

# Fire and Ice

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



# Chapter 1

## Fire

### **a Primeval Challenge Drabble**

“Abby!” Abby turned back, and her mouth gaped.

Out of the anomaly poured a bright, orange liquid. A wave of heat hit her. She scrambled into the Hilux and gunned the engine. The... the lava spread out behind the truck as Connor and Ditzzy started to run towards it, liquid rock at their heels.

She drove.

They stopped on a small hill. They could see a large, red pool, darkening to black in the middle. It was still growing.

“What about Cutter and Jenny?” whispered Connor.

“Those two?” said Ditzzy. “A little bit of fire won’t even slow them down.”



## Chapter 2

### Fire and Ice

#### A Primeval Short Story

Jenny sat in the Toyota Hilux, dressed only in a base layer of clothing. Anything more and she would sweat in the bright spring sunshine. The survival expert Lester had drafted in to train them had been adamant about the dangers of getting wet, so they had developed a protocol which involved dressing once they were through the anomaly. A thin dusting of snow from the far side drifted incongruously amid the grass and meadow flowers.

Abby climbed into the driver's seat and flashed her a happy grin.

"All set?"

"All set," agreed Jenny, putting on her sunglasses. Abby started the truck and they drove through the anomaly.

Jenny was still amazed by the vista each time she saw it. A cold summer sun blazed down on a white ice field that stretched as far as the eye could see. They were in the foothills of a long mountain range which Connor had christened "The Mountains of Madness" although Nick had more prosaically identified them as the Cascades.

Abby stopped the car and they pulled on the other layers of clothing, with much giggling and wriggling in the awkward confines of the truck's cabin.

There was almost a small roadway in the snow where the souped-up Hiluxes had driven back and forth between the anomaly and the makeshift research station. They'd been here a month now while the team enthused about and observed a teratorm colony they'd found. At least Connor and Abby enthused. On the few occasions Jenny had visited the camp, Nick had been businesslike but withdrawn. She'd hoped the unique opportunity to do some actual research would put the fire back in his belly, to adopt a phrase her father used. It was, in fact, one of the

reasons she had talked Lester into agreeing to the project. It didn't seem to have worked. Nick was as intent and focused as always, but the spark of enthusiasm appeared to be lacking.

She shuffled the papers and graphs she held in her lap.

"Are you worried about the anomaly?" asked Abby.

"Not really," said Jenny. "Dr. Mortimer assures me the decay will be slow, but it's definitely decaying. She was right when she said it would stay open at least two months, so I'm trusting she's right about this. There's no rush, but it's definitely time to pull out."

"Worried about Nick, then?"

"A little, I expect he'll want to hang on until the last minute and the colony is just too far away from the anomaly and this environment is just too dangerous for that."

"He'll see sense," said Abby. "We've got loads of data, enough to keep the entire zoology team occupied for years. It's been an amazing opportunity, so often we don't dare to do more than stick our heads through an anomaly." She grinned. "I've had a fabulous time, but I'm cool about pulling out. If nothing else, if we lose anyone on the wrong side of this anomaly, Lester will never let us set up an observation post again."

"True enough," agreed Jenny.

The camp was a rough half hour drive over flattened snow. Abby kept the car's heater down low in order to prevent perspiration.

They were about halfway there when Jenny felt the Hilux beginning to shake. Abby braked and wrestled with the steering wheel, while Jenny hung on to her seat. They slowed to a halt as small lumps of snow and ice pelted the side of the truck. Jenny peered through the window, anxiously fearing she would see the plume of an avalanche plunging down the rocky slopes towards them.

Gradually the shaking stopped and Abby let out an audible sigh of relief.

"Another good reason to go," she said. "Those earthquakes have been getting more frequent this last week."

Jenny looked up at the mountain towering above them, its summit wreathed in smoke. "I thought the chances of an eruption were small?"

Abby shrugged. "They are. That doesn't mean there won't be one, though. That's the third earthquake this week and we only had one in the previous three weeks."

"Aren't you worried about avalanches?"

"We haven't had any fresh snowfall and we figure the first earthquake dislodged most of what was going to move. It was a nasty one. That was just a little

shake.”

“If you say so.”

Although Jenny found the landscape beautiful and arresting, she was glad she’d only ventured through for the odd quick visit. She wouldn’t have wanted to be camping here the way the scientists were.

The observation camp consisted of a second Hilux and a tent. It was placed at the base of a rocky outcrop. The teratorn colony nested on the cliff-face. The camp was neat and tidy, something that had surprised Jenny, each time she’d seen it, because Nick’s office was generally such a disaster area. The survival training had placed a lot of emphasis on knowing where things were and being able to reach them quickly and easily. It seemed Nick had taken the briefing to heart.

In fact, she realised, it was tidier even than normal. Nick and Connor were tying down several boxes of equipment onto the back of the second truck. It was difficult to differentiate them in the bulky outer clothing and their faces were concealed behind balaclavas and snow goggles. They were just two figures hefting boxes in the snow.

Abby halted the truck and Jenny put her hand on the door to get out.

“It’s blowing quite a wind out there,” observed Abby. “Best protect your face.”

Jenny sighed in annoyance, but Abby was right. She could see the snow blowing along the ground. She taped her nose and cheeks, pulled on her snow goggles and balaclava and put up her hood. Abby had taken similar precautions so they, too, became anonymous, swaddled human shapes. Nick and Connor walked towards them and they ended up standing in a ragged line, their backs to the wind. Nick hauled up his balaclava to speak.

“Time to go?” he asked.

Jenny nodded. “How did you know?”

He gestured at the monitoring equipment on the back of the second Hilux. “We get the anomaly readings same as you, and Connor’s been through the theory with Angela.”

“The anomaly’s starting to decay,” said Connor. “We’ve got a week left, plus or minus a couple of days.”

Jenny nodded again. “Yes! That’s what Angela says.”

“Besides,” said Nick, gazing thoughtfully up at the mountain above them, “I don’t like the earthquake activity.”

Jenny wondered why she'd bothered coming at all. Sergeant Jones had been supposed to return with Abby and relieve Connor for a couple of days off. He wasn't a scientist, but he had experience living rough in extreme conditions and experience in rock climbing, which was useful given the teratorms' cliff top home. Jenny had thought, privately, that Jones would also prevent the scientists getting too carried away and managing to kill themselves. Since they needed a minimum team of four - in order to allow time off, Jones had been assigned. When she got the readings in from Dr Mortimer, Jenny had decided to send Jones home. It was partly a ruse, without Jones, Nick would be forced to break protocol and have only two people in camp that night or forbid Connor his day off. She now regretted the decision. If Jones had been here, he could have helped with the inevitable heavy lifting. Nick gave her a half grin.

"Wasted journey?"

"Seems so," she admitted. She was sorry there was no fight in him, even though it was making her life easier.

"Never mind," he said. "You and Abby can take that second truck back. Connor and I will load this one, fetch down the cameras and then we'll be on our way too."

Jenny saw Connor glance at his watch, pulling back the outermost layer of clothing awkwardly, with heavily gloved hands, in order to see it.

"I had a gig to go to tonight," he said a little plaintively.

Nick sighed. "OK. You take Jenny back. Abby and I will finish up."

"With Abby!" protested Connor.

"We thought you'd be OK here with just Jones for one night," explained Abby. "Connor was supposed to tell you earlier."

Connor shrugged. "Since we were going anyway there didn't seem much point."

"Look!" interrupted Jenny. "I'll stay and help Nick pack up. You two go."

"Are you sure?" asked Nick. "It's hard work and we need to get the cameras down from the cliff."

Jenny looked up at the icy cliff. "I'll be fine," she said. "My Dad used to take me rock climbing as a girl. I went to the survival training too, and it's not like we're miles and miles away from help if there's a problem."

Nick still looked doubtful, but Connor and Abby's grateful smiles obviously won him over. Jenny waved them off and then turned back to the remains of the camp with a sinking heart. With difficulty and a lot of miming they dismantled the tent and packed it onto the back of the pickup. With it went several boxes

of provisions, medical supplies, a small generator and two tanks of the special, freeze resistant, fuel mix.

Once everything was stowed they clambered inside the vehicle. Jenny gratefully removed her balaclava.

“No rest for the wicked,” said Nick, starting the engine. “I’m going to drive a bit further along to where the ridge meets ground level. Then we’ll double back along the top. There’ll still be a bit of a walk to get the cameras but it won’t be so far.”

Jenny nodded gratefully. Packing up the campsite, in the bulky arctic clothing, had been a lot harder than she’d anticipated.

Fortunately the car’s heater was working. Like Abby, Nick was keeping it down low but even so Jenny welcomed the absence of the bitter cold and the biting wind.

“Why are you so prepared to leave?” she asked suddenly. “You could get several days’ more readings before we get anywhere near the theoretical danger point.”

“I’ve got loads of data,” he said, “and I don’t want to risk any lives.”

Jenny digested that in silence.

Nick stopped the car when they reached a boulder field that tumbled haphazardly down the side of the mountain. When he’d first come up here with Connor and Abby, they had discussed clearing some kind of a road through to the cliff top, but in the end had decided it wasn’t worth the effort. Nick sort of wished they had. It wasn’t that he mistrusted Jenny, but she’d really only come through the anomaly on a couple of sight-seeing visits. She might have attended the survival training, but she hadn’t been living in the hostile environment ever since.

“It’s not far from here to where we put the cameras,” he said. “We didn’t have much enthusiasm for walking long distances.”

He pulled the climbing equipment out from under the seats. “Before we get out, let’s go over this equipment. See how much you remember.”

To his relief, she remembered a lot, was able to demonstrate the use of the reverso and knew the safety checks and calls. He wouldn’t have trusted her climbing the cliff - but then he hadn’t trusted Connor on the cliff either, but he was reassured that she would be a reliable belay partner.

“I’m not entirely decorative, you know,” she said a little frostily when he complimented her on her memory. Her lips slammed shut in a tight line, a splash of bright red lipstick in her pale face.

Nick permitted himself a small sigh as he stepped from the Hilux. Claudia would have leavened that remark with a smile and wouldn’t have held his eyes so directly. In his mind’s eye, Claudia’s lipstick would have been less strident and her cheeks full of soft warmth, a glow of autumn compared to Jenny’s icy winter.

Together they lifted a sledge down from the back of the Hilux. Jenny helped to fix it to Nick’s belt. If she had been Claudia, he’d have flirted slightly, even in three layers of clothing and snow goggles. But she wasn’t Claudia.

They set off through the boulder field, dragging the sledge behind them. They hadn’t gone more than a hundred yards when there was another earthquake. Nick felt Jenny grab hold of him for support, or possibly he grabbed hold of her, and they crouched together while the ground shook beneath their feet. The quake seemed to last a long time and Nick realised, with concern, that his feet were starting to sink into the snow as it shifted about them. More snow and ice was flying through the air and hitting him as he struggled to pull free, hampered by the heavy mukluks. He signalled to Jenny and saw her realise the problem as well. She struggled to lift her feet clear of the snow.

Just as suddenly as it started, the shaking stopped. They stood up carefully. Nick was relieved to find he could free his feet easily. He’d read somewhere about ground liquefying during earthquakes. He really didn’t want to experience that first hand.

He glanced speculatively ahead of them, towards the cliff face, aware that he wanted out of here badly. Four months ago he would have insisted they collect the cameras, to avoid leaving behind any trace that might alter history, but then four months ago Stephen had been alive, and he didn’t feel much like getting anyone else killed because of his stubbornness. He realised Jenny was staring at him and there was a look in her eyes he would have described as fear, if he had dared. For a moment the cool exterior was cracked open and she looked so much like someone else.

“Claudia,” he began.

The shutters fell down and she turned, stamping her feet as she headed off along the ridge. That had been more than usually tactless of him.

Jenny stomped through the boulders, aware her behaviour wasn't entirely rational. Some part of her mind was weighing up the costs of those cameras on a mental balance sheet and mostly concluding they weren't worth the risk. Another, more frightened, part of her mind was thinking of a woman named Claudia and the urgent need to leave as small a footprint on the past as possible.

Ten minutes later Nick called a halt. They detached the sledge, ready for the cameras. Nick slung a rope round a large boulder and attached the other end to one of her belt loops. She attached a kearabiner to the front of her belt and a reverso to that, pleased that Nick wasn't having to do all of this for her. Nick attached a second rope to his climbing harness and passed her the end. They checked the rope fed through the belay device correctly and that it locked as it was supposed to in response to a sudden jerk.

Nick gave Jenny the thumbs up and then walked backwards over the edge of the cliff. She glanced up anxiously at the volcano towering above them and prayed there would be no more earthquakes. Thankfully, there were only a couple of cameras on the cliff, fixed to what Nick had described as a small ledge. Jenny concentrated on paying out the line slowly - a bit too slowly it seemed. There were a couple of calls of "Slack" from below. Then, almost predictably, the ground began to shake again.

Jenny forced herself to lock the belay, fighting the instinctive urge to crouch with her hands over her head. There came a shout from below that could have been "Falling" but sounded more like "Aaargh". Then a sharp jerk on the rope pulled Jenny forwards suddenly, so she landed face first in the snow, arrested by the anchor in the rock behind her. Frantically she tried to push herself upwards against the shaking ground, the shifting snow and the taut rope. She was terrified that she would somehow sink and suffocate.

Then there was the most almighty bang. She felt a blast press her flat into the snow once more. Struggling to a sitting position, Jenny turned to look at the mountain behind her. Bright red fountained from the top in a spectacular display. Her blood chilled as she saw it fall on the slopes of the mountain.

"Take up slack!"

Jenny blinked and the call came again.

"Take up slack!"

Hurriedly, she struggled to her knees and began to pull in the slack on the rope. It felt like agonising minutes before Nick's head appeared above the top of the cliff. She kept looking behind her, although she was fairly sure no lava was

coming towards them, directly anyway.

Nick scrambled over the edge. He unhooked the ropes from her belt then grabbed her hand and pulled her away.

“The ropes,” she began.

“Fuck the ropes,” he said, “and fuck the cameras before you ask. Run!”

Jenny found herself stumbling behind Nick’s indistinct shape, as snow whipped around them and, she gradually realised, not just snow but ash and rocks. She was both hot and cold as she ran. The wind was no longer biting and icy but a choking hot breeze. Somewhere behind her the molten heart of the mountain was spilling out and melting the snow.

The Hilux loomed before them and they struggled inside. Jenny found herself coughing and gasping in the passenger seat as Nick turned the vehicle and began to drive.

“Where are we going?” asked Jenny.

“Away from the mountain,” was his terse reply.

Jenny turned in her seat to stare behind them. There seemed to be a lot more lava about now, several streams and rivulets pouring down the sides of mountain cutting them off from the route back to the anomaly. Nick was driving faster than Jenny would have liked and she found herself thrown about, despite the seatbelt. She watched the mountain anxiously as they pulled away from it, expecting any moment to see a river of fire spill out of the top and head in their direction.

“Do you think Connor and Abby got back OK?” she asked.

Nick nodded. “They had plenty of time.”

“What about us?”

“Right now we want to put some distance between ourselves and the volcano and, if possible, keep upwind of any ash fallout. Then we’ll try and work our way round the far side and get back to the anomaly that way.

Jenny nodded mutely and kept watching the mountain as it receded behind them. She started coughing again, ash trapped in her throat and lungs.

“There’s some coffee in the thermos,” said Nick.

Jenny stripped off her outer gloves and struggled with the thermos flask, eventually managing to pour a small mug while slopping a fair amount of coffee onto her clothing. It was barely luke-warm and she grimaced at the bitter taste.

“Sorry about the temperature,” said Nick, seeing her expression. “The thermos doesn’t hold heat all that well around here. We’ve been calling it iced coffee.”

Jenny chuckled and downed the rest of the mug. “I expect it has psychological benefits,” she said, putting the lid back on.

Nick had slowed down to a calmer pace and began to drive the Hilux upwards. Jenny assessed the geography. She wasn't sure they could claim to have placed a valley between them and the volcano. The words "secondary cone" floated uncomfortably across her mind.

"Higher ground should keep us out of the path of any lava flows," said Nick.

"Unless this erupts as well," commented Jenny.

"Oh aye! Unless this erupts as well."

He pulled the Hilux up next to a small hillock on the secondary cone/small mountain/whatever it was. They were upwind of the eruption now and the hillock acted as a partial windbreak. It was getting dark.

"Stay here until daybreak?" asked Jenny.

"Blundering out there in the dark is probably suicide," agreed Cutter.

Tiredly, Jenny followed Nick out of the car. He pulled one of the equipment boxes down from the back. The one which, Jenny recalled, contained the short-wave radio they'd been using. A receiver was set up near the anomaly and a wire threaded through to the other side.

Jenny watched silently as Nick switched it on.

"Hello! Hello! Anyone receiving me?" Nick called.

"Hello! We have a minor situation here."

Jenny giggled in spite of herself.

"This is Professor Cutter. If anyone is hearing this, Miss Lewis and I are safe but cut off from the anomaly by lava. We are going to try to drive round to the north of the volcano tomorrow and find our way back that way. We will keep this channel open."

Jenny frowned. "Why aren't they answering?"

"Something must have happened to the receiver."

Jenny didn't like the sound of that at all. If something had happened to the receiver that meant lava at the anomaly site surely, and if that was the case how would they get through?

"Let's put up the tent," said Nick.

It was difficult work, Jenny was unfamiliar with its set up, tired and oh so cold. As soon as she stepped out of the car she felt a chill wind that seemed to cut through her clothing. As they struggled with unloading the truck and erecting the tent the bitter wind seemed to just seep the life from her. Her arms, in particular, were aching cold. She struggled with the poles and guy ropes, her hands shaking in the bulky gloves.

"Jenny, you're shivering," said Nick's voice suddenly.

"What?"

“You’re shivering.”

Jenny realised she was. Her hands were trembling most, thanks to her cold, cold wrists, but the rest of her was shaking as well. She frowned at her arms and then a horrible realisation dawned.

“I spilled coffee on my clothes.”

Nick stopped absolutely still from a moment and then began to push her back into the Hilux.

“Strip,” he said once she was inside.

“What?”

He turned the key in the ignition, starting the engine, and pushed the temperature control up to maximum.

“Strip,” he repeated. “I’ll find spare clothes.”

Still shivering, Jenny struggled to remove the layers of clothing. She realised she was blushing at the mere fact of getting undressed, in the open, in a car. Nick was intent on unloading the back but she still wished she’d opted for something a little more practical than her normal lacy underwear.

Nick opened the driver’s door and dumped in an equipment box.

“Spare clothes,” he said, then shut the door again. She watched him return to pitching the tent. She was still shivering as she struggled into the new clothes. They must have been Nick’s and felt big and baggy on her. She examined her lower arms, where the coffee had spilled and was alarmed to see white patches on the skin.

It took longer than she’d anticipated for the shivering to subside, all the while watching Nick outside, struggling with a tent that clearly required two people to erect. She flexed her fingers, relieved to find them still working, although it sent shooting pains up her arms. Then she turned down the heat, hauled on her parka, boots, snow goggles and balaclava and struggled out of the Hilux once more.

With two of them, it didn’t take long to finish putting up the tent, although Jenny’s arms were agony. Nick indicated she should get into it and then he started pushing various boxes of equipment through to her before clambering in himself and sealing up the entrance behind them.

He shrugged off his parka and grinned at her as he emerged from the thick layers of clothing.

“Let’s warm this place up a little,” he said, “and then sort you out.”

He fished out a small stove and lit it. Jenny occupied herself stowing the other boxes down the centre of the tent.

“Any signs of frostbite?” he asked.

Mutely, Jenny pushed up her sleeves and displayed her wrists. Nick held her hands and turned them over.

“It’s where the coffee spilled,” she explained.

He nodded. “Well, it doesn’t look too serious,” he gave her a reassuring grin. “Frostnip not frostbite.”

He put a kettle on the stove and then opened the first aid kit.

“You’d better take some pain killers,” he said. “I imagine, now you’ve warmed up, that’s starting to burn.”

Nick brewed them some “proper” coffee - which meant Nescafe, it appeared. Then he slapped a frying pan on the stove and began cooking vegetables and diced beef.

“Where did those come from?” she asked.

“Tesco’s,” he said. “I still smile every time I think of that survival chap going on about good nutrition and standard rations and thinking, ‘but Tesco’s will only be an hour’s drive away’”.

“A bit further now.”

“We’ve enough food to last several days. There was always the risk of a blizzard. Don’t worry.”

Jenny smiled weakly at him over the top of her coffee. “I’m more worried about lava.”

“Either it comes this way or it doesn’t,” said Nick, fatalistically. “In the dark we’re as likely to drive into a crevasse as we are to get overrun by lava if we stay here.”

The tent wasn’t toasty warm, but the cooking stove prevented it being unpleasant. Through the canvas walls, Jenny could see that it was dark outside but a dull glow in the distance reminded her of the erupting volcano. Nick hung a lamp off a hook above them, bathing the interior of the tent in a warm glow.

“So what do you guys do in the evening?” she asked.

“Make notes mostly. We had a go at story telling but none of us were much good at it.”

Jenny chuckled quietly and imagined Connor telling a story, endlessly getting ahead of himself and losing his way, or Abby, all sharp sentences that were to the point, full of passion but lacking in slow description. As for Sergeant Jones, she doubted he knew any stories that weren’t X-rated.

“Did you tell any stories?” she asked.

“Only one that my Nan used to tell me.”

“How did it go?”

Nick looked across at her.

“Let’s clear up first,” he said.

Jenny found herself waiting impatiently as he stacked the dirty plates in a box (“We can wipe then down with snow in the morning”) and rearranged the boxes out of the centre of the tent and round the edges.

They climbed into sleeping bags and sat shoulder to shoulder.

“If we stay close, it’ll help keep us warm.”

“Really?” said Jenny. She distinctly remembered the ‘How to organise your tent’ diagram which had had boxes arranged decorously down the centre.

“Really,” he said putting an arm round her.

Grateful for the comfort, if nothing else, Jenny snuggled closer. “The story?” she prompted.

He grinned in the lamp light.

“Once upon a time there was a wee lass and a wee laddie called Jean (that was my sister’s name, by the way, my Nan was a little transparent) and Nicholas. They lived on the edge of the Cairngorms where the rolling heights come down to meet the central plain. They were a sister and brother who loved each other dearly and looked out for each other well and *never* argued over who was going to get the last Jammy Dodger.”

Jenny snorted quietly.

“My Nan was always very particular about the Jammy Dodger point.”

“I imagine she was.”

“Now, it was about this time that the troll king’s mirror was carried by goblins into the sky and got broken as it approached the sun. The troll king’s mirror was a terrible thing that distorted everything seen in it so that it became ugly. When the mirror broke, tiny shards of it scattered all over the world. When this happened, a tiny splinter lodged in Jean’s eye and another in her heart and she became cold to the world and harsh with her brother. She called him ugly names and refused to play with him.”

“Your Nan had it in for your sister a bit, didn’t she?”

“Not really, I gather Jean got told the same story but with the roles reversed.

“Jean carried on with her life, going to school and kirk on Sundays but there was no joy in it, for everything she saw was twisted and ugly. Because her tongue was sharp and bitter her friends deserted her and she oft’ times played on her own.

“That winter was particularly cold. Jean took to walking by herself in the foothills of the Cairngorms because the cold was not so harsh as the piece of troll mirror lodged in her heart and the bitter wind did not sting so much as the splinter in her eye. It was then she saw the only beautiful thing she had witnessed since the mirror broke.

“The Snow Queen rode down from the sky in her ice sledge. This was no wee sledge you drag up a hill and ride back down again, but a large horse-drawn chariot, like you can see in the shopping centre come Christmas-time, with Father Christmas in it handing out presents. But the Snow Queen is not Father Christmas. She is more real and more terrible and far, far more beautiful. Her skin is so pale it is almost the white of ice and her hair is black like the coal we used to light fires with when I was a wee lass (that’s my grandmother, by the way, I was never a wee lass). She had long fingernails like icicles and her cloak sparkled with starlight and was lined with fur.

“When Jean saw the Snow Queen her mouth dropped open and she stepped up to her with one thought in her mind and one question on her lips.

“‘Take me with you.’

“So the Snow Queen took Jean into her sledge and whisked her away to her castle at the North Pole.”

“You know,” said Jenny, “I think I’ve heard this story before.”

“I have a strong suspicion my Nan had been reading Hans Christian Anderson.”

“Now, young Nicholas, who was a strong, brave laddie and true of heart...”

“Was he now?”

“Are you doubting the word of my grandmother?”

“I wouldn’t dare.”

“Good. So young Nicholas, who was strong and brave...”

“And true of heart.”

“And true of heart, vowed to find his sister where so e’er she had gone.

“He packed a rucksack with food for the journey and headed north from home, for his heart told him that Jean could be found in that direction. Wherever he went he asked after his sister, bonnie, blue-eyed Jean, and everywhere he went, in Crianlarich, Fort William, Gairloch, Ullapool and Thurso he heard the same story of how the Snow Queen had driven past in the night, leaving the frost behind her and how there had been a blonde-haired blue-eyed lassie in the sledge beside her.

“When he came to John O’Groats, young Nicholas was stopped by the sea. So he called out the ancient rhyme of his family

“Oh far and wide my feet have strayed  
 So far from shore and sea  
 But my folk of fishing made their trade  
 So selkie come to me.

“The sea at the shore’s edge frothed and foamed and a large pointed head emerged. It was no selkie that answered Nicholas’s call, but a moasaur.”

“A moasaur?” interrupted Jenny.

“A predatory aquatic reptile from the Cretaceous. My Nan knew her audience well.

“The moasaur carried Nicholas across the sea to the arctic wastes of the North Pole and the Snow Queen’s palace. Inside the palace, Nicholas found Jean seated on the cold hard floor, her face creased in concentration. The Snow Queen had set her the task of assembling a puzzle from shards of ice. Once assembled, Jean would be freed.

“Jean hardly looked up as Nicholas approached, for the splinter of the mirror was still lodged in her eye and another in her heart. Nicholas knelt by his sister and begged her to come with him but she hardly glanced in his direction. He wept tears of sorrow that he could not reach her heart and eventually he kissed her forehead.”

Nick paused expectantly.

“Go on!” said Jenny.

“At this point you’re supposed to say, ‘Oh Yuk! Girls have germs and boys never cry.’”

Jenny gave him a hard look. “Oh Yuk! Girls have germs and boys never cry,” she repeated, without enthusiasm.

Nick grinned back at her.

“When the situation is truly serious and truly hopeless a young man who is strong and brave,”

“And true of heart?”

“Indeed, and true of heart, may weep just a little,”

“In a manly way?”

“In a manly way, and may bring himself to make an exception, just for once, and kiss his sister.

“A single tear dropped to her face and washed the splinter of mirror from her eyes. And the warmth of his heart, because he loved her so dearly and kissed her, even though she had germs, reached out and melted the shard embedded in hers. She looked up at him and saw him truly for the first time since the mirror fell to earth.

“She smiled then, the first smile that had crossed her face in many months and the joy of that smile was so beautiful to behold that the pieces of the ice puzzle got up and danced and then settled into place, freeing her from the servitude of the Snow Queen.

“Then Nicholas and Jean ran to the shore, where the moosaur awaited them, and they returned to bonny Scotland and eventually to their home.”

Jenny woke up several times in the night with a burning sensation in her wrists and the heavy weight of Nick’s arm about her. She wondered, idly, if he had also taken to cuddling Connor and Abby in the night but she doubted it. Her dreams were haunted by the white, white face of the Snow Queen, her hands grasping Jenny’s wrists and burning them with the cold of her touch.

When she awoke in the morning, it was to the smell of frying bacon. Nick was seated decorously across from her. If he was embarrassed about or even aware of the midnight intimacy, he didn’t show it.

Jenny gratefully took a bacon butty from him.

“All this fried food is going to do desperate things to my figure,” she joked. But she remembered the briefing only too well and the emphasis on plenty of energy and carbohydrate intake.

“You won’t be wanting any of the chocolate then,” joked Nick, producing a large bar of Fruit and Nut from the food box.

“Don’t push your luck.”

It was still early but neither of them wanted to wait around longer than necessary. Once again they donned the heavy arctic clothing and left the tent. It was about ten minutes work to collapse it and stow everything in the back of the pickup.

As they did so, one of the huge teratorns appeared, as if by magic, and sat on the back of the truck. It was a large ugly-looking bird, nearly a metre tall with a featherless neck and head. Jenny thought the teratorns looked like vultures, but Nick had said vultures were already around. The teratorns died out when the climate warmed up.

“Go on! Get away!” Nick shouted at it and flapped his arms. It rose up into the air and circled forlornly above them. With its wings outstretched, it dwarfed Nick and Jenny was surprised that a bit of shouting was sufficient to drive it away.

“That’s a little harsh,” said Jenny.

“It’s number 13, a trap-happy menace. Skews all the data.” Nick sounded grumpy.

“Trap-happy?”

“It worked out that one of our traps is a free meal. Soon as it sees one it hops in, eats the bait and then sits around waiting for us to release it. We’ve caught it nearly every day for the last two weeks.”

“Well, it’s gone now,” said Jenny.

Nick grunted and climbed back into the truck.

Jenny looked across the narrow valley to the volcano beyond. It seemed quiet at the moment, but the plume of smoke rising from the top didn’t reassure her.

“What will happen to the teratorns?” asked Jenny, as she climbed in beside him.

He shook his head. “I think the early lava flows will have washed straight over the colony. They may migrate and set up elsewhere. We don’t really know enough about them to make a guess.” He sounded depressed.

Jenny peered out of the window again but the unlucky number 13 was nowhere to be seen.

Nick set up the radio between them on the front seat of the car and tried once more to make contact with the other side of the anomaly. They were greeted by silence and static.

Getting to the north side of the mountain proved to be an arduous task. They had to drive the Toyota up a ridge that linked two mountains together. The far side took the brunt of the prevailing wind which left deep drifts of snow piled up against the slope. In the end Jenny took over the driving. When they got stuck, beyond the magic of the “rocking trick” Jenny recalled from *Top Gear*, Nick dug them out with spade and ice axe. Progress was slow.

The shortwave radio remained resolutely silent. They put out calls every hour but now with little expectation of an answer. Jenny tried not to think too hard about what they would do if the way to the anomaly was blocked.

By midday they had reached a valley bottom where the snow was more compact. Neither of them liked it much, though the going was faster. They were at the very foot of the mountain. No lava appeared to have come down this side, but they were uncomfortably aware that that could change any minute. They were at risk from the rock and debris that was being thrown out of the mountain. There was a continuous rattle on the exterior of the car and, every so often a loud bang as something heftier than a pebble landed on them.

After an hour or so, Jenny saw more teratorns circling in the air.

“Is that significant?” she asked, pointing through the windscreen.

“Hard to say. They’re scavengers. There might be a dead or injured animal there.”

They drove on, over the snow. As they drew closer, Jenny began to make out a creature, or rather two creatures on the ground below.

“What are those?” she asked.

“The upright one’s a Giant Bear,” said Nick. “It’s the largest known carnivore from this era. I’ve been keeping an eye out for one, but this is the first I’ve seen.”

“Oh great!” murmured Jenny.

“I’m not sure what the other is. Another large mega-fauna, possibly a Megatherium.”

“What’s one of those? It looks almost as big.”

“Bigger. It’s a giant sloth, believe it or not.”

“It looks dead.”

“Probably, people have often thought the bears might be scavengers and the teratorns certainly are.”

“So we’re probably all right, as long as we give it a wide berth?”

“I don’t see we have much choice. It’s about the size of this truck though, so we’re in trouble if we do catch its attention. Stop and let me out. I’m going to get the rifle from the back.”

Jenny stopped and watched as Nick went round the back for the rifle. He climbed back in and sat with it loosely gripped on his knee.

“That’s not a tranquiliser gun,” she observed.

He shook his head. “We probably won’t have the time to mess around with tranquilisers. Hopefully the noise will scare it.”

“And if it doesn’t?”

He sighed. “I’ll have to shoot it.” His voice was flat and unemotional.

Carefully Jenny eased the car forwards. She edged it up the far side of the valley to give the animals as wide a berth as possible. The bear rose up and watched them and it really was, she realised, the size of the truck.

“Just keep going slowly,” advised Nick. “Right now it’s probably most concerned about whether we are going to compete for the prey.”

Jenny kept her eyes on the ground ahead of them but couldn’t help occasional glances out of the windows at the huge beast. It took several paces towards them, but the teratorns took the opportunity to land on the carcass themselves and with a roar it turned back to scare them away.

A rumbling sound started up. Glancing at the mountain Jenny saw a plume of steam and smoke billowing down its side. Almost without thought she floored the

accelerator and swung back across the valley. They lunged forwards with a roar of the engine. Ahead of her, she saw the great beast turn and start loping towards them but she paid it little heed as she rushed across the valley floor, struggling to control the car as best she could.

“You’re taking us towards the landslide,” shouted Nick, in alarm. “Turn back!”

“I’m not letting it get between us and the anomaly,” Jenny shouted back.

“You’re mad!”

Afterwards, Jenny was able to pick apart her thought processes, an awareness that whatever was coming down the mountain towards them would flow along the floor of the valley and would be entirely impassable. In the moment, however, she was simply aware of a desperate need to be on the *other* side of the valley, on the lower slopes of the mountain and then hope to drive fast enough to let the deluge fall behind them. Nick eyes were wide and staring as he was bounced around the cabin.

“The bear thinks you’re going to attack it.”

“Well shoot it then,” said Jenny crossly. The giant bear was really the least of her worries.

Nick scrambled into the back, where he could get a clear shot, and wound down the window. In her mirrors Jenny saw him aim, but the fingers didn’t pull the trigger.

As their paths crossed, Jenny swerved to avoid the bear. It reared up on its hind legs and lashed out with a swipe of its giant paw. The Hilux rocked under the impact of the blow. Jenny struggled with the wheel. A second blow caught them as they moved past and the rear window smashed. Then it was behind them.

A billowing cloud seemed to be pouring down the mountain but they were close to the far edge. Jenny drove upwards and sideways. Everything become dark as if a cloud had crossed the sun and she knew the great plume was almost on top of them.

“We’re going to make it. We’re going to make it.” She muttered the mantra under her breath as though merely saying it would help.

A flurry of snow and sleet rattled across the windscreen and in through the broken window at the back and then they were out.

In the mirrors she could still see the great bear bounding after them. She watched with horrified fascination as the snow and sleet cloud overtook it, followed by a vast tide of mud, meltwater and debris. She slowed slightly to a more controllable speed. A new-born river swirled in the valley below.

Nick was breathing in short noisy breaths that were rapidly dissolving into laughter. “You are completely, and certifiably, crazy,” he gasped.

Jenny found herself laughing with relief too. “Well, we’re not getting off the side of the mountain now,” she said.

Nick actually whooped even as he shook his head.

“No, we’re stuck with whatever it chooses to throw at us.” He carried on chuckling. “Just remind me never to get involved in a game of chicken with you.”

He struggled back into the front seat, still hanging onto the rifle. “Sorry I didn’t shoot it.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Jenny felt sufficiently exhilarated to be magnanimous. “I know you don’t like killing things unnecessarily.”

“No, I don’t, do I? Not that it made much difference on this occasion.”

He stared soberly out of the window at the swirling river below them.

As it grew dark, they drove onto a rocky outcrop that jutted out from the side of the volcano. Once more they pitched the tent and settled down for the night.

Nick watched Jenny cautiously, as she rooted through the food box. She’d taken more pain killers, but she’d managed to drive most of the afternoon, so he wasn’t overly worried about the frost bite. She was bearing up remarkably well, he thought, given she hadn’t expected to spend more than an hour out here, and it had now been a day and a half. Her make up was smudged and patchy and her hair was windswept and tangled. He rather liked her like that. She looked even less like Claudia, but there was something vivid and wild about her, as if, once you cracked the outer icy shell, something terribly alive and dangerous burst out.

“Stir-fried chicken?” she asked brightly.

“Sounds good.”

She peered at the label on a packet of diced chicken. “Sell by date today. Have you been keeping it cold?”

Nick chuckled hollowly. “We’ve kept it outside mostly, if that’s what you’re asking.”

She tapped the packet with a fork. “Frozen solid. Oh well, the frying should thaw it.”

She pulled off the top of the packet and emptied the contents into the pan with a little oil, followed by a packet of diced vegetables.

“I’m glad I don’t have to try to chop anything,” she said.

“We worked that out pretty quickly. Pre-diced is the way to go out here.”

“No soy sauce,” she said, “it’ll be a little bland I’m afraid.”

“You could try one of the packets out of the pot noodles.”

Jenny made a face. “We can do without, I think.”

She tossed the chicken and vegetables about with a spatula for several minutes. Then she added a packet of instant noodles and tossed the contents together once more, until the noodles separated.

She placed the pan between them on an upturned box and handed him a fork. “Let’s not bother with plates,” she said.

When she had driven into the path of the meltwater she had had a wild, fiery expression on her face. The smile she gave him now had something similar in it, as if eating out of a pan was as exciting as a brush with death. Nick was aware that he, too, had been enervated by the rush of adrenaline, even though that had long worn off. He felt a strange lightness and joy. He was glad, he realised, that he was still alive. The simply cooked chicken and vegetables were delicious and the company was lively.

“Can we talk about the radio receiver?” she said, over the coffee that followed.

“It could have been hit by a rock.”

“They’d have set up another by now if it had. I think we have to assume a mudslide or lava flow.”

“Where there’s life there’s hope,” he said gently.

She shook her head.

“Look!” he improvised, “if we’re close enough we can transmit a signal through the anomaly.”

“You don’t know that.”

“No,” he admitted, “but I’m pretty confident.”

“Why would being close to the anomaly make a difference? The whole point of short wave was that it carries a long way, wasn’t it?”

“Hey! I wasn’t the one who trapped us on this side of the valley!”

“Point taken.”

“Once they know we’re close,” said Nick, warming to his theme, “They will be able to get through to us from their side. Fly a microlight, perhaps. It’s a big anomaly.”

Jenny grinned at him and there was an amused twinkle in her eye.

“What?” he asked.

“I’d forgotten what one of your mad ideas was like.”

“It’s not a mad idea!”

“Fly a microlight, through an anomaly, over a lava flow?”

“That may be a little far-fetched, but we should still contact Connor. He’s bright and they have resources.”

She shook her head again but was smiling now.

“I think you like my mad ideas,” he teased.

“Don’t count on it,” and she gave him the stern look that she usually reserved for recalcitrant reporters. It worked better when she was wearing a smart suit and immaculate make up.

She gave her head an abrupt toss, as if dismissing speculation for the present.

“My turn to tell a story,” she said.

“Agreed.”

“Once upon a time there was a girl called...”

“Jenny?”

“No actually, Akinyi.”

“Akinyi then, where did you hear this story?”

“A Rupert Bear book, if you must know. Akinyi was a girl at my school.”

“Where was she from?”

“Cheltenham,” said Jenny and sniffed in a way that indicated this was the end of that line of conversation.

Nick considered himself suitably chastised.

“One day Akinyi found a spark of sunshine that had fallen to Earth. It lay in among the roots of a tree stump in the wide savannah and the grass around it smouldered in the heat. Now Akinyi knew that fire in the grasslands can be a dangerous thing and she approached the spark, thinking that she would stamp it out. But then the spark spoke to her.

”‘Help,’ it said. ‘I have fallen down from the sun and now I am lost and alone. I can feel myself growing cold and dying, will you help return me to the sun?’

“‘Of course,’ said Akinyi, ‘How can I help?’

“‘There is a great rock in the middle of the savannah, not far from here. When the last sunbeam of the day strikes the rock then I can travel on it back up into the sky. If you can carry me to the rock, then I can return back to the sun.’

“Akinyi approached the spark but it was so hot she knew that, if she picked it up in her hands, they would be burned.

“‘Wait here,’ she whispered to the spark and then she ran to the farm of...” Jenny hesitated.

”Mr. Lester,” suggested Nick.

Jenny scowled at him. “Mr. Lester. Once at the farm Akinyi asked ‘Please Mr. Lester may I borrow a spade. I promise I will bring it back.’”

“And Mr. Lester said, ‘you can, as long as you fill five forms in triplicate and sell me your soul.’”

“Hey! Who’s telling this story?”

“Sorry.”

“Mr Lester said, ‘Of course you can borrow a spade because I know you’ll be responsible, bring it back undamaged and won’t cause any PR crises with it.’

“Akinyi ran back with the spade to the tree stump where the spark waited.

“‘Here!’ she cried. ‘Jump on the spade and I will carry you to the rock.’ ”

“‘Very well,’ said the spark and it jumped on the spade.

“Akinyi picked it up and began to carry it to the rock. She had not gone very far when a troupe of monkeys leaped down and surrounded her.”

“What sort of monkeys?”

“I don’t know! Lemurs!”

“You don’t get lemurs on the savannah.”

“A troupe of special heretofore-undiscovered-by-man-savannah-dwelling lemurs surrounded her. The lemurs called Akinyi names and pulled faces, because they are very naughty monkeys. They danced around her, tugging at her clothing, and she was afraid that she would drop the spark. But suddenly, the spark jumped up from the spade and it whizzed around the heads of the lemurs. It sparked and fizzed at them and singed their fur so they ran away squeaking and chattering among themselves.

“Then Akinyi caught the spark once more on the spade. It lay there panting and glowing only very faintly like the final ember of a fire.

“‘Hurry!’ it whispered to her, ‘Hurry!’

“So Akinyi hurried with the spark until she came to the great rock in the middle of the savannah. She walked carefully up the great rock, as the sun was setting, and she placed the spade with the spark at its summit. Then she stood back and, as the last ray of the sun struck the rock, before it sank beneath the horizon, she saw the spark lift up. It flew upwards along the ray towards the sun, shouting its thanks as it went.”

That night Jenny did not dream of the white, white face of the Snow Queen who gripped her wrists with a touch of ice. Instead she dreamed of hot African skies, warmth, friendship and dark faces. Her wrists still burned where she held the bright but fading spark that was Nick Cutter and she heard him shout his thanks as he raced away from her and back towards the sun.

In the morning she awoke to find her own arm around Nick. However, if he could ignore such embarrassment, then so could she.

After their morning bacon, Jenny made coffee. There was a half-used pack of Rombout's individual filter coffees at the bottom of the food box and she was tired of Nescafe.

"Those are Connor's," observed Nick.

"I don't suppose he'll mind."

When they'd finished Jenny opened up one of the little packets and dumped the coffee grounds into the thermos flask.

"What are you doing?" asked Nick.

"Good luck charm. If we get back I'm going to show you real iced coffee."

She opened the front of the tent, scooped some of the snow into the thermos and then gave it a shake. "Let it brew cold for a few hours and we should have the real deal," she said.

When they struck camp, number 13 came to visit them again. This morning Nick didn't scare it off but, instead, fed it the remains of the bacon.

"He really is a splendid animal," he mused to Jenny. "Have you seen the size of the wing span? It's not so obvious when he's seated like this."

"I did notice it yesterday. How on Earth did you guys ring him?"

"Well, as I mentioned yesterday, trapping this guy is all too easy and he's mostly pretty docile. Some of the others were trickier though, we had to tranquilise them."

"Weren't you worried about leaving the rings behind?"

Nick shook his head. "We chose a bio-degradable variety. I'm sorry, Jon," he added, crumpling up the empty bacon packet, "that's the last of it."

"Jon?" queried Jenny.

"Short for Jones. Abby named him, said his stomach was larger than his brain and that reminded her of someone else she knew. Sergeant Jones wasn't impressed."

Jenny laughed, "I'll bet he wasn't."

"Anyway," confessed Nick, "mostly, I'm not in favour of anthropomorphising wild animals and giving them names but, given he keeps showing up, we might as well call him something a bit more friendly than number 13."

The great bird began nudging one of the food boxes.

“There’s only chocolate left in there, mate,” said Nick. “You’ll have to fight Jenny for that and somehow I think you’d come off worst.”

Jenny whacked Nick on the shoulder. “Watch it you,” she murmured.

About an hour later they rounded the edge of the volcano and were in line of sight of the anomaly.

“Oh shit!” said Jenny.

A tall trail of black rock led down the side of the mountain and through the anomaly. Only the top of the bright circle of sparkling light was still visible.

“That’s lava isn’t it?” she added.

“Yes,” agreed Nick.

“Well, we’re in line of sight now. Let’s try the radio.”

Nick picked up the speaker. “Hello, is there anyone receiving this, hello? Hello?”

“Nick! Can you hear us? Come in!” It was Connor’s voice.

Jenny was amused to see a look of surprise on Nick’s face. She couldn’t resist muttering, “You were right... again.”

“Yes! I hear you!” he said.

“Oh good! We’ve been transmitting for days but the anomaly’s a fairly narrow window to transmit through, you have to be lined up right. We got your messages ’cos we’ve got a ring of receivers set up round this thing but we couldn’t seem to get any back to you.”

“That’s good to hear. We seem to be a bit stuck here though.”

“The lava flow?”

“You’d noticed that then. Is it doing much damage your end?”

“Enough to have Lester demanding Jenny’s immediate return, but no lives lost and not much property damage.”

Jenny winced. From Connor, “not much” property damage probably just meant it hadn’t reached a major city yet.

“We can still see the top of the anomaly but I’m not sure how we’re going to get to it,” Nick continued.

“The lava should have cooled enough to form a crust you can walk on.”

“What?”

“The lava should have cooled enough to form a crust you can walk on. I googled it.”

“He’s been trying to persuade Lester to let him come back through,” broke in Abby’s voice.

“You stay exactly where you are Connor! You hear me?” said Nick. “Jenny and I are going to go take a closer look at this lava flow of yours.”

“Be careful!” said Abby. “Most of the lava is coming through some kind of tunnel in the middle, but we don’t know how thick the crust is.”

“We’ll get back to you,” said Nick.

He started the Hilux. “Let’s see how close we can get before we have to set out on foot.”

“Do you think I could claim a freak volcanic fissure?” mused Jenny.

Nick laughed. “I think you’ll have to. The geologists will have a field day though. There really shouldn’t be anything like that in the UK.”

They drove closer to the lava flow, near a rocky ledge that seemed to be about the same height as the lava. They parked on the edge of the snow line. Between them and the lava, all was bare rock.

“Well,” commented Nick, stepping down from the Hilux, “here goes nothing.”

He put the radio in a rucksack, with the aerial sticking out and the microphone draped over his shoulder, so they could keep in touch with Connor. Jenny added the thermos flask and the remaining chocolate, on general principles, and they set out for the rock.

The closer they got to the lava flow the more uncomfortably hot it became. Standing on the rock, Jenny found she was sweating freely.

“If we have to retreat,” she said, “we’ll both have to strip - frostbite city otherwise.”

Nick laughed. Jenny bent down and picked up a pebble. She tossed it out onto the lava flow. It bounced and rolled but didn’t noticeably melt or fall through the crust.

“Me first, I think,” she said. “I’m lighter.”

Nick held her hand as she cautiously stepped down onto the top of the lava flow. It seemed to hold her weight. Carefully, she let go of his hand and took a few further steps out onto the flow, gaining confidence. She could feel the heat through her boots but, presumably, if she kept moving fast enough it would be OK. She recalled that was the trick for walking on hot coals. She hopped from foot to foot and turned back to call to Nick. Before she said anything though, she became aware of a slight stickiness. Glancing down she saw black goo dripping from the soles of her boots. They were melting. Throwing caution to the wind she ran at full speed back to the rock. As she got close a hot squelchiness developed around her socks.

Nick looked confused but caught her, nevertheless, as she threw herself off the lava flow and onto the rock.

“What is it?” he said anxiously.

“They’re melting!” She ripped off the boots and then her socks. The boots lay on the rock between them, an oozing ruined mess.

Nick switched on the radio. “Connor! We have a problem. The lava’s too hot to walk on. It’s melting our boots.”

“OK! Let me think about this.”

“Maybe you could check on the Internet how long it takes to be cool enough to, you know, actually walk on?”

“It’s not his fault,” said Jenny.

“I’ll make it up to him when I get back. I’ll buy him the Star Wars Director’s Cut or something.”

Jenny struggled to her feet. The rock they were standing on was hot and she limped off, hurriedly, distancing herself from the lava flow. “I hope you’ve got a spare pair of boots in the car somewhere.”

Connor was back in radio contact almost before they’d got the spare boots unpacked.

“Turns out,” he said, “when they souped up the Hiluxes they installed extra insulation in the bonnet. If you open it up and look at the firewall, you should find it. You could wrap it round your feet for protection.”

“OK, we’ll take a look,” said Nick.

“We’ve got a chopper this end. All you have to do is get through the anomaly.”

“All we have to do is get back through the anomaly,” muttered Nick to Jenny. She couldn’t help grinning back at him.

When they opened the bonnet, the extra insulation was visible, stuck to the back wall, between the engine compartment and the cabin. Nick shook his head.

“What did they put it in there for? Why would I need extra fire protection on field trip to a glacial period?”

Jenny shrugged. “You know the engineers, they had so much fun souping this thing up and pretending they were Jeremy Clarkson. All eventualities covered.”

Nick shook his head. “Well, there’s a toolbox in the back. Let’s see if we can get this insulation off.”

They hauled down the toolbox and opened it up. Nick found a small crowbar and started trying to lever the glued-on rockwool away from the interior of engine compartment. Jenny sorted through the rest of the tools, in case there was something better.

“There’s a fire blanket in here,” she called out.

“Could be useful. We should bring that as well.”

The insulation was difficult to prize away from the casing, but eventually they had four reasonably sized pieces. Jenny bored holes through the corners with an awl, grateful that it was warm enough this close to the lava flow to dispense with the bulky gloves and parkas, and they threaded wire through them which they attached to the top of their boots. They looked bizarre, with the thick insulation attached to their feet like giant slippers, but hopefully it would serve.

They tramped back to the anomaly and out onto the lava flow. Even with the insulation, Jenny could feel the warmth seeping through.

“Best not to hang about,” she said nervously.

They were about halfway to the anomaly when there was a boom from above them. They both paused to look back. A new fountain of lava was spewing upwards from the top of the volcano and then pouring down on top of the lava flow on which they were standing.

“Oh shit!” said Nick.

Jenny grabbed his arm and started to pull. “Run!” she shouted.

They ran for the anomaly, the small sparkling light just visible above the hot black rock. Jenny threw down the fire blanket. There was a singeing smell, but it didn’t obviously melt or combust. Nick made a “you first” gesture, which almost started her arguing until common sense asserted itself. She crouched down on hands and knees and crawled across it, through the anomaly. The fire blanket was burning hot under her palms.

She stood up and gaped at the scene before her. She was standing in the centre of a black and steaming landscape. The lava had clearly poured through the anomaly and then spread out in a circular fashion from that point. There had been a small copse of trees at the edge of the farmer’s field. That was gone, under the expanding rock. Jenny judged the lava extended for maybe a quarter of a mile from where she stood, in all directions.

She started to run away from the anomaly, scanning the skies for the chopper. She spotted it hovering to her right and started to wave her arms and jump up and down.

“Where’s the chopper?” shouted Nick from behind her.

She pointed and saw him beginning to run towards her. There was a loud squawk. Nick turned round. Jon’s head was peering through the anomaly and squawking in an interrogative fashion.

“Go back! Go back!” shouted Nick, frantically running back towards the anomaly while waving his arms about.

“Nick!” Jenny shouted, torn between exasperation that the blithering idiot was

about to risk his life for an extinct bird and overwhelming relief that the blithering idiot was about to risk his life for an extinct bird. “Nick!”

The chopper dropped low enough for her to grab hold of the wire ladder. She climbed on, hooking one arm firmly around a rung. Then she gestured frantically at the pilot in a way that, she hoped, conveyed, “Get me closer to the blithering idiot, I’m going to have to grab him.”

Jon had now walked through the anomaly. Its head came up to Nick’s chest and was cocked on one side, eyeing the man curiously, while Nick made herding gestures back towards the anomaly.

The helicopter swept her closer and she managed to grab Nick’s arm. He was an incredible weight but, as his feet left the ground, he appeared to come to his senses and managed to grab the wire ladder as he did so. Apparently of the opinion this was great stuff, Jon opened his vast wings and rose into the air beside them. He continued squawking enthusiastically, circling them in wide loops, while a red sea surged through the anomaly below.

Sitting on the terrace of the country house hotel which Lester had somehow managed to both evacuate and commandeer, Nick found it hard to believe that a mere couple of hours before he had been running for his life. A good shower had made him feel much more human and he was looking forward to a cool beer.

Jenny appeared opposite him on the terrace. She held a tray containing a pot of coffee, a battered thermos flask and two ice-filled glasses. She had a mobile pressed to one ear.

“No! No!” she was saying. “Don’t say unexplained about anything. Use words like unusual and unexpected.”

She switched off the phone with a smile and sat down opposite him. She was wearing a strange outfit that seemed to consist of a tracksuit top, ra-ra skirt and tights. Abby and Connor had been despatched to Tesco’s to get clothing for them. Nick had got a pair of non-descript jeans and a plain shirt but it seemed Abby had felt the need to put more character into her choices. Jenny’s face was clear of any make up. In fact, Jenny had appeared more concerned by her two-day old make-up than her two-days worn clothing and had demanded make-up remover and a brush almost as soon as she stepped off the chopper. Whatever make-up Abby had purchased, Nick mused, Jenny had obviously deemed unwearable.

Jenny placed the glasses on the table, and poured the coffee into them.

“What’s that?” asked Nick.

“Iced coffee, made from unsullied Pleistocene snow and brewed slowly and lovingly over 6 hours. I just filtered it to get the grounds out.”

She flashed him a bright and vivid smile and raised her glass. “To fire and ice!” she declared.

“Fire and ice,” echoed Nick.



# Chapter 3

## Undercover Lyle

### A Primeval Crackfic

There was a loud banging on Sanctuary's front door.

Reluctantly, Stephen and Ryan broke out of their clinch.

"I'm beginning to miss the days when it was just you and me and the occasional visitor," said Stephen. "Lately it's been like Piccadilly bloody Circus round here."

"We could always not answer," murmured Ryan, his eyes drifting towards the stairs that led up to the bedrooms.

The knocking came again.

"You're thinking of screwing me in time to the banging?" asked Stephen. "A deep thrust for each pound... on... the... door," he said pausing for each thump that sounded from outside.

Ryan's breathing speeded up noticeably. "Upstairs!" he said firmly.

They had reached the halfway landing when Lyle's voice echoed through the letterbox. "Will you two buggers stop shagging and open the bloody door? My balls are freezing off out here and that makes me irritable."

"How bad can an irritable Lyle be?" asked Stephen, pushing Ryan up against the wall in a deep kiss.

*"Do your balls hang low?  
Do they wobble to and fro?"*

Lyle's off-key singing was hard to ignore. Nevertheless, Stephen manfully continued kissing Ryan, a look of intense concentration on his face.

*“Can you tie them in a knot?  
Can you tie them in a bow?”*

“I’ll give him balls,” muttered Ryan, through gritted teeth.

*“Can you toss them over your shoulder like a regimental soldier?”*

Lyle paused and repeated the line, warbling, almost entirely without artistic merit, on both *shoulder* and *soldier*.

Ryan sighed. “We’d better let him in.”

They opened the door. Lyle strode into the house, armed with a large carrier bag and a manila folder.

“After your singing, that had better have beer in it,” said Stephen, eyeing the bag.

“Nope! My disguise. I’m going undercover. Can I use the bathroom?”

“Undercover?” questioned Ryan. “Where?”

“In a ficathon entry. Look here,” Lyle thrust the manila folder into Ryan’s hands. “The job advert and my CV are in there. I’ll be right out. I just want to start bleaching my hair.” The bathroom door slammed shut behind him.

Ryan pulled a sheet of paper out of the file and walked into the kitchen.

“You’re not eligible, mate,” he called out. “It says ‘strictly no fanon OCs’.”

A muffled shout emerged from the bathroom in reply.

“What’s that?” called Ryan.

More muffled shouting.

“He says he knows,” reported Stephen, who was hovering in the hallway. “That’s why he’s using a disguise.”

“I could have sworn he said something a bit more colourful than that.”

Stephen walked over and took the other piece of paper out of the folder.

“Sergeant Jones,” he read out. “Place of birth, Somerset.”

“Why Somerset?” asked Ryan.

Stephen shrugged languidly and helped himself to a beer from the fridge. He had a feeling he was going to need it.

“Oi! Super Secret Squirrel!” shouted Ryan. “Why Somerset?”

The bathroom door opened and Lyle emerged with a plastic bag over his hair.

“Very convincing,” observed Stephen. “No one will recognise you like that.”

“Why Somerset?” asked Ryan again.

“I do a good Somerset accent.”

Lyle stood up straight and cleared his throat. “Ooh! Arrr! That be lovely zzider that be. Ooh! Arrr!”

Ryan and Stephen exchanged glances.

Stephen looked back down at Sergeant Jones' CV. "You've missed out Pirate from previous career."

"You go to Somerset a lot?" asked Ryan.

"Used to, but I got banned."

"Banned from Somerset?"

"Got into too many bar fights. Scrappy buggers down there, always picking fights for no reason."

"You don't say," said Stephen blandly.

"Fortunately, the advert says 'non speaking role'," said Ryan.

"If you're going to take the piss, you could at least offer me a beer," said Lyle, sounding aggrieved.

Ryan took two more beers out of the fridge and tossed one to him.

"Skills: Taking it up the arse like a man," read out Stephen. "Not a conventional CV entry."

"Ah but it's fanfic," said Lyle confidently. "Pretty much a job requirement that."

Ryan looked at the job description. "It says gen or het here. I don't think your ability to take it up the arse, like a man or otherwise, is actually going to help."

"Oh!" Lyle looked crestfallen. "Might as well cross that out then."

Stephen grabbed a pen from the counter-top and drew a line through the statement.

"But I need to show I'm experienced at this fanfic thing," said Lyle. "How about putting 'manly, yet sensitive' down?"

Ryan almost choked into his beer. "Do you even know what sensitive means?"

"I write poetry!"

"You write doggerel on the walls of the men's bogs. It's not the same thing."

"I do not write on toilet walls."

*"A Private just lately enlisted  
Made a gesture described as limp-wristed  
Behind Lester's back  
So I gave him a slap  
If he does it again he'll be fisted,"*

recited Stephen.

"...and don't try to pretend someone else wrote that," put in Ryan.

"It was just some friendly advice! I was being sensitive, like I said."

“Moving swiftly on,” sighed Stephen. “You can’t put down ‘caving’ as a hobby. They’ll be bound to spot it’s you.”

“But the job description says, ‘experience in rock climbing an advantage’ ”

“Just put ‘rock climbing’ then,” said Stephen, making more notes on the CV.

“What do you want this job for anyway?” asked Ryan. “It’s not like you have to be in every piece of fanfic written, some of them are pretty extreme. Believe me, we know!”

Stephen shuddered. “We’ve still got the eye-liner somewhere.”

“That could be handy,” said Lyle. “Sergeant Jones could be sort of gothy. Maybe he has a crush on Abby?”

“No!” said Stephen and Ryan in unison.

“But it says het.”

“It says het and non-speaking,” said Ryan. “How do you jump from that to a make-up wearing Sergeant with a crush on Abby?”

“It fleshes out the prose and adds depth to the world-building.”

“You read primeval\_denial too often,” opined Stephen.

“Didn’t your mother tell you that you’d go blind if you wanked off to porn about yourself?” asked Ryan. “Anyway, you’ve still not said what’s so important about this piece of fanfic?”

“Lester asked me,” said Lyle. “There’s been a drabble already and he’s worried about Cutter and Jenny.”

The sound of a loud ping came from the bathroom.

“My hair!” shouted Lyle and rushed back.

While the sound of banging and cursing echoed from the bathroom, Stephen and Ryan helped themselves to more beers.

“There’ll be water all over the floor,” said Stephen gloomily.

“Management can send the bill to Lester,” said Ryan. “Hear that Management!”

“*What was that?*” came a female voice

“Send the bathroom clean up bill to Lester,” shouted Ryan.

“*Will do,*” said the voice.

“What’s got into her?” asked Stephen. “They’re usually a bit chattier than that.”

“Lyle’s taking a shower.”

Stephen nodded thoughtfully. “We should invite him round to shower more often. Then we could shag unobserved for a change.”

“Ta da!” Lyle leaped from the bathroom with hair that could charitably be described as dirty blond, with streaks.

“You’re doomed, mate,” said Ryan. “You still look like you.”

“Ah ha! But I have a secret weapon.”

Lyle reached into the plastic bag and produced a large, bright blond, fake moustache. He stuck it firmly on his upper lip and grinned hopefully at Stephen and Ryan. It didn’t match his new hair colour, and neither hair nor moustache matched his eyebrows.

“It’s certainly distracting,” Stephen managed after a moment.

“And there’s more!” Lyle added suddenly. He reached into the plastic bag and concealed something in his hand.

He dropped the bag, stood up straight and saluted. At which point the moustache began to whirl.