and heading back the way they had come.

“Oh, by the way,” he paused looking back at them. “I believe I’m allowed to give each of you a piece of advice at this point.”

“Really?” said Nick.

“Yes, really. Yamin, once you’ve passed those stones don’t eat anything you haven’t brought with you, and see if you can stop your father doing the same. Irritating as he is, I’d quite like him back at the end of this. Professor, I can’t pretend to understand the details of what is about to happen but I am given to believe that help should come from those you call for in need.”

With that he turned.

“Lester!” Nick shouted after him, “Lester, come back now. You can’t just leave it at that! What’s going on? It’s not just me you’re putting in danger now, it’s my daughter as well. Come back here!”

Lester studiously ignored him, walking away. Nick snorted and started to run after him, determined to bring him back. To his surprise Yamin quickly caught up with him.

“Leave it, Dad! He’s not going to tell you any more.”

“We’ll see about that.”

“Believe me, I spent the past week trying to weasel the details out of the both of you. It’s no use. We’ll just have to go between those stones and see what’s

going on.”

Nick scowled. “Is Lester passing himself notes through time?”

Yamin shrugged. “Obviously you’re not, so let’s assume he isn’t either. Come on.”

Unwillingly, Nick turned back and uneasily followed Yamin between the standing stones. Once through he paused to look around him. All looked the same. Why had he supposed otherwise? It wasn’t as if he has expected to fall into another world. The same over-cast Scottish coastline met his gaze as before. The ash trees on this side crowded together more closely but the way before them was still clear and easy. Heather scraped against their boots once more as they came out of the grove.

After lunch, a fog began to come down and visibility dropped to a few metres. It wrapped itself around them dulling their senses and stifling their voices. Atop another rise they saw a shallow slope which, probably, ran all the way down to the beach. A small burn cut down its centre. Hawthorn, just come into blossom, crowded about the bank, but on the far side all was blackened and withered. A metre wide track stretched out in both directions with the corpses of trees standing bare on the parched earth.

“The Nuckelavee’s breath withers crops,” said Yamin.

“It’s not a Nuckelavee.” Nick walked to the burnside and stared across the water. “I suppose, it could be the source of the legend somehow.” He frowned. It was hard to make sense of it, but it was just possible some large creature had survived long enough to encounter humans but had never been documented by naturalists.

“Want to know what I think?” offered Yamin.

“Do I have a choice?”

“No.”

“Go ahead then.”

“I think it’s a Nuckelavee.”

“It’s *not* a Nuckelavee.”

“Just for a moment Dad, assume that the otherworld exists.”

“The otherworld?”

“Fairyland.”

“Why are we having this conversation?”

“Just for a moment assume that the otherworld exists.”

“OK, OK, I’m assuming.”

“Good. Now Lester warned us about the food. It’s a classic part of fairy tales. You mustn’t eat food from the otherworld.”

“I’m still assuming.”

“We have tales of a Nuckelavee. Lester’s talking like he’s just stepped out of one of Granny Cutter’s tales. And there’s my knife, which Lester specifically insisted I bring with me.”

“What’s the significance of the knife?”

“It’s cold iron. You mentioned that fact when you gave it to me.”

“I gave you a knife?”

“For my sixteenth birthday. You’re quite an eccentric Dad you know.”

“I think you’ve been listening to too many of Granny Cutter’s tales.”

“You were always very insistent that I mind what Granny Cutter told me.”

“Fatherhood clearly sent me soft in the head.”

“Either Lester’s gone mad or he thinks this is the otherworld.”

“Nope. I’ve stopped assuming. It makes no sense. Come on, let’s cross this burn and look at that trackway.”

“Nazneen’s father is the chairman of a multi-national company.”

Nick, ignoring her, began carefully to cross a set of stepping stones.

“Last year he green-lit a project based on one of her ideas,” Yamin persisted.

“Did he now?”

“I’m just pointing out that some Dad’s pay attention to their children’s ideas.”

“I’m assuming Nazneen’s idea didn’t require her father to believe in fairies first.”

“I’m making more sense than you are at the moment.”

“How old are you?”

“Seventeen.”

“Well, irrespective of whether you’re my daughter or not. You are a lot younger than me and I’ve been studying zoology a lot longer than you have. There is no such thing as a Nuckelavee.”

A sound washed up from the beach towards them, as though the crash of the waves became temporarily amplified. They both stopped and turned.

“The Nuckelavee makes a sound like the roaring of the sea,” said Yamin, helpfully.

Nick looked at her. “Are we crossing this to examine the trackway or not?”

“Just saying.”

Nick knelt down on the other side. The grass looked like it had been burnt. Yamin knelt beside him.

“Acid perhaps,” she said.

“Maybe,” he conceded.

He looked up and down the track. “The beach or inland?”

Once again the magnified sound of crashing waves echoed up to them.

“The beach I think,” said Yamin.

They followed the trackway until the grass and trees gave way to a rocky shoreline. Nick felt the spray against his skin as the waves crashed on the shore. The slight wind seemed to pick up strength. Yamin’s pony tail whipped around her face. Looking up the beach Nick could see what looked like a horse and rider in the fog. He started towards it. Yamin caught his arm.

“What if that’s the Nuckelavee?”

“Then we’ll see what it is.”

“It’s coming towards us. Let’s wait here by the burn, or better still on the other side of the burn.”

“A Nuckelavee won’t cross running water right? You’re still taking this very literally.”

“Humour me.”

The burn widened out as it reached the beach and they waded across without much difficulty. Yamin drew her knife.

As the figure resolved itself out of the fog Nick could make out the horse’s body but it seemed bereft of a head. Like a centaur a man’s torso rose from its back. He began to make out details of its webbed hands and a vast misshapen head with a wide mouth. Cautiously he unslung the tranquiliser rifle.

“See,” said Yamin.

“I see it,” Nick shook his head, “but I don’t believe it.”

The Nuckelavee, or whatever it was, opened its mouth and roared, a sound like the waves on the shore washed over them. Nick could see a smoky haze drift from its mouth and a faint acrid smell tinted the air.

“OK,” he said, “let’s back away cautiously.” He slipped off the safety.

They moved away from the burn. Nick hoped that it really wouldn’t cross running water. He raised the gun, sighting on the creature. It roared again. This time Nick choked as burning fumes filled his lungs. Eyes watering he sighted down the rifle and shot the creature. It was a good shot into its hind quarters, but the dart just bounced off onto the shore.

“Cold iron,” said Yamin, but her voice sounded far off, lost in a low singing that rang in his ears.

*If from the sea it comes, dank fog and spray
About its form. If beast both fierce and fell,
O’er turns your plans and all your efforts fail,
Call from your heart, for elf-shot stills the limbs*

*And binds the foe. Her hand may loose the spell
if so your heart desires and make all well.*

Nick blinked. “Oh very useful,” he said to no one in particular. He slipped the safety back on and slung the rifle over his shoulder. “I suggest we get out of here.”

“It won’t cross running water.”

“A) You don’t know that and B) even if it doesn’t, Nuckelavees have no problem with the sea, as I recall.”

Yamin glanced at the Atlantic only a handful of metres from where they stood.

“Point taken.”

They began to head inland. Glancing back, Nick saw the creature veer into the sea. Not good at all. They scrambled back up the side of the burn, pushing between the hawthorn bushes, scattering white flowers in a trail behind them.

Before long they heard galloping hooves.

“Keep it distracted,” said Yamin, and ducked behind a rock brandishing her knife.

“Dear Lord”, thought Nick, but there was no opportunity to argue. He looked back once more, he could just make out its shape in the fog, getting closer rapidly. He carried on for several hundred yards then turned, anxious to see what happened. As the Nuckelavee passed her rock, Yamin leapt out. She was obviously attempting to get up on its back behind its torso. Nick winced, not as easy as it looked in the movies, especially with a knife in one hand. The Nuckelavee reared and turned. Yamin got knocked sideways into the burn. Nick began running towards them again, no clear idea in his head of what he could accomplish but there had to be something he could do. Grab the knife perhaps that had fallen clear? But he was going to be too late. He was too far away.

1.2 Hand

He was going to be too late. He was too far away. If he had been there he could have reached out his hands. If he had had back up support, Stephen, his right hand man, Ryan, anyone, placed among the other boulders by the burn.

His gaze was fixated on the knife so he hardly saw anything else. But there was a flash of denim; a hand on the knife; and a figure was up behind the Nuckelavee as Yamin had intended. Meanwhile a second figure, in black, was hip deep in the burn dragging Yamin out to the safety of the other side.

The Nuckelavee bucked and roared, fumes billowing over the figures in the water. The man in black choked while the other man clung on to the creature's back. Nick was still running towards them hardly believing what he was seeing. The man in black straightened up, still coughing and unslung an automatic weapon from his back. He let it off into the air. The denim clad man lost his grip, falling off the back of the Nuckelavee, but Nick could see it was bleeding from its shoulder. The moment he had a clear shot the other stopped firing into the air and trained his gun on the creature. The bullets seemed to have little effect but, dismayed perhaps by the opposition, the creature turned and fled back towards the sea.

Nick ran up to the group. The figure in denim turned round. He had recognised him already, had recognised the way he and the man in black worked together. He just hadn't believed it.

"Stephen!"

"Hello, Nick."

He glanced over at the other, who was professionally checking over Yamin's unconscious figure.

"Ryan?" Ryan looked up and nodded. "But how?"

"Search me," Stephen shrugged eloquently. "Last thing I remember was being eaten."

Nick winced. Stephen turned his back on him and leapt across the burn to join the others.

"She's breathing normally," Ryan reported. "Hopefully it's just a concussion." He didn't get a chance to say anything further because Stephen had grabbed him and was kissing him.

"Whoa there, lover," Ryan grinned as he pushed him away. "What's the big occasion?"

Stephen said something incoherent. Nick, following Stephen across the burn, could just about make out the words "missed you" and "dead". Ryan was looking confused. Nick knelt down beside Yamin and pushed her hair away from her face. She seemed terribly pale, but there was no visible bleeding.

"Who is she?" asked Ryan, watching his movements.

"Her name is Yamin. My daughter, so she says."

"Your daughter?" queried Stephen. "You sly devil!"

"So she *says*," Nick repeated with emphasis. "She says she came through an anomaly and was sent by myself and Lester."

"Any idea why?" asked Ryan.

Nick shook his head. He sat back on his haunches, surveying the two dead men in front of him.

“She thinks we’re in the otherworld.”

Stephen snorted and tossed his head.

Nick began to repeat Yamin’s theories but Ryan cut him off.

“Later,” he said, “she’s wet and I want to get her dry and warm as quickly as possible.”

They rooted through her pack, thankful to find spare clothing.

“I can’t undress my own daughter,” objected Nick.

“I can,” said Ryan, as practical as ever, as he worked to pull off her trousers. “It’ll keep her alive.”

“He’s got a point,” said Stephen.

In the end Nick held her up against his body, while Stephen and Ryan changed her soaking trousers. They’d just finished and were laying her down again when she was violently sick all over Nick.

“Sorry Dad,” she whispered.

“Doesn’t matter, at least you’re conscious,” Nick took off his ruined jacket. “I’ve a spare waterproof.”

“Wash the jacket and keep it,” said Ryan. “We may be able to dry it out and we may need all the spare clothing we can get.”

At that point Yamin was sick again. Nick found himself, in his shirt selves, his ruined jacket discarded, holding her as she retched into the burn.

“I’ve got a splitting headache,” she whimpered when the heaving had died down a bit.

“Right, we have to move,” said Ryan. “We’ve stayed here too long already. That thing may come back and I want to be somewhere easier to defend.”

Yamin straightened up, and then doubled over, retching again.

“At least there’s nothing left to come out,” pointed out Stephen, although he looked worried. Yamin was clearly going to be difficult to move.

“Try not to move too fast,” advised Nick. Slowly, Yamin stood up. There was no retching but she staggered as she took a step towards them. Nick caught hold of her to keep her upright, glancing anxiously at Ryan and Stephen.

“We move,” said Ryan. “Best we can.”

They set off following him away from the burn and back inland. Nick had his arm round Yamin, holding her up. She leaned into him and said very little. When he spoke to her, he had to work to gain her attention which seemed to be wandering.

“I’m going to kill Lester for this when I get my hands on him,” growled Nick.

“I thought you weren’t convinced she was your daughter,” said Stephen.

Nick glared at him.

They walked in angry silence for a minute.

“Tell me about this otherworld hypothesis then,” said Stephen, eventually.

“I wouldn’t mind an explanation either,” said Ryan. He glanced back at them. “Last thing I remember is camping in the Permian. From what’s already been said, I take it I didn’t survive.”

Nick swallowed. “No. There was a second predator that followed us back through the anomaly.”

Ryan nodded and then turned to face forwards once more. Nick figured he was listening attentively though, as he outlined what had happened and Yamin’s theories.

“So Lester knows more than he is letting on, as usual,” said Stephen at last.

“Lester wasn’t behind the conspiracy.” Nick answered a different question. “It was Leek and Helen.”

“I’d rather grasped Helen was involved.” Stephen’s tone was clipped and his face stony. He didn’t look at Cutter.

“Stephen, I’m sorry.”

“About what?”

“I should have told you Leek was behind the conspiracy as soon as I found out. I’m sorry I didn’t.”

Stephen nodded, but the lines of tension and anger, so unusual in Stephen but so common in his last weeks, remained.

“So,” said Ryan into the silence, “what are we? Fairies?”

Stephen sniggered. There was a broad grin on Ryan’s face. Nick noticed that he and Stephen were studiously avoiding each other’s eyes.

“I don’t know. I’m sorry,” replied Nick, ignoring the suppressed laughter. “All I know is Lester said help would come.”

Ryan nodded. “I wonder what happens to us when this is all over?” he said bleakly.

It was impossible to answer.

“Here will do,” said Ryan. They were at the base of a rocky outcrop, maybe three metres in height. A narrow sheep trail led up it. Nick saw his reasoning. The Nuckelavee could only approach from one direction and they could escape up the outcrop on a track it probably couldn’t handle.

“We rest here, at least for a bit,” said Ryan.

Nick lowered Yamin to the ground and she sat down, smiling weakly at him.

“I don’t suppose,” said Ryan, “either of you checked up on my daughter?”

Nick was taken aback, an apology forming on his lips.

“We kept an eye on her,” said Stephen, to his surprise. “She’s managing.”

Ryan nodded.

“Nuckelavee’s are attracted by burning kelp,” said Yamin suddenly. She was leaning back against a rock, eyes closed.

“That another piece of wisdom from Granny Cutter?”

“It drives them into a frenzy.”

“So?”

“So, we dig a pit trap, burn some kelp and trap the Nuckelavee.”

“Is this a Cutter hunch?” asked Stephen.

“Cutters have good hunches.” Yamin had opened her eyes to slits but there was an expression on her face that Cutter had seen before around Stephen. He was going to have to have a word with her.

“Not always.”

Yamin waved a hand dismissively. “Sometimes we make minor mistakes.”

“Big of you to acknowledge the fact.”

Cutter glanced at Stephen. “I said sorry, didn’t I?”

“For keeping me in the dark about Leek? Yes, you did.”

“Pit trap.” said Ryan, “Anyone got any better ideas?”

He looked around.

Yamin opened her eyes fully. “And so far today I have actually been right about everything.”

“Except taking on a Nuckelavee single-handed armed only with a knife,” said Nick, drily.

“Except for that, yes.”

“We’ll need spades,” said Ryan.

Nick fished out the map. “The lighthouse.”

“Will it be there,” asked Stephen, “if we’re in the otherworld?”

Nick was about to assert it would be, but changed his mind. “So far the geography’s mostly been the same.” He spread out the map.

“Geography’s the same,” said Stephen, “no guarantee buildings will be, if this is the otherworld.”

“It is,” said Yamin, her eyes closed again.

Stephen glanced at her, a look of irritation on his face. “Like father like daughter. So you also think the lighthouse will still be there.”

“Yes,” she said.

Ryan sighed. “We go to the lighthouse.” He looked at Yamin, “Can you walk?”

Yamin struggled to her feet. Nick noticed that her colour was coming back.

“I’m fine,” she grinned.

Stephen walked ahead with Ryan while Cutter and Yamin followed behind but he found himself unsure how to start a conversation now his initial euphoria at having Ryan back had receded. His mind kept running over the events since Ryan had died. Stephen couldn't think of any good way to explain about Helen.

Ryan nodded his head back at them. "You and Cutter weren't getting along so well at the end?"

"No."

"You want to tell me about it? Or better still, sort it out. I don't like situations where my team are bitching at each other."

Stephen looked back at Cutter and Yamin. As far as he could tell from snatches of conversation they were arguing about the validity of behavioural simulation techniques in Paleontology.

"I just wish he wasn't so bloody right all the time."

Ryan grinned. "Well I can't help you there. He's bloody annoying in all sorts of ways but I find his tendency to be right reassuring." He paused, his expression darkened and his tone became dangerous. "He get you killed?"

Stephen shook his head, "No, I did that all by myself."

Ryan smiled suddenly, with simple affection. "You're a fool, you know that?"

"Yes, I know that."

They walked in silence for a bit. Cutter and Yamin had moved on to a complex debate about Religion and Science. It was difficult to work out who was on which side.

"Did the rest of my team get out of the Permian?"

Stephen shook his head. "No, I'm sorry."

"Not as sorry as I am. They were good men. Cutter survived though. What about his wife?"

"Her too."

Ryan shook his head. "Damn! Two good men dead and she walks away."

Stephen opened his mouth to object and then thought better of it. "Yeah, it was a bad day."

"Did you blame Cutter?" asked Ryan. "Is that why the two of you fell out?"

Stephen shook his head. "No. Well, mostly no. You'd made it clear enough that you had a job to do and it had risks."

Ryan nodded.

They topped another rise and stopped, gaping in amazement. Rising from Ardnamurchan point was a Gothic tower. It was slender and dark with carvings

twining up its sides and crenellations round its top. From its spire an ethereal pale light shone, sweeping round in a slow circle, dusting the countryside with a faint frosting as it passed.

“Is that the lighthouse?” asked Stephen.

“It’s not the one on the postcards,” said Cutter. “No tea room for a start.”

“Told you I was right,” said Yamin.

“The other thing about Cutters,” Stephen observed to Ryan, sotto voce, “is that they don’t know when to stop.”

Opening the door to the tower they found themselves in an echoing chamber. There was a fire burning in the hearth and a small pile of wood set by it. A staircase wound round the outer wall leading up the tower.

“Let’s check upstairs,” said Cutter.

Slowly they climbed the tower, passing empty room after empty room until they stood in the lamp chamber. A cold pale flame burned eerily in the centre of the floor, with a mirror rotating around it, casting its beam out to sea through thick glass windows. They paused, all silenced by the strange sight. Beyond the window, waters crashed on the rocks and the Atlantic surrounded them on three sides. In the west the sun was setting, painting a vivid stripe of red and pink across the sky, reflected in the sea below. Stephen leaned on the rail and stared out to sea. Cutter watched the red and pink reflected on his face with the pale blue sweeping across it. There was a strange yearning look in his eyes, almost fey. Nick suddenly wondered if those words, spoken in jest, were true, that this was not Stephen at all. He glanced behind him to where Ryan stood, also looking out to sea, but if there was any yearning in his face, Cutter couldn’t tell. The four of them stood in silence while the sun set. There was a click and a beam of light came on. Ryan, it appeared, had a torch.

“We’d better camp for the night,” he said. “We’ll hunt the Nuckelavee in the morning.”

They trooped downstairs to where the fire still burned in the hearth.

“Is there some fairy tradition about hearths and hospitality?” wondered Nick, out loud.

Yamin shrugged. “Respect the hospitality. Replenish the hearth.”

“We can cut more firewood tomorrow,” said Ryan and began to load logs onto the fire.

Yamin began to unload her backpack. “I have soup and flapjacks.”

Cutter looked through his backpack and produced more soup, noodles and chocolate. It wasn’t a sumptuous meal but there was enough to go round.

After supper, Yamin wanted to tell campfire stories. Nick agreed because it avoided the need to actually talk to Stephen. Then Ryan announced he was going outside for a cigarette.

“I’ll join you,” volunteered Yamin.

“Excuse me!” said Nick. “No you won’t!”

Yamin scowled at him, “I’m not a child anymore, Dad.”

“I don’t care. You’re not smoking while I’m around and that’s final!”

“We’ve already had this discussion, Dad.”

“No we haven’t and I’m not going to change my mind even when I’m in my fifties so you are staying in here.”

Nick clambered to his feet to enforce his point. To his surprise he felt Stephen’s restraining hand on his arm. “Let her go,” Stephen said. “Save the argument for when you *are* in your fifties.”

Yamin smiled, all dimples, and blew Stephen a kiss before nipping out after Ryan.

“And you,” Nick added in frustration, “can keep your hands off my daughter.”

Stephen backed off several steps. “I’m dead, in case you hadn’t forgotten. You’ve got nothing to worry about. Besides which, she’s your daughter, so I wouldn’t. End of story.”

“Shame you didn’t feel the same way about my wife.”

Stephen made an angry gesture. “I hardly knew you at the time.”

“Oh, and that makes it all right does it?” Cutter raised his voice.

“No, it doesn’t. But I’m not going to feel guilty specifically because Helen was married to you on top of all the other things I have to be guilty about,” Stephen snapped back.

“So when, exactly, were you planning to tell me about your affair with Helen?”

“I wasn’t planning on telling you. That much, at least, should have been obvious.”

Cutter shook his head. “Always so honest,” he allowed the sarcasm to drip heavily in his tone.

Stephen stepped forward angrily. “When would you have had me tell you? When I interviewed for that first job? When we went down the pub to celebrate the first grant we got together? At Helen’s memorial service? Your thirtieth birthday? When exactly would you have had me tell you?” They stood eye-to-eye for a minute. Then Stephen turned away. “I’m dead. And you’re still... you’re still...” Stephen stopped and shook his head. Then he headed out of the door banging it shut behind him.

Stephen paused on the threshold, taking a shuddering breath in the night air. He was dead. He'd thought... well to be honest he hadn't thought anything terribly coherent when he'd made that fatal decision to enter the chamber and shut the door behind him. But as he'd backed away watching Nick through the port hole, he'd thought of it as atonement of a sort and then he'd found himself in this strange place and nothing had changed. His death had not changed Nick's attitude at all. Suddenly he felt as though he had lived and died in vain.

Yamin pushed passed him suddenly, giving him a murderous look. Beyond her Ryan stubbed out his cigarette and gave him a wry smile.

"What's her problem?" asked Stephen.

"Should have kept your voices down a bit. She didn't take kindly to the idea you cuckolded her father."

Stephen sighed in exasperation running his hands through his hair. "She is *so* like her father. They are so damned unforgiving and bloody minded. I *died* for him."

"Really? I died doing my job, trying to protect people." Ryan looked at him long and hard.

"That too," he conceded. Ryan smiled and Stephen found himself grinning back.

"He tried apologising earlier, you know," Ryan pointed out. "You were just being too proud then to back down."

"I wouldn't have. I wouldn't have ever," Stephen found himself faltering at Ryan's expectant expression. How to tell Ryan that Stephen had joined forces with Helen who had got both him and his men killed in her pursuit of a trip to the future.

"Go on," said Ryan in a level voice.

"I let Helen talk me round."

Ryan raised an eyebrow but the expression on his face did not bode well.

"There was something funny going on," Stephen explained desperately. "I thought it was Lester. Nick didn't. I thought we should go to the press. Nick didn't." He felt himself blushing under Ryan's steady gaze. "I was lonely," he finished lamely.

"And Nick was right?" asked Ryan.

"He could at least have given reasons!"

"But he was right?" pressed Ryan.

"But he was right," Stephen conceded.

"I think you have some more apologising to do," said Ryan, patting him on the shoulder as he headed back into the tower.

“Oh and by the way,” he said just before he opened the door. “If you weren’t dead already I’d wring your neck for going back to Helen. You’re a fucking idiot, Stephen Hart.” Ryan smiled slightly to take the sting out of his words, but his eyes weren’t friendly and Stephen had no doubt, had they both been alive, that Ryan would have been a lot less forgiving.

He stood alone in the dark for a while, pondering on wasted second chances.

“Were those here last night?” asked Stephen, in the morning. Next to the door of the tower was stacked a neat pile of spades, axes and wooden shoring.

Cutter shrugged. “I don’t remember seeing them, but they must have been, right?”

Three sceptical faces stared back him. “Oh, all right, it was the fairies. Are you all happy?”

Three hours later, they were about four feet down in an ever widening hole. Yamin and Ryan were back at the “lighthouse” trying to rustle up some lunch from the remaining supplies. Cutter and Stephen were left alone in silence.

“I missed you,” said Cutter, suddenly.

Stephen looked at him in surprise. “I was missing you for months.”

“Months?”

“Nothing was the same again, not after Helen’s revelation.”

Cutter paused and heaved himself out of the pit to sit on the edge, “I knew we had problems. I just never realised...” he trailed off shaking his head. “I guess it took me a while to adjust to the idea.”

Stephen nodded, sitting opposite him. “Then Helen starts sending messages and texts, turning up at my flat. I couldn’t just call up Lester and his goons.”

“I would have.”

“You were a lot angrier with her than I was.” Stephen held his hands up at Cutter’s glance. “Sure, not without reason. But even you didn’t want to hand her over at the start.”

“That’s before I knew what she was capable of. She doesn’t care about us at all, you realise that?”

Stephen gave him a long hard look. “She’s pretty mixed up,” he conceded in the end. “We’re not as important as her agenda.”

They stared at each other across the chasm that separated them.

“I shut you out,” said Cutter, in the end.

“Helen drove us apart,” agreed Stephen.

They continued to stare at each other in silence, neither knowing how to heal the divide.

Stephen took a deep breath. "Helen started to explain her reasoning." He held his hands up. "Yes, I know now she lied, but you weren't telling me anything. You just expected me to take everything you said on trust. Ryan was dead. Everyone else was busy." He shook his head. "And suddenly Helen is confiding in me. It was like one door shut and another opened. I was a fool, though, and look where it got me."

"You know I'd have gone back in to that room, if you hadn't," said Cutter suddenly, changing the subject.

Stephen nodded. "Yes I know."

"You saved my life. I didn't even realise you were being shut out. I didn't really even pause to think how you were coping with Ryan's death. I was too bound up in my own losses. So I'm sorry. I'd do anything for things to have worked out differently."

"So would I."

Cutter smiled and jumped back down into the pit.

"More work to do," he said.

Stephen followed him back down. Cutter looked up and Stephen grinned at him. Cutter smiled. Together they continued digging.

The fog began to close in again. As it did so, a horn sounded out from the lighthouse startling them. It was the deep bellow of a fog horn but had a higher pitched ancient sound that made Nick think of hunting horns. By this time Ryan was digging with him while Stephen chopped replacement firewood for the hearth and they paused to look up at the tower.

"No one up there," said Ryan.

"That we can see at any rate."

Half an hour later Nick called a halt to the digging. Even with the shoring, he no longer thought it safe for people to stand in the pit and he'd been on a fair few digs in his time. Stephen put up a half-hearted argument pointing out he was dead already, but being buried, alive or dead, clearly didn't really appeal, even to him.

"It's not deep enough," said Ryan. "That thing is big."

"We put spikes in the bottom," suggested Stephen. "Injure it as it falls."

Nick and Stephen's eyes met and he knew they shared the same thought, as they had in the past. It was not a humane way to trap an animal, but they had little choice. Some of the shoring was left over and they fashioned it into stakes and planted them in the pit, then covered it over with a ground sheet and covered that with grass. Those not digging had already amassed a pile of kelp near the pit.

It was a bugger to light but in the end they got a fire started and threw the kelp on top. An unpleasant smell wafted into the air forcing them back away from the pit. And then they all heard the roar, like the crashing of waves, and the sound of hoof-beats echoing through the mist.

Stephen had the tranquiliser rifle. It was a slim hope but Nick could have been unlucky with his first shot that bounced. Ryan had his automatic but they had little faith in that either. They were left with Yamin's knife and close quarters were needed for that. Nick had managed to persuade Yamin to remain in the tower and give the knife to him. It had almost been another argument but this time Stephen and Ryan backed him up so she had agreed, albeit with bad grace.

The creature emerged out of the fog, bigger than Nick remembered, breathing acrid fumes that withered the grassy land around it. Roaring as it came, it crashed towards them and leaped over the pit trap as if it hadn't been concealed at all.

1.3 Heart

*If from the sea it comes, dank fog and spray
About its form. If beast both fierce and fell,
O'er turns your plans and all your efforts fail,
Call from your heart for elf-shot stills the limbs
And binds the foe. Her hand may loose the spell
if so your heart desires and make all well.*

It charged towards them. Stephen shot his gun and then rolled to one side. Ryan was already backing away to one side firing, for all the difference it made. Nick drew the knife but knew it was pointless even as he did so. There was no way he could take on this beast armed with just a hunting knife. As it charged towards them the words echoed through his head. *A call from your heart.* Claudia was lost, even though, in his mind's eye, he now saw her clearly before him. A self-deprecating smile, the wind blowing her hair. An arrow thrummed past his ear and embedded itself in the animal which stopped its advance as if turned to stone.

They all turned. Standing behind and above them under an oak tree, her hair tumbling loose around her shoulders, was Claudia, unmistakably Claudia. A quiver hung at her hips and a long bow was in her hands. She was clothed all in white except for a single black glove in the hand that had pulled the string. Light seemed to radiate from her like the fractured patterns of an anomaly. She smiled.

Nick headed up the slope towards her.
“Jenny?” questioned Stephen behind him.
“Miss Brown?” said Ryan at almost the same moment.
Nick already had her in his arms, hardly able to believe his eyes. She smiled at him.
“You’re not real are you?” he said.
“I am and I am not. I am something that never was,” and she kissed him.
“Oh yuck!” Yamin could be heard saying.
They stopped kissing when Nick sensed Stephen at his elbow.
“Not Jenny?” Stephen said, with raised eyebrows.
“Who’s Jenny?” asked Ryan. “Is Miss Brown dead too?”
Nick closed his eyes and leant his forehead against Claudia’s. She smiled again at those around her. “This is going to take some explaining,” she said.

From somewhere Claudia produced a cloth and spread it on the ground. They sat beneath the oak tree. Daffodils and crocuses sprang around its roots so they sat amidst drifts of flowers, an island in the foggy landscape.

“I am a messenger from the Faery Queen,” she began.
“I thought you were a Civil Servant,” said Ryan.
“PR guru!” said Stephen, putting up his hand.
“Strumpet!” said Yamin, looking grumpy.
“Behave yourself, Yamin!” admonished Nick.
“Behave myself? I’m not the person kissing random fairies!”
“Hush, child!”
Yamin stuck her tongue out at him.
“I am a messenger from the Faery Queen,” re-iterated Claudia, firmly. “I never existed, except in Nick’s memories of when I did exist. This places me in a particularly powerful state and lets me act as a messenger.”
“Are you Claudia?” asked Nick his arm round her, “or are you a fairy like Yamin said?”
Her forehead wrinkled in a frown. “As far as I am concerned I am Claudia. I have no memory of ever being anything else, if that is what you are asking. I remember you entering the anomaly into the Permian and then,” she shrugged, “a voice from the Faery Queen, and here I was.” She nestled into the circle of Nick’s arms.

“So what’s the message from the Faery Queen?” asked Yamin.

Claudia nodded at the frozen Nuckelavee. “She would like the Nuckelavee returned. At the moment we are on the borders of her realm, a soft point where the mundane world and the faery kingdom overlap. Do you have a map?”

Ryan opened the map and placed it in front of Claudia. Claudia’s finger traced the road from the hotel in Kilchoan towards the turning circle. “She will meet us in Orm Saig Beg where the Lord of the Isles was assassinated. That is a particularly weak point.”

Nick looked over the map and then at the Nuckelavee. “How on earth are we going to transport it all that distance?”

“Connor, Abby and Jenny were going to bring a landrover and trailer,” remembered Yamin.

“Can we get to them?” wondered Nick, glancing up at the lighthouse above them.

“Stephen and Ryan can pass between the two worlds,” said Claudia. “They are close enough bound to both. If they return to the hotel seeking the landrover they will find it.”

“That will also take some explaining,” said Nick.

Stephen and Ryan set off along the paved road that led inland from the Lighthouse towards Kilchoan. For a while they compared notes on Jenny and Claudia.

“This is all extremely strange,” Stephen said, at last.

“You’re telling me.”

“Do you think we really are Stephen and Ryan?”

“Does it make a difference?”

“What do you think will happen to us after this is all over?”

Ryan shook his head. “I don’t know, but I can’t see anything to be gained by worrying about it.”

“It’s not quite what I had in mind as an after-life. Running around after Cutter whenever he gets in trouble.”

“If it’s any consolation I imagine this is a one off.”

They walked in silence for a bit. Stephen hadn’t asked the question that was really troubling him.

“You’re replacement wasn’t as good with Cutter,” he said, after a bit, still avoiding the central problem.

“How do you mean?”

“Cutter kept managing to slip off without back-up. Got us into a lot of dangerous situations.”

Ryan smiled. “He was always difficult to keep up with. We had to be ready to go at a moment’s notice.”

“We missed you.”

“*You* did. I imagine Cutter was glad to be rid of my interference.”

Stephen took a deep breath. He really had to ask.

“In your version of reality. The one where Claudia Brown is Lester’s right hand, not Leek...”

“Yes?” Ryan said. Stephen had reviewed all their conversations over the past day in his head. They all made sense, but still. Hell, he’d kissed Ryan and hadn’t been decked.

“In your version of reality,” he repeated. “Were we?” He wasn’t even sure how to complete the question but Ryan’s broad and slightly mocking grin reassured him.

“You bet,” he said.

“Right. Good,” said Stephen, and eyed him covertly. “But,” he persisted, “your Stephen and my Ryan, right. That’s not you and me, is it?”

Ryan stopped short and turned to face Stephen, standing eye to eye right inside his personal space.

“Some days,” he said, “I’m glad I’m just a simple soldier. And I can’t believe that you, Stephen Hart,” and he poked him in the chest, “are having scruples about whether kissing me counts as infidelity when you were off with Nick Cutter’s bitch of a wife before I was even cold in my grave.”

At which point, Stephen gave into temptation and kissed him again.

“You know,” added Ryan airily, “we probably don’t want to get to Kilchoan until dark.”

Stephen glanced at his watch. “We’ll be there long before that at this rate.”

Ryan’s answering smile was full of mischief. “Any suggestions for how to pass the time while we wait? Bearing in mind you owe me one hell of an apology.”

Towards dusk, they began to be passed, intermittently, by traffic.

“Out of the otherworld then,” commented Ryan, as the first car passed them. Half an hour later they managed to hitch a lift to the hotel.

“What do we do now?” asked Stephen, as they stood in the driveway.

“Well, they’re not going to disbelieve our story once they see us,” said Ryan. “So I guess we just march in.”

“Landrover and trailer are here,” said Stephen walking over to the vehicles. “We could just take them. It would save a lot of explanation.”

“You know how to hot-wire a landrover?”

“No, but I bet you do.”

“There’ll be no need for that, I hope,” said a voice.

They both turned round in surprise to find Lester walking from the hotel.

“I saw you from my room,” he said. “I’m taking your presence to mean that Cutter’s successfully captured the beast.”

“You don’t seem particularly surprised to see us,” challenged Stephen.

“No, I don’t, do I? Do you want to drive?” He held out the key.

Scowling, Stephen took it from him, and the three of them climbed into the cabin.

“You’re coming with us then?” Stephen said.

“Yes. You have a problem with that?”

“Just curious that’s all.”

“All in good time, Mr Hart, all in good time.”

Lester glanced at Ryan. “I don’t suppose you are armed are you?” he asked.

“I left an automatic back at the lighthouse, sir. I’ve a hand gun with me.”

“Pass it over.”

Ryan frowned and exchanged a glance with Stephen who shrugged. Ryan handed over the gun.

On the white cloth she had spread on the ground, Claudia had laid out food. Cold meats and fruit with loaves of bread. Nick looked up to find Yamin staring at him intently.

“What happens to me if I eat this?” he asked Claudia.

“You remain in the otherworld. Eating fairy food makes you part fae yourself.”

“I remain with you?”

Claudia looked at him. “Yes”. Her face was blank. For the first time since she had arrived she wasn’t smiling into his eyes.

Nick picked up an apple and contemplated it.

“What happens to me?” asked Yamin, in a small voice.

Claudia looked across at her. “I think you would unhappen like I did.”

Nick turned the piece of fruit over in his hand and then placed it back on the cloth. His head bowed. He felt Claudia's hand on his hair and her lips pressed against his forehead. They stayed like that for some time.

"As if I'd have let *you* choose," Yamin eventually said, huffily.

Nick couldn't help smiling, "No, I don't suppose you would have done." Yamin, he suspected, was quite capable of knocking him out then tying him up. Claudia, he guessed, was in some way disallowed from interfering with the outcome.

"It is better this way," Claudia said. "Everyone is supposed to make their own choice." She tossed an apple to Yamin. "How about you?" and her eyes danced with laughter.

"She's not..." began Nick.

"Everyone gets their own choice remember," said Yamin and made to bite the apple as Nick started to his feet.

"Naah!" she said, laughing at him. "What would I want to stay here for? Sometimes, Dad, you are a right prat."

"Any you?" asked Nick, looking at Claudia. "Do you get a say in this?"

She shook her head. "I'm part fae already. That can't be changed." She touched his hand. "For the record though, I think you made the right choice. The price was too high and even *I'm* not sure I'm really Claudia."

"Would that have made a difference?" asked Yamin.

"Who knows, but I don't want a life founded on sacrifice and wishful thinking."

An hour after dark Lester, Stephen and Ryan turned up with the landrover and trailer. Lester looked appraisingly at Claudia.

"You must be Miss Brown."

"Yes."

He nodded. "Jolly good!"

"Don't tell me you were expecting her as well!" said Stephen.

"I considered it a distinct possibility. Would that be your bow by any chance?"

He nodded to where her weapons lay discarded on the picnic cloth amidst the uneaten food.

Claudia nodded, "Yes, sir."

"I couldn't appropriate them could I?"

"Of course."

Lester looked distinctly satisfied.

He glanced at the uneaten food and then up at Nick. "I've brought sandwiches," he said, fishing two rather limp-looking packets out of his pockets.

It took all six of them to load the still frozen Nuckelavee onto the trailer and strap it down. They then crammed into the landrover with Ryan driving, and headed for Orm Saig Beg.

As they travelled, Nick became aware of forms and figures emerging from the darkness to surround them: riders on horse-back, pale figures of knights in armour riding alongside the landrover. The sounds of children's laughter echoed in the darkness and the smell of roses drifted on the cold air. At last they halted and the six of them got out of the vehicle. Lester was still holding Claudia's bow arrow. He now looked at Yamin.

"I couldn't trouble you for your knife, could I?" he asked.

She raised her eyebrows but handed it over without comment.

Before them stood an anomaly, sparkling in the night. Around it and over it had been built an arch, carvings of Celtic knotwork showing through climbing clematis and honeysuckle.

Before the gateway stood a tall woman, taller Stephen, and thin as a willow. She wore a heavy brocade gown in blues and greens depicting mythical beasts that pranced and danced as she moved. On her head was a golden circlet. Her skin was dark as midnight and smooth as silk. Her face was full of regal beauty, yet its lines were sharp and pointed. Her eyes were large, dark and expressionless. Black hair, glinting with silver like starlight, fell in a heavy braid over one shoulder. About her and about the landrover was arrayed a delegation of knights, interspersed with deer and unicorns. Children in bare feet, with garlands of flowers in their hair played between the legs of the host.

"Your majesty," Lester stepped forward and bowed.

"You are the representative of the Court of Albion?" she asked.

"I am."

"And the Champion of Albion?"

"Professor Cutter." He gestured at Nick to step forward also.

She moved forward, erect and formal until she stood before Nick, gazing at him thoughtfully. She then looked beyond him to the others.

"And these are the champions who came to your aid?"

"Yes, your majesty," said Nick.

"Some of them must return with me, I see."

Nick looked round then to see that Claudia, Stephen and Ryan all glowed palely in the darkness like the court of the faery queen. She smiled at him. "And

you have successfully trapped the Nuckelavee.” She looked at Lester. “They have done well. It seems we shall have a lean decade.”

Several of her court moved forward and began unloading the Nuckelavee from the flat-bed.

“More than that,” said Lester. He took out Ryan’s hand gun and handed it to one of the retainers. “From someone who no longer is.” He handed Yamin’s knife to another. “From someone who is yet to be.” Finally he gave Claudia’s bow to a third. “From someone who has never been.” He turned to face the Queen.

Her expression clouded with fury. “The deal is complete!”

“The deal is complete,” said Lester. “Albion is freed.”

The Queen rounded on Nick. “And you were not warned of this? You were not told who to summon to your aid?”

Nick shook his head. “I haven’t been told anything. I still don’t know what’s going on.”

She laughed, mirthless like shards of ice.

“The deal is complete,” she said. “I will not forget who defeated us.”

Her gaze turned back to Claudia, Stephen and Ryan. “However, I will not return entirely empty-handed.”

“Must we return with you?” asked Ryan.

Her head tilted to one side almost coquettishly. “You can not remain in the human world. You may return to the void, if you so wish, and there are other realms that might have you. However, our two worlds are linked. I have need of knights who are experienced in fighting the creatures that come through time’s gateways. They open ever more often in my realm as they do in yours. Will you become a knight of Queen Mab?”

Ryan glanced over at Stephen, who shrugged then nodded. The Faery Queen turned her gaze on Claudia, “And you? Will you join my court?”

“I’m no hunter,” said Claudia.

“No, but you are part fae, more so than they are. You will find you understand our thoughts and ways and you can guide them.”

Claudia’s mouth twitched in a smile, “I become the line manager of Queen Mab?”

The Queen laughed again, this time a merry childish laugh like small bells ringing.

“I name you Dara among our kind for your wisdom and compassion. The oak is your symbol.”

Claudia curtseyed and the Queen laid a hand on her head. Mab smiled, then turned and walked back through the anomaly. Where her skirts brushed the ground,

jasmine and moon flower blossomed filling the night with their scent. Six knights followed her leading the Nuckelavee. Horses were brought forward to Stephen, Ryan and Claudia.

Stephen paused before mounting, holding out his hand to Nick. "Farewell Cutter," he said.

Nick grasped his hand, "Farewell," he said and then pulled Stephen forward into an embrace. "I wish you hadn't died."

"You me both," said Stephen with a smile, "but I'll be all right with Ryan and this Claudia-Dara, I think."

"It's not the same though."

Stephen shook his head. "Everything changes. First thing you taught me."

He stepped aside and Nick found himself shaking hands with Ryan, uncertain how to treat this man he hardly knew and who he had managed to get killed.

"Look after them," he said, awkwardly.

"Don't worry, I will," said Ryan and Nick believed him.

Nick kissed Claudia once more before helping her onto her horse. She rested one hand against his face. "Don't obsess over me too much," she whispered with a smile. "I never existed you know."

"I know," he whispered back.

Then they too were gone through the gateway. The anomaly pulsed once and then winked out, collapsing in on itself. The glowing light that had surrounded them vanished as if it had been switched off and they stood on the dark road, the houses of Kilchoan just visible in the moonlight.

Lester glanced at Yamin. "Time to get you home, young lady."

"So are you going to tell me what that was all about?" asked Nick as they drove to the turning circle.

"An old bargain. A tribute of ten children a year to the court of the fae in decades where the Nuckelavee is captured and twenty in decades when it is not."

Nick looked at Lester in the gloom. "How old a bargain?"

Lester shook his head. "Before records began. We only had the legend. If the champion was aided by a companion who was yet to be, a companion who no longer was and a companion who had never been and tokens of this were presented to the Queen then the tribute ceased. We knew the dead could be summoned, that happened several times before. But until now we never had a chance at someone who never was."

"You knew about Claudia!"

"You've not been entirely discreet about it, Cutter, and there was the little matter of the conversation Helen had with Miss Lewis."

“Why didn’t you tell me this?”

“By the terms of the contract the champion must not be told the nature of his mission nor its import. It might have been safe to tell you once the thing was caught but I couldn’t see it would hurt to wait until everything was safely resolved, especially since the precise terms were not necessarily clear.”

“Damn you, Lester, you had no right to use me nor Yamin in this way.”

“Ten children a year, Cutter, for more than a thousand years. Frankly I can live with your disapproval.”

“He’s right Dad,” said Yamin, suddenly. She’d been silent throughout the encounter with Queen Mab, but now she bounced in her seat, self-confidence apparently returned. “We done good!”

Lester brought the landrover to an abrupt halt where he had parked his car the previous morning. It took them a half hour to walk to the anomaly, using torches from the landrover, while Yamin chattered away, wanting to discuss everything that had happened.

“Go on, admit it, I was right,” said Lester once she was gone and silence had fallen.

“You have your moments.”

Nick found himself smiling in the darkness as they walked, together, back towards the ruined croft, the road, and the welcoming comfort of the hotel.

1.4 Follow Up Drabble: Creepy Crawlies

Written for a primeval100 challenge

As her horse crested the rise, Claudia could see the anomaly. She spurred it to a gallop, Stephen and Ryan close behind her. Dark smoke billowed up, enveloping them. Claudia clutched Mab’s charm at her throat.

“Clouds of Hecate! yield!”

The darkness parted, allowing them a pathway.

Words floated out from beyond the gate.

*Eye of newt, and toe of frog,
Wool of bat, and tongue of dog,
Adder’s fork, and blind-worm’s sting,
Lizard’s leg, and howlet’s wing,*

Claudia reigned up sharply.

“What is it?” asked Ryan.

“I think this is one intervention we should allow to run its course.”

1.5 Follow Up Drabble 2: Food of the Faires

A response to episode 3.03

Nick coughed as smoke caught in his lungs and winced at the sight of blood in his palm. That couldn't be good. He struggled to sit. He wouldn't be going any further.

Amid the acrid smells there was a faint hint of Jasmine and Honeysuckle. He must be getting delirious. The sound of distant music hung in the air. The corridor shimmered and glowed as if an anomaly lay beyond the smoke.

Something rolled along the floor, stopping just by his hand. It was an apple. When he lifted it close, it smelled of oak moss, wisdom, compassion and Claudia.