

## Excerpts Pipes of Pan

### Book I . . .

The cavern lay at the dead-end of a passageway in the lowest level of the dwarves' domain, immediately above the uppermost tunnels frequented by The FiendFolk and only separated from them by a fissured seam of rock. Though well aware of her magical powers, the dwarves were still concerned for her safety, for sleeping WeeFolk are as vulnerable as all other sleeping beons, and so they had carefully chosen two dwarves to guard the corridor outside her door - Insomnia Smith (nicknamed Wideawake), a clever, gifted silversmith who rarely slept more than one hour in twenty-four, and Dim Jim Brawn (called Sledgehammer Smiley for short), a squat, undersized dwarf with huge fists, a silly grin and a punch like a pile-driver.<sup>1</sup>

They could have saved themselves the trouble. Well knowing that no crowned head is ever truly safe in its bed, Mab had taken her own precautions; as indeed she did each night in her own bedroom (a sad reflection on life at her court). This was just as well, since the dwarves' precautions went all awry: Insomnia Smith's wife had recently blessed him with twins and he hadn't slept a wink for nearly a month. Wrapped in peace and quiet for the first time in weeks, he leaned his back on the wall, yawned hugely, blinked once and fell deeply asleep. Dim Jim gawped at his sleeping companion for a while until this pastime palled; at which point, quite forgetting why he was there, he trotted off in search of livelier company.

It was long past midnight before the dwarves went to bed. Hard-working, hard-living beons they are, who toil and have fun with equal gusto. And they sleep with the same gusto, their snores rumbling down the tunnels and echoing through the caverns till the very rock vibrates. Little can wake a sleeping dwarf, for little can be heard above his snores.

### *The FiendFolk*

About two o'clock in the morning the first FiendFolk took up the scent of the fairy queen...

Slithering and squirming, creeping and crawling, shuffling and shambling they came; hurrying along the passage leading to her room, pushing and shoving to get there first. Loathsome beons they were - ghouls, bwci, bugaboos, hobgoblins, undead and mostlies (mostly alive); odious of face, repulsive of form and sickly in colour. Maggoty white and jaundiced yellow, scabrous and shrivelled, they reflected the nature of their abode, where darkness bleaches and searing heat splits and seams the skin. Their eyes and ears were huge to catch the slightest vestige of light, the tiniest scratch of sound.

With a scrabble of talons they came; with a rat-like scuttle, a swinish snuffle and the brush of a bat wing on the wall. With expectant growl and hopeful gasp they closed in on their prey, lips slavering, jaws slobbering; the air thick with the foetid stench of catacomb creatures rank and foul.

Sniffing and snarling, greedy eyes gleaming, the eager pack paused at the entrance to the queen's chamber. Huddling before her door, they did not notice the mist creeping down the passage behind them: an ice-cold mist, coiling and curling, twisting and twirling; a thick yellow mist with the rotten-egg smell of sulphur. Then clammy fingers reached out from its midst and

<sup>1</sup>: Dwarves have very descriptive nicknames, such as Simon Strong i't Arm, Willie Weak i't Legs, Soft i't Head Sam, Hatchet-Face Harry; their *full* names are complicated and give much more information (see Book III)

claw-tipped fingers armed with suckers and dripping with icy sweat twined themselves lovingly round the hindmost creature, an immigrant imp from the desert sands of the east, a soft, sloth-like ġūl with the hooked bill and talons of the carrion eater <sup>2</sup>. A shriek of utter horror and despair rang down the passageway, and the rest of the ghastly pack whirled round, recoiling with horror... Out of the mist stole a hideous thing.

Gaunt it was and pale. Flaccid flesh, like melted wax, sagged loosely round a thin frame. The slug-shaped head was huge and hairless, the face lacked chin and brow. Except for eyes it had no *features* to speak of; no lips, no nose, no ears. The mouth was a thin wide gash, narrow diagonal slashes served as nostrils, and a hole on each side of the head as ears. But it was the great, ghastly eyes that appalled. Lidless, bulging, and covered with a whitish mucous film, they were unevenly placed and constantly moving across the head, one sliding now above the right earhole, one slipping down to the left of the mouth... nothing escaped those roving eyes. Festering sores bedecked body and face, and the spectre was literally dripping with sweat. Sweat oozed from every pore of the mottled skin, dripped from the ends of the suckered fingers, invaded the nostril slits, ran into the evil eyes and out of the earholes; an ice-cold sweat, musty and fusty, rank and dank, redolent of mould and decay... The dreaded Abu 'Drak.<sup>3</sup>

The ghoul grinned a terrible lipless grin. Poking a claw among stained, needle-sharp teeth, it picked out the remains of the unfortunate ġūl and spat them out. The panic-stricken FiendFolk milled around, each trying to get behind the others; then, as if suddenly making up a collective mind, with the courage borne of sheer desperation they rushed past the horror in a body and fled, screeching and howling in terror.

Left alone, Abu 'Drak turned the massive iron door-ring and the great oaken door swung silently inwards on well-oiled hinges. Hesitating on the threshold he listened for movement, for sounds of alarm; the door was thick as the trunk of the mighty tree from which it was carved, but the ġūl's shriek had been loud to waken the dead.

Nothing. Naught but the crackle of burning logs, the chuckle of tumbling water and - plain to the small but sensitive earholes - the faint sound of light and peaceful breathing. Silently he closed the door; unnoticed, the bolt slid silently into place behind him. Firelight flickered, lighting the chamber in sporadic flashes, creating shadows and movement where nothing moved. He paused to take his bearings, the huge eyes rolling in astonishment; the whole cavern was a gem of costly perfection. Wondering, he took in the gold, the gems, the magnificent furnishings.

Facing him, not more than a few feet away, stood an opulent bed on a raised dais. The sumptuous hangings of the bed and the superb craftsmanship of the ivory headboard spoke of an occupant of uncommon importance. The beguiling scent of freesias filled his quivering nostril slits, and he saw that huge baskets of these fragrant flowers (Queen Mab's favourite) surrounded the dais, their perfume wafting over the sleeping form in the bed.

Abu 'Drak moved nearer, leaning over the bed. The firelight bathed the whole room in a scarlet glow, staining the creamy headboard blood-red, setting the thistledown pillow aflame. He leaned closer still, and breathed a sigh of intense satisfaction. A fairy! A fragile, tender, juicy

2: Ġūl: Spirit preying on corpses

3: Literally translated: 'Father of Sweat'

fairy! An exquisite delicacy, a dainty morsel indeed! Those soft white limbs, rosy in the fire's gleam, that fine-spun, golden hair - a fiery copper it seemed in the firelight, and short-cut it was, unlike the usual fairy tresses... a distant memory stirred, a vague unease beset him; he shook it off impatiently.

She slept so deep, so peacefully: how pleasurable 'twould be to wake her, to see the terror fill and darken the guileless faerie eyes, to hear her screams, to feel her shudder and squirm beneath his touch, to smell the salty scent of fear, to taste the sweetness of the shrinking flesh, the richness of the fairy blood, made sweeter still and richer yet by her terrified gulps for air and the rapid beat of the tiny, racing heart.

Green spittle drooled as his taste buds watered. Lower he bent over the bed, lower and lower. Dripping, suckered fingers reached out for her throat, to pick her up, to hold her in front of his face and shake her awake, to caress and fondle, to pat and pet, to stroke and squeeze, to twitch and tweak, to *hurt!* To feel the pangs of death shudder through the slight frame, the anguished eyes as the soul flew forth... these things were his delight.

He reached out - and his hand went right through her! Went through the bed, went through the very dais! Losing his balance he toppled over and fell face down onto the stone flags of the floor. Dazed and bewildered, he lay there for some seconds gathering his wits. Looking up he could see no dais, no bed, no fairy - *nothing!* He scrambled to his feet a little to one side of his former position, and still there was nothing. Unsteadily he staggered a few paces backwards towards the door - and lo! dais, bed and fairy again appeared before him. A spell! A mighty spell! It was Abu 'Drak's turn to tremble... those short curls, their colour... their colour! Realisation dawned, dismay overwhelmed him. Paralysed with fright, Abu Drak ceased moving, ceased thinking, *ceased sweating.* The father of sweat dried up with fright.

As he crouched there, staring, unable to turn away from the vision, the fairy eyes opened and looked directly into his. Brilliant turquoise gleamed from beneath long lashes! Unmistakable! Only one beon had such eyes! His fate was sealed! Shocked out of his stupor, Abu 'Drak turned to flee. He grasped the door-ring, but the door would not open; he struggled to draw the bolt, but the bolt would not move! He squealed like a stuck pig, a high, drawn-out sound that set the hearers' teeth on edge; he wailed, a keening plaint that chilled the blood to the very marrow. Then, with the courage of utter despair, he turned to stand at bay.

Queen Mab stood before him.

She had indeed been long awake, the very first clawfall in the passage had roused her; but after Abu entered she had not dared open her eyes or stir a limb, for these movements would have been reflected in the illusion she'd cast to confound whatever entered the chamber.

Eyes blazing, claws outstretched, Abu leaped to the attack in one mighty bound - and froze in mid-leap. Seething, foam dripping from nostrils and maw; grimacing, mouthing unuttered curses... hamstrung and helpless he hung there. Bulging with hate, the wayward eyes reeled across the writhing face in panic; the nostril-slits flared and the needle-teeth bared in menace.

Mab didn't turn a hair. Standing calmly before him, eyes cold and uncaring, lips curled in revulsion, she looked him up and down and recalled the descriptions of the very few beons

who had met him and lived to tell the tale..."monstrous, evil, loathsome, ruthless, pitiless, sadistic, horror on feet... None did him justice. Certainly he was no beauty, not even by the necessarily broad-minded standards of the FiendFolk. He was repulsive, disgusting... and that *smell!* But there was something else, something worse; something that Mab had encountered only twice before in her long and eventful life. 'Evil incarnate' was the only true way to describe him.

Just as there are many social ranks of BigFolk and WeeFolk, so too are there many grades of FiendFolk. These range from the fairly harmless puckish water sprites that tickle trout under the banks of streams till these squirm in ecstasy, then jump on their backs and play bucking broncos till the poor fish collapse from exhaustion, or mischievous gremlins whose playful pranks are behind many a mechanical failure of the dwarves' machines... through the brutal bugaboo kings, perpetrators of atrocious cruelties, or the voracious, carnivorous Beefeater Bashers (exiled by an exorcist after decimating the guard in the Tower of London)... to malevolent demons like the frightful Ded Hed Djinn, a vicious specialist in infliction of suffering<sup>4</sup>, or grisly greater ġūls such as Habeus Major, chief of the Korpus clan whose family motto is 'HaveUs Korpus' (*korpus* being Ymcir Caelig for *body* and a rough translation being 'Grab the grub').<sup>5</sup>

Abu 'Drak belonged to the *topmost* echelon of evil. Although long known to Mab, he'd had the good fortune never to have crossed her path before, which was why he had lived so long; but he knew of her – what OtherWorld beon did not?

Shaking with impotent rage, he regarded her in turn – tall and slender, a coppery halo of short head-hugging curls, bright turquoise eyes framed by dusky lashes, dark arches of brows (at the moment frowning), a translucent petal-soft skin The most beautiful sight he had ever seen, the last sight he was destined to see.

Under her calm front, Mab's emotions were in turmoil. She was struggling against an urge she had never known before – an overwhelming desire to inflict *prolonged* and *painful* death. The ġūl's shriek of mortal agony still rang in her ears, and as she thought of the long trail of suffering, misery, anguish and horror this loathsome entity had left in its wake as it trod the path of its wretched existence, the longing to see it suffer to the same degree was overpowering.

As if reading her thoughts, Abu 'Dak gave a sudden bellow of fury and made a violent lunge in her direction; but the magnetic field she had spun held, and he was hurled back, glutinous tears of rage and frustration seeping from the lidless eyes.

Those eyes fascinated Mab. Grey-white and gruesome, they seemed to have a life and will of their own; bobbing and jiggling about the sluglike skull, slipping over the waxy wetness (he'd started sweating again), jolting over a scabby sore, hopping over the hump of a pimple.

4: Kicked out of the Orient by the good djinns, Ded Hed had dished up some heart-rending sob-story and been granted political asylum by the WeeFolk of the West, who didn't realise what they were letting themselves in for and threw him out when they did. He promptly went underground in the Missing Mountains and has been a thorn in dwarf sides ever since. His name is not an allusion to his physical appearance but to the fact that he's a brainless (but savagely sadistic) lump of brawn, pure bone from the chin up

5: This is the *true* origin, spelling and meaning of 'habeas corpus' and *not* that in Latin books (you can't believe *everything* you read in books... except, of course, mine)

She pulled herself together. Tearing her gaze away with great effort, unable to bear the sight of him a second longer and unwilling to witness the undeservedly merciful swiftness of his end, she averted her face, twisted the amber ring on her index finger, pointed in his direction – and destroyed him. A shiver of air, and Abu ‘Drak was no more; he simply ceased to be.

How did she do all this - create the illusion, suspend him in mid-air, kill him instantly with a twirl of a ring? By magic? No; for magic is no magic at all, merely the skilful manipulation of the natural forces electricity, magnetism and gravity and their interplay with the physical and chemical properties of the basic elements air, water and fire.<sup>6</sup> BigFolk use electricity, magnetism and gravity, but they do not *understand* them; the WeeFolk do.

Using the light and shimmer from the blazing fire, Mab had created a natural illusion that everybeon knows, an illusion caused by atmospheric conditions, a ‘fata morgana’, a mirage; a mirage that placed the dais and bed a good twenty feet nearer to the door than they actually were, while skilfully positioned mirrors made Mab and the original dais and bed ‘disappear’. (BigFolk illusionists can do this too, but WeeFolk are better at it)

As a further safeguard she had translated water from the spring<sup>7</sup>. BigFolk know three states of water - liquid, frozen and vaporised as mist or steam, but there are others we have not yet discovered and Mab had used one of these, a flexible state between ice and mist, to erect an unbreakable crystal shield over the whole dais – like a giant cheese-dish cover without a handle. Had the unlikely occurred and both mirage and mirrors failed, she would still have been safe.

To keep Abu suspended in mid-air was child’s play for a beon skilled in the use of magnetism and gravity. These two forces can push, pull, counterweight and counterbalance energy or matter and so suspend an electric field, a flea, an elephant... or a planet.

She had killed him with plasma, amorphous matter that can destroy or heal.<sup>8</sup> The ring was a dwarf device presented to the queen on the occasion of her last birthday. It produced a pencil-slim beam of highly accelerated plasma; a neat little gadget that, until now, she’d only used for roasting chestnuts.

With an unqueenly grunt of satisfaction, Mab checked her defences (just in case) and got back into bed. The snores of Insomnia Smith seeped faintly under the thick door: *he’d* been in no danger, dwarf-flesh was too gritty, too hairy and too salty even for the FiendFolk’s uncritical taste. She smiled; closing her eyes she drifted gently asleep...

To be wakened an hour later by the haunting sound of The Pipes of Pan.

Haunting as in ‘banshee’, for the player obviously hadn’t got the hang of them yet. Most beons would have put the sound down to the squeals of some spirit in torment or, if much-travelled beons, to the *gab-pipes*, the national instrument of Lochland, where their shrill skirls transmit the latest hot gossip from mountain peak to mountain peak and the valley merchants do a

6: Okay, okay, scientific nit-pickers! I know these are no longer regarded as elements, but this is a story not a treatise

7: ‘translated’: changed from one state into another

8: Plasma: see NOTE at end

roaring trade in earmuffs <sup>9</sup>. But Mab had heard the pipes before<sup>10</sup>, and though the screeches now echoing through the lower reaches of the Missing Mountains were far removed from the dulcet, seductive tones produced by the pipes' owner, she recognised them still.

But to *whom* or *what* would Pan lend his pipes?

Had the Woodland God – absent so long – finally *returned*? If so, why was not *he*, but somebeon *else* playing the pipes? Or had Pan *lost* them and were they now found - but not by *him*?

An icy hand closed round her heart. . . . .

**NOTE:** Plasma is a gas with ionised atoms (i.e. atoms stripped of electrons) that changes with its surroundings. It is usually hot, but can be cold. Although 99% of the universe consists of plasma, and although known to us for well over 100 years, apart from vain attempts to achieve nuclear fusion we BigFolk have barely begun to exploit its enormous potential. And we use only *cold* plasma – for such essentials as printing letters on cellophane, etching computer chips, sterilising fragile utensils, or the manufacture of TV and computer screens and disposable nappies.

The WeeFolk use both hot and cold plasma in a *thousand* different ways, most importantly as a powerful energy source.

(The dwarves' deep dwellings lie above a mammoth reactor, Earth's molten outer-core; and they have long since fused the atom.)

9: Part of the national costume; called 'porrans' and used also as purses by the thrifty wearers

10: For a brief interlude, the incorrigible Pan had wooed the beautiful young Princess Mab and reaped an agonising rebuff for his pains (he hadn't been able to use the privy for a month after... Details in Book III)

## Book II

### PART 1: Excerpt A

As a tide surging up a shingle beach, the hubbub around him ebbed and flowed, reaching a full-throated roar, the boom of a breaking wave, then receding again, word grating on word as pebble on pebble. He seemed detached, apart from this sea of sound, watching himself and the company from afar; physically conscious of his surroundings but mentally aloof, uninvolved. And thus it was that between his abstraction and the general bedlam, he failed to notice Belycose's abrupt emergence from his drunken stupor and the bellowed command to a guard, who immediately left the room. But others at the table heard and gave voice to a sudden roar of approval, startling Nomolos out of his daydream. The shouts gradually crystallised into a chant, a slurred, blurred chant from wine-drowsy tongues that rendered the words inarticulate. Drunken fists pounded on chairs and tables, drunken mouths screamed from drunken faces. The room throbbed with a cacophony of sound. Gradually, however, unable to concentrate for long, the drink-fuddled minds lost interest and the excitement died down. Nomolos idly wondered what it had all been about, then shrugged; this court gave so many causes to wonder.

It must have been a good hour later that he thankfully decided he could now depart without affront. He caught the eye of his personal aide and faithful friend Sir Chumsey Truman, who was sitting lower down the table, and they were both about to rise and take polite leave, when the great doors were thrown back with some violence and all heads turned. The tramp of heavy feet and the chink of chain-mail could be heard coming ever nearer. An expectant hush fell, then the chanting began again, rising to a deafening crescendo, and now Nomolos could make out the words...

'Take a cup an' fill her up,  
Drop o' gin to begin,  
Sip o' wine to make her whine,  
See her swaller, hear her holler,  
She'll get sicker all the quicker,  
Throw her down – Mind her crown!'

He could make no sense of them. Then there was a flurry of movement at the doors, a glimpse of heavily armoured guards involved in some sort of a *mêlée* and, in a sudden glittering kaleidoscope of colour, a swarm of splendidly dressed, jewel-bedecked ladies swept in - led by Queen Aleena, Serena, and his own mother!

### *Belycose*

From under half-closed eyelids Belycose had been watching Nomolos for quite some time. Sitting slumped in a corner of his great chair, face turned towards his young guest, befuddled with wine, he mulled over all the slights and offences he'd suffered at the hands of this young nobody who'd cheated him of a fortune by stealing his daughter; who as adept swordsman, archer and huntsman had beaten all the young gallants of his host's court at every sport and feat of arms; who'd thwarted him in all his ambitions; who sat here now like the sanctimonious prig he was and turned up his nose at his company. Drink had washed away all the king's caution and inhibitions (those few he had), and his resentment built up and up to baleful rage as he considered ways and means to prick this puffed-up balloon of a boy, this canting cur. In a surge of spite, he shouted to the captain of his guard to fetch his wife and daughter, and

this set off the chanting.

On a couple of former occasions he'd ordered his wife's presence at such a drinking orgy, had made her sit with his mistresses at the same table and, upon her declining to drink wine from their cups, had forced undiluted Geneva down her throat - clutching her hair, wrenching back her head, thrusting the goblet between her clenched teeth, choking, nay almost drowning the terrified woman. Gulping, gagging, gasping for air, her face, shoulders, clothes and headdress dripping with the pungent, breath-catching liquor, she'd be the butt of jokes, the laughing stock of the whole sotted company. Retching, vomiting, miserably ill, she'd eventually and mercifully pass out; but her disgrace was not as yet complete. Slung over a common soldier's shoulder, she'd be borne back unconscious to The Queen's Wing and thrown down at the feet of her horror-struck guards like a damp sack of potatoes.

Some court-wit had composed a cruel persiflage, a parodic ode on her humiliation. It was joyously received, and the chorus hummed by derisive courtiers whenever the queen passed by (a copy of the score having kindly been thrown through her balcony window in order that she might recognise it). It was this chant that Nomolos now heard.

These incidents had irretrievably stripped Queen Aleena of what little authority that gentle lady had ever had at court, and the subsequent contempt and ridicule of the courtiers were unconcealed and barely supportable. She had been ill for weeks after each such episode. As a natural, protective response, her own people - guards, servants and ladies alike - gathered closer around her, but there was a totally unexpected side-effect also: the common people rallied to her support. Accounts of the queen's humiliation spread like wildfire not only within but also without the palace, and enraged the population.

The first intimation came while the queen still lay prostrate after one such occasion, her slight frame racked with the effects of alcohol poisoning and in a state of mental shock. It was the king's birthday, a public holiday that always began with a grand procession through towns and villages crowded with his subjects dressed in their Sunday best, eager for a glimpse of pomp and glory - and for the handfuls of silver and copper thrown now and then out of the windows of the royal coach. But this year the thoroughfares of the towns and villages were deserted, doors closed, windows shuttered and not a single flag or scrap of festive bunting to be seen. The royal procession rattled through silent empty streets, past empty doorways and empty windows; and there was nothing Belycose could do about it! A riot can be suppressed, a deputation clapped in irons, but who can fight nothing?

That week his courtiers suffered in his subjects' stead. To Queen Aleena's bedroom, however, now found their way the first snowdrop of March, the first primrose of April, the first bluebell of May, the first rose of June; on her board appeared the first fruit of the season, the finest pheasant, the freshest fish and the fattest fowl. Whenever she went abroad on her regular visits to the sick or poor, the common people flocked round her. In their eyes was no contempt or mockery, nor trace of that pity which is so hard to bear; but a demonstrative warmth and liking that healed, and a sympathetic respect that soothed.

Months of nights full of tension and fear followed, but almost two years had passed since that last 'invitation', and apparently tired of the sport (or wary of public opinion) the king had sent for her no more - until now.

This was, however, the first time the king had called for his daughter, and the eyes of the courtiers glistened with anticipation, turning to Nomolos with malicious glee. The same court wit sniggered, his mind already busy with a scurrilous version of a children's nursery rhyme 'Hoity Nomolos sat on a wall, Toity Nomolos had a great fall, When the king's daughter with all the king's men...' he paused for inspiration, his thoughts wandering off into fantasies of the coarsest kind.

### *Léonie*

Meanwhile, the Captain of The King's Guards hastened to the queen's quarters, grinning all over his face, pausing at the main guardroom to announce the forthcoming diversion and collect an escort. At the news that the princess was also summoned, the men fell over 25 themselves in their eagerness to make up one of the party. A group of eight finally made its way to the doors leading to the queen's wing, where the captain demanded entrance in the name of the king.

The sentries of the Queen's Own Guards protested and tried to hold them back, but they were outnumbered eight to two, and as further King's Guards (who had followed to see the fun) took a menacing pace forward, they were forced to allow the escort to enter. In The Visitors' Guardroom the Sanyxon guards heard the commotion and rushed into the antechamber to assist the sentries; but upon recognising the red tabards of the King's Guards, their half-drawn swords slid back into the scabbards. If it did not concern their own queen it was none of their business; they dared not interfere. Bound to leave the escort unmolested, they gave vent to their anger by slamming the double-doors to the hall in the faces of the crowd now gathering outside.

Both of Queen Aleena's sentries had entered with the escort and now barred the way to the inner rooms, bidding the intruders state their business and wait in the anteroom on the queen's pleasure; but the captain insisted he must address her personally "*In the name of the King!*" and the eight men swaggered boldly down the corridor with maddening sneers on their faces, the sentries trailing behind white with suppressed rage. Though devoted to Queen Aleena, theirs was but a token force within the palace walls. Far outnumbered by the King's Guards, there was in truth little they could actually do to protect her.

The hands of the watching Sanyxons hovered over the hilts of their swords. They yearned to draw them and run the insolent scoundrels through, but had to content themselves with following close on the sentries' heels to make sure nothing happened to their own queen.

Queen Léonie took exactly two seconds to wipe the grins off the escort's faces.

The two queens had been sitting quietly with Serena and some of their ladies in the large, airy balcony-room, working on a silken arras for Aleena's state reception room, when the sound of voices raised in altercation followed by the loud trudge of many feet caught their attention. They all looked up and exchanged enquiring glances. To Queen Léonie's astonishment, both Aleena and Serena turned quite white and their ladies-in-waiting were actually trembling. A moment later the doors crashed open and eight soldiers of the King's Guard strutted boldly into the room.

"His Majesty the King commands that the queen and princess attend upon him immediately!"

trumpeted the captain, and under Léonie's disbelieving gaze stepped insolently up to Aleena, grasped her by the arm and dragged her to her feet. Léonie's outraged response was instinctive and immediate. Her thick tapestry needle jabbed violently into the muscular hand on Aleena's wrist and a second later her heavy fan broke the fellow's nose.

The watchful Sanyxons hovering outside the open doors needed no further encouragement. Drawing their swords they rushed in, overpowered the startled King's Guards and frogmarched them back to the antechamber to await Queen Léonie's orders, while the two Sanyxon sentinels outside her own apartment moved down the corridor to take up position in front of the doors to the balcony room. Here they stood with swords at the ready.

The Thelevians were livid but helpless; twenty-three comrades were gathered just outside the antechamber door, a mere shout away, but the sword-points at their throats discouraged more than a mutter and their spluttered oaths and threats bounced off the Sanyxon veterans like hail off a turtle's back. These were as aghast as their mistress at the insolence of the Thelevian soldiers - to dare lay hands on Queen Aleena! So sweet and gentle a lady! They grasped the hilts of their swords more firmly, and longed to ram the blades down the ruffians' craws.

Léonie's mind was racing. She couldn't imagine what the king was about, and there was no time to question Aleena now; but the sight of her friend's stricken face and the terror in Serena's eyes spoke worlds. She instructed her personal page to inform the escort that it would be unseemly for the queen and princess to appear in company unless suitably attired and they must accordingly wait!

"And request Lord Tytrus to attend on me immediately." She added. "Be discreet - those scoundrels need not know what we be about. But wait! 'Thou shalt bear a brief note.'" She hurriedly penned a few lines requesting the lord to come instantly but casually - with no appearance of haste, and the young page bore it off importantly, thrilled at the whiff of menace that had suddenly disturbed the peaceful (and for the adventurous boy, dull) tenor of the royal ladies' days. With him he bore a flagon of wine so that he might pass the note unobtrusively.

Lord Tytrus, a blond, fiercely moustached and bearded giant of forty-five years, was the highest-ranked officer at present on duty in the visitors' guardroom. He had been a soldier since his seventeenth year and a member of the Amogilon Guard of Honour that escorted the then Princess Léonie to her marriage with King Septimus. He had stayed with her and been her faithful servant ever since.

When the page entered the antechamber, Tytrus was standing threateningly over the Thelevian captain, his piercing blue eyes boring into the shrinking guard, whose insolent bravado and bluster were now quite flown. Although a muscular man, the captain looked puny beside the flaxen-haired colossus. The remaining members of the Thelevian escort were backed up into a corner of the room within a menacing semicircle of Sanyxon soldiers who were enjoying themselves immensely.

The page repeated Queen Léonie's message that the royal ladies must change to more suitable attire and the Thelevian escort must wait on their pleasure. The announcement was greeted with despair by the captives who, thoroughly discomfited, were eager to escape their humiliating situation as soon as possible and knew just how long a lady's 'toilette' could take.

Stepping behind Lord Tytrus, who was still glaring down at the unnerved captain, the page politely coughed to attract his attention. He then held up the flagon of wine and saying “This most special wine with Her Majesty’s compliments. If Milord will allow me to pour him a cup,” moved off into the adjoining guardroom, thereby forcing Tytrus to follow him. Inside the room he hastily handed over the queen’s note, put his finger to his lips like the conspirators in the mummery’s plays he had seen at Septimus’s court, poured out a goblet of wine (to keep up appearances), bowed and strolled out as nonchalantly as he could. He was having the time of his young and so far uneventful life.

Tytrus hastily scanned the note, then taking up the goblet strolled casually into the antechamber sipping his wine. A couple of seconds later he sighed, drained the goblet, and told one of his soldiers he must check on Queen Léonie’s sentries and to keep a sharp eye on the captain during his absence. Hand on sword, he sauntered languidly into the inner corridor leading to the various apartments, shutting the anteroom door behind him.

Queen Léonie was anxiously awaiting him. Hastily they conferred and quickly concluded that there was only one possible course of action. It would be an unprecedented act for a royal guest at a friendly foreign court and would most certainly lead to a conflict, but they both doubted this would erupt into war. Thelevia’s armed forces were ill-trained, undisciplined and inexperienced, while those of Sanyxo were competent, well-versed veterans. Besides, Septimus could count on the support of Queen Léonie’s fatherland in any conflict; ties of mutual respect strengthened the natural tie of blood between the two countries.

The Sanyxon troops in the Royal Park must be summoned to their aid. Tytrus could not go. He must escort Queen Léonie, who was resolved to accompany Aleena and Serena into the king’s presence - something they could not delay much longer, certainly not long enough to allow relief to arrive. It was therefore decided to enlist the aid of the page Ginwill, whose discretion and ability to improvise (the flagon of wine had been his own idea) had already been proven. Like most royal pages, Ginwill was of noble birth; second son of a marquis, he’d been sent to court to improve his social polish and skills, a usual practice of the times.

He would leave the palace by means of the balcony window and hasten to the troops with all possible speed, and unseen.

With a couple of sword-slashes, Lord Tytrus cut down the thickly woven bell pulls, taking care not to tug them and thus call servants upon the scene. He tied them quickly together, slid back one of the glass doors that comprised the balcony wall, and lowered the silken rope. Meanwhile, Léonie rapidly penned a note to the Earl of Slankerty (Second-in-Command of the Sanyxon army as a whole and Commander-in-Chief of the two brigades that had been deemed necessary to ensure the safe journey of Léonie and Nomolos on the present occasion). The note briefly explained the situation and gave explicit instructions. The balcony was only fifteen feet from the ground. A few seconds later Ginwill was sliding down the sides of the dried-out moat. Its sides were vertical, but so overgrown with shrubs that an active boy or man had no difficulty in descending or ascending. The Sanyxon troops were to enter the palace by the same route. With Queen Léonie’s final admonition still sounding in his ears “*Remember! Under no circumstances are they to enter any other way!*” he climbed up the far side of the moat and sped off into the night.

Bored and yawning, Tytrus re-entered the antechamber. A cloak was now slung carelessly over his right shoulder; a cloak that reached to the ground, covering his sword arm and scabbard; a cloak he had not worn when leaving the chamber. But the Thelevian guards were still huddled in a corner and no one seemed to notice let alone care. With approval he noted that, not waiting for orders, his men had now donned full armour and the blue tabards of Sanyxo. Tall, muscular, hardened in battle, they towered over the uneasy Thelevians who were more familiar with smoky taverns than bloody battlefields. He slipped into the adjoining guardroom, donned armour and tabard, picked up his shield and shoved his spare sword into the empty scabbard at his waist.

It was high time they attend on the king. Who knew what new devilry he might hatch were they to keep him waiting too long? Léonie hurried into her own dressing room and with the expert help of her tiring-maid was ready in a very short time. She squared her shoulders and took a deep breath. A final glance in the floor-length mirror, then with a sigh of satisfaction she turned and made her way to the door. She was in full state regalia. As she moved, stiff gold-threaded folds of brocade rustled like autumn leaves and the ermine border of her red velvet cloak swished softly along the floor; a broad collar of diamonds sparkled at her throat, rubies girded her arms, ropes of pearls girdled her waist, diamond raindrops drooped from her ears. She felt the pressure of the heavily jewelled crown on her brow; 'twould give her the headache she knew, but 'twas indispensable for her purpose which was to confound and dismay. Her personal tastes were of the simplest, and she felt like an overloaded Maypole; but needs must when the devil drives - and he is a devil, she thought.

Pausing for an instant for a word with one of her sentries outside, Léonie re-entered the balcony room and was relieved to see that Queen Aleena and Princess Serena had followed her bidding and were also dressed in full ceremonial state. They had not understood her insistence on this, but frightened and fluttery as sacrificial hens, were only too willing to do the bidding of one who offered a helping hand and radiated strength and confidence. Léonie stepped forward to arrange Serena's cloak more becomingly and whisper words of encouragement in her ear.

Also attired in their most magnificent clothes, the ladies-in-waiting of the three royal ladies were present in force. Queen Léonie had given them the choice of accompanying their mistresses or not; and had assured them most sincerely that any lady who wished to remain in The Queen's Wing was free to do so without fear of incurring the slightest displeasure. "We females are oft timid creatures," she had said "Boldness is not usually part of our nature, which tends to compliance and mildness, and none shall take blame for acting in accord with her inborn nature." But boldness should not be confused with courage, and despite fluttering hearts and trembling knees, all had appeared, resolved to stand by their mistresses come what may. Mistresses and ladies numbered twenty-one in all.

Preceded by the two Sanyxon sentries, they made their stately way down the inner corridor to the antechamber, matching their pace and deportment to those of Queen Léonie who, ignoring protocol, had taken the lead with Aleena and Serena on either side, and had no intention of hastening at the behest of one she considered a brutish lout and cowardly bully. Faces flushed, eyes alight with nervous excitement, moving in a nimbus of glittering jewels, shiny satin, shimmering silk and lustrous velvet, the women resembled a bevy of brilliantly coloured butterflies or flock of exotic birds of paradise.

The Sanyxon sentries threw open the doors to the antechamber and stood aside to allow the

royal party to enter. One of them lacked a cloak and failed to present his sword in salute, but Léonie, usually a stickler where the slightest lapse in military dress and protocol was concerned, seemed too preoccupied to notice. Heads high, she and her charges stepped gracefully into the antechamber, and the looks on the faces of the King's Guards was all that Léonie had wished for and more. They were stupefied. How different from the earlier occasions upon which Queen Aleena, alone and en déshabillé, had been dragged, unresisting and white with humiliation before the king. Here was no timid, half-dressed royal spouse faint with fright, here no shy daughter blushing with dread and shame. Here was a regal sovereign and haughty princess, proud and stately, resplendent in ceremonial robes and crowns, surrounded by a host of richly clad and bejewelled noblewomen and accompanied by another high and mighty queen.

Lord Tytrus' eyes glinted with appreciation as he stepped forward to make his obeisance. He had never seen his queen so extravagantly attired and bejewelled in all their mutual lives, not even at her coronation! And she was actually wearing the gem-encrusted, heavy and much detested crown to boot! Léonie permitted herself an answering twitch of her lips as his amused eyes met hers; then turned to her royal companions.

“Come cousins! Come! Let us be on our way. Let us pay our dutiful respects to your lord and mine host, The King!”

And taking them by the hand, Aleena on her right and Serena on her left, she forestalled the obvious intention of the eight Thelevian guards to position themselves in a formal manner, namely one guard in front, one on each side, and one behind both queen and princess (an unnecessary display within the palace itself unless when escorting prisoners, and a subtle means of additionally insulting the royal consort and her daughter).

Tytrus, his men and Aleena's Own Guard then thwarted the escort still further by deftly closing up behind the group of gentlewomen, thus relegating the Thelevian escort to the very back, to trail along seething with impotent anger. Queen Aleena's sentries now hurried forward to open the doors, presenting arms as the small company passed out of The Queen's Wing into the outer hall.

The main contingent of King's Guards had been waiting impatiently, eagerly anticipating the reappearance of the escort with hapless queen and princess and growing increasingly puzzled and uneasy at the long delay. When the doors to The Queen's Wing finally opened to disgorge not two shrinking, terrified females hedged in by a wall of sneering soldiers, but a host of proud, swanlike creatures sweeping heedlessly by in a blaze of glittering gems and vibrant colour, accompanied by a guard of honour in full martial splendour, the Thelevians fell back in bewilderment, as staggered as the escort had been.

To his great joy, Tytrus saw a group of his comrades-in-arms just entering the main hallway the next Watch! The Changing of the Guard! Twelve Sanyxon guardsmen, all fully armed, ready to take over the watch and sentry duty. Their leader Baron Xavier, a close friend of Tytrus, immediately saw that something was afoot, and signing to his men to join the Sanyxon rearguard, dropped into step beside Tytrus who put him in the picture with a few terse words. Together, the Sanyxon sentries and their replacements plus The Watch and their replacements and The Queen's Guard now numbered thirty-two in all... twenty-four Sanyxons and eight Queen's Own Guards.

Baron Xavier had missed the page Ginwill and the instructions he bore by a matter of minutes. The page had run through the park straight as the crow flies, whereas The Changing of the Guard being a regular affair, Xavier had marched his men up to the palace along the main track. The sentries at the gate had not even bothered to look up from their dice as he and his men passed by.

Their progress down the main hall was a triumphal parade. The small party had reshuffled positions slightly: Lord Tytrus and Baron Xavier in Sanyxo blue and two captains in the green tabards of The Queen's Own Guard now preceded the royal party, while the rest of their small force brought up the rear and the fuming Thelevian escort trailed disconsolately in their wake. Behind these again came the main body of the King's Guards in a disorderly straggle. Expectant lackeys and idlers, who had clustered about the hall to gloat, gawped in open-mouthed dismay as the ladies stalked haughtily by.

As the procession approached the doors of the banqueting room, these were hastily thrown open by the astonished sentinels on duty. Now came the critical moment that Léonie had secretly feared. The moment when she would no longer be in control; the moment when that unpredictable, cruel brute the king might carry out his outrageous intentions despite the embarrassing pre-emptive presence of herself and her son. For Léonie now knew what he planned. During her hasty dressing, she had plied her tiring-maid Gudwun for information and had unleashed a torrent. Delighted at the rare opportunity, since Léonie usually discouraged gossip (though not shy to pry when the situation, as now, required it), Gudwun had told her all that had happened on the previous occasions that Belycose had demanded his queen's attendance. She had heard it from Aleena's maid two years previously, she said, when it had been the subject of horrified prattle among the servants for months. Léonie made no comment, but catching her eye in the mirror Gudwun blanched, fervently thanked the Good Lord she was not required to accompany her mistress; and decided to betake herself under her bed till all was over. It was then that Léonie had sent an urgent message to Aleena, saying it was imperative that she, Serena and all their train be dressed in their most sumptuous clothes, their most splendid jewels.

Léonie thus knew roughly what to expect, and also that from the moment they entered the banqueting hall she must rely on wits alone: her own and those of Tytrus. Her soldiers bore arms and must therefore remain at the entrance. Apart from the king's personal bodyguard of two men, no man might bear arms in the banqueting hall - a necessary precaution not only for reasons of the king's own personal safety but because weapons in drunken hands during drunken brawls had proved to have disastrous and sometimes deadly consequences (which says much about the manners and security of his court). Exceptions were necessarily made for royal guests, but Prince Nomolos had waived the privilege out of courtesy to his host, and both he and the single personal aide who attended him at these banquets had accordingly left their swords in their rooms. The King's Guard, however, would in this instance be allowed to enter armed in order to deliver their charges up to the king, and this would mean nine armed enemies inside the room (the eight of the escort plus the guard who had remained by Belycose) were Tytrus to prove unsuccessful...

But Tytrus did not fail her. As the ladies entered, the Sanyxon guards fell back to the sides of the doorway, stumbling clumsily over their own swords as they did so and inadvertently lurching into the path of the Thelevian escort now bustling forward to surround the royal

group. There was a scuffle as the escort tripped over the guards - pushing and shoving in an effort to regain balance - and a brief skirmish as this was resented. The king's sentries, who had stepped aside to enable the royal ladies to enter, were given as short shrift as the escort, and somehow, when everything had sorted itself out, escort and sentries found themselves cut off from the banqueting room by a solid wall of Sanyxon breastplates while, with sheathed swords, Tytrus and five of his men now stood across the entrance just outside the banqueting room but facing inwards. Lounging in casual attitudes, trying to look as harmless and relaxed as possible, bored and but vaguely interested in the proceedings, they would have deceived no one; but none in the room looked their way; all attention was on the ladies.

Forming a triangle, with Lord Tytrus and his five soldiers (facing the banqueting room) as the base, Baron Xavier (facing the hall) as the spearhead, and the remaining men-at-arms as the sides, the Sanyxons and Aleena's Own Guard comprised a most effective barrier, blocking all access to the banqueting room whose doors were still open. Baron Xavier unsheathed his sword, his companions to either side followed suit. The hands of Lord Tytrus and his men rested on the hilts of their swords, but they did not draw them. There was now but one armed man inside the banqueting hall - the bodyguard who had remained by the king when his companion hastened off to fetch queen and princess. Including escort and sentries, The King's Guard in the main hall barely outnumbered The Queen's Guard plus Sanyxons; however, of the latter, six were engaged in watching the royal ladies, ready to intervene should these be threatened. Still, each Sanyxon guard considered himself the equal of four Thelevians, and luckily the latter shared this opinion - they drew their swords, waved them about, glared, and awaited events.

They were all playing for time. The Thelevians were waiting for support from the garrison behind the palace (a footman had fled to raise the alarm) and the Sanyxons were waiting for reinforcements from their fellow countrymen in the park (they should be arriving any minute). In the banqueting hall, the appearance of the ladies was met with dumbfounded silence. In fact, until the doors to the banqueting hall had been thrown open and the tramp of approaching feet been heard, the whole company, including the king, had forgotten the promised amusement. A full hour had passed in which the wine had flowed freely, sluicing away coherent thinking, drowning memory in its wash. The opening doors and sound of approaching guards had recalled the king's command to mind and revived the chanting, but all eyes had turned to the doors expecting to see a piteous pair of frightened pigeons not this proud pageant of peacocks.

Fascinated... astounded... incredulous... the courtiers' expressions required a dictionary to do them justice. Stupid as he undoubtedly was, Belycose was not stupid enough to underestimate Léonie or to disregard her influence in any way; but in his befuddled state he had simply forgotten her, forgotten she was in the palace, in his queen's own wing! Her appearance was therefore a shock, and a gaggle of gorgeously attired, high-born ladies an added blow. A warning bell sounded in the drink-sodden mind, but the braggart bully pushed its way to the fore.

A further disagreeable surprise was the sight of his wife's face. No tears, no sign of the shaking and trembling, the helpless fright that always made the sport with her so enjoyable; she was a little pale it was true, but her head was high and her carriage regal. Frightened she might be, but if so she certainly wasn't showing it. The explanation was simple: for the first time since her marriage Aleena was not facing her spouse and his insolent cronies alone; for the first time

resistance was not completely hopeless, doomed from the outset; for the first time she had a chance to resist.

But the biggest surprise was his daughter! Serena had glided gracefully into the room without a glance to left or right; calm and confident, chin up, eyes bold, face flushed with something far removed from anxious shame. She had almost danced down the corridor, for she was about to join Nomolos; to join him, stand by his side, and face the world with him! It was just like one of the romances she was so fond of reading! She pressed her arm closer to her side, feeling the pressure of cold steel through the thin silken sleeve, remembering Léonie's whispered instructions as she'd twitched the velvet cloak into place.

Unlike Nature, Léonie did not abhor a vacuum; she found it useful. Taking advantage of the astonished lull, she walked quickly forward closely followed by her female train. Catching her son's eye, she gave a barely noticeable twitch of her head - an injunction to join her that he immediately obeyed, with Chumsey close on his heels. The royal board was at the far end of the hall, set at cross-angles to the other, longer tables; with swift strides, Nomolos and Chumsey had skirted the table and moved up the other side before Belycose realised what they were about. They reached the ladies just as these came to a halt in front of the king and made the elaborate, sweeping court-curtseys required by protocol. Also in accordance with protocol, Léonie waited for the king to speak first. He was leaning forward, peering at her out of bloodshot eyes under shaggy brows. Like a bull in the ring, she thought; puzzled, dazed, goaded by the banderilleros' darts and the picadors' lances to the point of exhaustion. But she had no illusions; like a maddened bull he was dangerous in his cunning stupidity.

Belycose was in a quandary. He knew what Léonie was about, had known, despite the alcoholic haze, the moment she'd walked in; and his instinct was to throw her out, to brook no interference in this his will and pleasure. Had she been any other queen he would have done so immediately without pause to consider, for it was unheard of that a royal guest should challenge a royal host - and that, he knew, was exactly what she had in mind. But the Sanyxons were a warlike people, a nation of soldiers. True, they had not made offensive war since the reign of Nomolos' grandfather Sextus, but the invasions and depredations of earlier generations had struck fear in the hearts of rulers throughout the continent; and the regular Sanyxon army was still large and admirably trained, and had considerable experience in defensive warfare. King Septimus was a peace-loving man, but insult or injury to his wife or his son and heir would have him and his country up in arms at once. And then too, Léonie was the only daughter of Ajax, Emperor and Warlord of Amogilon; not a man to let even the smallest slight to daughter or grandson go unavenged.

With a great effort he came out of his trance, forcing his mead-soused brain to coherent thought. His tongue was wine-heavy, unwieldy, ill able to frame thoughts that were none of the clearest; so he spoke slowly, carefully, to avoid slurring his speech. But though he'd always carried his drink well and had constant practice in speechifying when in his cups, he only half-succeeded. His diction was fuzzy, the sentences coherent but ill-advised, the tone insulting and the effect disastrous.

"Madame, Her Majesty doth me an overwhelming honour! Overwhelming! But methinks the present company be unfit, nay unseemly, for one as delicately nurtured as she. As Her Most Gracious Majesty doth see, 'tis but a rough man's board, with companions and tastes too lowly for a high-born lady let alone a royal queen!" and he gave a careless flip of his hand towards the painted, half-dressed mistresses and belles-amies and their intoxicated gallants.

Léonie took no pains to disguise her disgust.

“But not too lowly or unseemly for His Majesty’s wife or daughter ‘twould seem, Sire! Of a surety, they are of as royal blood as I!”

He seemed about to explode with suppressed wrath. His eyes narrowed, his mouth thinned to a mere slit.

“I brook no interference in my concerns, Madame, whether of politic or private nature! No more than would Your Majesty’s most unfortunate consort - who hath my profoundest sympathy - brook my interference in his doings!”

Nomolos and Chumsey exclaimed in indignation, angrily reaching for swords they did not bear, but Léonie smiled. He had lost his temper; that was good, that was very good. And so she smiled a tight, secretive smile of triumph; a smile of such deliberate, smug, supercilious amusement and utter disdain that Belycose went berserk and threw all caution and curbs to the winds.

“My charming, whimpering whore of a wife and spineless milksop of a daughter do as I command! Say I ‘Crawl in the straw and eat the dung of the stable’, that will they do! Say I ‘Sup with the beggar, the thief, the leper, the devil himself’, then thus will it be!” he bellowed, eyes starting from his head, flecks of spittle appearing at the corners of a mouth working with rage.

“And thou, Madame!” dropping her title completely, for he was now quite out of control. “Thou, Madame! Take care how thou dost incense me, lest thou savour the hospitality of my dungeons and yon craven cur of whore-spawn thou callest son exchange a princess’s embrace for that of The Iron Maiden!”<sup>1</sup>

He had gone too far; much too far. In the same instant he knew it, the gasps of his courtiers told it, the face of Léonie showed it. Then things happened so fast that he was not able to determine afterwards what had come first, next, last or how.

### *Ace up Her Sleeve*

Certain only was that, about to rush forward, Nomolos and Chumsey were hindered by Serena and Léonie embracing them in an apparent effort to hold them back, while the king’s own remaining bodyguard drew his sword and sprang onto the table, ready to defend his royal master (the following events Belycose only glimpsed between and around the guard’s sturdy calves). Then Léonie and Serena fell back and the prince and his aide suddenly held swords in their hands!

There followed a blur, a rough-and-tumble and the sound of heavy chairs crashing to the floor as men sprang up, cursing, swaying, falling over each other and their own drunken legs. Feet were pounding down the room, armour squeaking and clanging, men shouting, women shrieking. A cordon of steel now surrounded the royal ladies and their entourage, drawn blades menacing all who strayed too near. In the hall outside a full-scale battle seemed under way; armoured forms swayed back and forth - tabards of blue, red or green framed briefly in the open doorway, passing and re-passing in the erratic dance of defence and attack.

<sup>1</sup> An upright, coffin-shaped box lined with iron spikes; standard fitting of any respectable torture chamber

Earl Richard had arrived in the nick of time. Stealing swiftly but silently through the park, using siege-ladders to cross the moat and enter Aleena's balcony room, he and his men emerged from The Queen's Wing just as reinforcements from the Thelevian barracks rushed in through the servants' entrance at the back of the palace. They met in the main hall and the clash was immediate.

As already said, the Thelevians themselves made poor soldiers, theirs was a land grown rich from trading, well able to employ and pay mercenaries from other more warlike races to fight its battles. Thus, of the troops now pouring in to do battle on behalf of Thelevia, almost half were foreigners whose job, whose whole *raison d'être*, was fighting. However, they had expected just a handful of some thirty Sanyxon soldiers to be mopped up in a single swipe, not what appeared to be a whole battalion! And where had they come from? Popping out of a door halfway down the main hall like rabbits from a burrow! Surprised by the sudden appearance and size of the opposing force, startled by a harrowing, spine-chilling cry, confused by the instant attack, the king's men hesitated - and were lost.

There was no hesitation on the Sanyxon side and no waiting for orders. Richard, Earl of Slankerty was a popular commander. Joining the army as cadet at the tender age of fourteen, he rose quickly to cornet, then commissioned officer, and steadily worked his way up the ranks to Second-in-Command of the Sanyxon Army. In common with all popular or unpopular men, he'd been given a nickname, a nickname that had however changed with time. As a podgy, spotty adolescent he'd been dubbed Spotted Dick in honour of the popular suet-and-currant pudding of that name, but as he grew older his war-craft and cunning earned him increasing renown and the epithet 'Dodgy Dickon' (Dickon being a more respectful diminutive of Richard). In contrast to most Viking-like Sanyxons, the earl was of medium height, black-haired and blue-eyed: a dark, intense man in whom all the fire and energy of a Celtic mother blended with the calm discipline of a Sanyxon father to a ferocious but cool-headed warrior who never shirked a confrontation or shunned a battle, never blenched before overwhelming odds - and never led his men into unwarranted danger. He was also always first into battle.

With the blood-curdling Celtic war cry with which his ancestors had once disconcerted the Romans (their descendant found it most useful in unnerving an enemy) he fell on the leading Thelevian troops, his own men hot on his heels.

In fifteen minutes it was over.

### **Excerpt B:**

So Ben was sent back to Amelin bearing a letter (lacking address and unsigned for fear of accident). Avoiding the town, he rode direct to Forthwright Farm and returned with Mr Gentley. (Had Bélis been less impatient he would have been there to see them go and have them followed.) Farmer Phil would have liked to accompany them, but could not bear leaving the little Gentleys (whose Granddad he had come to consider himself to be) "*ter go a-traipsin' rahnd arter yon 'are-brained feller-me-lad'*". But he sent his love with hothouse peaches and grapes to Diminity and a ticking off in the form of an ink-spattered, adventurously spelled and punctuation-famished letter to her spouse, which missile Buffy was forced to hand over to his wife for translation.

Beginning in a tone of severe reproach, the letter soon tired of verbal rebuke and relaxed into comfortable gossip including: *“That there blakbrowd blakarted divil as wur avisitin wi Sqire uv takken is uglie visiage an is raskley pack off sumwears an gude ridans two. E cum a-pokin rahnd ere afor e waint but got wery shoort shrifft fer is truble.”*

According to Mr Gentley the ‘shoort shrifft’ had consisted of a stalwart array of field hands, farmhands, drovers and shepherds, brawny and brown from sun, wind and hard physical labour, flourishing pitchforks and billhooks, horsewhips and cow-prods...

Bélis’s attack could not have been more mistimed, his victims more misjudged. He had counted on proven allies (i.e., poor light, shock and terror) to frighten a few peaceable, simple-minded yokels into trembling submission; but sweeping into the farmstead at dusk in full armour, with drawn swords and fierce shouts, he and his followers had found themselves in the midst of the annual harvest supper when all workers from the extensive estate gathered in the great rickyard to celebrate the successful reaping of the corn, the basis of their survival.

Spits of suckling-pigs and oxen turned over open fires, great baskets of hot bread, fruit, tomatoes and cheese, and bowls of baked potatoes and butter made the rounds, and a hundred men and more sat with their families at the long trestle-tables. As the soldiers burst through the archway, the children certainly did scream and panic, but not so the womenfolk and certainly not the men.

For many a weary year, the neighbourhood had been overrun by organised bands of outlaws, brigands and smugglers, and raids and alarms had become part and parcel of rural life. That time was not long past and far from forgotten. The marauders had ultimately been driven out not by military aid (repeatedly promised but never appearing), but by desperate and determined peasants banding together, fighting for their own and their families’ survival and future.

A moment of stunned paralysis, then the company jumped from its benches, mothers snatching up children and fleeing to the nearest shelter or, hemmed in by the circle of horsemen, taking cover under the tables; men running for weapons wherever they found a break in the ring of riders, or throwing themselves at the horses’ heads, tugging down bridles regardless of slashing swords and sabres. They did not know that their attackers had strict orders not to kill or seriously maim...

Bélis could not afford to bring the whole country up in arms against him - England was famous for defence of its sovereignty. It might itself slaughter as much of its civil population as it pleased, but this was a jealously guarded privilege that no foreigner was allowed to share, and the last thing the prince wanted was to be hunted down in a land whose only border was a stormy ocean and many of whose inhabitants were seasoned seafarers and soldiers. No invader had penetrated its mix of natural defences and native defiance for many a hundred years, and presumably never would unless and until pigs and men could fly.

The ‘simple-minded yokels’ had no such considerations or restraints and applied their homely weapons in earnest...

Natalie Nicely, caught crossing the yard with a tureen of hot soup by the leading horseman,

flung its contents into the horse's eyes and the pot at its rider. Pamela Gentley, bearing a platter of spare-ribs, bent and unleashed the guard dogs, tossed the ribs under the clattering hooves with the dogs in hot pursuit and the platter onto a helmeted head. Betty Hutton drew a linchpin from a loaded haywain, sending bales bouncing and tumbling in all directions, then hitched up her skirts and ran to fetch Billy-goat Buttem.

Timid little Sally Forthe, the goose girl, covered herself with glory by personally leading her charges into battle - and those feathered xenophobes indulged their ancestral hatred of trespassers to the full: long necks stretched, powerful wings flapping, sharp beaks tweaking, beady eyes vicious, they scuttled into attack with Gander Snapitt well to the fore.

Those chambermaids who'd escaped from the circle raced upstairs, and lacking military hardware resorted to the domestic kind, pitching warming pans and chamber pots through opened casements with deadly aim and effect.

Led by that tough little termagant Tilly - always spoiling for a fight - the dairymaids made a bold sally between skittish rumps and brawny arms to the poultry sheds, filled pockets and aprons, and pelted the intruders with eggs. Determined not to be outdone, the older children, delirious with excitement and charmed by this novel mode of warfare, resorted to softer missiles. Dashing to the farmyard midden they grabbed up handful after handful of reeking dung, flinging it into the mêlée with a zest that made no distinction between friend and foe.

Phil Forthwright had left the feast for a while to attend a difficult calving (females, human or otherwise, having no regard for the convenience of others on such occasions) and was in the byre helping Bill Hutton when the attack began. Hearing the tumult, farmer and vet rushed to the byre door to find a steel-capped, steel-corseted warrior bearing down upon them brandishing a sword. Grabbing the hay-fork that held open the door, Phil jabbed the rider square in the chest, knocking him clean out of the saddle, while Bill hit the horse hard on the nose with the delivery-forceps.

George Gentley had just emerged from the cellar, staggering under the weight of a barrel of home-brewed ale. His eyes darting in all directions in instinctive search of wife and children, he threw the barrel under the feet of the nearest horse, sending it stumbling into its neighbour. The stout oak cask continued rolling over the cobblestones, kicked here and there by flailing hooves and bringing down a number of riders before it finally burst.

Add to all this barking terriers, intent sheepdogs and business-like bulldogs darting in and out of the fracas, snapping at fetlocks and nipping at ankles, giving spine-chilling yowls as hooves trod on tails; the thump of billy-goat horns applied to tender places, the insistent lowing of curious cows, squealing of nervous horses, braying of bad-tempered donkeys, fluttering and cackling of hysterical hens and the whole scale of shouts, yells, screams, curses, shrieks and howls of which the human throat is capable, and one gets a vague idea of the commotion.

Completely bowled over by the speed, vigour and boldness of the defence, deafened by the noise, Bélis and his retainers were speedily routed; and retiring discomfited and in disarray, were hotly pursued for some distance down the track by Mistress Nicely wielding her frying pan, Gander Snappit, Billy-goat Buttem and the bull mastiffs Getim and Grabber - all five being of resolute turn of mind and tenacious nature, and fervent believers in the sanctity of hearth and home.

The farmhands shooed the animals back into their proper quarters, took broom and shovel to the mess, and returned to their repast with appetites sharpened and thirst wetted by massive doses of adrenalin. Puffed out chests and puffed up egos were much in evidence (both better deserved than is usually the case), and events were already being mentally magnified and embroidered for hyperbolic effect. The tales would improve with time, as good tales and good wine always do, and the brave deeds of that day recalled and extolled for many years to come...

Strange things are fame and ignominy...

Not all are born to be bold or brave, and one little lad covered himself with shame not glory. After snaffling a virgin fruit pie, Mrs Horner's youngest son fled to a quiet corner, and sticking his thumb through the crust to get at the plums, struck capital out of dismay and disorder. Throughout the turmoil and seemingly quite unconscious of it, Jack sat contentedly munching and smacking his lips without a thought for the safety of family and friends. Indeed he considered himself a very good boy indeed for keeping out of trouble's way, and was later astonished by his mother's mortification and his comrades' contempt.

Strange things are fame and ignominy. The saga of Forthwright Farm and its defenders would eventually fade and be forgotten, buried under worse tribulations and braver deeds of later generations; but Jack's greed proved immortal; lampooned by a jeering schoolfellow, it passed on to posterity in the form of a nursery rhyme.

Strange things are fame and ignominy. Good men, just men, come and go and are in due course forgotten; the bad or base, never.

## **PART 2: Excerpt A**

Inside the pub the notion had appeared brilliant, but outside the rest of the gang was already having second thoughts; the E-pills taken hours ago had lost their effect. Only Bill's dogged and increasingly aggressive reiteration of the fact that they'd be undisturbed for at least two hours finally got them moving at all. Reluctantly they turned up their collars and trailed after Bullyboy, following the bobbing torchlight towards the cliff path.

The floodlight revealed a simple mortise lock on the back door, so entrance was easy - a raised foot and a shattered lock with the window smashed in for good measure; but apart from a pair of binoculars for bird-watching and a couple of wooden carvings, presents from Sandy, there was little worth stealing. The ancient transistor radio with its Bakelite case, a relic of a long-vanished era, was examined with jeers of derision, as was an old Brownie box-camera, at least a hundred years old, a keepsake from Aileen's mother. There was no medicine cabinet in the bathroom, just a shelf with aspirin and bicarb; no drugs at all. The shotgun hung within easy reach behind the back door and was pounced on immediately; it was loaded, but intensive search revealed no further ammunition.

They wreaked vindictive revenge for the disappointment by breaking everything breakable and taking knives to the rest. Books were torn from shelves, pages ripped out, photo-frames broken and the glass ground into the carpet; eggs, milk, tea, butter, flour, porridge, soup and soap flakes landed on the floor, and linen and clothes, yanked out of drawers and wardrobes, were thrown on top and trodden spitefully into the mess.

Though by then a bundle of nerves, doubts and fears, and plagued by a bout of chronic indigestion, it was Windy who thought of deeds and documents. There must be an assignment of leasehold or conveyance of freehold, insurance policies... pension papers... passport... maybe even a will, he said. Bank books too! None of these were likely to be of any use to them, but destroyed they'd cause the woman infinite trouble to replace and all were inflammable. But they searched in vain; Aileen was sensible, Aileen was careful. All documents including bank books were in a box in a bank-vault and her cash and bank card were in the shoulder-bag that went everywhere with her; credit cards she had none. But they found her current-account statements - the bitch was rich!

The discovery increased their anger. Bullyboy found an axe in the lean-to woodshed and demolished the Aga, the heart of the house, and they all peed in the well; but somehow this only served to augment the overpowering urge to do violence that now had them firmly in grip. A decanter of brandy and one of whisky together with a porcelain jar of biscuits always graced the sideboard in Aileen's living-room (one of her few concessions to luxury). They drained the bottles and ate the biscuits and tossed bottles and jar into the stone hearth. Drunk too rapidly, the alcohol went just as rapidly to their heads and unleashed all the latent petty evil; the brakes came off with a vengeance. Disappointed and disgruntled, they looked around

for other means to pay back the bitch for the vile double crime of affluence and thrift. How could an honest housebreaker ever hope to make a living if such habits caught on?

Again it was Windy who suggested the chalet. Terrified of discovery, ears flapping anxiously for the slightest hint of the couple's return, he'd drunk only a mouthful or two of the brandy. If the man and woman came back too soon he wanted to be able to run fast and in a straight line. But his companions' talent for malicious damage both startled and fascinated him; he was curious as to just how far they would go. Drunk as they were, it would take but a word to inflame them. Watching them stagger around, faces flushed, eyes glassy and unfocused, Windy felt his own superiority keenly. His was definitely the only brain in this outfit.

The floodlight flashed on again as they went out of the door, and by its light they lurched down the cinder-path leading to the chalet. The door wasn't locked. Sandy possessed nothing worth stealing and wished to avoid a broken lock. The fire in the kitchen grate had been carefully damped-down with moist peat, since he also wished to avoid a burned-down home. A paraffin lamp stood on the table in the middle of the room, and after much fumbling with a contraption he'd seen only in films, Windy managed to remove the glass and light it. The flame flared up with a silken whoosh and he hastily adjusted the wick.

He'd reckoned that Sandy would have some sculptures lying around for the taking - and there they were. Two shelves mounted on the wall were filled with carvings, and a third shelf held the half-finished model of a seagull together with various small knives, some of which looked like potato-peelers and apple-corers. He picked up the unfinished carving, a seagull with only one wing and one leg. Windy remembered the bird; he'd tried to catch it last winter but its beak had been too quick and too sharp.

The tablecloth would do to carry the carvings. He turned, and removing the lamp set it down on a stool by the door. There was another object on the table, pipes of some kind... the kind shown in fantasy films and children's fairy-stories; hollow tubes of differing lengths stuck together. He picked the thing up, wondering if it was worth the taking, and with a shrug shoved it in his trouser pocket. He whisked off the tablecloth, laid it on the floor, swept the carvings off the shelves onto it, and tied the four corners together. The others were rooting around in a disgruntled manner, vexed at the continuing lack of valuables. Examination of the sitting room and tiny bedroom had revealed them to be equally Spartan. Frowning, Bullyboy watched Windy swing the sack over his shoulder, and swayed drunkenly towards him.

*"Ere, you! Not thinkin' of clearin' off with that lot all on yer own are yer? We're all in on this!"*

Windy froze in terror.

*"Just packing things up, that's all! Here! You can carry them if you want!"*

He swung the bundle off his back and held it out with both hands. Grabbing it, Bullyboy tried to heave it onto his own back, but unsteady as he was its weight pulled him off balance. The carvings fell to the floor and he on top of them. There were sharp cracking sounds as fragile wooden objects snapped under his weight. Windy closed his eyes in exasperation.

A vicious bad-tempered kick from Bullyboy sent the bundle flying into a wall; the knot gave way and a splintered jumble fell out. Bill's drunken interest vanished as suddenly as it had arisen,

and he turned away leaving Windy to gather up the bits. A couple of carvings were still intact, and after a quick glance in Bill's direction Windy unzipped his anorak and slipped them inside. Innerly he was seething - what a waste! They'd have brought a good bit on the Internet!

The other day the Tele had shown a carving of a hawk killing a mouse that had been auctioned for two hundred thousand quid! Two hundred thousand! There'd been close-ups of the sculpture from all angles showing what the auctioneer had called 'meticulous attention to detail', 'astounding realism' and 'fabulous workmanship', but as far as Woody could see Sandy's carvings were just as good! He could have sold these here for a fortune and at long last left home - away from his mother's canasta clubs, parties, and muscular young fitness-trainers and his father's golf-clubs, specious speeches and short-skirted typists! Shit, shit, shit! That stupid fat bugger! That drunken slob! That cretinous ape!

Petty crime abruptly lost its appeal - crime involving drunken persuaders, muggers, shoplifters, pickpockets, bookies' runners, fences and the like. A big-shot role in that sort of crime no longer seemed attractive. He looked round the room with disfavour, seeing his companions for what they really were, Not the rough diamonds with soft kernels and their own code of honour, not the debonair gentlemen with ingenious brainwaves that Hollywood so often cracked crooks up to be, not the disadvantaged unfortunates cherished by social workers, nor yet the products of poor schooling.

They were scum! No different from the moneyed, well-educated members of his father's select circle; those unprincipled, sticky-fingered merchant bankers and politicians, masters of crime and champions of corruption that comprise the upper crust of criminal society and deal only in large-scale corporate theft and city fraud. He'd seen his father's friends rotten drunk too a couple of times; they called it 'in their cups' or 'three sheets in the wind', but that didn't make it any more attractive than the 'pissed' or 'boozed up' condition of less educated drunks.

He turned away in disgust... and met Tiny's horrified gaze. Tiny had been violently sick, and though he felt wretchedly ill his mind was clearing and the realisation of what they had done was creeping in. The boy looked as if he'd had a nightmare and woken up to find it reality. Panic, fear, shame, disbelief... a host of emotions crowded his face. He was unconsciously wringing his hands and mumbling "No! No! No!" over and over in a monotonous undertone.

Six months older than Tiny in age, Windy was aeons older in worldly wisdom (though not half as knowing as he himself believed), and Tiny had always regarded him with an admiration bordering on hero-worship; but now the boy's eyes were hot and accusing, and Windy was smitten with an unfamiliar sensation of mortification. Tiny wasn't like the others. But before he could speak a scuffle broke out between Bullyboy and Dungeon.

The alcohol status in blood and brain had swiftly changed, and with it the mood of the gang. The adrenalin surge had subsided and excitement deflated into the maudlin or morose, with the quarrelsome stage just round the corner; and now that corner was turned. Staggering about, brain befuddled with a cocktail of E-pills, beer, whisky and brandy, Bill had tripped over Dan's feet, fallen heavily - and got up punching.

He was bigger and beefier than the younger man, but Dan had no flab and powerful shoulders. Though handy with his fists he'd never been known to start a fight, but neither had he ever been known to back down from one, a trait that had had him up in court and bound over to

keep the peace on a couple of occasions. He was the only one of the crew who Bill failed to make nervous. Now he just fended Bill off at first, pulling his punches, not interested in a serious fight; but then Bullyboy's drug-misted brain remembered the heavy rings on his thick fingers, and the tussle turned nasty.

The others scattered like chaff in the wind. Falling over themselves to get out of the way of flailing fists and swinging boots that came dangerously near in the tiny room, they made a simultaneous rush for the door and in so doing overturned the stool. The lamp crashed to the floor shedding drops of fiery rain. A spout of blazing oil gushed out and in an instant a sheet of flame shot up from the wooden floor to the wooden beams above.

Skinny and Spike were first out of the door, getting stuck in their panic and finally being hammered through by a frantic Sunny and Dandy hard on their heels. Falling in a tangle of arms and legs, they picked themselves up and went haring up the garden path. For probably the first time in his life Windy thought of someone else - grabbing the dazed Tiny by the arm, he hustled him through the doorway and began pulling him along the path.

There were yells and screams behind them, and glancing back he saw Bill and Dan burst through the door in quick succession, both on fire, flames licking up trousers and sleeves. Bill's pony-tail was alight, and bellowing like a maddened bull he was trying to put out the flames. Then Dan flung himself onto the wet grass beside the path, reaching out and dragging Bill with him. He rolled over and over dousing the flames, and Bill followed suit. Windy didn't go back to help; he reckoned he'd enough on his plate spurring on Tiny, who seemed to be in some kind of shock. Judging from the noise they were making, the two were in no danger of kicking the bucket just yet.

Windy and Tiny were halfway up the path when an unearthly, blood-curdling screech stopped them dead in their tracks. It came from the chalet they'd just left, and never, never in all their born days had they heard anything so appalling. The screech rose to a ghastly crescendo, setting teeth and nerves on edge... and it seemed to be getting closer! Bill and Dan had fallen silent and were gazing back at the chalet - and then they were on their feet and running, yelling again, not in pain but in horror, and something was bounding down the path after them... a leaping ball of fire, and in its depths a glimpse of flaming talons, needle-sharp teeth and fiery eyes. A whiff of hell and an ear-shattering shriek, and then the thing passed them and was gone. Ahead there were screams as it overtook the others. Tiny fainted, a dead weight that Windy could no longer support; but, catching up, Bill and Dan - blackened, blistered and singed as they were - grabbed an arm each, hauling the unconscious boy along the rough cinder-path after them with no regard for scrapes and bumps. A terrified Windy scuttled fearfully along behind.

But the night had not finished with them yet; not by a long way...

Chalet, garden and cottage now lay behind them. His rough passage up the cinder-path seemed to have revived Tiny who was moving under his own steam again; and they had almost reached the top of the track leading out of the hollow when a "Pssst!!" from those in front halted them.

Dandy Jim came slithering back down the slope on his stomach. "Company!" he hissed. At the top of the slope, where the track curved over the rise and began its descent to the town,

faintly visible in the red glow from the burning chalet, stood a man and woman. Mrs Aileen and Sandy! Instinctively the men dropped onto all fours and crawled off the track into the stunted scrub growing on either side. Then came a blinding flash of light and the world blew apart.

The shock-wave reached them before the sound, and after the sound there was silence. They were dimly aware of debris raining down and that they'd wet their pants for the second time that night. Gradually hearing returned, but all seemed unreal, as if happening at a great distance and to someone else. Completely drained, body and emotion exhausted, they remained where they were, hugging the moist earth under the sheltering undergrowth, gratefully gulping the salt-soaked air, dimly aware of the distant boom of the turning tide, reluctant to rise and return to painful reality.

Somewhere along the line they became conscious of sirens, floodlights and voices. Fire engines, police cars, ambulances hurtled past - as far as anything could hurtle over that rough trail; but bouncing, bounding, skidding, swaying, rattling, rocking, they gave their very best. A barrier was laid across the track and policemen posted to discourage the curious; a futile gesture, for when the rubbernecks arrived they would bypass the barrier, swarming out across grass and scrub, determined to enjoy whatever tragedy and horror had triggered so impressive a turnout.

Windy's brain began working again. They had to get out of here! He peered at his cheap Timex (the Rolex his father had bought him lay untouched in its leather case at the bottom of his sock drawer). The hands glowed faintly green, pointing to almost eleven... Pubs would be emptying now, workers had to get up in the morning... but the howl of the sirens, the revolving lights, those symbols of civil might, would make them stop and stare. The arc lights that turned night into day and the conflagration reflected from the low-lying clouds would send them hurrying up to the headland, drawn by the irresistible attraction of someone else's disaster.

Time to get moving, then! Cautious whispers and nudges brought all eight together. Most of the floodlights were directed onto the chalet and cottage; only one lit up the track, and the thick bushes on each side provided good cover. Keeping well below the skyline, they crawled and slithered around the edge of the dell, keeping to the right - the side away from the most populated part of the island. Windy had it all worked out...

To the left and below Nell's Point lay a long sandy beach and promenade; to the right The Old Harbour, a silted-up bay, relict of the maritime trade of earlier generations. When the tide was out, the mud-flats of the defunct harbour stretched from Nell's Point to a housing estate on a flat promontory of the mainland. The slimy, grey-brown mud was littered with the stark bones of derelict hulks, sunk years ago as obstacles to an impending invasion that never took place. The air reeked of putrefaction from the rank remains of stranded seabeings and rotting seaweed, and in the daytime was noisy with quarrelsome seagulls seeking something to scavenge. Certainly not a place in which to sunbathe or picnic - or even swim when the tide was full, for the wrecks were too near the surface and gave rise to strong and wayward currents.

In this bay (about a mile distant as the crow flies from beach and promenade on the other side of the point) was a tumbledown wharf, deserted even in daytime; and on the landward side of the wharf was the road that had once borne ships' cargoes to their various destinations and now bore weekend trippers to and away from sun, sand, and provocative T-shirts - the modern equivalent of kiss-me-quick hats.

Beyond this road (and still on the island) lay a ghetto of small red-brick terrace houses, once quartering dockers, sailors, ferrymen and pilots, but now first-homes for penurious newly-weds, last-homes for impoverished pensioners, or weekend energisers for city-drained clerks. Here the gang could melt into the murky warren of back-alleys behind the streets – back-alleys left unlit by a council that had decided to forgo the luxury of lamps in dark alleyways in favour of a prestigious monument in front of the town hall.<sup>11</sup> But to get to the wharf and from thence to safety, the gang must first scramble over the cliffs on the other side of the headland, no easy climb even in the broad light of day.

Crawling crabwise away from the track, they finally judged themselves far enough away from the lights and action, and slithered snakelike over the edge of the dell. Here the scrub ceased abruptly and the wind hit them with the force of a sledgehammer. While they were in the hollow the tide had turned and with it the wind direction. On the exposed cliff top it was impossible to stand upright. Heads bent before the blast, they were forced to crawl on all fours to the edge of the cliff above the Old Harbour. There was no path of any kind, just a sheer drop of some seven feet onto a fairly flat, sloping ledge and below this a steep jumble of jagged, limpet-crusting rocks leading down to the mud-flats.

The incoming tide was already crashing against an outlying cluster of rocks some hundred feet distant, and brief bursts of wind-borne spray gusted up in their faces. Along the shoreward side of the harbour ran the road to the mainland, and the reflection of its lamps in waves and foam was the only source of light. Below them lay blackness, sharp and slippery rocks, rock-pools and other unseen pitfalls. They were still under shock and all felt ill. Except for Windy and Tiny, all had drunk too much and now vomited exhaustively. Debilitated, bathed in ice-cold sweat, their limbs as jelly and with pounding headaches, they wanted nothing so much as to lie down and die, but panic and desperation kept them moving.

Bill's torch had been lost in the fire, and though they knew the ledge was there, it was too dark to see it - misjudge the leap and they'd smash on the rocks below. As the tallest, Tiny went first. Lying on his stomach, he swung his legs over the cliff edge while Dungeon and Bullyboy held his arms and lowered him down. As the heaviest, Bullyboy followed next, his feet guided by Tiny while Dungeon, the strongest, took the strain from above. Then came their meal-ticket Windy, followed by Dandy and the lightweights Skinny, Sunny and Spike. Once on the ledge, each new arrival immediately clambered further down to the rocks below leaving Tiny to guide the next man down. In the daytime four or five had place on the ledge, but in the dark two at a time were one too many.

Being last, Dungeon would have no support from above and would have to drop the last few feet with no way of judging the distance; it needed two strong men below to catch and support him. So lanky Tiny climbed down in turn and was replaced by Bullyboy and Dandy. Legs braced, pressing close to the cliff to withstand the clutches of the wind, they stood ready to

11: The council had wanted a sculpture illustrating 'Right is Might' (a maxim as provocative as it was hackneyed, hinting as it did that bureaucracy wins every time), and a renowned artist of the modern school had obliged with a lump of bronze that cost a million and, with some imagination, might be seen as a bunched fist with an admonitory finger raised to heaven. This monument to parochial importance was to be unveiled as soon as a local stonemason had chipped title and date on the marble plinth, the sculptor being above such lowly task. But on the morning this was to be done, a phone call had mayor and council hurrying out to the front of the town hall to face a grinning crowd and smirking mason. "Someone was quicker!" he said, and pointed to the plinth. Crudely carved were the words 'Up Yours!'

break Dan's fall, but scrabbling with feet and hands he slithered rather than fell, and a second later all three were scrambling over the rocks in the wake of the others.

On the ledge they had just left, something began to glow very faintly, a dim phosphorous shimmer in the black pall of night. The wind paused to examine it, stroked its surface, turned it over. Venturing out from the folds of Mother's storm-cloak, a baby breeze wafted gently into the hollow heart of the thing. The glow pulsated, quivering like a living creature, like a horse eager to race, a hound eager to hunt. Softly the pipes began to play. They'd fallen out of the pocket of Windy's baggy hip-hop pants as he jumped from the ledge, but he hadn't noticed; he'd had other things on his mind.

Against the howl of the wind and the crash of the advancing breakers, conversation was impossible. The going was incredibly rough, much harder than their worst expectations. Over the din, Dungeon yelled that it would be best to climb straight down to the foot of the cliff and skirt its base. There a narrow band of shelly sand would make easy going and with luck they could outrun the incoming tide. It all depended on how fast they could get to the cliff bottom. Till now, they'd been clambering horizontally across the rocks parallel to the shore, but besides natural obstacles of rocks and pools, great slabs of concrete and rusting iron cable occasionally blocked their way - remnants of wartime bunkers and ack-ack turrets erected to defend the peninsula against the onslaught of men, and later broken up to defend it against the onslaught of the sea.

They were three-quarters of the way down when Windy began to scream. He'd been some way in front of the others, his progress audible as the rattle of stones, an occasional splash and yelp of pain. Now there was a sudden flurry of movement and sound and a cry of alarm followed by a blood-curdling shriek. For a moment they stood unmoving, petrified, hair standing on end, remembering that horrible thing on the cottage path. Then they fled; falling over rocks and into pools, scrambling on all fours not towards but away from whatever had befallen their pal.

Up to then, fear and the innate herd instinct in the face of a common danger had kept them together, helping each other; but now the still deeper-rooted instinct of self-preservation took over and it was each for himself and the devil take the hindmost. Behind them a squeal like a stuck pig was sharply cut off, giving way to a moaning, a whimpering and gibbering that were somehow worse than the screeching. Another flurry of movement - and a huge shadow, darker than the night, was amongst them. Great pinions beat against faces and heads, talons ripped, sharp daggers hacked at clothes and flesh; the visitant was everywhere at once. They were all bellowing and screaming. Then the shadow was gone as suddenly as it had come.

Sobbing for breath, arms flailing about their heads, fighting off an assailant that was no longer there, they blundered on downwards, tripping and falling, gathering cuts, scrapes and bruises on the way. More dead than alive, they eventually reached the bottom of the cliff where they crowded together, each seeking the support and reassurance of his fellows. Dungeon was hysterical, gabbling non-stop... he knew a vampire when he met one! But the others were beyond speech and coherent thought. None of their wounds was fatal or anyway near it, but they were bleeding profusely as flesh injuries often do; and unable to see in the dark, each was convinced he was bleeding to death.

Tendrils of water were invading the sandy strip, forerunners of the breakers that by now had almost rounded the outlying reef; but the storm had abated, the gale had dropped to a stiff

onshore breeze. Sound carries well over water, and they could hear the increasing hum of traffic on the main road as news of the fire spread through the town and people came to look. The moon had emerged from the clouds and the cliff loomed darkly above them, throwing menacing shadows. Out in the bay a sea leopard barked. With one accord, still bunched together, they made a rush for the wharf and the road beyond. No one noticed that Windy was missing.

They had taken maybe a half-dozen steps when the first crab appeared - a ghost crab, translucent white. Seconds later the creatures were all over them, in their pockets, pants and hair, and the sand underfoot was suddenly studded with limpets, the hard, knobby shells painful through the soles of their trainers. Then the tide came in with a rush and with it sea creatures of every kind. Lobsters pinched them, sea-urchins pricked them, jellyfish stung, seaweed clung. They lost all sense of direction, time, and reality itself . . .

Police and newspapers put it down to drugs; drugs and alcohol. Then a hospital spokesman pointed out that though six of the gang had tested positive for Ecstasy, the blood tests for one of the youths had revealed no sign of drugs and an alcohol level that was not excessive. Okay, then mass hysteria! That was it!

Psychologists had a beano, reporters went to town. Everyone had his or her own theory and aired it to whomsoever would listen . . . Sandy and Aileen went their way and thought their thoughts and said not a word.

### **Excerpt B**

“You ill, so Poopsy he bring present. He think pipes pretty, they please you, make you better.”

“Well maybe they did at that,” said Lily with a smile and a pat for Poopsy.

“They must be extremely valuable,” said Bryn. “I bet they were pinched and the thief had to dump them. Too easily identified,” he explained. “I’ll take them down to the police station first thing tomorrow and hand them in.”

\*

The moon came out from behind a cloud. It peeped through the French window at the sleeping dog, bathing it in a ghostly white pool of light, waking it up. Poopsy yawned and rolled over onto his back, paws waving foolishly in the air. Another mighty yawn, then he rolled back again and got drowsily to his feet. He shook himself vigorously and looked about. He felt a bit peckish, time for his midnight snack. He padded into the kitchen.

Katinka had filled his bowl with biscuits, the kind he liked best. He was fond of Katinka, very; knew what a growing dog needed, she did. No funny ideas about keeping a dog in top-fit condition like that Desmond Bradley. Not that he hadn’t been fond of Desmond, mind; a good master he’d been, patient and kind, but with too sharp an eye on a dog’s figure for Poopsy’s liking. And then, too, there’d been the fellow’s strange obsession with dead birds, expecting a dog to pick up the nasty things in his mouth, with the overpowering reek of oil and gunpowder and hot metal tainting feathers and blood and turning the stomach. He shuddered at the memory, ran his tongue round the bowl again in search of any stray crumbs, and finding none, lapped up some water and returned to the sitting-room. He flopped down on the hearthrug with a grateful sigh.

But he couldn't sleep. He stretched his legs, rolled over onto his back, wriggling pleasurably in the softness of the rug like a fat and hairy eel, stood up, trotted hopefully into the kitchen, snuffled around the floor, found nothing but an unwary spider; chased it, chewed it, spat it out and went back to the sitting-room.

The moonbeam had moved and now shone directly onto the small table where the doctor had set down the pipes. Poopsy lay down, rested his chin on his forepaws, and gazed proudly at his gift. The grains of the wood intarsia were clearly visible, etched sharply by the white light, the brown, yellow and reddish hues muted to subtle shades of grey. The pipes shimmered in the moonbeam, drew in the ghostly light, intensified it and threw it back, flooding the room with a lustrous, pearl-like radiance. Poopsy could not take his eyes off them; they seemed to grow larger and larger, filling the room, the world, the universe; drawing him into them, deep down into the very fibre of their substance...

... Darkness, then light... a forest, a weeping maid with pale green hair, a youth of gold, bright and dazzling as the sun, and a fearsome creature with the horns, hooves, tail and legs of a goat and the face and torso of a man. Then girl and youth vanished and the creature sat alone beside a young laurel sapling, and cut two small, greenish slivers of bark from its trunk - the green slivers now set in the band binding the pipes. The creature glanced up with bright brown eyes and a satirical smile and its face grew larger and larger till it filled Poopsy's vision, his head, his being. Then it too vanished, and confused fleeting visions took its place... Now he was running with the primordial pack, jaws open, panting, tongue lolling out of his mouth, each sinew straining, each nerve tense; now fleeing in panic from hairy men with fists full of flame; now running with them side by side; now he lay in a cave and the men threw wood on a fire and he was warm and content...

The pictures faded and Poopsy found himself still on the rug, eyes still on the pipes. He sighed heavily; it was a dog's life. He put his head between his paws in sign of submission; the pipes were his master, he their slave...

\*

Doc Roberts appeared bright and early the following morning. Lily was ready, dressed in her best, looking young and blooming... too young, too blooming. He shook his head in puzzlement; she looked twenty years younger at least! What on earth was going on here?

He helped her into her coat.

"It'll be a busy day, so let's get cracking. Clinic first stop, drop by the police station second; then lunch in the city and a visit to Quillquick & Davit - I've made an appointment."

He crossed the room and put out his hand to pick up the pipes from the table; but before he could grasp them Poopsy shot forward, snatched them up in his mouth and was off through the open French windows, claws slipping and scrabbling on the polished floor as he rounded the corner onto the terrace. All three were momentarily flabbergasted, then Doc and Katinka set off in pursuit. But they had no chance; wriggling under a hedge, Poopsy was gone, deaf to all shouts and commands.

"What's got into the damn dog?"

Lily laughed.

“Maybe the pipes weren’t supposed to be a present at all, maybe he just lent them to me to cheer me up because I was ill, and now that I’m better he wants them back!” ... ..

All efforts of Lily, Katinka and Bryn to persuade Poopsy to lead them to the pipes were in vain; he would just sit down and gaze at them with the blindest daft-dog expression an intelligent hound can assume. ... ..

He had buried them on Lord Crawley’s land, successfully dodging Desmond Bradley, who was out culling a plague of badgers presently infecting local cattle with some disease or other. Poopsy found and enlarged a convenient hole in the middle of a wood. The hole smelt strongly of some creature that wasn’t rabbit, but Poopsy wasn’t choosy. He nuzzled the pipes down as far as they would go and shovelled earth, twigs and leaves on top. He was glad to get rid of them. A dog doesn’t like to have more than one master or mistress; it’s confusing... whom should it obey? He bounded off homewards, occasionally flitting after an imaginary rabbit or springing into the air out of pure high spirits mixed with relief.

### Book III

And it came about, that unable to find Pan herself and ignorant of Mab's efforts and success in recovering The Pipes (all Big Mama's attention being now entirely engaged in the search for Pan), she turned for help to her fathers, The Ancients...

Obedient to the call of their daughter *Otuccani* they came; The Ancients, lords and masters of the elements, gods from the beginning of time<sup>12</sup>. Reluctantly they came, wrenched from pleasant pastimes or roused from a million-year sleep, who can tell... *Otu*, *Aychtuo* and *Hespinotu*, the primeval gods of Air, Water and Fire; and with them *Hades*, dread God of the NetherWorld – *Otuccani*'s first-born, and elder brother to Pan.

Having existed before Earth was created, being themselves her creators, The Ancients bear no resemblance to any earthly form. Mutable in shape, size and nature, they are gasiform gods, and what words can describe the shape or form of gas, its sound or mode of progress? Its own inimitable reek it may have, but not necessarily. It is faceless, bodiless, armless; legs it has not to walk, nor fins to swim, wings to fly, nor belly on which to wind and slither ...

*Otu*, God of Air, is the most intangible god of all; an ethereal, insubstantial, almost invisible phantom a blend of shimmering air over hot desert sand, the dancing motes in a sunbeam's slant and swirl of dust-laden air. Gliding as drifting leaf in fall or twirling like tumbling sycamore seed, his passage is the waft of a gentle breeze or blast of a blustery squall. His breath may be warm or hot, fresh or icy, sweet or salty, sour or spicy; keen with the tang of gorse and heather or soft with the scent of roses. His speech is the whisper of rustling grass or whistling howl of a gale. *Otu* is a sensory god, easier to smell, hear and feel than to see.

*Aychtuo*, God of Water, is a translucent, misty manifestation... cobwebbed with threads of spray, frothy with foam from stormy seas, beaded with drops of morning dew and the glancing glitter of sun-tipped waves. His movements are fluid; the tranquil ripple of idle lakes, the rush of streams in downward haste or relentless surge of shore-bound breakers. In his wake lies luscious growth or sodden devastation. Always moist, his breath may be salt-laden and bracing, or drenched with the scent of rain fresh-fallen. His speech is the fountain's tinkle, the brook's light babble, the mighty cataract's boom. *Aychtuo* is the most tactile god of the trio.

*Hespinotu*, God of Fire, is vibrant, colourful: now a sword of scarlet flame in scabbard of yellow sulphur, anon a white-hot flare, a bloodshot river of molten lava, a ruddy heart-warming glow in soot-grimed chimney corner. His is the slow creep of underground embers, the swift stride of wildfire, the volatile rush of explosive combustion. A warm hearth, sad heap of ashes or

12: Big Mama has many names, such as Earth or Nature, and has had a thousand more in a thousand tongues over thousands of years, but her real name is *Otuccani*, and she is child of the Ancients, with all their powers, all their genes - and a few of her own added

blistered earth mark his coming and going. His breath is warm, searing or scorching, heavy with sulphurous fumes or redolent with apple-wood burning. His speech is the welcoming fireside crackle or fearsome roar of volcanic eruption. Hespilotu is energy pure; the most capricious, most vivacious of The Ancients.

Confident, virile seeds of the universe, strong in purpose and pride, impassioned artists with an immaculate conception - the *perfect planet*; such were the gods that gave birth to Otuccani. Such were the proud fathers, The Ancients, when they gazed on their new-born daughter Earth. Such they still are as they roam the infinities of space and time. Such they still were when, in olden times, they visited their daughter. But now, when they enter her realm, they undergo an appalling transformation...

On Earth the effects of Man's squandered legacy are stronger than ever (floods, droughts, smog), and the primeval gods *themselves* weaken and wane the instant they enter her poisoned atmosphere. The shock to their systems of Man's pestilential stenches is violent, tremendous and (since a father's wellbeing depends to a large extent on that of his offspring) compounded by distress beyond measure at sight of their child's ever-increasing affliction.

For the last millennium of Mankind has taken a terrible toll of their daughter. Poisoned by its greed, its selfish, crass stupidity, she is chronically ailing, fighting for survival with every despoiled cell, every defiled atom of her being.

Thus ill and unable to cope with yet another danger that menaced every sentient being, she in her dire need called to her aid the strong, confident, dynamic fathers of yore. But weak, weary, uncertain gods, plagued with the hundred querulous quirks of old age, peevish and tetchy, were those that answered her call:

First the spirit *Otu*, more wraithlike than ever, no shimmer, no swirl when he moves. A waft of petrol, a whiff of sewage mark his passage. His breath is hot and thick with contagion; his voice the croak of smog-ridden throat, the wheeze of asthmatic chest.

Then the shade of his twin *Aychtu*... more amorphous now, with no discernible contour, no fleck of foam, no drop of dew, no glancing glitter. No easy ripple of movement either, no rush, no surge; just a sluggish roll, the uneasy swell of an oil-slicked sea. In his wake the wrack and reek of rotting biota. His breath is tainted, acrid with toxins; his voice the death-gurgle of rivers a-froth with runoff rank and foul and the plastic-choked gasp of once-mighty oceans, lungs clogged with jellyfish, coughing up algal slime.

Last to appear is *Hespilotu*, dim, pale and wavering... a flickering phantom, a weak flutter of flame, a tendril of smoke from embers slow-dying, his progress the gutter of lamps burning low. Sulphurous still is his breath, but the heat is gone, and his voice is the faint sputter of sparklers expiring.

*Such* are the shades of The Ancients who fathered Otuccani when, always unwilling, they revisit their daughter. *Such* the champions who now came to her call.

Irritated by the summons they might have been, but The Ancients love their daughter dearly and were determined to do their best to aid her. However, like potentates everywhere, their best comprised *relegation*; and herein lay the error that changed the face of Earth, for having

not the vaguest notion of how the search should best be carried out, each passed both task and buck on to his minions, the lesser gods – gods born of the *human* mind and endowed with *human* names, traits and form.

Otu summoned the Wind God *Aeolus*, the Storm Goddess *Pallas Athena* and the Thunder-Lord *Thor*; while his twin brother *Aychtuo* summoned *Poseidon*, Ruler of Oceans and Rivers, and *Hagel*, Spirit of Rain, Frost and Ice. *Hespinotu* summoned *Vulkan*, Mover of Mountains, and *Zeus*, Wielder of Lightning; while *Hades* sent for *Pluto*, the fearsome Prince of UnderEarth. In addition, Big Mama also set Pan's ForestFolk scurrying in search of their missing master, with Big Mama's only daughter *Ceres* and granddaughter *Persephone* to keep the friskier fauns out of mischief.

In turn, these lesser deities passed the godly buck to *their* minions, and these relegated the donkey-work to *their* minions and so on *ad infinitum*, one breathing down the neck of the other. Soon, most of the OtherWorld was engaged in the search for The Great God *Paneios*. Goaded on by a hundred bosses, the undermost underlings searched diligently, intently. The sooner that bothersome immortal was found, the better! Always bad news was that one! Always spelled trouble! Always up to some mischief or other, a proper nuisance all round!

But the lesser gods were *peeved*. Very!

When messenger *Mercury* delivered The Ancients' summons, *Aeolus* and *Pallas Athena* were dancing a sultry, passionate tango over Biscay Bay; the desultory affair they'd been having the last few hundred years was finally hotting up.

*Thor* was playing boules, left arm against right, and the rumble of bowls trundling down the uneven alley of nimbus cloud, and the resounding crack as the right-arm bowl inexorably hit its mark (*Thor* cheated), were sending the peoples of Europe mad.

*Poseidon* and *Vulkan* had been on holiday from Earth... Peacefully fishing in astral seas when the messenger suddenly popped up at his elbow, *Poseidon* jerked up the rod in surprise - and watched the biggest starfish he'd seen in his life slip off the hook and swim away with a lewd flip of two arms; while *Vulkan* was dragged from a game of golf just in the crucial split-space he was trying to get a comet out of the roughs of a meteor shower and into No. 5 Black Hole.

*Hagel* was under an iceberg in the midst of a most promising flirt with an ice-maiden, and *Zeus* about to win a toss-the-lightning-bolt contest in a parallel world.

*Pluto* was shaking up San Francisco and Kyoto yet again... bored with repetition, he was the only demigod to welcome the interruption. The others unleashed their bad temper first on their underlings (the usual course of bad-tempered masters) and then on Earth itself. The months that followed would never be forgot.

Except for *Pluto*, the demigods had no intention of joining in the search themselves. They all agreed that the finding of Pan was a menial job, fit only for minions. But chafe as they might, they dare not ignore the commands of The Ancients completely – dare not return to their interrupted pursuits till Pan was found. They would therefore have to amuse themselves as best they could. They smiled at each other; mean and meaningful smiles. Man's creations, born of Man's mind, over-dimensional, cast in his image, the lesser gods were aggrieved and

mischief-bent...

*Poseidon*, Lord of The World Below Water, was having fun. Typhoons raged, tossing ships in the air like so many balls, gulping down fish-boats and ferries, warships and liners with catholic taste, reducing oil platforms to tangles of twisted steel, toppling containers. Tidal waves attacked the land hungrily, swallowing entire islands, invading mainlands, battering cliffs, crumbling chalk, smashing rock and, in retreat, taking with them huge tracts of land as their booty by right. Rivers rose and overflowed banks, engulfed towns and swamped low-lying cities, drowning livestock and people alike.

The ocean lord pounced on a yacht in distress with undisguised glee, pounded it unmercifully with tons of water, pressed it down and down till its frail flanks staved in and its human cargo perished. With ineffable delight, he swept from a lonesome isle all sentient life and all signs that it ever had been. He shifted water till deeps became shoals with sharp-fanged rocks to rip and rend, gouge and gash, opening unsuspecting tankers like so many tins of sardines. Many were the ways the demigod found to while away time till *Pan* was found.

*Aeolus*, *Athena* and *Hazel* had joined forces and were having high jinks. Hurricanes howled over lowland plain and upland moor, tornadoes tore through pine forest and tropical jungle, whirlwinds whipped up ocean and lake.

Fierce gales sent rain-pregnant clouds scurrying before them, driving their warm-bellied flocks over cold pastures to give birth in a deluge of tears. Rain and hail, snow, frost and ice played follow-my-leader, regardless of season or place. Not a plant or creature on Earth that was not affected, not a plant or creature that had time to adjust, not a plant or creature that was not ailing.

The thin crust of Earth had the ague; it vomited, sweated and shivered. Rudely awakened from thousand-year dreams by the poking finger of a chuckling *Vulkan*, primal volcanoes vented their spleen... spewing out molten bile, exhaling sulphurous breath, coughing up stifling ash, breeding monstrous tsunamis. In particular, *Vulkan's* capers along the coastline to each side of Naples, where lies a whole chain of dormant hellholes, threatened to provoke a chain-reaction that would destroy not only all living things, but blow Earth itself apart.

Meanwhile, glad of the break in routine, a contented *Pluto* was happily pushing and pulling tectonic plates here and there and back again; peering under, between, across and around them; raising valleys, sinking plateaus, rearranging geology and geography both. Although not sharing their resentment, he was loyal to the lesser gods, having much of the staunch trade unionist in his make-up.

Hot-tempered *Thor* and *Zeus* made no pretence at all of searching. Using the thigh-bone of a brontosaurus and a god-sized prehistoric ammonite, *Thor* was playing bowling the hoop, the steady thunder of the rolling hoop punctuated by an occasional ear-splitting crack as he thwacked it with the thigh-bone. *Zeus* was showing off his whole box of tricks, hurling lightning bolts, flinging phosphor-forks, tossing fire-balls, sending zigzag spearheads sizzling through the skies, jazzing up the leaden skies with sheets of blinding light. Six foot down in the earth, the acoustic accompaniment and visual effects turned *Wagner's* bones green with envy.

In an orgy of destruction, the demigods rummaged and ransacked, wrecked and ruined all and

everything that came in their paths with impunity; all under the pretence of searching for Pan. Hurricanes and tornadoes laid waste vast regions of Earth. Mudslides and avalanches buried villages crouched on mountainsides and towns nestled in vales. Volcanoes, inactive throughout mortal memory, woke to new life. Molten lava destroyed all in its path and set forests afire. Ash, hurled high in the sky and borne far by the wind, smothered all upon which it settled, masked sun and moon and darkened the heavens; photosynthesis stopped, plant life died; animal life followed.

Gales devastated forests, woods, spinneys and copses, and lightning fired the uprooted trees; those WoodFolk who could not flee were crushed or burned. Flash-floods were succeeded by drought, drought shrivelled crops and crumbled earth to sand, and sand married storm. Sandstorms blanketed further swathes of arable land and were followed by famine. Disease came hard on famine's heels. The seas reclaimed land once wrested from them by mortal hand, land hard-won by centuries of unceasing toil. Tidal waves swept away small and sleepy seaside towns and wrecked bustling sea ports. All-engulfing monster tsunamis wolfed down cities wholesale. Riverside cities were under water, transport was hamstrung: Subway, Underground, Metro were drowned, roadways were turned into rivers, airplanes grounded, railways laid lame by torn-up tracks, ships set out and failed to return.

Few of Man's creations could withstand the onslaught... oil-platforms and wind-farms were demolished, skyscrapers laid low, dams destroyed.

Like a nest of frightened ants stirred up by a small boy's stick, Mankind scurried hither and thither, blundering panic-stricken from one 'natural' catastrophe to the next, seeking reasons, answers, explanations, apportioning blame... Always 'others' were to blame.

Earth's cataclysmic years occupied but half an hour of OtherWorld space-time, which is on an entirely different scale from man-time... After telling the lesser gods to get on with the job, The Ancients had gone off for a short nap in a handy cumulus cloud, and persuaded their daughter, worn out with worry, to do the same. Big Mama slept the profound slumber of utter exhaustion, The Ancients the uneasy sleep of old age.

It was *Thor* who woke them. Tiring of his game with the hoop, he gave it a last mighty thwack that sent it spinning across the skies until, losing momentum, it wobbled violently from side to side and finally fell flat with a resounding clatter directly over The Ancients' slumbering heads. Sleeping the shallow sleep of the very old, these were roused in an instant. They awoke to an alien world.

Aghast, they plunged into the fray with no hesitation or pause for thought, and trying to put things right, made things worse. Used to working on a much larger scale of folding mountains and rifting valleys, lifting highlands and lowering plains, sinking continents and raising others, fashioning oceans and designing volcanoes, they were not bothered as to details. Those they had always left to Otuccani; it was her business, she was responsible for running the world, she was the worldwife after all!

To say they were flat-footed, ham-handed, clumsy-fingered, that they waded into the tumult snorting with anger, bellowing with rage, would be incorrect. Such terms apply only to humans, but they certainly lost their cool<sup>13</sup> and 'smote about them mightily' in their own

13: Except for *Hespinotu* who, of course never had any and simply blazed more fiercely than usual

inimitable fashion, scattering lesser gods left and right and sending their underlings scrambling head over heels for cover. For a short space The Ancients shook off their Earthbound ennui and, recovering force and energy, hounded the celestial vandals unmercifully ... and in their furious progress laid waste those battered creations of mankind that had still been standing.

Otuccani, sleeping the sleep of exhausted youth, roused more slowly than her fathers. Finally awake, she yawned and lazily stretched. Then, aware of an appalling commotion, she hastily opened her eyes and looked around. Looked, and clapped her hands to her head in horror!

Only when none could give her the information she'd sought, when all else had failed to find her son Pan, had she called on her fathers. It had been her very last resort and, she now saw, the second greatest mistake of her life, second only to that of Man's evolution. She sprang from her cloud-couch in a hurry...

Ailing she may be, but Earth's will is strong as ever, and her usually patient temperament can explode without warning...When she finally got everything back under control (and paternal godly ears would burn for many a million spaces thereafter and demigods blench in remembrance), the search was resumed under her strict supervision, and hers alone; for there was still no sign of Pan. All sought him.

The sulking Primeval Gods sought him, the chastened lesser gods sought him, the WeeFolk sought him, the AnimalFolk, InsectFolk, BirdFolk and FishFolk sought him. Above, on and under Earth's surface they sought him; in the roofless skies, mountain peaks and hidden valleys, in ocean deeps and UnderWorld caverns they sought him. Everybeon sought him, everybeon except Man and his vassals the TameFolk.

'Twas the fairies who found him...